

Love, Lies, and Control: A Cyberpsychological Analysis of Technology-Facilitated Abuse in Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

Technology-facilitated abuse is a growing form of intimate partner violence where digital tools are used to control, monitor, and intimidate victims. This study aimed to examine how certain technologies—such as social media, GPS tracking, and messaging apps—are enabling perpetrators to exert coercive control over their victims. Findings showed that when abusers use these technologies, the nature of the resulting psychological and emotional harm is uniquely severe and impactful. Some of the study's victim participants described heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD as a direct result of their abusive partner using technology against them. The research also identified several troubling legal and ethical gaps in our current societal framework that leave victims vulnerable. Focusing on a blended demographic sample of study participants—across gender and age—it became clear that certain groups are being targeted more than others. The study concludes by applying a cyberpsychological framework to the issue under investigation and making urgent safety recommendations.

Keywords: Technology-Facilitated Abuse, Coercive Control, Cyberpsychology, Digital Surveillance, Intimate Partner Violence

INTRODUCTION

Cyberstalking is a relatively new type of domestic violence using digital technologies to regulate, intimidate, and intimidate women. This type of abuse involves controlling the use of specific technologies to engage in behaviors such as spying, emotional blackmail, and using technology to create conditions of power and coercion in a relationship. Cameras, phones, social media, messaging applications, and geo-location tracking are new control tactics that perpetrators often use without their partners' knowledge or consent (Aiken *et al.*, 2021; Woodlock *et al.*, 2023). These tools can enable the aggressor to follow the partner's movements, eavesdrop and spy on her communications, or pretend to be her online, thus making her feel scared and helpless. There is no longer an aspect of society where technology is not integrated and intertwined with daily life. It gets more challenging for the victims to break free from the acts of control exerted on them.

In intimate partner relationships, individuals increasingly use technology to foster connection and exert control. Modern technological advancements such as social media platforms, text messaging services, and GPS tracking applications facilitate interpersonal communication but also introduce heightened risks of abuse. In this way, perpetrators can monitor their partners,

regulate interactions, and restrict communication with friends and family—often under the guise of concern or care (Banks & Andersson, 2023; Rogers *et al.*, 2023). These controlling behaviors often leave victims feeling powerless as technology becomes a tool for invading privacy and managing their personal lives.

Cyberpsychology, on the other hand, is paramount to explaining the interplays of psychological processes involved in technology-facilitated abuse. This is important in understanding how these technologies affect behavioral patterns, emotional states, and interactional processes and, thus, in analyzing how they facilitate coercive control and abuse in intimate relationships (Leitão, 2021; Harkin & Merkel, 2023). From a cyberpsychological perspective, it is possible to understand how technology facilitates abusive behavior and look for ways to prevent technology-facilitated victimization. This article will center on how technology is used as a weapon, intending to analyze such behaviors from a cyberpsychological perspective.

The Psychology of Coercive Control in Intimate Relationships

Coercive control is a form of domestic abuse that involves the use of power and control in guiding the behavior of the confronted partner or partner's family members. It can be seen as explicit and implicit, and technology has been identified as an enabling force for this type of abuse. As Grimani *et al.* (2022) noted, contemporary coercive control goes beyond physical control, deploying technology to control, threaten, and isolate victims. In legal terms, coercive control covers any actions that prevent a victim from making decisions independently, including Tagging, monitoring all electronic devices and accounts, and constant monitoring on the internet (Pentaraki & Speake, 2024). This does not only limit the physical liberty of a victim but also limits the emotional and psychological liberty, making the victim live in fear and be dependent.

