Chapter 24

# Digital Coercive Control and Spatiality: Rural, Regional, and Remote Women's Experience

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## Abstract

Technology increasingly features in intimate relationships and is used by domestic violence perpetrators to enact harm. In this chapter, we propose a theoretical and practical framework for technology-facilitated harms in heterosexual relationships which we characterize as *digital coercive control*. Here, we include behaviors which can be classified as abuse and stalking and also individualized tactics which are less easy to categorize, but evoke fear and restrict the freedoms of a particular woman. Drawing on their knowledge of a victim/survivor's experiences and, in the context of patterns and dynamics of abuse, digital coercive control strategies are personalized by perpetrators and extend and exacerbate "real-world" violence.

Digital coercive control is unique because of its spacelessness and the ease, speed, and identity-shielding which technology affords. Victim/survivors describe how perpetrator use of technology creates a sense of omnipresence and omnipotence which can deter women from exiting violent relationships and weakens the (already tenuous) notion that abuse can be "escaped." We contend that the ways that digital coercive control shifts temporal and geographic boundaries warrant attention. However, spatiality more broadly cannot be overlooked. The place and shape in which victim/survivors and perpetrators reside will shape both experiences of and response to violence. In this chapter, we explore these ideas, reporting on findings from a study on digital coercive control in regional, rural, and remote Australia. We adopt a feminist research methodology in regard to our ethos, research processes, analysis, and the outputs and outcomes of our project. Women's voices are

foreground in this approach and the emphasis is on how research can be used to inform, guide, and develop responses to domestic violence.

## Introduction

Technology increasingly features in intimate relationships and is used by domestic violence perpetrators to enact harm. Advocate and practitioner knowledge of this issue is growing, but thus far the literature has largely focused on dating violence in teen and adolescent settings, examining different phenomena in each study and not always using a gendered lens. Often these investigations fail to distinguish between perpetrator types (friends, acquaintances, partners) or consider the broader dynamic in which online (and also offline) harms are enacted. In this chapter, we propose a theoretical and practical framework for technology-facilitated harms in heterosexual relationships which we characterize as *digital coercive control*. Here, we include behaviors which can be classified as abuse and stalking and also individualized tactics, which are less easy to categorize, but evoke fear and restrict the freedoms of a particular woman. Drawing on their knowledge of a victim/survivor's experiences and in the context of patterns and dynamics of abuse, digital coercive control strategies are personalized by perpetrators and extend and exacerbate "real-world" violence.

Digital coercive control is unique because of its *spacelessness* and the ease, speed, and identity-shielding which technology affords. Victim/survivors describe how perpetrator use of technology creates a sense of omnipresence and omnipotence, which can deter women from exiting violent relationships and weakens the (already tenuous) notion that abuse can be "escaped." We contend that the ways that digital coercive control shifts temporal and geographic boundaries warrant attention. However, spatiality more broadly cannot be overlooked. The place and shape in which victim/survivors and perpetrators reside will shape both experiences of and response to violence. In this chapter, we explore these ideas, reporting on findings from a study on digital coercive control in regional, rural, and remote Australia. We adopt a feminist research methodology in regard to our ethos, research processes, analysis, and the outputs and outcomes of our project. Women's voices are foreground in this approach and the emphasis is on how research can be used to inform, guide, and develop responses to domestic violence.

The behaviors we discuss are not exclusive to heterosexual relationships, although we emphasize that, recognizing patterns in victimization and perpetration, our work has focused on examination of female victim/survivors and male abusers.

We begin with a review of related literature, with a focus on intimate partner violence, and the key concepts of digital coercive control, and spacelessness and spatiality. We then provide necessary background explaining what led us to undertake the study we report on in this chapter. Next, we set out our research approach and methods before moving on to report on our findings, discussing them in the context of the existing literature, highlighting themes related to digital

coercive control; low versus high-tech abuse; gendered and sexualized shaming; monitoring and surveillance; spacelessness and post-separation violence; technology as a tool for breaking isolation, rurality and patriarchal gender roles; and networking of abuse using family and friends. In conclusion, we call for future scholarly investigation and policy and practice developing relating to intimate partner violence that considers spatiality, not only in terms of the spacelessness of digital media and devices but also the influence of place and space more generally.

