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Technology-assisted abuse within intimate relationships

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Introduction
Advancements in technology and the availability of the Internet has created numerous types of cyberspaces (e.g. social networking sites (SNS), chatrooms, etc.) as well as new methods of digital communication facilitated by the use of smartphones (e.g. instant messenger, video chat, etc.) allowing us to develop and maintain social and interpersonal relationships using such tools. While such technologies provide us with instant, accessible and affordable methods of communication, they have also brought risks in terms of providing a new method in which abusive behaviour within intimate relationships can occur. Drawing on published research this chapter aims to provide an overview of the role technology plays in intimate partner violence (IPV). Consideration will be given to the nature, prevalence and impact of technology-assisted abuse within intimate relationships, including the role that gender plays in such experiences. The chapter will be organised in two main sections, focusing on technology-assisted IPV that occurs in adult intimate relationships and that which occurs within adolescent romantic relationships. Finally, the implications of the research reviewed will be discussed in terms of policy, practice and research.

Technology-assisted abuse in adult intimate relationships
IPV in adult relationships is often referred to as domestic violence or abuse and may include elements of stalking and harassment. While traditionally understandings of IPV has focused on physical, psychological, emotional, sexual and financial forms of abusive and controlling/coercive behaviour (Home Office, 2012), research has recognised that IPV may also be communicated digitally (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Duerksen & Woodin, 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock, 2014). Unlike the government definition of domestic violence in England, the definition of stalking includes the use phone calls as a method through which stalking behaviours can be experienced (Home Office, 2011), while definitions of cyberstalking recognise a broader range of technologies such as email and other computer-based communication tools that can be used to monitor, threaten, insult or harass a person (including a current/former intimate partner), as well as infect an individual’s computer with viruses (Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2007). The term obsessive relational intrusion has been used to define the
unwanted pursuit of intimacy through the repeated invasion of a person’s sense of physical or symbolic privacy (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Additionally, ‘technology-facilitated stalking’ (Woodlock, 2017), ‘digital coercive control’ (Harris & Woodlock, 2019), ‘technological IPV’ (Duerksen & Woodin, 2019) and ‘technology-facilitated coercive control’ (Dragiewicz et al., 2019) have been used to refer to the use of digital media to control and abuse intimate partners/ex-partners within the context of IPV. For the purpose of this chapter, the term technology-assisted IPV will be used.

Nature of abusive, coercive and controlling behaviours

Drawing on rational actor theory, Frisby and Westerman (2010) found that partners who had dominating conflict styles preferred computer-mediated channels of control such as text messaging, phones, instant messenger, SNS and emails, due to the proximity such methods offered, the technological advantages of convenience and because they offered opportunities for immediate contact with a partner by any means necessary in order to exert their control. Technology therefore offers many opportunities for access to a victim, in addition to a lack of deterrence due to its hidden nature.

Technology-assisted IPV has been described as being unique due to its spacelessness, meaning this method of abuse transcends fixed spatial boundaries and borders (Harris, 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). As a result of this, perpetrators are able to contact, harass, abuse, control and monitor their victims 24 hours a day, seven days a week, instantly, from a distance, and repetitively, both during the relationship and after it has ended (Woodlock, 2014, 2017). Southworth et al.’s (2007) seminal paper describes the use of a broad range of technologies in intimate partner stalking including cordless and cellular telephones, fax machines, email, global positioning systems (GPS), spyware, keystroke logging hardware, video/hidden cameras, caller identification, calling cards, computer and Internet technology, and online databases. A recent study by Dragiewicz et al. (2019) reported that the most commonly described technology-assisted IPV behaviours were repetitive texting, emailing, stalking and harassment via Facebook, as well as abusers using cloud-based storage (e.g. iCloud and Google) and GPS data and devices as a method to monitor a partner.

