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To cite this article: Susanne Boethius, Malin Åkerström & Margareta Hydén (2022): The double-edged sword – abused women's experiences of digital technology, European Journal of Social Work, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2022.2040437](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2040437)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2040437>



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Published online: 22 Feb 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The double-edged sword – abused women's experiences of digital technology

Det Tveeggade Svärdet – Teknologins Betydelse för Kvinnor som Utsätts för Våld i Nära Relation

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ABSTRACT

Technology has become a vital part of people's lives. Mobile phones, smart phones, social media platforms, apps and other internet-connected devices and software have changed our way of interacting with each other, as well as managing everyday tasks. In this article, the use of such technology is discussed in relation to its integration in the lives of women who are victims of domestic violence. The study is based on interviews with 21 Swedish women, all abused by their former husband or boyfriend. The empirical data demonstrates how technology is used by the perpetrators as a means of coercive control. The analysis shows that the accessibility of digital media enables the abuser to be constantly present in the woman's life, even after she has left him. However, the same technology is also important to the women, enabling them to manage victimisation, monitor the perpetrators, store evidence, obtain information, gain support and keep in touch with family and friends. This article reveals the use of technology in IPV as a 'double-edged sword'; providing the capacity to protect and even to use as a 'counter-strike' by victims, as well as enhancing perpetrators' capacity to harm.

ABSTRAKT

I denna artikel diskuteras hur digital teknik används då kvinnor utsätts för våld i en nära relation. Studien baseras på kvalitativa intervjuer med 21 svenska kvinnor som lämnat sina män efter att de blivit utsatta för våld. Analysen visar att förövarna använder digital teknik, bland annat smarta telefoner, digitala övervakningssystem, sociala medier och plattformar, för att kontrollera, hota, förfölja och övervaka kvinnorna. Även efter separation möjliggör tekniken för våldsutövare att vara närvarande i den våldsutsattas liv utan något krav på fysisk närvaro. Samtidigt gav samma teknologi de våldsutsatta kvinnorna verktyg för att hantera situationen genom att i viss mån övervaka förövaren, samla information, spara bevis, söka stöd och i akuta situationer be om hjälp. Sammantaget kan digital teknik både förlänga och underlätta kontroll och övervakning från den manliga partnern men samtidigt ge kvinnorna en viss möjlighet till kontroll. I den meningen utgör tekniken ett tveeggt svärd.

KEYWORDS

Intimate partner violence; digital violence; digital abuse; qualitative method; technology and violence

NYCKELORD

Våld i nära relationer; Digitalt våld; Digital misshandel; Kvalitativ metod; Teknologi och våld

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Introduction

Internet and digital media have become a vital part of people's lives. Smart phones, social media platforms, apps and other Internet-connected devices and software have changed our way of interacting with each other, and recent studies have highlighted digital technology as an important component of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Douglas et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). Early studies of IPV focused foremost on physical acts of violence, and later studies have highlighted the harm caused by combinations of violence: physical, psychological and sexual (e.g. Boethius, 2015; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Stark, 2007). More recent, researchers have focused on an emerging trend in the context of domestic violence; abusers use of technology as a way to control, track, monitor and harass victims (Woodlock, 2017; Dragiewicz et al., 2018), and how its used by victims in a positive way, e.g. constant connectivity, availability, visibility, ease of access (Øverlien et al., 2020, p. 812).

To capture the varied patterns of abuse that occur over time (i.e. non-sporadic incidents), the concept of 'coercive control' is used to show how perpetrators control, manipulate and intimidate their victims through isolation, surveillance, sexual and economic exploitation, threats of violence, micromanagement of daily activities, and shaming (Stark, 2007). The 'technology of coercive control' involves four main techniques or strategies: harming and intimidating (coercion), and monitoring and isolating (control) (Stark, 2009, p. 1514). Digital technology has been identified as a means of coercive control (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019).