## Overview of Related Literature and Key Concepts

### *Investigating Intimate Partner Violence*

The bulk of literature on technology-facilitated violence in intimate relationships centers on "electronic (or cyber) dating violence." Sometimes the focus is purely on electronic channels, though there may be consideration of how "online" violence intersects with "offline" dating violence (see, for instance, Barter et al., 2017; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015a; Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Marganski & Melander, 2018; Temple et al., 2016; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). Often a quantitative methodology and system of analysis is adopted which draws on surveys or questionnaires of high school or college/university students (Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). Potentially, such approaches can provide insight into prevalence rates, too, although there has been extensive variation in rates recorded. Proportionally lower or mid-range levels have been observed by some (12% by Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; 26% by Zweig et al., 2013; 32.2%–53% by Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2017; 40% by Barter et al., 2017, in their respective studies) and higher levels in others (93% by Leisring & Giumetti, 2014). Essentially, these variations in prevalence rates can be attributed to differences in framework, such as the phenomena examined as well as measurement and theoretical processes.

Reviews of electronic dating violence have undoubtedly yielded useful data, both in regard to the role of technology in young people's intimate interactions and the ways that intrusion, harassment, aggression, abuse, and stalking can be performed in these settings. However, in some investigations, the relationships between parties are not necessarily restricted to dating partners, but may also include friends (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011) and other behaviors, such as cyberbullying (Cutbush & Williams, 2016). There is some debate among scholars as to whether or not there is a sex symmetry or asymmetry of cyber partner violence. We (Harris & Woodlock, 2019) are concerned with the "gender blindness" of the literature. However, Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, and Calvete (2015b) maintain that studies generally show that men and women perpetrate different types of cyber aggression and that the women experience more harmful effects in victimization. We contend that, where the dynamics, patterns and context of violence are not foreground, sex differences in the type, intention, and impacts of acts are obscured (Harris, 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019, see also Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Some measurement scales may include "false positives" for violence (Dragiewicz, 2009; Hamby & Turner, 2013) or fail to distinguish

patterns of control and coercion – which underscores domestic violence – from incidents of situational couple violence.

Young people are certainly heavy adopters of technology, yet by generally drawing from a school or college/university cohort, scholars have inadvertently reinforced myths that older persons do *not* experience technology-facilitated violence in relationships (George & Harris, 2014). Here, we note that, while much can be learned from works on digital dating violence, this is not always characterized as interpersonal violence and there are likely significant lifestyle contrasts between the age cohorts. For instance, middle or high schoolers (and indeed college/university students) are less likely to reside together, share children, or have connected finances. Our own work, which focuses specifically on adult women's victimization by domestic violence, has found an average age in the early-mid 30s and affirmed that older women (above the age of 50) also report experiencing image-based sexual abuse and other forms of technology-facilitated domestic violence (Harris & Woodlock, in press; Woodlock, 2013, 2017). Literature on perpetrator use of technology in the context of domestic violence is limited, but growing, and driven both by advocates and academics (Dimond, Fiesler, & Bruckman, 2011; Fraser, Olsen, Lee, Southworth, & Tucker, 2010; Hand, Chung, & Peters, 2009; Mason & Magnet, 2012; Southworth, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2005). Domestic violence agencies and civil societies (such as the United Nations and also organizations such as Take Back the Tech) broadly have also shaped research, policy, and practice agendas (Harris, Dragiewicz, & Woodlock, 2021).

### Digital Coercive Control

Digital media can provide channels to enact, extend, and exacerbate other forms of abuse (such as economic, psychological, or sexual abuse). In-person stalking may be accompanied by cyberstalking (technology-facilitated monitoring of a victim/survivor's movements, activities, or communications [George & Harris, 2014]). Additionally, abusers may impair an authorized function or cause an unauthorized function on a device. Victim/survivors also report incidents of "doxing": when their private and identifying information is published without their consent. Technology can provide vehicles for abusers to impersonate real people (or create profiles of fake people) or engage in identity theft, in efforts to intimidate, harass, or defraud targets (Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz, 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Harris, 2020; Harris & Woodlock, in press). These acts can be accomplished through access to a victim/survivors' actual or virtual properties and achieved through force, coercion, deception, or stealth (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). This is not an unchanging list. Technologies and strategies of perpetration will evolve as will, ideally, recognition and responses to such harms.