Woodlock (2014) reports on findings from the SmartSafe Project in Australia that explored the use of technology in IPV and stalking using surveys with 152 IPV professionals and 46 victims/survivors. Woodlock (2014) found three main ways that perpetrators were using technology to facilitate their stalking including causing fear, having an omnipresence (e.g. through using GPS tracking devices/software and monitoring social media accounts) and punishing and humiliating (e.g. by publicly shaming women, often in sexualised ways). Omnipresence was described as enabling perpetrators to create the sense that they are present in every aspect of the victim’s life meaning the victim had no privacy, security or sense of safety, and served to isolate victims further (Woodlock, 2014, 2017). Perpetrators threatened to share sexualised content online to humiliate the victim (Woodlock, 2017), which may result in victims becoming targets of revenge porn and harassment by others.

The use of technology in IPV can be used in combination with physical, psychological, sexual and financial abuse and control offline (George & Harris, 2014; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Southworth et al., 2007; Woodlock, 2014). Indeed, Dragiewicz et al. (2019) emphasise that the use of technology by abusers has become interwoven within the pattern of IPV, comprised of numerous controlling, abusive, threatening and violent tactics. It is therefore argued that technology-assisted IPV is an extension of offline violence (Harris & Woodlock, 2019). In research with young adults, it was found that involvement in technology-assisted IPV increased
the odds of offline IPV (Marganski & Melander, 2018). Traditional IPV perpetration has also been reported to predict technology-assisted IPV perpetration (Duerksen & Woodin, 2019). The co-occurrence of technology-assisted IPV has also been noted. For example, 35.8% of female and 26.5% of male university students in Spain reported being a victim and a perpetrator of technology-assisted IPV at the same time (Villora, Yubero, & Navarro, 2019a, 2019b).

Southworth et al. (2007) provide some examples of the use of technology in IPV and stalking from news stories and anecdotal experiences of victims in the United States (US). One example describes how a man murdered his former girlfriend after using a caller ID service to track her down, while another describes how a woman’s violent husband killed her following her plan to escape to a new home after he found a deleted email that she had sent to a friend asking for help moving. These examples highlight how technology can provide perpetrators of IPV with an extensive range of tools that can be used to monitor and control a current or former intimate partner, as well as highlighting the intrusiveness of technology-assisted IPV and its devastating impact. Leaving an abusive partner does not ensure that the abusive behaviour will desist and in fact the level of technology-assisted IPV can increase. For example, all of the survivors interviewed by Dragiewicz et al. (2019) reported technology-assisted IPV began or escalated at separation. This is a crucial factor that may deter victims from leaving an abusive relationship as the perpetrator can stay connected through digital devices (Dimond, Fiesler, & Bruckman, 2011).

### Prevalence

A number of studies have documented the prevalence of technology-assisted IPV as being substantial, and recognised its diverse nature among both young adults and adults. It is worth noting however, that due to the increased availability and development of both digital devices and technological capabilities, seeking to measure prevalence is challenging. Woodlock (2014) identified that 97% of 152 professionals working with victims of IPV reported that perpetrators used technology to stalk women, with mobile phones being the most commonly reported device used followed by social media (such as Facebook), email and GPS tracking. This was echoed in a later study in which 98% of practitioners reported this knowledge (Woodlock, McKenzie, Western, & Harris, 2019). Depending on the behaviour measured, 6–78% of victims reported some form of technology-facilitated IPV ranging from a partner/ex-partner contacting them via a mobile/text message to call them names, harass them or put them down (78%), to a partner/ex-partner giving their children a phone/device as a way of creating further opportunities to contact them against their wishes (6%) (Woodlock, 2014). George and Harris (2014) similarly highlighted that the most commonly reported technology-assisted IPV behaviour by survivors was receiving frequent and repeated abusive messages, voice calls and harassment via their social media profiles. Harris and Woodlock (2019) contend that technology-assisted IPV must be considered as a form of gendered violence, that effects women disproportionately compared to men. However, at times research has reported mixed findings regarding gender differences in experiences of technology-assisted IPV. That is not to say however, that experiences of violence are not very different for females compared to males, as evidenced in feminist perspectives of IPV (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1989; Yllö & Bograd, 1990).