The ubiquity of digital technology use in everyday life has had an impact on interpersonal violence overall (Douglas et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019), providing perpetrators with new ways to threaten, stalk, track, monitor and harass victims. Technology-assisted abuse is often interconnected with other, offline, abusive behaviours (Woodlock, 2017; Woodlock et al., 2020), but also has unique aspects, such as the spacelessness that makes it possible for perpetrators to reach, track and communicate with their victims regardless of physical distance (Harris, 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). A victim's abuser can be omnipresent (Woodlock, 2017).

Because digital technology is used so widely, for example to manage finances (bills, shopping, money transfers, etc.), everyday tasks (health care, school information, parking, etc.), property management (home alarm systems, locks, cat flaps, etc.) and monitoring (global positioning tracking systems and watches, etc.), perpetrators of IPV are provided with a new facet of everyday life that they can supervise and control; their victims' online life. Perpetrators can also fundamentally impact their victims' lives by hindering their access to technology, even after separation (Woodlock, 2017).

However, even as technology facilitates new variations of IPV, it can also help victims find support and help (Clark, 2016; Øverlien et al., 2020), and even strike back. Our findings not only give voice to women's descriptions of being abused, but equally – if not more so – their descriptions of how they have resisted and defended themselves by using digital technology. This article reveals the use of technology in IPV as a 'double-edged sword', providing the capacity to protect as well as the capacity to harm. The results contribute to the growing field of research examining the interplay between technology and IPV.

Previous research

Various terms have been used to capture the complicated and intricate abuse-situations and contexts that are integrated with digital technology, for example 'technology-facilitated stalking' (Woodlock, 2017) and 'technological IPV' (Duerksen & Woodin, 2019). Another term, grounded in an understanding of IPV as a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviours, often accompanied by the threat of violence, is 'technology facilitated coercive control' (TFCC) (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). TFCC includes harassment on social media or through short message service (SMS) messages, recordings, GPS stalking, accessing accounts without permission, impersonating a partner, etc.

Dragiewicz state '[Like] other forms of coercive control (Stark, 2007), TFCC is inextricably contextualised in relationship dynamics, culture and structural inequality' (Dragiewicz et al., 2018, p. 610).

Harris and Woodlock (2019) used the term 'digital coercive control' and, like Dragiewicz et al. (2019), stress that, based on the relationship between IPV and power and control, the abuse must be interpreted in context and from its consequences.

[digital coercive control] specifies the method (digital), intent (coercive behaviour) and impact (control of an ex/partner) and – because the concept of 'coercive control' is central – situates harm within a wider setting of sex-based inequality. (Harris & Woodlock, 2019, p. 533)

Most studies of digital abuse in the context of domestic violence are based on broad data sets, for example of cyberbullying and cyberharassment (Borrajó et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2016), but technology-assisted abuse appears to be quantitatively widespread in IPV. In an Australian study of practitioners working with domestic violence, almost all of the respondents (98%) reported that they had experienced clients who had been exposed to digital coercive control (Woodlock et al., 2020), and a US study of online harassment found that the most common perpetrators of digital abuse and cyberstalking were current and former partners (Lenhart et al., 2016). Studies that focus on technology-assisted abuse are generally situated within a North American context, and the samples often comprise university students. Based on a sample of 365 college students, digital monitoring behaviours were shown to be the most common means of digital dating abuse (Reed et al., 2016). However, while quantitative studies show that technology-assisted abuse is a frequent component of IPV, less emphasis has been given to the context of the partners' relationship (Harris, 2018). Because of the wide variety of ways perpetrators use technology as a means of abuse, qualitative studies that highlight victims' experiences are needed to understand its role in IPV (Douglas et al., 2019). Rapid changes in technology, and how we use it, make it hard for researchers to know what to ask for, making standardised measures in risk of being un-relatable and likely to overlook important factors. Qualitative studies allow women to describe technology-facilitated coercive control in detail (Dragiewicz et al., 2019), and specific areas can be highlighted, such as young people's experiences of partner violence (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Øverlien et al., 2020). Aghtaie et al. (2018) show that digital technology has created new mechanisms of control and surveillance that can exaggerate the effects of abuse that takes place offline, highlighting the importance of examining the victim's experience.