Some of the aforementioned presentations can be identified, categorized, and regulated under various laws, such as those pertaining to domestic violence, stalking, image-based sexual abuse, or cyber offenses. However, the same behaviors performed by perpetrators in abusive relationships can also be present

and innocuous in nonabusive relationships. Checking locations of an intimate partner, or sending frequent text messages, for instance, can be deemed harmless or harmful depending on the dynamics of the relationship (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Similarly, while video phone calls can enable connections between parents and children in families without domestic violence, we have heard accounts of perpetrators encouraging children to turn on video functions in efforts to locate a woman's residence and gain information about entrance points and security in a refuge (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, in press). Moreover, abusers have knowledge of a victim/survivor's personal history, experiences, and health of a victim/survivor, and so their strategies are individualized. Women might be sent messages that may not be viewed as offensive or abusive by an outsider, but might evoke fear and unrest because of the terms or incidents mentioned or because the time at which contact was made has a certain meaning for them (Woodlock, 2013).

Ultimately, we contend that "the relational and individual features of technology-facilitated domestic violence mean that it cannot be easily or absolutely cataloged" (Harris & Woodlock, in press). To capture the use of devices and digital media to stalk, harass, threaten, and abuse partners (or ex-partners and direct or collateral victims, such as children), we propose that the phrase (and term) *digital coercive control* be adopted (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2018 suggest "technology-facilitated coercive control"). This term identifies "the method (digital), intent (coercive behavior), and impact (control of an ex/partner)" and positions harm in a broader setting of sex-based inequality (Harris & Woodlock, 2019, p. 533). The concept of "coercive control" is central here (see also Havard & Lefevre, 2020; Woodlock, 2013, 2017), which is a gendered theory. Essentially, theorists maintain that men use coercive control violence in efforts to exploit, maintain, and reinforce their status and power (Douglas et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Hester, 2010; Stark, 2007). Though there is debate about how applicable coercive control may be for some victim/survivor experiences (such as in LGBTIQ+ relationships, Harris & Woodlock, in press), we emphasize that we see this as an intersectional approach and that the dynamics, distribution, and outcomes of violence are also shaped by racism, xenophobia, and homophobia (Stark & Hester, 2019).

Though Stark (2007) did not pioneer the concept of coercive control, his work has been most influential in academic study and practical application (Douglas et al., 2019). Stark's (2007, 2012) model encompasses spatially diffuse modes (like "spaceless" digital channels) and a range of perpetrator tactics (such as isolation, intimidation, threats, degradation, gaslighting, monitoring, and stalking), including those not generally classed as "serious" forms of violence (Harris, 2018). While advocates often appreciate that technology-facilitated abuse has extensive impacts on victim/survivors' sense of well-being and security, criminal justice agents have, in the past, suggested these harms are less serious and distinct from other forms of abuse (George & Harris, 2014). We see digital coercive control as typically part of women's broader experience of violence and highlight the pattern as opposed to using an "incident" centric model of abuse (Stark, 2007; Woodlock, 2013). Digital coercive control specifically (and coercive control more broadly) creates a condition of "entrapment" and "unfreedom", which constrains women's "space for action" (Kelly, 2003).

### Spacelessness and Spatiality

Digital coercive control is an extension of violence enacted through more traditional, "offline" channels (Harris & Woodlock, 2019). However, there are unique features of technology which warrant attention. Temporal boundaries have been shifted as digital media has afforded instantaneous communication. Scholars and civil societies have wondered if the ease and immediacy of messaging and the absence of face-to-face contact (of some channels) may result in senders exhibiting little empathy for recipients or dissociating from the effects of the message they are sending (Gray, 2012; see also Amnesty International, 2018). The spacelessness of technology, too, is transformative. While access points (devices) exist in the "real-world," social media accounts, digital profiles and alike are not bound to any geographic location. Thus, victim/survivors can be exposed to digital coercive control anywhere and anytime they use digital media (Harris, 2018; Woodlock, 2013, 2017). This is exacerbated by the "context collapse": the blurring of public and private, professional and personal lives on social media (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). As the different domains become intermeshed, violence is increasingly not confined to certain domains. Thus, even abuse in the domestic sphere which was long shrouded by a "veil of privacy" (Fineman, 1994) is by no means enacted only in "private" digital spaces (Vickery & Everbach, 2018). Abusers, for instance, mount campaigns on social media platforms in efforts to publicly shame and humiliate victim/survivors and post intimate images and videos without consent on internet sites (George & Harris, 2014; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock, 2013).