In their study of 804 undergraduates in the US, Burke, Wallen, Vail-Smith and Knox (2011) found that half of both females and males reported the use of technology to monitor partners, either as the perpetrator or victim. A range of monitoring or controlling behaviours were examined including sending excessive emails or making excessive phone calls; checking call and email histories; checking phone bills; monitoring partner’s Facebook accounts;
making inappropriate Facebook postings/posting inappropriate pictures; using a GPS device, a webcam, hidden camera or spyware to monitor partners; and using partners’ passwords to monitor them. Although both sexes reported a considerable amount of technology-assisted IPV behaviour, females were significantly more likely than males to monitor the email accounts of their partners (25% vs. 6%) and to regard doing so as appropriate behaviour (Burke et al., 2011).

Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, and Calvete (2015) found that in a sample of 788 young adults (aged 18–30) in Spain, a significant number reported technology-assisted IPV in the form of controlling behaviour (75% victimisation and 82% perpetration) and direct aggression such as insults and threats (14% victimisation and 10.6% perpetration). Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix and Calvete (2015) similarly found that in a sample of 656 18–30 year olds in Spain, the prevalence of online control perpetration was 88.4%, although females were significantly more likely than males to report engaging in this behaviour (90.3% vs. 81.2%). The perpetration of online direct aggression was 20.3% (26.1% females vs. 18.7% males), although gender differences were not significant. Hassett-Walker (2019) examined technology-assisted IPV in a sample of 476 young adults (aged 18–30) in the US. They found that males were significantly more likely than females (28.7% vs. 18.5%) to report being monitored or controlled by a partner via social media or technology, and experiencing emotional or verbal aggression via social networking (14.8% vs. 6.9%). Although not statistically significant, males were also more likely than females to report monitoring or controlling a partner for all technologies except for a mobile phone. A similar pattern was found for the perpetration of emotional or verbal aggression with the exception of the mobile phone and text message method (in which females reported a slightly higher percentage).

**The role of attachment**

Some authors have argued that the perpetration of technology-assisted IPV (i.e. monitoring and controlling behaviours and the surveillance of a partner) is associated with attachment anxiety explained as a means to establish/re-establish proximity (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013; Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015). The high prevalence of controlling or monitoring technology-assisted IPV behaviours may be explained by such attachment characteristics. However, further research is needed to explore this in more detail. It could be that our extensive use of technology in daily communication, as well as the accessibility of communication tools and personal information online has resulted in increased opportunities to use it for abusive and controlling purposes as well as to blur the boundaries between what is considered as acceptable behaviour within relationships. Indeed, Duerksen and Woodin (2019) found that technology use (especially social media use) and technological disinhibition (i.e. behaving differently online/digitally than one would normally behave offline) uniquely predicted technology-assisted IPV perpetration.

