

Digital coercive control and relationships

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The concept of 'digital coercive control' explains how technology can be used to enact harm in intimate relationships

EXAM LINKS

- Gender
- Crime and deviance

Electronic devices, apps and new media have transformed the ways we make contact, exchange ideas and participate in various spaces. This has enormous benefits. We can find and connect with people instantly, and over great distances, across the globe. In times of conflict, unrest, natural disasters, crises and pandemics, technologies can provide vital connections, and offer access to support and assistance.

Technologies can literally be lifelines and can make our lives easier. There are so many functions they fulfil and pathways they offer us to engage in education and employment and participate in social and civic activities. We can express ourselves,

Box | Methodology

This article is based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups from a range of studies conducted with victim/survivors. All participants were engaged through and supported by domestic violence services.

establish and experiment with our identity or how we want to present ourselves online. Many people welcome and enjoy technologies, but their heavy presence can also mean that technologies may feel dangerous or inescapable, especially when used as a weapon.

Cyber harms

In movies, television and the media, cybersecurity threats are usually presented as enacted by unknown strangers: hackers crouched over computers, with hoodies and sinister motives. Governments, organisations and individuals worry about how unknown persons might wreak havoc, damaging and stealing our data and identities, seeking to scam and defraud, exploiting vulnerable users, causing disruption and even jeopardising democratic processes such as voting.

Yet anyone can enact or be subjected to cyber harms. Indeed, we need to think not only about unknown people as perpetrators — they can be people we know or *might* know. For example, perpetrators might be introduced through digital apps or networks. Consider how platforms suggest 'people you may know' (Facebook) or who are 'suggested for you' (Instagram), to extend your online social circle. They could also be people you come into contact with in the real world

— acquaintances, friends, family member and intimate partners. When dating, for example, how do we know when digital behaviours are unsafe? What is acceptable and 'normal', and what is a warning sign?

What is intimate partner violence?

‘[He said to me] ‘I’ve got a whole memory stick full of [intimate] photos, if you want to get smart, I’ll post them.’ (Shelly)

There are different words used to describe abuse that happens in romantic relationships. It might be referred to as intimate partner violence, domestic violence, dating violence, toxic behaviour or coercive control. At its core an abusive relationship involves an unequal power dynamic, with one person being constrained and entrapped by a controlling partner. In these settings, violence is frequent and routine and involves manipulation, intimidation and coercion.

Abusers frequently destroy or weaken their partner's support system. The targeted person may feel isolated and dependent on an abuser. This is often gendered violence, with women overwhelmingly identified as victim/survivors and men as perpetrators. The quotes in this article are from victim/survivors who identified as female, all of

whom had male perpetrators. However, it is important to recognise that any gender and sexuality can be subjected to and enact harm, and research shows that LGBTIQ+ persons experience violence at the same, or higher, rates as cisgender women and heterosexual women.

Individualised tactics are used by the perpetrators of intimate partner violence; strategies that feed off and affect a particular person because of their experiences, history and circumstances. For example, abusers may use certain words in messages or call at certain times that carry meanings and threats for their target, because of their experiences and identity.

A victim/survivor once told me how terrified she was because her partner would periodically hide in a wardrobe and jump out at her, at night. This would be annoying and unsettling for many people but, for her, it was upsetting because she had been sexually abused as a child, and her abuser had hidden in her wardrobe at night. The intent here was to evoke her past memories and trauma, and her response was shaped by this too. Here, you can see the specific strategies that were used and how they harmed a particular individual.

Technology as a tool of abuse

10 messages in a row ... full-on harassment with phone calls all the time ... at four o'clock in the morning — phone call after phone call and if I'd tell him to stop, like there would be [no] chance [that] he would. (Louise)

Technology is just one tool that abusers may use to coerce, control and restrict the freedoms of another person. Technology-facilitated abuse can be present alongside other forms of abuse, such as physical, sexual, emotional, psychological or financial, abuse and is often used to perpetrate these other forms of abuse.