Domestic violence abusers capitalize on temporal and spaceless features of technology to erode boundaries and create a sense of omnipresence and omnipotence (Woodlock, 2017). This can include, for instance, high volumes of contact such as seemingly unending abusive text or email messages and posts on social media and constantly monitoring the activities, movements, and correspondence of victim/survivors using technology (Woodlock, 2013). As noted above, such practices create a condition of entrapment and unfreedom (Stark, 2007) and can be a deterrent to help-seeking and attempting to exit a violent relationship (Dimond et al., 2011; Hand et al., 2009). Our heavy utilization and reliance on technology (in providing education, employment, leisure, social, and civic engagement opportunities) ensures that it is difficult for victim/survivors to escape exposure to digital coercive control. There has been some recognition in the existing literature of spatiality in these regards, but little exploration of how the place and space in which digital coercive control is enacted can shape victim/survivor experiences of and responses to such abuse (Harris, 2016; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Harris & Woodlock, in press).

## Background to Our Study

Our study evolved from previous work we conducted in this field. Woodlock's (2013; 2017) SmartSafe project was one of the first investigations, globally, to survey victim/survivors and support workers about the use of technology in

abusive relationships. She documented how, via digital channels and devices, abusers sought to control, intimidate, and isolate women. Woodlock's research provided insights into impacts of and trends in perpetration and areas to knowledge-build in the Australian domestic violence sector (such as in safety planning processes). At the time there was scant scholarship on this topic. Some literature made reference to perpetrators using technology though this was not their focus. A study by George and Harris (2014) on victim/survivor's experiences of family violence in regional and rural Victoria (Australia) reported that technology-facilitated abuse and stalking had particular impacts on the well-being and safety of women in nonmetropolitan areas. They also highlighted the innovative digital strategies of advocates, offering opportunities to overcome geographic and social barriers to help-seeking, with limited resource investment. This was the first study to explore sociospatial impacts of violence in regard to technology-facilitated abuse, stalking, and advocacy, although not their main area of inquiry. Moving forward, we (Woodlock and Harris) decided to jointly develop a project that would advance our understanding of how technology shapes experiences of and responses to domestic violence in different places and spaces (Harris & Woodlock, in press).

Our research project *Spaceless Violence and Advocacy: Technology-Facilitated Abuse, Stalking and Service Provision in Australia* examined women's experiences of digital coercive control in regional, rural, and remote Australia (centering on the most heavily populated jurisdictions of Australia, the states of New South Wales [NSW], Victoria, and Queensland). We recognized that, compared to urban victim/survivors, those in nonurban locations face exacerbated barriers when seeking assistance (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; George & Harris, 2014; Hogg & Carrington, 2006). Abusers often capitalize on and seek to extend geographic and social isolation, including through technology (Farhall, Harris, & Woodlock, 2020). Risk in rural locations can be elevated by the sheer distance between a victim/survivor's residence and first responders. Consequently, what would be a serious assault in a metropolitan zone can quickly become a homicide in a nonmetropolitan zone (Harris, 2018; Lanier & Maume, 2009). In these settings, technology has the potential to contribute to the abuse and danger victim/survivors face (Harris, 2016). However, we emphasize that technology also can potentially bolster and provide new borderless avenues for help-seeking, the provision of assistance and services to victim/survivors, and regulation of violence (see also Harris, 2016; Harris et al., 2021). There is evidence that, in some rural or remote places, women have greater uptake of technology (for personal and professional purposes) than men (Hay & Pearce, 2014) and that Indigenous people are high adapters of technology (Carlson, 2013). This is significant, particularly as Indigenous women are overrepresented as victims/survivors of domestic and family violence (see Our Watch, 2018) and because there are indications that rates of domestic and family violence are highest in (at least some) regional and rural areas (see Dillon, Hussain, & Loxton, 2015; George & Harris, 2014).