**Impact**

Although the impact of technology-assisted IPV has been viewed as being less harmful than offline IPV, and in particular physical violence, due to the perceived distance separating the victim from immediate physical harm (Hand, Chung, & Peters, 2009; McCall, 2004), the impact of such abuse can be devastating for victims. It has been argued that constantly receiving harassing messages from an intimate partner may heighten perceptions of vulnerability, potentially escalating the threat of physical violence (Dimond et al., 2011; Melander, 2010). Survivors of
technology-assisted IPV report serious, pervasive and persistent negative outcomes, highlighting that technology magnifies the harms of IPV and provides opportunities for new forms of abuse (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). For example, nearly 90% of participants in Maple, Short and Brown’s (2011) survey said that the harassment had actually caused a change in their lives in work, personal relationships, or financially. Similarly, the impact of technology-assisted IPV and stalking has been reported to have a significant impact on victim’s mental and physical wellbeing (84%), day-to-day routines (74%), employment (66%), parenting (26%) and relationships (63%) (Woodlock, 2014). Indeed, research has highlighted a number of negative impacts of technology-assisted IPV and cyberstalking including increased fear for safety, stress, anxiety, feeling sick, insomnia, post-traumatic stress syndrome/disorder, depression, distress, distrust, anger, paranoia, frustration, helplessness, an erosion of trust in the self and other people, economic and social costs (e.g. changing phone numbers, addresses, jobs, schools, hobbies, restricting social activities, investing in protective technologies for home security and bodyguards) and physical injury (Maple et al., 2011; Logan, 2010; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002; Truman, 2007; Woodlock et al., 2019). Such impacts can increase the isolation of victims, which may be exacerbated for some populations in vulnerable positions. For example, research has highlighted that those living in rural locations and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are at increased risk for IPV, including technology-assisted IPV, in addition to experiencing enhanced barriers to safety, accessing support and justice, and increased social isolation (George & Harris, 2014; Woodlock et al., 2019).

Victims of partner stalking have also paid the price of their life, or have endured attempts to kill them by their partner/ex-partner. McFarlane et al. (1999) examined intimate partner stalking that occurred within 12 months of attempted and actual partner femicide, finding that 76% of victims who were killed by an intimate or former partner and 85% of victims whose partner or former partner attempted to kill them, were stalked by that partner in the 12 months before their murder/attempted murder. This echoes the examples of cyberstalking reported by Southworth et al. (2007), in which technology was used by ex-partners to track down victims resulting in their murder.

Experiencing technology-assisted IPV can have many impacts for victims’ own technology use such as having to change phone numbers and close social media accounts, consequences of the coercive tactics used by perpetrators to isolate and intimate victims (Woodlock, 2017). However, such distancing and avoidance actions could actually be more risky and unpredictable for victims as the perpetrator might try to contact them directly as a result of losing that ability to contact and control them (Woodlock et al., 2019). Some survivors have found that disconnecting a telephone line or email account in an attempt to thwart a stalker results in the abuser escalating to a new method of control or access (Southworth, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2005). This may also raise some practical challenges for women/survivors. Women who are separated from and share children with a perpetrator may not be able to disengage from digital communication channels because of shared parenting (Woodlock et al., 2019). Indeed, 13/14 survivors with children in Dragiewicz et al.’s (2019) study reported technology-assisted IPV during post-separation parenting. Additionally, Harris and Woodlock (2019) have been critical of the victim-blaming attitudes that burden victims/survivors with the responsibility of managing their technological use in terms of ensuring their own safety and digital privacy or from refraining from using technology completely. It is argued that there is a major dilemma faced by practitioners in how to promote and facilitate client safety from technology-assisted IPV while still enabling safe use of technology so clients can remain connected to family, friends and community (Woodlock et al., 2019).
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Attitudes

Research has highlighted that technology-assisted IPV may be viewed as less serious compared to traditional offline IPV among the general public. For example, Messinger, Birmingham and DeKeseredy (2018) found that intimate partner cyber monitoring was less likely to be defined as abuse and was perceived as being less serious and less deserving of survivor support than that of physical violence in a sample of young adult undergraduate students. Harris, Honey, Webster, Diemer and Polito (2015) also found that older adolescents and young adults are less likely to identify non-physical behaviours as violence than they are to recognise physical violence and forced sex, and at times, expressed that they would excuse partner violence depending on the scenario. Furthermore, 46% agreed that tracking a partner electronically was acceptable to some degree; despite the majority (84%) recognising that covert tracking of a partner electronically was a serious behaviour. Tolerant attitudes may mean technology-assisted IPV is potentially normalised in some relationships meaning its seriousness and impact is not always recognised.