Method

This study is based on interviews with 21 Swedish women who had experienced IPV from a former husband, cohabiting partner or boyfriend (all the perpetrators were male). The women were recruited from a help centre for abused women, in 2017–2019, as part of a larger study of abused women and their social networks. We explained that we were specifically interested in the women's interactions with their social networks, and the decision to file a police report, which most of them had done. The use of technology and digital media was not something that was specifically asked about, but raised by the women when they talked about their experiences of being abused. Situations where the woman was still with her former partner, and after the woman had left her violent partner, were included.

The women were aged between 27 and 55 years, and separated from their abuser at the time of the interviews; some of the women had children. The women had been exposed to various kinds of violence, including sexual violence, isolation, material violence and psychological abuse. Some women had been physically abused almost every day, while others had experienced weeks between physical incidents, or the perpetrator's physical outbursts were separated by many years. Most of the men were exclusively abusive to the women, while others were also violent against the children, or against other family members and pets. The interviews lasted around 90 min each, and were conducted by the first author. Initially, the woman was asked to draw a map of

her social network in which she identified the people who were integral to her life. This network map was then used as a starting point for the interviews.¹ An open interview approach was used, with some themes decided upon in advance, while others were guided by topics that the woman introduced. The interviewees chose where the interviews were conducted; most were held at the support centre, but some were conducted in the women's homes and some at the university.

All the interviews were conducted in private, and the participants signed informed consent forms. They received a letter about the project and information about the right to withdraw at any time, and about the aim and use of their participation-generated material. This information was repeated verbally before each interview. Social workers with expert knowledge of IPV were accessible if needed, and contact information for the researchers was provided. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed, and anonymised by changing names, times and places. The women were given no compensation for their time.²

Findings

Two aspects of technology use were revealed by the interviews: the perpetrator's use of technology, and the abused woman's use of technology. These usages were interrelated, and could at times be seen as responses to each other, 'Parallel to any narrative of victimization is a narrative of resistance' (Hydén, 2005; Øverlien et al., 2020, p. 810). For analytical purposes, we present them separately.

Perpetrator use of technology

Three ways the perpetrators used digital technology, in conjunction with other means of abuse, were identified: to (1) control communication, (2) threaten and harass, and (3) target the woman's social network.

To control another facet of the woman's life

Technology is an important part of social engagement, and abusers can regulate their victims' digital participation (Woodlock, 2017); by controlling their activities on smart phones and computers, their freedom of communication with other people is curtailed. Communications were monitored and supervised; the women were not allowed to use digital devices to communicate with certain people or at certain times, or were forced

to erase contacts or not use certain technology or digital media. Some perpetrators forced the woman to delete contacts they did not approve, while others actively deleted messages or blocked contacts on their partner's devices, without her knowing. Anne:

I suddenly noticed that people in my phone book were blocked. My boss was blocked. My workplace was blocked. Carlos (her friend) was blocked. Charlotte (her friend) was blocked.

Some men broke their partner's smart phones; as a consequence of this, the woman would have fewer and fewer contacts because her contact list was repeatedly destroyed. Ronja described how this was affecting her contact with others even post-separation:

cause he broke all my phones, and I had all my numbers in them, of my staff that were also my friends. All these (network members) have disappeared because I have no contact information for them.

Some perpetrators demanded joint accounts or access to the women's passwords. The perpetrator could then control not only who the victim communicated with, but also monitor her digital activity. The perpetrator could also regulate how the victim portrayed him on social media. Louise explains:

I wasn't allowed to have my own Facebook (account), we should have one together. There, I should write how wonderful he was, he had to check what I wrote and the account was in my name.

The perpetrators controlled their victim's communications with others both directly and indirectly, leading to an increased distance between the victim and members of her social networks not only online but also offline; she was no longer invited to parties and events that took place offline. The perpetrators not only governed their partner's online contacts, communications and movements, and influenced the presentation of their online persona. They also looked retrospectively at the victim's past posts and online presence. Maja's abuser went through messages that she had written before she met him, and used those messages as an excuse to beat her:

[he] went back and read messages that were a year or two old. So, sometimes when I was beaten, it was for something I wrote to a person two years ago.