## Research Approach and Methods

We used feminist research methods in our project as this approach is centered on providing an insight into women's experiences as they understand them. Using feminist methods means that the researchers are concerned with not only the methods used and how appropriate they are for the topic but also with the research process and ethics (Burman, Batchelor, & Brown, 2001). The outcome of the research is also of importance when using feminist methods, with an obligation that the outputs and outcomes are for, not just about, those that are participating in a project. Ethical feminist research practice is seen as work that "will get to places and audiences where it might help further the social good" (Sprague, 2005, p. 224). Reflecting on and integrating these principles into our study, our aim was that the product of our work would be shared with community organizations that work directly with victim/survivors. Our findings would also inform training for domestic violence advocates and practitioners.

Our project used semistructured interviews as the main research method. Interviews provide an insight into women's experiences that have often been marginalized, and as such are central to feminist research methods (Reinharz, 1992). As in-depth interviewing usually works with small sample sizes, feminist interviewing aims to gain deep understanding into women's experiences, and the findings may not necessarily be able to be generalized to larger populations (Hesse-Biber, 2007). We wanted to understand the meaning that women made of the use of technology in violence they were subjected to, and if they felt that where they lived shaped their experiences. Consequently, we cannot draw generalizations about how many women in rural, regional, and remote locations in Australia are subjected to technology abuse, but our findings can advance understandings about how technology is used in domestic violence and how geographical space and place impact these experiences.

### *Recruitment*

We partnered with Women's Legal Service (NSW), a community legal center which provides free information, education, and representation for women, as well as engaging in law reform and campaigning for women's rights and protections. The agency had also worked with Woodlock previously on the issue of technology and domestic violence (Woodlock, 2015). Through their facilitation we made contact with women's services throughout rural NSW, Queensland, and Victoria, to recruit victim/survivors who had been subjected to the use of technology in domestic violence.

Recruiting women who were connected to domestic violence support services ensured that our participants had support from a service throughout the process; they were able to discuss risks before the interview and debrief with staff afterward. This approach has limitations, as the majority of women who are subjected to domestic violence do not seek formal support. Therefore, the participants only included women who had recognized the abuse they were subjected to was domestic violence, or someone else they had contact with (such as family, friends,

or professionals), prompted them to seek support. Relying on services to assist with the recruitment processes also puts added pressure on domestic violence services, which are already under considerable strain, and we found it an uncomfortable process to send reminders and prompts to organizations.

### Interview Process and Demographics

We conducted individual interviews with 13 women and one focus group with two women. Our participants ranged in age from 25 to 50, with an average age of 33. While this correlates with the average age of women impacted by domestic violence, it is older than the high school and university aged cohorts that are largely focused on in relation to electronic dating violence. When asked about their cultural background, the majority of participants said they were Australian (69%) and within this group 15% identified as Aboriginal. There were 31% who said they were born overseas, with 15% from New Zealand, 8% from South America, and 8% from Asia. All women were subjected to abuse from a male former intimate partner.

Interviews were conducted in person as well as via the telephone depending on the participant's preference. The in-person interviews were held at the support service offices. One focus group was also held at a support service office. Prior to their participation, women were given plain language information about the project and had time to discuss the risks and benefits with the support services, as well as with the researchers. The interviews and focus group that were conducted at the support service offices were attended by both researchers, with one taking the lead and the other researcher offering support. For the interviews that were conducted via the phone, contact was first made via the support service who explained the research to the participant and then with her permission, forwarded her details to the researchers, as well as outlining any safe contact protocols. These included sending a text message before calling the phone so that the participant recognized our numbers. All participants received a $50 gift card to acknowledge their contribution and time. We also gave a donation to services that assisted us in recognition of their time and the effort that went into finding participants for our research. The interviews and focus group were recorded, with participant consent, and transcripts were subsequently prepared. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants in the transcripts in order to protect their confidentiality.

### Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The transcripts from our 13 interviews and one focus group were coded using thematic analysis, and we used NVivo to assist with categorization (King & Horrocks, 2010; Saldaña, 2012). We applied the system of thematic analysis outlined by King and Horrocks (2010), first coding the interviews descriptively, using codes such as "GPS used to track" and "Contact with police." Then we applied interpretive coding to the findings, where meaning was interpreted

according to the research question. Interpretive codes included "Technology used to control" and "Victim-blaming by police." Both researchers read and coded the transcripts separately, using double coding to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis. Our codes and themes were then compared and contrasted, and we worked together in the development of a thematic structure of descriptive and interpretive codes. We then collaborated on the final stage of thematic analysis which is to define overarching themes (King & Horrocks, 2010). These overarching themes include "The use of technology by perpetrators is often not taken seriously as a form of abuse" and that "Technology is used alongside other forms of abuse."