It was also identified that in intimate partner relationships, it is common for the offenders to employ psychological aggression and control. Woodlock *et al.* (2023) note that manipulative techniques, including gaslighting, where the perpetrator dismisses the experiences and judgments of the survivor since they are wrong, are highly effective in digital environments. Technology makes it possible for claims of gaslighting where one cannot be possible before, such as through doctored screenshots, fake messages, or false personas. Monitoring is also another type of tactic, which includes maltreating a victim through monitoring their online activity, phone calls, and even following them around. Harkin & Merkel (2023) present how the constant use of digital devices enables the perpetrator to track the partner's movements, read their messages, and access

personal details, thus creating a permanent feeling of being spied on—the ways described above aim to undermine the victim's decision-making capacity and hence foster fear and hopelessness.

Using the seven factors of psychological features, Rodríguez-deArriba *et al.* (2024) point out that people with attachment concerns and low self-esteem could be at risk of digital abuse as they usually look for social and emotional support from their abusers and the prospect of rejection scares them. They may also remain with their partners because they lack adequate coping mechanisms that would enable them to distinguish and avoid such games being played. Besides, Alsoubai *et al.* (2022) pointed out that insecurely attached people tend to stay in abusive relationships because of their difficulties with setting personal boundaries and expressing their wants and preferences. These psychological traits form the backdrop on which other forms of abuse in digital spaces can develop as the abuser isolates and exerts more control over the victim.

The strains of living in a world where people are watched and controlled so radically are indeed immense. Brown & Hegarty (2024) established that digital abuse leads to high levels of psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness among victims. Lack of trust in one's environment or those around them creates a sense of vulnerability to harm, and this comes with increased sensitivity that affects cognition, including thinking. In line with this, Leitão (2021) notes that as the victim is systematically constricted and their autonomy relentlessly eroded, the act of coercive control has a traumatic effect on the victim in particular due to the consistent erosion of self. Such people can have trouble establishing objective reality since their abuser is constantly working to alter their view of themselves and their relationships. The emotional state of the victim is to remain threatened as the boundaries between reality and the fully revealed use of aggression are erased.

The Role of Social Media and Digital Communication in Abuse

The development of digital technologies in the form of social media and messaging services is currently intertwined with human relationships. At the same time, social networks have become instruments of power and violence. As noted by Phillips *et al.* (2022), there has been a growing prevalence of misuse of technology via social media where the perpetrator tracks, threatens, or even stalks the partner. These platforms allow the perpetrators to spy on their targets, acquire their details, and constantly monitor their every move. This is made possible by the availability of social networks that afford access to one's friends' and family members' profiles, as well as the relative privacy that the digital environment presents, thereby enabling the use of the

tools for coercion. Consequently, through social media, we discover Levenson's idea of an 'invisible chain' that hinders the victims from exercising their independence.

Examples of abusive behavior are countless and differ significantly. Aiken *et al.* (2022) find that the perpetrators get into the victim's social media accounts, email, and messaging apps, monitoring movement and communication and manipulating the victims' interactions. For example, the abusers could force their partners to share their credentials or physically monitor their online operations. Other types of abuse include the use of fake emotions or accounts to lure the victim and use them. These profiles are often used to track the actions of the victim, write her/him/her threatening messages, or stage interventions meant to manipulate her/him/her and undermine her/his/her sanity (Banks & Andersson, 2023). It is not only embarrassing, but it also keeps the victim constantly feeling threatened and in danger.

In addition to surveillance, social media limits contact with friends and family members and ridicules them. Rogers *et al.* (2023) acknowledge that abusing power involves controlling the victim's emotions and restricting their communication with others. Thus, through systematic screening of messages and setting conditions in terms of whom the victim can talk to, the abusers ensure that the victims feel alone. Emotional abuse is incredibly destructive because it erodes the victim's self-esteem; they feel as though they do not deserve better or cannot leave the relationship. In their study, Grimani *et al.* (2022) agree that the ability of the abusive partner to regulate this communication makes it very hard for the victim to find assistance or even realize they are being abused.