Help-seeking and the role of technology in intervention

Victims are often reluctant to seek help due to feeling embarrassed or fearful that they will not be believed, as represented by less than half of victims seeking help in Woodlock's (2014) study. Tarza, Iyer, Thrower and Hegarty (2017) highlight that delivering an IPV intervention online or via a smartphone has the potential to overcome some of these barriers such as reluctance to access services and its associated stigma. Indeed, a range of technological and Internet-based tools are now available for victims of IPV. Technology can be used to help victims in terms of raising awareness; access to information, resources and service providers; crisis support; reducing feelings of isolation by maintaining contact with social networks; provision of online/social media-based peer support groups; equipping victims with safety devices and help with safety planning; recording and collecting evidence of abuse for criminal justice agencies; wearable technology solutions; and empowering victims (Al-Alosi, 2020; Think Social Tech, Snook, & SafeLives, 2019). There are websites and helplines (e.g. nationaldahelpline.org.uk) to support victims of IPV and professionals working with survivors. Techsafety.org, a US organisation, provides a list of apps for smartphones and tablets that address the issue of IPV including screening tools to recognise abuse and find resources and safety planning and advice (e.g. myplanapp.org). However, the provision and awareness of digital services for support in the UK remains patchy and fragmented (Think Social Tech, Snook, & SafeLives, 2019).

Importantly, technology may be the only feasible way for some victims to overcome barriers from seeking help, such as time, geography, disability and communication barriers (Al-Alosi, 2020). However, factors such as age, disability, education, ethnicity and poverty may affect a victim’s understanding or familiarity with technology and act as barriers due to difficulty with Internet connection and accessibility/affordability (Al-Alosi, 2020; Tarza et al., 2017). Furthermore, these authors highlight that such interventions need to be mindful of issues such as safety, privacy and the accuracy of information online.

Technology has also been reported to provide benefits for survivors of IPV, particularly those who have had to relocate to shelters for safety. Technology can offer victims opportunities for communication, help-seeking, and provide advocacy, support and administration of justice for victims/survivors (Harris, 2018; Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Dimond et al. (2011) interviewed ten women who were residents at a shelter in the US and found that mobile phones and SNS offered glimpses of support, such as feeling and staying connected with family and friends,
especially when they have had to cut ties in order to move on. Additionally, IPV survivors used technology in order to find housing, jobs and resources to support themselves and their children, meaning survivors had to weigh up the risks and benefits of their continued use of technology and social networking applications. Technology has also been used to support victims to stay in their own homes once separated from an abusive partner. For example, a scheme in Wolverhampton called Safer Homes provides additional security including CCTV or digital door cameras to ensure the safety of victims. A similar approach has been used in Australia (Mikakos, 2017). Finn and Atkinson (2009) argue that technology safety issues and online privacy should be a regular part of assessment and safety training for victims/survivors and advocacy staff both in shelters and community victim services due to its practical benefits in addressing safety in addition to empowering survivors.

**Technology-assisted abuse in adolescent romantic relationships**

Adolescents have been referred to as a ‘digital generation’ or ‘digital natives’ due to technologies, like the Internet and (smart) mobile phones, becoming an essential and integral part of adolescents’ lives and social interactions (van der Hof & Koops, 2011). Adolescents may therefore be particularly vulnerable to experiences of technology-assisted IPV, especially as they may lack relationship experience and knowledge of what is healthy and acceptable relationship behaviours (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Barter et al., 2017). The first definition of adolescent partner violence to acknowledge the role of technology is that provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012):

Physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional violence between two people within a close or dating relationship, as well as stalking. It can occur in person or electronically such as repeated texting or posting sexual pictures of a partner online and may occur between a current or former dating partner.

Several studies have explored the role of technology in adolescent experiences of partner violence or what has been termed ‘cyber dating violence’ (Yahner, Dank, Zweig, & Lachman, 2015), ‘cyber dating abuse’ (Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013), ‘digital dating abuse’ (Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2017), ‘electronic dating aggression’ (Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2012) and ‘technology-assisted adolescent dating violence’ (Stonard, 2020). For the purpose of this chapter, the term technology-assisted adolescent dating violence (ADV) will be used.