For instance, text messages might be sent with the intention of insulting or demeaning their recipient (emotional abuse). The coercive partner may try to distort, influence or confuse their target's thoughts and cause them to doubt their mental health, for example by changing the temperature on a smart home device and denying they have done so (psychological abuse). They may demand or gain access to bank accounts and take funds (financial abuse). Intimate photos or videos may be taken and/or shared without consent (which is a form of sexual abuse that

we refer to as 'image-based sexual abuse'). Technology can be used to stalk victims, both 'offline' and 'online'.

Normal or harmful?

Some behaviours, such as those listed in Box 2, might be readily seen as unhealthy or unsafe. Destroying a phone, for example, or using spyware to stalk someone, are more obvious signals of risk. However, there are practices that might not be so easily identified or categorised as hazardous, that make victim/survivors uneasy, scared or distressed. Some of these may also be present in non-abusive relationships. So, how can we tell if they are normal or harmful? The key is to think not just about the behaviour, but the *aim* of one party, the *effect* on the other, and the *context* in which it occurs.

As an example, two people might willingly and happily share their locations, which makes meeting up easier, and can make both parties feel comfortable. Yet if, throughout the relationship, there have been efforts to monitor a partner, attempts to limit their contact with others, and threats and punishment issued for going to certain places and seeing certain people, this surveillance is worrying. It is the history and dynamics between two

parties and not the behaviour that is different.

Likewise, video calls allow us to bond with people in other places, especially when they have been physically separated because of lockdown or other Covid-19 restrictions. However, abusers may use video calls to try and get intel about where someone is, including when they are in a refuge (safe accommodation for someone who has ended a violent relationship). Sometimes, abusive partners may have been responsible for setting up technologies in the first place.

Box 2

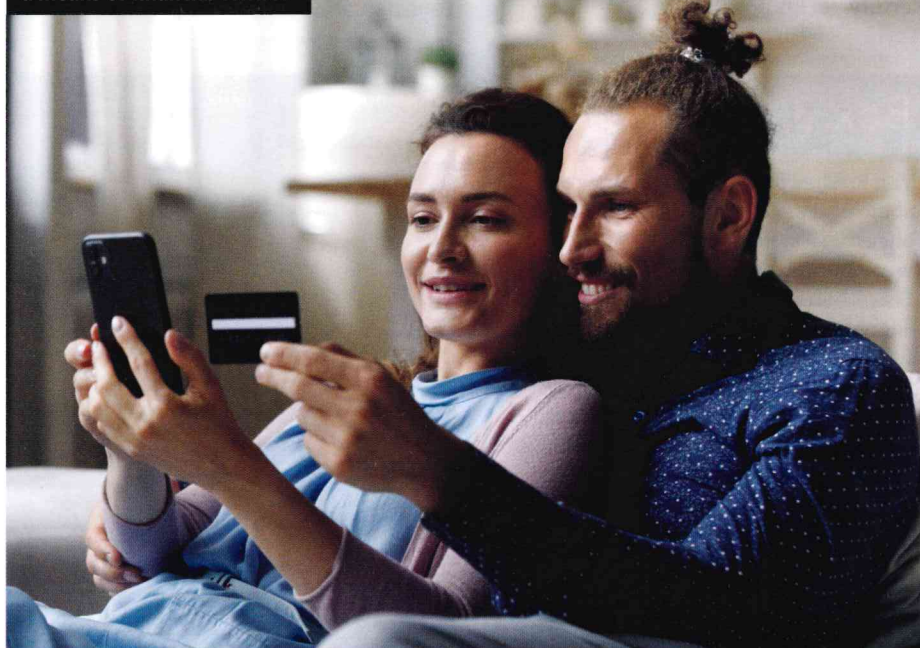
Digital abuse and the law

Not all digital intrusions are illegal, but there are some behaviours that are more readily seen as abusive or potentially illegal, such as the use of technology to:

- send or post messages to harass or defame someone
- destroy or restrict access to a device or account
- cause an unauthorised function or impairing an authorised function on a device
- publish someone's private and identifying information (doxing) or sexualised content without their consent
- impersonate someone in an attempt to intimidate, distress or defraud them
- stalk (track a person's activities, movements or communications)

Technology can be used to stalk victims, both 'offline' and 'online'

Technology can be used as a means of financial control



This can be useful and helpful, but it can also erode privacy and provide access to devices and accounts which may make their partner uncomfortable. As Sarah, a domestic violence victim/survivor, explained:

‘I wasn’t tech savvy... He set up our accounts... ‘Don’t worry about it if you can’t [use the device], I’ll do it for you’... It looked helpful but he could see the communication between us. He watched me because I put the password in, I just kind of felt — because I had always protected my password and I thought [maybe this wasn’t okay], but he’s put me on his computer, so I guess we’re sharing these things, but that was right from the beginning.’

Digital coercive control

‘I didn’t realise he was checking how long and how often I would call certain people and would remark ‘Oh, you talk to such-and-such for [a while] everyday, don’t you?’ I’d say ‘No, I don’t’.... He said ‘Yeah, you do’. (Fiona)

We use the concept of *digital coercive control* to capture how technology is used to enact harm in abusive relationships (Harris and Woodlock 2019). This phrase highlights the channel that is used (*digital*), the intent (*coercion*) and the impact or consequence (*control of a current or former partner*). When we study digital coercive control, we include the more everyday and individual ways abusers use technology in relationships that are hurtful and harmful. This is important, because if we too narrowly define and identify technology-facilitated abuse and

EXAM-STYLE QUESTION

Using information from the article and your own knowledge, evaluate the view that, despite their benefits, new technologies can be used as a form of domestic abuse. (AQA-style, 20 marks)

The article contains a wealth of relevant material, but you might also do some research yourself to find other examples. Note that the question mentions the benefits of new technologies, so you should write briefly about these. This is a 20-mark question, so avoid getting too bogged down in detailed descriptions of how the new technologies can be/have been ‘weaponised’ to attempt control. You could use the contemporary example of the pandemic to show how features such as lockdown have made some people, particularly women, especially vulnerable to this form of abuse. It is important to keep your answer sociological, so use relevant concepts throughout, and you may wish to make links to issues such as wider gender inequality and patriarchy. You have to ‘evaluate’ the view, so remember to include material to show whether you think that the evidence does (or does not) support it.

dismiss the context in which it occurs, we may minimise or ignore harm.

Thinking critically about how technology is used in relationships means thinking about partners’ motives and the implications for those involved. Among some friendship groups, for example, it may be common to share passwords and devices with each other, and the same is true of intimate relationships. People may be happy to do so and feel comfortable and confident in their choice. But sometimes, there is normalisation or romanticisation of practices that are concerning.

Obsessive contact with someone, and expectations that they will always be available to text, call and share their location is sometimes seen as a sign of devotion, but it can also signal insecurities, unhealthy attachments and attempts to restrict freedoms. Sometimes people argue that open access to devices and accounts shows you have ‘nothing to hide’ and are faithful to your partner, but this nevertheless requires

loss of privacy. Certain behaviours do not automatically signal the relationship is abusive. Technology is not the only tool used by abusers, so thinking about the dynamics and features of relationships, motives and the consequences of behaviour is key.

Impacts

‘...[X] texted me a single letter at a time and I put it all together and it read letter by letter ‘URDEAD’. (Keri)

Technology is ever-present in our lives and the speed and oversight it provides means perpetrators seem to be inescapable and all-powerful. We are potentially vulnerable any time we access a device or digital account.

Sometimes people argue that open access to devices and accounts show you have ‘nothing to hide’, but this nevertheless requires loss of privacy

Box 3 Available support

Visit Refuge’s page about technology and abuse. This is a UK-specific resource, and primarily for women:

www.tinyurl.com/kbyxa889.