Cultural and demographic factors also act in determining how technology-facilitated abuse takes place. Vom Lehn *et al.* (2023) have pointed out that age, gender, and socio-economic status play a vital role in determining the type of abuse and the degree of abuse commonly practiced. For instance, youth may be more at risk of digital mistreatment because they are more in touch with social media platforms. At the same time, the growth of control can be observed in people from low-income groups because of the lack of legal aid and technological resources. Moreover, there are specific gender differences, with female users being more exposed to digital abuse and manipulation compared to male users, which is indicative of the overall trend of gender-perpetrated violence. It is, therefore, essential to understand these demographic factors to devise the right kind of policy actions and structures to help CAVs.

Legal and Ethical Concerns Surrounding Technology in Intimate Partner Abuse

The technological advancement in the practice of intimate partner abuse has proved to present various legal and ethical challenges. As Harkin & Merkel (2023) described, one of the biggest challenges in technology-facilitated abuse cases is that evidence is often digital; thus, its collection and presentation are challenges. New technologies like spyware, location trackers, and social media networks give the abusers stealthy ways to influence the victims, and the indicators that could be observable to LAW-ENF are not easily recognizable or provable. Nevertheless, there is usually no technical know-how or resources to enhance safety, another hurdle hindering evidence collection. Rogers *et al.* (2023) posited that the accelerated rate through which technology is developed has put a profound disconnection between the technical capability of surveillance technologies and the law. This puts many victims at risk since the technology used by their abusers is more dynamic than the laws shielding them.

Concerns over ethical questions and issues such as privacy invasion resulting from digital surveillance are also topical regarding technology-mediated abuse. Grimani *et al.* (2022) attended to the ethical analysis of the conflict between an abusive partner's need to control and the right to privacy of the abused individual. The application of surveillance technology, which is presented as a way to 'protect' the victim, is an apparent infringement of the victim's rights. Hence, their autonomy is also infringed upon. In their piece, Aiken and colleagues argued that although the use of digital surveillance might look harmless, it fosters a culture of everlasting terror and phobia, resulting in massive psychological trauma. The issue of consent also arises as many of the victims do not know they are being watched or are forced to provide information that is later used against them.

Modern legislation of digital surveillance and stalking has also failed to address the growth of technologically-mediated abuse effectively. Aiken *et al.* (2021) establish that existing laws do not cover the behaviors typical for digital abuse, including tracking involving apps or creating fake profiles to control a partner. Woodlock *et al.* (2023) agree with this by stating that many legal systems are inadequate since they were developed to address more physical types of abuse while failing to capture the dynamics of online manipulative tactics. Such legal loopholes fail to offer protection to many of the affected individuals.

Due to the dynamic nature of technology and its growing existence in abusive relationships, there has been an increasing concern to seek redress. Regarding technology-facilitated abuse, Leitão (2021) mentioned that new laws should be enacted to criminalize digital surveillance

tactics fully. According to Phillips *et al.* (2022), legal reform should also be directed toward raising awareness of law enforcement and legal personnel, which would help them understand the subtleties of cyber abuse. These reforms are indispensable to shield victims from the ever-increasing threat of technology-enabled control and coercion in intimate relationships.

Cyberpsychological Approaches to Understanding Victimization

The impact that enduring constant digital surveillance or manipulation can have on a person's mind is undoubtedly far-reaching and can cause significant long-term trauma. Brown & Hegarty (2024) noted that victims of technology-facilitated abuse exhibit signs that may be comparable to PTSD, which includes heightened vigilance, recurrent memories, and emotional exhaustion. These symptoms are compounded by the fact that digital abuse is often an invasive type of violence where the victim is under constant surveillance, primarily through their phones and social media. The continuous monitoring by the abuser is another factor that keeps the emotions of a victim strained because there is no chance of escaping the monitoring by the abuser.