**Nature of abusive, coercive and controlling behaviours**

As with technology-assisted IPV among adults, technology is thought to influence the dynamics of ADV by redefining the boundaries of romantic relationships in ways that provide a fertile ground for conflict and abuse (Draucker & Martolf, 2010). Studies have examined the use of several technologies such as mobile phone calls or texting, instant messaging, SNS, emails, picture messages, video calls, web chats/chat rooms, and websites/blogs as methods to perpetrate ADV behaviours (Cutbush et al., 2012; Stonard, 2019a). A review of technology-assisted ADV studies found the typical behaviours measured include the sending of insults, threats, humiliating or spreading rumours about a partner; non-consensual distribution of personal information or images; sexual/sexting pressure; frequently or excessively checking up on a partner’s whereabouts; monitoring a partner’s messages; demanding a partner’s passwords to phones or online
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accounts; deleting or ‘unfriending’ a partner’s contacts or friends from social media; making a partner feel afraid to not respond to communication; and preventing a partner from using technology to talk to others (Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014). Hellevik (2018) explored adolescents’ experiences of technology-assisted ADV and identified four categories of victimisation including the use of technology to harass, control, monitor and sexually coerce a partner. Adolescents identified that online partner harassment was facilitated by the availability of social networks and the direct and rapid communication that at times enhanced the severity and cruelty of the harassment and provided new avenues for abusive behaviour (Hellevik, 2018).

Prevalence

The prevalence of technology-assisted ADV in the studies reviewed by Stonard et al. (2014) ranged from 12–56% for victimisation and 12–54% for perpetration depending on the type of behaviours and technologies measured. The prevalence of technology-assisted ADV reported in these studies varies widely; however recent research suggests that the prevalence of such abuse is increasing. Studies published since this review report prevalence rates ranging from 13–73% for victimisation and 12–70.5% for perpetration (Barter et al., 2015; Dick et al., 2014; Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrad, 2018; Doucette et al., 2018; Muñoz-Fernández & Sánchez-Jiménez, 2020; Morelli, Bianchi, Chirumbolo, & Baiocco, 2017; Temple et al., 2016; Stonard, 2020; van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2017) depending on the type of behaviours measured and the research design used. For example, studies vary in whether they ask about current or recent relationships and the timeframe in which respondents are asked to report on their ADV experiences. Research has found that adolescents’ experiences of technology-assisted ADV often include multiple abusive and controlling behaviours via a range of technology methods, highlighting its extent and intrusiveness (Stonard, 2019a). Research has also found a high co-occurrence of technology-assisted ADV victimisation and perpetration (Smith et al., 2018; Stonard, 2020).

Importantly, technology-assisted ADV has been associated with psychological, controlling, physical and/or sexual ADV that occurs offline (Doucette et al., 2018; Morelli et al., 2017; Stonard, 2020; Temple et al., 2016), emphasising the intrusive and inescapable nature of ADV. However, for some adolescents, their experience of ADV was limited to that which was technology-assisted, as they did not experience ADV in the offline context (Stonard, 2020), meaning such experiences may have unique risk factors and impacts. Hellevik (2018) also found that for the majority of the 14 Norwegian adolescents interviewed, technology-assisted ADV was experienced alongside offline ADV of a similar nature; however, for two of the adolescents, only technology-assisted ADV victimisation was experienced and the partner was viewed as behaving completely differently online than they were offline. This supports the concept of online disinhibition outlined by Suler (2004) which attempts to explain how people behave differently in the online context compared to offline as a result of factors such as dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination and minimisation of authority.