## Findings

### *Digital Coercive Control*

Victim/survivors in our study detailed the way that technology was incorporated into perpetrating coercive and controlling tactics, often extending and exacerbating other forms of (offline) abuse (Harris & Woodlock, in press). Digital coercive control occurred alongside other forms of harm such as sexual violence, physical abuse, and nonfatal strangulation. For many victim/survivors, digital coercive control began during the relationship and was largely characterized by abusive text messages, monitoring via apps and GPS devices, and image-base sexual abuse. Technology had a heavy presence in their lives and abusers' reach and contact was extensive. Women talked about feeling as though they were exposed to harm anywhere and at any time and being constantly under surveillance. Kira described her abuser making "constant [contact]. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a hundred [texts and emails] a day. It was very, very frequent." Likewise, Louise was sent a raft of messages – "10 in a row" – before she had a chance to respond, and

> …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.

Earlier in relationships, women might feel that such contact was romantic or demonstrated their devotion. As Claire explained:

> [It was] little things that I kind of mistook as, oh, he's very caring, [but it] was obviously the beginning of the grooming and the controlling and the forward behaviors that I ended up accepting actually, as someone caring for me.

Abusers often framed their behaviors as helpful or positive. Maya's ex would routinely open her email inbox and "clean up" her emails for her. He linked his phone number to her email account because, he said, she was forgetful, and he could help retrieve her account if she lost her password. Women also talked about

how their abusers would demand to have passwords on children's devices too, "to keep her [our daughter] safe." As Fiona explained, these can be claims and concerns all parents have, but the context of her relationship meant his access to her devices and, her children's devices, was problematic:

> I've got a friend who's got a tracking device on her son (he hurt himself from riding) and he said 'just look me up, where I am, if you're worried', you know? She's a great woman, right? So she's got his best interests. But in a DV [domestic violence] situation, it's completely different.

## Low-Tech vs High-Tech Methods

Navarro (2015) notes that abusers can use "low-tech" methods (which do not require specialized knowledge) or "high-tech" methods (drawing on advanced knowledge). Women in our study believed that perpetrators mainly drew on low-tech strategies and skill sets. However, it can be hard to discern exactly what avenues perpetrators engage. Sometimes perpetrators delighted in women being forewarned they had control of devices or accounts, creating a (perhaps inflated) sense of perpetrator omnipresence and omnipotence. Abusers also sought to hide their activities (see also Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). Many women suspected that perpetrators engage in covert strategies and applications they had not discovered, which was a source of great anxiety. Fiona stressed that "there are some things you will never know about, with technology." Complicating the issue, domestic relationships involve the sharing of intimate knowledge, account ownership and access, and unique relational dynamics that enable insider threats to digital security (Freed et al., 2018, see also Dragiewicz et al., 2019). While we appreciate that some abusers may be more tech-savvy than others or use high-tech approaches and apps (like spyware, screenloggers, or keyloggers), abusers are also well positioned to guess or locate account information and can also use stealth, deception, and force to accomplish their goals (Harris, 2020). As our participants acknowledged, there was information (such as about their location) that could have been either gleaned from high-tech channels (like GPS tracking devices, hidden in their property) or low-tech channels (such as location-enabled features on devices, like "find my friends" apps).

### Gendered and Sexualized Shaming and Humiliation

Abuse and harassment were often gendered and sexualized and technology was used in attempts to shame and humiliate women. Six of the thirteen women we consulted were subjected to image-based sexual abuse. Some women talked about images or videos being created with consent but numerous women, upon reflection during interviews, mentioned feeling manipulated, pressured, or coerced by

abusers. Our participants also described feeling unease knowing perpetrators had possession of images or videos. Shelly lamented that her ex refused to delete "inappropriate photos" of her and

> …he brings up that he has these photos, and he's tried to use them as an emotional tool as well. Just saying "I've got a whole memory stick full of photos, if you want to get smart, I'll post them."