Chayn is an international organisation which has resources as well as remote (digital) support groups: www.chayn.co.

Victim Support provides a variety of ways in which victims of all kinds of abuse can get advice and support, and has a separate section for young people:

www.tinyurl.com/52rxzpy8.

The UK government has a site which explains how to recognise forms of abuse, and guidance and support on reporting it and seeking help: www.tinyurl.com/ztdxsrsc.

Nothing to hide or an invasion of privacy?



Protest against domestic violence



Digital coercive control has short- and long-term impacts on emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing and health. It could also lead to fatal consequences if this type of control leads on to, or is accompanied by, physical violence.

Two women every week are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales alone. Abusive and obsessive contact (such as frequent calls or texts), stalking by technology and engaging with victims on social media and dating sites under

false identities, have all been identified as emerging trends across domestic and family violence homicide cases.

Tech safety and support

‘He was going on Facebook... He kept saying [in Facebook messages] ‘I know where you are’. They [support workers] said to look for flags [that my safety and security was threatened] and it was psyching me out. (Teresa)

Some people engaging in digital coercive control may be tech savvy, with advanced skill sets and software, but ‘low-tech’ approaches (which do not require much technical knowledge or resources) are common. It can be hard to differentiate between high- and low-tech approaches. Offenders may seem to know everything and be everywhere, perhaps because of spyware or keystroke loggers, for example, which are on devices, but this information could be obtained in a less technologically sophisticated way.

Intimate partners have intimate knowledge, so they might know (or be able to guess) passcodes and hints to open accounts and be able to get a hold of, or manipulate, devices. Sometimes, they may set up the technology/accounts, which seems (and may be) helpful or caring. Yet this may provide an abuser with access to devices and profiles, later. They might also be following their partner’s social media posts, or posts by others, that reveal intel.

There is, unfortunately, a burden on people experiencing digital coercive control. Effort and ‘safety work’ are required to manage one’s security or to disengage from technology, if that step is required. For those who support victims/survivors, it is vital to convey that victims are not to blame for the abuse and that they should not be expected to stop using technology. Technology is not the issue; *abuse* of technology is. We can challenge the ideologies and practices that support abuse — for instance, the idea that such abusive practice is ‘normal’ and ‘legitimate’, or that people are ‘entitled’ to take and share intimate photos without our consent.

There are avenues of support available for anyone being subjected to digital coercive control (and intimate partner violence more broadly). Domestic violence organisations have useful guides (and support workers) which can provide help and checklists to help people use technology safely. Some useful contacts are listed in Box 3. Technology can be weaponised, but it can also be harnessed to prevent and respond to violence and abuse.

RESOURCES

Harris, B. A. and Woodlock, D. (2018) ‘Digital coercive control: insights from two landmark domestic violence studies,’ *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 530–550.

Pseudonyms have been used for victim/survivor quotes featured in this article. They come from the following studies:

Dragiewicz, M., Harris, B., Woodlock, D. et al. (2019) *Domestic Violence and Technology: survivor experiences of intrusion, surveillance and identity crime*, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network.

George, A. and Harris, B. (2014) *Landscapes of Violence: women surviving family violence in regional and rural Victoria*, Deakin University.

Harris, B. and Woodlock, D. (forthcoming) *Spaceless Violence: technology-facilitated abuse, stalking and advocacy*. Final report, Australian Institute of Criminology.

KEY POINTS

- This article is based on research on the victims and survivors of ‘intimate partner abuse’, in which technologies are used to control partners.
- The term ‘digital coercive control’ is used to describe the many ways that victims are subject to ‘cyber harm’ by those close to them.
- Such control has both short- and long-term impacts on the victims’ emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing, and in extreme cases, can lead to fatalities.
- Those experiencing such abuse often have to carry out ‘safety work’ to manage their online security and may even have to disengage from using certain technologies.
- The use of digital coercive control is an emerging trend in cases of domestic and intimate partner abuse.

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