Although both genders report a notable amount of technology-assisted ADV involvement as a victim or perpetrator; for example, Stonard (2020) found that out of 277 adolescents (aged 12–18) surveyed in England, 68% of males and 76% of females reported experience of technology-assisted ADV victimisation and 45% of males and 53% of females reported experience of perpetration; some studies have reported notably higher percentages of victimisation for females than males. In a large five country comparative study in Europe surveying 4,500 adolescents aged 14–17, Barter et al. (2015) found that 48% of females and 25% of males had experienced

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emotional technology-assisted ADV consisting of six different behaviours. This echoed some earlier research with 1,353 adolescents aged 13–16 by Barter, McCary, Berridge and Evans (2009) in the UK that found that 12% of females and 4% of males reported that a partner had used mobile phones or the Internet to humiliate and threaten them, and that 42% of females and 29% of males reported that partners had frequently checked up on their movements by phone or text. Similarly, in surveys in the US, Zweig et al. (2013) reported that in a sample of 3,745 school students, 26% of females and 12% of males reported being a victim of technology-assisted ADV, and Dick et al. (2014) identified that in a sample of 1,008 14–19-year-olds seeking care at school-based health centres, more female than male participants reported technology-assisted ADV victimisation (44.6% vs. 31.0%). Cutbush et al. (2018) however, found that victimisation was more prevalent for boys (42%) than for girls (31%), at baseline only, among 795 seventh-grade students. In a sample of 632 Spanish adolescents aged 12–18, Muñoz-Fernández and Sánchez-Jiménez (2020) found that females also reported significantly more technology-assisted ADV perpetration than males. Research has been consistent in finding that adolescent females report more victimisation of sexual technology-assisted ADV such as sexting pressure, the receiving of unwanted sexual images and the non-consensual sharing of sexting images (Stonard, 2020; Wood et al., 2015; Zweig et al., 2013).

The prevalence of technology-assisted ADV is evidently substantial among young people. However, Cutbush et al. (2018) did report that both perpetration and victimisation experiences each decreased significantly from the beginning of seventh grade to the end of eighth grade, with boys’ experiences of victimisation and perpetration decreasing significantly over the two years. More research is needed to examine the trajectories of technology-assisted ADV throughout adolescence in order to assess changes over young, middle and older adolescence.

**The role of attachment and jealousy**

Adolescents have discussed the nature of technology-facilitated communication with a dating partner as enhancing feelings of jealousy, obsession and insecurity that may lead to technology-assisted ADV behaviours such as monitoring and controlling a partner (Stonard, Bowen, Walker, & Price, 2017). For example, adolescents discussed the potential for anxiety to be felt about seeing when a partner was online but not replying to their messages and feeling anxious and obsessed with a partner’s frequency or response to their communication. Females were also reported to monitor their partner’s messages or Facebook accounts, demand passwords to accounts and delete female friends on Facebook due to jealousy or anxiety about a partner’s fidelity (Stonard et al., 2017). Other studies have also found that unique features of technology such as increased visibility of a partner’s activities and communication with others (particularly those of the opposite sex) online can exacerbate feelings of jealousy and subsequent harassment, surveillance, controlling and monitoring behaviours (Girlguiding, 2013; Baker & Carreño, 2016; Rueda, Lindsey, & Williams, 2015; van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, Willems, & Van Dam, 2019).

In terms of attachment, Reed, Tolman, Ward and Safyer (2016) found that higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with more frequent perpetration of technology-assisted ADV and that females reported higher levels of anxiety than males and more frequent technology-assisted ADV. Bhogal and Howman (2018) also found that attachment anxiety was associated with high levels of technology-assisted ADV. Reed et al. (2016) suggest that social media may create a ‘cycle of anxiety’ whereby social media plays a role in triggering relationship anxiety as well as being a tool to monitor a partner online in an attempt to alleviate anxiety. However, the nature of adolescent attachment is less well understood, meaning more research in this area is needed (Brown & Wright, 2001; Crittenden, 2000). It is also important that the
implications of such an approach to explaining technology-assisted ADV is considered in more detail so such explanations are not perceived as victim blaming in the sense that a perpetrator can justify their behaviour based on a need to re-establish proximity as a result of, for example, a victim’s lack of communication in response to a partner’s messages.