The technology-assisted abuse and the physical abuse were in this case highly intertwined.

To threaten, harass and monitor the woman

Threats. Threats were often delivered on smart phones via direct calls, voice mails, texts or emails. Sometimes the threats were very clear and straight forward. Anne got a lot of threats from her ex-boyfriend in texts and emails, stating things like 'I will find you and kill you' and 'I promise I will see you dead'. Other threats were more subtle and could only be understood as harmful when considered in context. Amelia had a former boyfriend who had often face-to-face threatened to hurt her beloved dog. A text message from the perpetrator with the words 'I hope your dog is fine' would terrify her, making her fear that the abuser would hurt her dog in real life. Sexual pictures and video recordings that former partners had access to were also used as a means of abuse; the perpetrator would threaten to show them to the victim's coworkers, bosses, family and friends. For Martina, that such recordings existed came as a surprise; it was only revealed when she told her boyfriend she wanted to separate from him:

[Perpetrator said] 'Just so you know, I filmed us having sex. I have all the movies, if you leave me now I will expose them to everyone at work'. And I (Martina) sat as team leader for about ten employees, at this company, so then ... I felt that he had put a gun to my head ... I felt like, I am stuck here (in the relationship).

Harassment. The most common digital means the perpetrators used to harass their victims, as for the threats, was phone calls, text messages and emails. The harassment ranged from an absurd number of calls, messages and emails containing little or no aggressive statements, to multiple directly spoken life-threatening messages. Ingrid explained how her ex-husband started to call her more and more after their separation:

Charlie became even worse (after separation) – He calls and, yeah harassed me or whatever you want to call it. Controlled me. He wanted to know everything, what I did, why I wasn't at home, when I would get back from work.

Elsa also described how her former boyfriend kept calling her on the phone and sending her texts, sometimes throughout the night, even years after they separated. Louise described how her ex-boyfriend 'phone terrorized' her not only when they lived together but also after their break up, as well as texting her and sending pictures to her smart phone:

He moved out but he phoned terrorized me so much, which he had done during our whole relationship. Even when we lived together. He texted me and MMS me all the time. And he kept on doing that until I changed the SIM card in my phone.

The constant contacting, calling, texting and online messaging was something the woman often had to respond to when in the relationship with the perpetrator, who demanded that she was available to answer at any time. Unanswered calls/texts or unsatisfied answers often resulted in physical or verbal abuse when the woman was back home. After separation, many women changed their phone numbers, closing existing accounts and blocking the perpetrator's numbers and accounts, to get away from his digital contacts. But deleting accounts could mean the victim lost contact with her social network, as Nora described:

So I deleted everyone that he (knew), all our mutual friends, on Facebook and so on, I didn't dare have contact with any of them, because I don't know how much contact he had with them.

Erasing contacts and changing phone numbers and accounts to get away from the perpetrator was not always enough to end the technology-facilitated abuse. Anne, after she received threats and harassment via texts, phone calls and online platforms, decided to block her former boyfriend from those devices. The perpetrator then used what Anne called 'one dime threats': by using a bank transfer app to send just one dime to her bank account, he could write a few sentences in an accompanying message.

Monitoring movement. People carry their smart phones with them in almost every situation, which means that a perpetrator can reach his victim throughout the day. Texts and phone calls were commonly used by the perpetrator to keep track of the woman, as were location services. By installing or using preinstalled tracking devices in the woman's phone or computer (both hidden and openly), the man could monitor her movements both in real life and online. Emma became aware that she was being tracked while driving to work, when she heard a strange sound. Fearing that her former boyfriend had sabotaged the car, she drove to the nearest police station, where they found a hidden smart phone with a GPS locating service on it.