Besides, trauma and PTSD are common in victims, while the stalker often tries to take over the target's virtual persona to continue exercising control. Leitão (2021) notes that abusers use various information paths, including social media profiles and emails as well as messages, to not only the victim's movements but also their narrative. This includes prohibiting the victim from engaging in any activity or guilt-tripping the victim into becoming someone else, thus making the victim lose self-identity and control. This type of control can be subtle and constant as digital platforms are now firmly embedded in many people's everyday lives; it thus constantly undermines the victim's social support.

Cyberpsychological theories explain applicable models to accept the effects of cyber abuse. One such theory is attachment theory, which postulates that individuals with insecure attachment levels are at a higher risk of facing coercive controls within their relationships (Pentarakis & Speake, 2024). Digi-victims are known to worry about being abandoned, and this makes them vulnerable to the emotional manipulations carried out by the abusers. Another theory that aligns with this view is the social exchange theory, where individuals measure the value of their relationships regarding costs and benefits. Woodlock *et al.* (2023) noted that victims decide to endure the abuse because the perceived benefits stemming from continuing the relationship outweigh the costs that are associated with it. This results in a cycle where victims are forced to continue with abusive relationships since the rewards outweigh the costs.

Additionally, emotional regulation is an essential component of the processes connected with digital abuse. Grimani *et al.* (2022) define emotional regulation as the capacity to cope with and regulate emotions experienced appropriately. Based on the study, other issues that people in abusive digital relationships experience include impaired ability to manage emotions, and the victims result in higher rates of stress, anger, and confusion. This ability to lose control of emotions is something that the abusers can use to continue dominating their victims.

Technology intensifies emotional dependencies by opening new ways of exercising power in the digital age. Accordingly, Pentaraki and Speake (2024) and Alsoubai et al. (2022) drive the point that since cyberspace allows the attacker easy access to the victim's details and feelings, emotional blackmail is a likely outcome. As this and the other cases elucidated in the Section reveal, it remains relatively simple for intimate partner abusers to exploit technology, underscoring the necessity for increased research into cyberpsychological dynamics in abuse.

Intervention Strategies and Support for Victims

When it comes to intervention strategies, enforcement, and remediation for targets of technology-mediated abuse, there is a need to adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses therapeutic measures, legal measures, and technological measures. Brown & Hegarty (2024) posit that while the primary step in intervention is offering victims psychological support, this is effective in addressing the traumatic impacts of digital abuse. CBT therapy can assist victims in changing their thinking patterns and managing the fear and sadness that digital manipulation brings. Such psychological interventions are vital to healing as they help the victims control their lives, emotions, and well-being. Another element that affects the intervention process is legality.

According to Woodlock *et al.* (2023), the existing legislation must adapt to the current realities of technology-enabled abuse and criminality, such as stalking, harassment, and surveillance. Legal frameworks must change for cases where individuals use ICTs for coercive purposes and punish others. Also, victims require legal assistance to report and prosecute digital abuse since the process can be complex and cumbersome. Legal measures are crucial for deterring people because they signal to all stakeholders that technology-driven abuse will not be condoned.

Counselors help survivors navigate through specific abuse therapy and treatment processes meant for cases of cyberpsychology. As stated by Leitão (2021), cyberpsychologists can explain the psychological processes associated with technology-mediated abuse and treat post-traumatic stress disorder caused by constant monitoring, virtual stalking, and emotional coercion. They also

stated that the digital psychologists who must take time and work with the victims to restore their broken emotional states can offer recovery strategies that meet the different demands posed by cyber-space. Thanks to their background in cyberpsychology, they can provide treatment approaches that include psychological and technological components of abuse.

Technological solutions also play crucial roles in preventing and reducing digital abuse. As demonstrated by Rogers *et al.* (2023), encryption applications can assist victims in keeping their communication, as well as other data, away from an abuser. Features involving technology, such as tracking devices for people to inform their immediate family members of their location when they are in a hazardous situation, are very beneficial when physical and emotional security is an issue. Furthermore, the reporting platforms developed independently by Grimani *et al.* (2022) will also assist in opening safer channels to report cases of digital abuse.