Three women were aware that their abuser had publicly shared images or videos of them.

In text and social media communications "name-calling" like "slut" was common "[i]f he didn't get his own way" (Fiona), as were attacks on women's sexuality. Threats of rape and sexual assault were widely reported, too, like messages that said "I deserved to be raped because I needed somebody to straighten me out" (Kira). Filipovic (2007) and Jane (2014) report that sexual violence can be presented as "corrective" to perceived "transgressions" from gender roles: here, we might think about expectations of female passivity and men's expectations of dominance. Menacing terms and expressions could evoke anxiety and pain in all of our participants. For those who had previous histories of sexual violence, these words had particular meanings and consequences. Cody's ex was well aware she had been sexually abused as a child. During their relationship he referred to and blamed her for this victimization. Post-separation he knew that adopting slurs she associated with her past and mentioning names of family members would trigger her memory and trauma. Natalie's ex shared information about her sexual history with her mother, family, and friends, over the phone. As Woodlock (2017) and Logan, Shannon, and Walker (2005) explain, perpetrators use technology and their knowledge of women's fears and personal history to torment women, to deter them from leaving, and to show they have power beyond the private sphere.

### Monitoring and Surveillance

Perpetrators used access to our participants' accounts and devices to monitor their communications, activities, and movements. Some set up or gifted phones, tablets, or computers on shared plans which allowed them to follow women's use. Others would view billing information. Women were not always aware of men's oversight. Fiona recalled how, at the time, she did not know that her abuser was examining her message and call histories:

> He would say it in a way that [was off-the-cuff] so I didn't realize he was actually looking at the phone bill. I didn't realize 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] every day, don't you?" I'd say "no, I don't".… He said "yeah, you do."

Several abusers informed women they were using (GPS) tracking mechanisms. Natalie's ex told a friend of hers he was using technology to find her:

> He'd just appear. I'd be in some random supermarket and he'd just be behind me, or I'd be in some bushy area… he'd just appear in random places… just behind me.

As a consequence, she felt like he could turn up at any time: "I just had the nervous tic of looking over my shoulder every five seconds."

### Spacelessness and Continued Violence Post-Separation

The accounts of our participants challenged myths surrounding domestic violence, including that violence can be easily escaped and that violence ends post-separation, as has been well established in the literature (see, for instance, DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009). For many, digital coercive control escalated (especially in regard to cyberstalking); at the very least, it did not subside, post-separation. Thus, the notion of "'feeling safe' from an abuser no longer has the same geographic and spatial boundaries it once did" (Hand et al., 2009, n.p.; see also Dimond et al., 2011; Fraser et al., 2010). These harms are spaceless which means "[t]here wasn't ever a break from it… you can't actually escape it," as Kira says, "every other type of abuse, I was able to…it just ended at some point." However, the space in which the woman and perpetrators are based matters.

### Impact of Social and Geographic Features on Visibility

Social and geographic features of regional, rural, and remote locations shaped experiences of abuse and barriers that our participants encountered when seeking help and responding to violence. They described how, living in small communities, they felt more visible. They were more likely to be known to services and agencies when disclosing violence and seeking assistance and so were confronted with "going public" with private violence (see also George & Harris, 2014). Victim/survivors who identified as Indigenous, culturally or linguistically diverse, or those who had previously come into contact with the criminal justice system described feeling especially visible.

### Technology as a Tool for Breaking Isolation

Though women in our study engaged with support workers and practitioners in their geographic area, we note that, for rural women, technology can provide confidential channels beyond their community to respond to violence. In that way, technology was a lifeline for many of our participants, especially those who were geographically and/or socially isolated. Perpetrators sought to extend their isolation while they lived together, for instance, by moving their family to remote

farms, destroying their relationships with others, and restricting their access to technology. For those who did not have social networks in the area, including newly arrived women (and those on temporary visas), technology offered key channels to maintain links with friends and family. Digital media could also offer further employment and education channels, which was vital, as rural communities had less opportunities than in urban communities. Our participants' experiences demonstrate the ways in which technology can be a source of empowerment, in enabling women to access resources and build capabilities to exit relationships and gain independence (see also Louie, this volume).