In Maja's case the perpetrator openly downloaded an app on her phone, which he then used to keep track of her:

And this app ... he checked that, so he knew where I was at all times ... and he wanted, if he wrote or called and asked where I was going, me to tell him. So sometimes he did that just to test if I was where I said I was.

Some women also believed that their perpetrator monitored them in ways that they had not yet identified. These suspicions were fuelled by the perpetrator showing up unexpectedly at the woman's location, when the information had only been available online, such as pre-booked doctors' appointments and meetings. Digital channels were not always considered safe.

To target the woman's social network

The third use of technology was to target the woman's social networks. At times the perpetrator used network accounts to contact her, or encouraged others to confront or criticise her (cf. Dragiewicz et al., 2019, p. 24). Another form of network abuse was threatening the woman's friends and family members through texts, social media or emails. Some interviewees described how the perpetrator sent emails and messages to members of her social network, trying to embarrass or shame her. Emma explained how the perpetrator sent an email to her parents and siblings stating that she was promiscuous. He also hacked her cousin's Facebook account, impersonated the cousin and posted negative statements about Emma.

Some perpetrators posted comments when logged into the woman's social media accounts, making it look like the woman had written the post herself. They also impersonated their victims to answer her text messages. Maja described how her boyfriend changed her password on a social media platform, so that she was unable to reach her own account, and then started to post in her name:

(He) changed my profile picture and things like that. And he also made fake accounts in my name and sent friend requests to friends and such. So they thought it was me. I found out afterward. (He) made a new account every month so they (her social network) must have thought that I was totally (shakes her head).

Several of the women explained how the man 'friended' people from her social networks from his own social media, and started following social media posts from people close to her.

Overall, the perpetrators threatened, harassed, monitored and controlled their victims' communications, and targeted their victims' social networks, pre- and post-separation, using technological devices. Technology-assisted behaviour was used both as a means of abuse itself and as an integral and inter-related part of other abusive behaviour.

Victim use of digital technology

As shown, the perpetrators used technology in various ways to harm their victims, in conjunction with other forms of abuse. However, the victims also mentioned digital media as an asset when it came to handling the abuse. The victims mentioned four positive aspects of use regarding their victimisation: (1) for support and information, (2) to obtain evidence, (3) to monitor the perpetrator, and (4) to counterstrike.

Finding support and information

The interviewees turned to online resources to obtain information about abuse in close relationships, and how to prepare and file a police report. Social media also enabled some women to join support groups and make contact with help centres: they could join online groups or find details of face-to-face support groups without leaving their homes.

Digital technology was also important for support from family and friends. Previous studies have shown that social networks can promote 'negative support' (DeKeseredy et al., 2019), and abused women's social networks are often characterised by ambivalent relations (Bellotti et al., 2021). However, in this study, when women talked unsolicited about their networks in relation to digital technology, it was about help and support that was sought for, offered and welcomed.

In ongoing abusive situations, the women made efforts to have a cell phone available. Kerstin explained how she secretly bought an extra cell phone as protection, making it possible for her to reach others if needed, without her husband knowing:

I had one cell phone hidden with a prepaid card ... because he learned that if I had access to my mobile phone, I called (her family members). So it went into the wall if he got to it first. That's when I got a cheap mobile with a prepaid card.

Digital devices also enabled the women to keep in contact with their social networks, at times and places of their own choosing. Their social networks also initiated support. Veronica's friends, who all knew her but did not all know each other, created a chat group and promised Veronica that one of them would always answer, at any time, if she needed anything:

so they (her friends) were there all along. It didn't matter what time of day I wrote something, someone answered ... when I sat there at 3 o'clock at night and had the worst panic, I just said (wrote) something, and one of them always answered, no matter what it was about, someone always said (wrote) something supportive or encouraging.

The ease of organising a chat group created an uncomplicated way for Veronica to get emotional support when she needed it: the support was only a text away.