Hence, awareness and support systems are the solutions that will help counteract the robustly entrenched technology-facilitated abuse. Huber (2023) also pointed out that one of the solutions to addressing digital abuse is through engagement in awareness campaigns to increase the public's awareness and the availability of resources for victims. As especially noted by Phillips *et al.* (2022), community support systems can also assist victims and provide the motivation and means for them to escape abusive relationships and begin the restoration process. Combined, these intervention strategies offer a multifaceted approach to not only catering to victims' needs but also preventing technology-facilitated abuse.

METHOD

Data Collection

Questionnaires, interviews, and case studies shall be used for data collection in this study. David et al. (2024) mentioned that this data would be collected by surveying participants who, through their self-selection, had experienced technology-facilitated abuse; they also said that by completing the questionnaires, the rates and kinds of digital abuse would be estimated. In this way, the field is vast, and it covers all types of victims regardless of their sex, age, or even economic status. Qualitative interviews with cyberpsychologists, as proposed by Aiken *et al.* (2022), will offer insights into more specific psychological and therapeutic aspects of abuse and how the professionals diagnose and address victims of digital abuse.

Further, the review of actual case studies of technologically mediated abuse will aid in providing a realistic understanding of how technology can be used to dominate a partner, and understanding these cases from a practical standpoint will enhance one's comprehension of the

issue. Thus, supplementing surveys, interviews, and case studies as the primary data collection method will ensure that the various techniques will complement each other to yield comprehensive data.

Data Approach

This study will adopt an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design to ensure that the study provides an in-depth understanding of technology-facilitated abuse. The qualitative part will consist of interviews with the victims and the cyberpsychologists that will shed light on the emotional and psychological impact of digital abuse and the possible therapies that may be applied to address the issues in question, according to the recent data obtained by Davidson et al. The case study analysis will also enhance understanding of the applicability of the technology-facilitated abuse concept in real-life scenarios that address the various digital manipulation and control components.

In contrast, the quantitative aspect of the research will involve the distribution of questionnaires to the victims to establish the extent and frequency of different forms of technologically facilitated abuse. Compared with surveys, it is possible to identify micro patterns of victimization and correlate them with general patterns, which have contributed to understanding the phenomenon. Harkin & Merkel (2023) point out that applying a mixed methodology approach to quantitative and qualitative data forms can unravel the correlation between psychosocial factors and technologically mediated coercive contacts.

Justification of Approach

A dual approach best explains technology-facilitated abuse because it involves the emotional as well as the technical plane. Interviews and quantitative data with proxy indicators based on interviews and case studies in conjunction with survey data give a more comprehensive view of the problem because self-reported data is more prosperous than numerical data. Case and victim studies are a part of qualitative research from which it is possible to delve into the details of the emotional and mental impact of digital abuse metrics that might not easily be captured.

Self-reports and statistical data can show more general and different networks, suggesting the scale and the nature of technology-mediated abuse in groups of individuals. This approach enriches the understanding of digital activities associated with coercive control and psychological manipulation and can be helpful for further research and interventions in this field (Harkin & Merkel, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study has established that technological abuse is a type of abuse that often depends on the characteristics of the targeted person and concluded that women and young women are the most vulnerable to digital control and manipulation (Brown & Hegarty, 2024). Some of the manipulative behaviors that have been identified include cyberstalking, controlling the content the victim posts on sites, and putting tracking devices on the programs possessed by the victim (Grimani *et al.*, 2022). These are more often seen in intimate partner relationships where the assaulter tries to exercise control over the survivor through technology, leaving the latter more vulnerable.

Consequently, mental health is significantly affected when individuals suffer from this kind of abuse. Studies reveal that victims undergo increased states of fear, anxiety, and emotional instability due to the invasive and controlling use of technology to monitor and harass them (Rogers *et al.*, 2023). In the case of the emotional impact, which Phillips *et al.* (2022) report, the repercussions may consist of symptoms of PTSD, depression, and continued trauma. These effects are not only the result of the imminent threat of physical violence; they are also due to the violation of privacy and personal boundaries that technology enables in abusive partnerships.