### Rurality and Patriarchal Gender Roles

In essence, rurality brought forward barriers into our participants' lives. A wealth of literature has documented how geographic, social, and ideological structures and features in rural places can foster and facilitate violence (Farhall et al., 2020; see also Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Loxton, Hussain, & Schofield, 2003). In our study, as with our previous studies (see George & Harris, 2014; Harris, 2016), victim/survivors described their communities as conservative or conducive to violence, because of localized gender roles and patriarchal values. As Hogg and Carrington (2006, p. 180) argue, gender in rural communities can have unique meanings and presentations:

> The social organisation of masculinity in these rural social sites is constructed more narrowly around heteronormative conceptions of masculinity that subordinate others through practices of domination that have historically relied on the exercise of violence.

Rural hegemonic masculinity has been observed by scholars, internationally (in New Zealand, by Campbell, 2000; South Africa, by Jewkes et al., 2006; the United States, by DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; United Kingdom, by Hey, 1986; Whitehead, 1976 as cited in Harris & Woodlock, in press).

In small, close-knit communities, women can be ostracized or demonized when disclosing abuse, particularly when "traditional" patriarchal, gender, and family values are present (George & Harris, 2014; Hornosty & Doherty, 2002; Wendt, 2009). Speaking to this, Kira, reflecting on her past victimization (as a child in the family setting and, being sexually assaulted as a child and adolescent and, as an adult, subjected to domestic violence) noted:

> I grew up in a small community… once one [person] started [engaging in violence] it was kind of a trend where all the males in the community would just, I guess, jump on board, if that makes sense?

Informal support networks can be reluctant to assist victim/survivors or intervene to prevent violence, especially where perpetrators are well-known and

regarded (National Rural Crime Network, 2019; Neilson & Renou, 2015). Claire's ex "went around the streets telling people that I'm crazy" and his version of events spread quickly, because of the small size community. Claire went on to explain: "he [my abuser] is established – he knows people and he's well-liked … He's in a boy's club and knows lots of people." She talked about, in contrast, feeling alone. Here, we can consider how abuser allies and perpetrator peer support networks (see DeKeseredy, 1990; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016) are shaped by rurality, facilitating not only violence but also women's isolation.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz proposed that "abusive patriarchal men" may have like-minded allies who develop, exchange, and reinforce values and beliefs that support violence and provide resources and guidance that essentially "allows men to feel normal and justified when committing violence against current and former intimate partners" (2016, p. 4). Numerous participants spoke about these structures which underscored what we termed "proxy perpetrators." This can include persons within their abuser's social network who elect to engage in digital coercive control.

### Engagement of Family and Friends in Networks of Abuse

Family members or friends may, for instance, contribute to negative social media campaigns attacking a victim/survivor, send demeaning messages to her, or use technology to stalk her movements, without prompting from the perpetrator (see also George & Harris, 2014). We include, in this category, persons who unwillingly or unknowingly facilitate perpetration, such as children (see also Dragiewicz et al., 2019).

Children were also manipulated into facilitating abuse of our participants. When Shelly blocked her ex on social media, he reached out to her daughter, claiming he wanted to watch her play sports and "she felt excited that he wanted to watch, so she gave him all the details [that helped him find me]." Other family members and friends appeared to be actively commissioned by an abuser, enlisted to harass or watch a woman using digital channels (see Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Murray et al., 2019). One woman, Kira, told us that friends of her ex would inform him of her whereabouts and activities. When she blocked his number, others provided their phones or digital profiles so he could contact her and "continue to harass me through [their accounts]." It was difficult for her to know if he was also using tracking devices to monitor her movements. These networks of abuse exacerbated the vulnerabilities of rural women.

### Conclusion

Moving forward, we advocate for further studies of technology in the context of domestic violence which examine how victim/survivors, perpetrators, and advocates use technology. Technology shifts temporal and geographic boundaries and so will impact experiences of violence and abuse, as well as the responses that

follow. We call for future scholarly investigation and policy and practice development to consider spatiality, examining not only the spacelessness of digital media and devices but also the influence of place and space. The metropole has, overwhelmingly, been the focus of studies in this arena. This is a knowledge deficit that must be addressed: barriers and risk to regional, rural, and remote women can not only be exacerbated but also potentially overcome (or at least abated) through technology.

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