However, such online relations were not without risk. In Anne's case, staying in an online community meant that the perpetrator was able to keep contacting, finding and threatening her. In other cases, the perpetrator managed to take part in the victim's private conversations online; digital channels not always being safe. Information shared by the victim with her close friends and family was sometimes accessible to the perpetrator, making it possible for him to locate her. Emma's sister, for example, emailed a vacation travel plan to Emma that the abuser managed to read; he then showed up at the destination airport on the day of her arrival.

All the interviewed women tried to do something to prevent the perpetrator reaching them through digital devices. Some of them were advised to erase their online life completely. This advice was given to Anne, who started to delete and remove accounts and contacts, including closing an account on a community platform that she had been a member of for many years. She described how she then started to get phone calls from people she had never met offline:

When I closed that account, it took no longer than a couple of hours, then a (online) contact called me, several people had contacted her from (the online community). And then (moderator for the online community) calls and several people have contacted him. And they are very worried and wondered what had happened. Okay, there I have the ones who understand. There I have my contact network, there I have my support.

As Anne started to erase her online life, she realised that this was also where she could find support, so she decided to stay with the community.

Evidence against the perpetrator

Digital media devices were also used by the victims to record or store evidence, for various purposes, as has been discussed in an Australian context (Douglas & Burdon, 2018). The victims took pictures of injuries and bruises, sometimes with the sole purpose of recording evidence during the relationship, although this was sensitive material. Anne took a picture of her injuries, but did not dare keep it on her own device in case her abuser found it; instead, she sent it to her children's father for safe keeping.

So I have a picture that I finally dared to take ... I sent it to Johan (ex-husband). I did not dare to have it in my phone.

Some women stored messages, online notes and emails sent by their abusers, to be found if killed by the abuser. Others collected threats as evidence, with future court sessions in mind. As Woodlock (2017) has shown, digital abuse often continues after separation. Veronica, for instance, tried to collect evidence, when living at a hidden location, by taping her abuser and their daughters when they had Skype meetings, so that if he said anything threatening or harassed the children, she would have proof in upcoming court proceedings.

However, because messages often need to be understood in context to be interpreted as threats and abuse, they can be difficult to use as evidence in police investigations. Several women who filed a police report were told that their collection of emails, videos or photos could not be used.³ Nevertheless, the evidence could help convince people within the woman's social networks that she was a victim of abuse. Women showed digital evidence (such as pictures, messages and videos) to family and friends, so they could understand what they been going through.

In some cases the family and friends' use of technology became important. Martina's parents managed to convince her to leave her former boyfriend because they had installed a hidden recording device at her work place without her knowledge, and had recorded the abuse. In Jeanette's case, her friends documented her injuries when she arrived at their house after being abused:

And when I get home to them, they have a video thing ... then they say: – undress now! So I had to go in to the shower and they documented everything.

Easy access to cameras and video recordings, and the ease with which data can be collected and sent via smart phones and computers, greatly helped these women, and in some cases their network members, to collect evidence of the abuse and injuries. In a few cases, this could then be used in a police investigation, but also to inform the social network about the abuse.

Monitoring the perpetrator

The ways in which the perpetrators used digital devices to surveil the women's movement have been discussed. However, the interviewed women also tried to keep track of their former partners online. This created an extra burden on the women, and some asked members of their social networks to remain friends with the perpetrator on social media, to keep an eye on him. Martina's friend did this for her: she knew where the perpetrator lived, if he had a new girlfriend, where he worked, etc. This gave Martina a sense of control and safety:

After the relationship ended he created an Instagram page where he dedicated things to us, he wrote stuff, posted pictures and videos (of us), he projected sadness, longing and anger, everything that had to do with us ... he also posted where he was. It was like his way of communicating with me, and he is still doing it, this is how sick he is ... I don't check it so often nowadays. I have a friend that checks it so I know where he is ... one of my friends keeps track of him, so I don't have to ... when he's in town I want to know that he is here.

In an attempt to assess and manage threats from perpetrators, women sometimes endure ongoing contact with the abuser (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Louise mentioned how still having some contact with the perpetrator made her feel more in control:

my new boyfriend got frustrated that I didn't just break the new phone card and throw it away, but it was nice, and others (victims) had told me as well, that even if it's frightening, you know where you have him, you know where he is, he can tell you 'oh, I'm home' and also if I answer he calms down a little bit, instead of just showing up outside my house to check on me.