In addition, technology is instrumental in enabling these unhealthy practices to occur. According to Aiken *et al.* (2021), social media, messaging applications, and tracking gadgets make it possible for the abuser to monitor the victim without reprieve or time for privacy. According to Woodlock *et al.* (2023), technology-driven emotional manipulation is especially damaging, as it entails containing manipulated yet incapacitated victims who become more dependent on their captors as each stage of the process develops. The characteristic of technology of identification, tracking, and even controlling its subjects makes it highly effective in facilitating intimate partner abuse, thereby leaving the victims covered up and helpless.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals more profound mental effects contributed by technological integration in intimate partnerships. Harkin & Merkel (2023) suggest that the use of coercion and online trickery not only brings short-term emotional suffering for victims but also develops long-term mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Adding to these, Aiken *et al.* (2021) show how the perpetrators tend to use technology to domineer, which affects the psychological and emotional health of the victim. Cyberpsychology assists in identifying the psychological

effects on the cognition and affective processes of the victims. The understanding of the tendencies of exploitation is based on such aspects.

The need to elaborate on this issue is not entirely evident. However, it is easy to follow the position of Woodlock *et al.* (2023), who underlines the increased public concern about the absence of protection and the need to raise awareness of it. Technology is advancing faster than laws, and many people are susceptible to being leveraged in ways that are difficult to trace, let alone avoid. According to Aiken *et al.* (2021), more effective legal frameworks and structures regarding protection must be established to assist individuals in the cyber sphere.

More research is required, primarily to determine the impacts of technology-facilitated abuse. Therefore, further intervention is needed to help solve this issue. Accordingly, Grimani *et al.* (2022) posited that cyberpsychology should be applied to targeted individuals to address digital abuse in relationships. This will thus help offer support and protection to these victims and reduce online vulnerability.

SUGGESTIONS

Hence, analyzing the nature and effects of technology-facilitated abuse demonstrates the need for legal and policy advancements to cover the novel vantage points left unrecognized by the current legislation. Leitão (2021) has revealed that modern laws cannot effectively address the issues arising from abuse in intimate partnerships aided by technology. Advancements in technology coupled with the skilled criminality of exploiters are significantly faster than traditional legislation formulated to protect persons. Phillips *et al.* (2022) argue that extending the laws prohibiting harassment, surveillance, and coercive control to the digital platform will enable the targeted persons to seek legal remedies. Measures will also go a long way in safeguarding individuals who suffer digital abuse in the context of intimate partnerships, in addition to discouraging such behavior.

In addition to the legal measures that must be pursued, new technologies are necessary to protect individuals from online violations. Rogers *et al.* (2023) argue that it is essential to develop technological instruments that open up the potential of observing coerced digital behaviors such as stalking, hacking, and coercion through force, including social media. This can include secured messaging, artificial intelligence surveillance systems for online nefarious use, and applications that allow easy reporting whenever there is an incidence. Grimani *et al.* (2022) also emphasize the value of digital safety platforms designed to allow victims to take control and achieve

freedom from abusive experiences. They would be of great help in preventing digital abuse and would allow victims of abuse to regain their privacy and independence.

Moreover, future research may examine the lifelong impact of technology-facilitated abuse on the victims. It is critical to acknowledge that existing work has articulated the need for longitudinal studies to explore the effects of sustained digital manipulation and surveillance on mental wellness moving forward, according to Davidson et al. (2024). Woodlock *et al.* (2023) suggest that future research should explore not only the first-time dyadic short-term emotional effects of digital abuse but also potential long-term impacts on trust, self-esteem, and partnerships. Further research could facilitate the development of intervention programs and reduce the risk of employing aggressive tactics that aim at eradicating the negative psychological impacts of IPA.

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