By using digital devices, the women could keep track of the perpetrator's whereabouts and locations, but this could make it harder to erase their digital bond and contact with the perpetrator post-separation.

Counterstrikes against the perpetrator

The strategies so far have been about using digital technology for protection and support. But the women could also engage in more offensive strategies, staging public accusations against the men who had abused them. Some women used digital tools post-separation to share their experiences of abuse with others. Annika and her friends 'ganged up' to 'out' her former boyfriend as an abuser, by posting on social media when the perpetrator contacted and threatened her:

Because the police couldn't do anything, I had to do something myself, I had no choice but outing him. So we used Facebook. Other people have posted when he has done something, other people have written posts and shared them as well, so it reaches him. It has silenced him quite a bit.

Another method used was to send information about the perpetrator and his abusive behaviour to others in private emails. Nora and her mother documented her experience of abuse in an email that they sent to family and friends, making sure people knew about the man's behaviour in detail. They also wanted to share information in case 'something happened' to them, for example if he attacked them.

By posting on digital media and social platforms, or using private messages, these women shared their stories. When using social platforms, the women made the perpetrators aware that their communications were open to others, and were no longer hidden between the two of them. The women felt emotionally liberated after revealing their earlier hidden reality. We can interpret this as an action that reversed the power balance, symbolically breaking the women away from the coercive control that had imprisoned them. But the women also hoped that such naming and shaming would have an even greater consequence: preventing future abuse.

Concluding discussion

Our findings provide an empirical contribution to research on digital technology and IPV. In line with other studies (Woodlock, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019), the interviewees provided many examples of how perpetrators use digital technology to harass, monitor, stalk, threaten, embarrass and isolate their victims. But we have also highlighted how women use the same technology to seek support, defend themselves, resist, and at times 'strike back'.

The accounts presented here show how technology was used by the perpetrators as a means of coercive control and that digital violence was often connected with offline abuse. All the women in this study had been, or still were, abused repeatedly by their former partner, and technology-assisted abuse was used by the perpetrators in conjunction with other means to harm and control the women's lives, both pre- and post-separation. Because it was accompanied by non-digital violence and threats, the digital abuse was interwoven with the real-life experiences. The victim accounts show that, as indicated by Douglas et al. (2019) and Dragiewicz et al. (2019), technology-assisted abuse must be placed in context (its meaning, motives, and output) for us to be able to understand the full consequences of digital behaviour.

The 'technology of coercive control' involves four main techniques or strategies: harming and intimidating (coercion), and monitoring and isolating (control) (Stark, 2009, p. 1514). We found examples of all these strategies. The perpetrators controlled their victims' digital communications with others directly (forbidding and forcing) and indirectly (sharing online accounts, overseeing posts, knowing passwords, surveillance), and monitored their online and offline movements by using digital tracking systems.

The ubiquity of using digital devices in almost any situation makes it possible for a perpetrator to demand that the woman is accessible to answer his messages or calls at any time. Text, calls and messages reached the women at all times of day, often with the expectation of an immediate response. Failing to respond could result in the woman being beaten when she got home.

Threats and controlling behaviour were present even when the abuser was not physically close, creating a present but absent abuser. Stark (2009) emphasises that abused women are not only harmed by physical violence, but also by being surveilled, harassed, criticised and controlled in minute detail. These facets of abuse are evident in, and enhanced by, digital technology. Whereas in the past victims of domestic violence could have periods away from the perpetrator (e.g. when going to work, shopping, or at a parents' meeting), in the digital era victims are vulnerable to control by the perpetrators at any time (George & Harris, 2014; Woodlock, 2017). To escape the perpetrator, physical distancing is not enough.

This study also shows that the perpetrators' digital presence limits the victims' use of technology. To get rid of technology-assisted harassment, many women changed their phone numbers, user names and online ids, sometimes multiple times, blocking the perpetrators from social network sites, phones and emails, and refrained from creating new accounts and profiles. However, even if the victim blocked the perpetrator and ignored contact attempts, he often found ways to communicate with her. The ingenuity shown by the perpetrators included fake profiles, messages through bank transfer systems, and more.

Advice given to the women, from 'sisters-in-despair' or from social workers in support centres, included erasing their online life completely, and removing themselves from digital platforms and forums. This created a new form of restriction in social contact: not because the perpetrator prevented her from using the technology, but as a consequence of a safety procedure to stop the perpetrator contacting and monitoring her online. This was often impractical and made it hard for the victims to keep in contact with their networks; according to previous research, disengagement from technology can create or escalate risks for abused women (Harris, 2018). Some women did not even consider withdrawing from digital technology as an option because it was such a vital part of their lives, in accordance with Øverlien et al.'s (2020) study of young people's experiences of digital abuse.

In line with previous research (Hand et al., 2009; Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Southworth et al., 2005), we found that technology could be of benefit to the victims, making digital technology a double-edged sword. Technology was used to seek out help and support. The women searched online for information about support groups, reporting to the police and various other aspects of domestic violence. Digital media, often secretly, was used to gain support from social networks, and stay in contact with family and friends. Messages, pictures, emails and posts from the perpetrator were saved by the victim to build a body of evidence demonstrating the abuse. In many cases the 'evidence' did not represent a crime when considered in isolation (cf. Douglas & Burdon, 2018), but had to be viewed in context to be interpreted as a threat or abuse. But even when it could not be used by the police in an investigation, the evidence was important when the victim disclosed the abuse to others. The pictures, recordings and saved messages meant the victim could demonstrate what the perpetrator had done.

Furthermore, the women engaged in more offensive strategies, by posting public accusations about the men who had abused them on social media, sending detailed descriptions of the abuse to all email contacts, or sending pictures of injuries to people who doubted the severity of the abuse. By posting the information online via social platforms, the victims made the perpetrators aware that their hidden reality was no longer just between the two of them. This counterstrike

reversed the power balance, symbolically breaking the victim away from the coercive control that had imprisoned her. The women also highlighted another important consequence, that such naming and shaming could prevent future abuse.

This study is based on interviews with victims of violence and can only provide information on the technology disclosed by the victims. Some women suspected that the perpetrators were also using technology not known to them. Digital channels used by the victims were associated with a risk, and the perpetrators sometimes gained access to information shared by the victims in what was thought to be a safe digital environment. The need for increased safety without the victim withdrawing from technology needs to be addressed.

It is important to reflect on the fact that the interview guide did not include specific questions about technology use, making it very likely that the women had much more experience of technology-assisted abuse than became visible in this study. Rapid change and development in technology makes it difficult for interested parties to keep up to date and ask relevant and comprehensive questions about technological abuse. There is a growing body of research on technology and its links to IPV, but more empirical evidence is needed about its nature, extent and consequences. Research focusing on IPV and technology often originates from professionals (Woodlock et al., 2020), but studies are needed that originate from the victims and perpetrators themselves. We should strive to incorporate different voices, and acknowledge that narratives of abuse should be complemented by narratives of resistance. This article reveals the use of technology in IPV as a 'double-edged sword', providing the capacity to protect and even to use as a 'counter-strike' by victims of domestic violence as well as enhancing perpetrators' capacity to harm. Finally, while studies of young people in violent relationships have emphasised the importance of digital technology for those generations who have been brought up with computers and smart phones, our study indicates that limited access to digital devices and the Internet has important consequences for abuse victims of all ages.

Notes

1. This network data is a part of an ongoing study, to be analyzed elsewhere.
2. The Regional Ethical Review, Lund, reviewed and approved the project (Dnr.2017/1077).
3. Research shows that recorded evidence of intimate personal violence can be hard to stand as evidence in Australian courts (Douglas & Burdon, 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was funded by FORTE, The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare [grant number 2016-00987].

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