**Impact**

The impact of technology-assisted ADV can be devastating for victims, especially for those who are already in violent and controlling relationships. Barter et al. (2009) identified that technology provided an extra mechanism by which partners could exert control for young people (aged 13–17) who were already in a violent relationship and that this control extended into every aspect of adolescents’ social lives both online and offline. The negative impact of ADV, including technology-assisted emotional abuse, has been identified by Barter et al. (2015) to include being upset, scared, embarrassed, unhappy, humiliated; feeling bad about oneself, angry, annoyed and shocked, particularly for females. However, affirmative or no effect responses were also found which were defined as feeling loved, feeling good about oneself, wanted, protected; thinking it was funny; and it having no effect (Barter et al., 2015). Reed et al. (2017) also found that girls reported being more upset by technology-assisted ADV behaviours and expressed more negative emotional responses than boys. Technology-assisted ADV has been associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, worse dyadic adjustment, low self-esteem and psychological/ emotional distress in both adolescents and young adults (Borrajo & Gámez-Guadix, 2016; Hancock, Keast, & Ellis, 2017; Smith et al., 2018).

In a qualitative study exploring adolescents’ perceptions of the role and impact of technology-assisted IPV, Stonard (2019b) found that technology was viewed as disenabling victims in addition to enabling both victims and perpetrators as a result of its unique features. For example, technology use in ADV was viewed as disenabling victims as a result of its public nature, the permanence and loss of control over abusive comments or behaviours that were posted online, as a result of the misinterpretation and confusion caused by the loss of verbal cues, the loss of privacy and a deeper invasion of personal freedom, and as a result of online abuse developing into offline abuse. Technology was viewed as enabling perpetrators by facilitating technology-assisted ADV due to its availability, immediacy, anonymity, and providing increased confidence to abuse from behind a screen. Victims were also viewed as being enabled through avoidance opportunities, the provision of proof/evidence of abuse motivating response, resilience, and/or providing a coping mechanism. Some of these findings were echoed in an earlier study by Stonard et al. (2017) which found that adolescents viewed technology-assisted ADV as inescapable. Hellevik (2018) also found some victims described the effect of permanence as a result of re-reading abusive messages from a dating partner that may be stored on a mobile phone resulting in a sense of re-victimisation each time these were viewed. One adolescent female discussed how the lack of emotional cues in text messages increased the level of derogatory emotional abuse between her and her boyfriend (Hellevik, 2018). Technology-assisted ADV therefore appears to result in some unique impacts, as well impacts that would also be present in offline ADV.

**Attitudes**

Despite the potential negative impact of technology-assisted ADV, some adolescents view technology-facilitated abuse (as has been found with offline ADV) to be a relatively normative and acceptable behaviour with romantic relationships. Adolescents and young adults in both Draucker and Martsolf’s (2010) and Barter et al.’s (2009) studies sometimes viewed
technology-assisted ADV such as excessive contact and monitoring or controlling behaviours to be motivated by care or concern rather than being viewed as intrusive or as a result of relationship insecurity. Girlguiding (2013) found that a notable portion of female adolescents reported attitudes that were accepting of technology-assisted ADV. For example, 39% of girls believed it was acceptable for a partner to make you tell them where you are all the time; 22% said that checking up on you and reading your phone could sometimes be ok, and 17% thought it was ok to send photos or videos of you to friends without your permission. Rueda et al. (2015) similarly identified that in some cases, adolescents viewed overt monitoring such as forbidding texting with peers of the opposite sex and looking at a partner’s messages as acceptable. Likewise, adolescents in Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden and Lucero’s (2014) study indicated that some technology-assisted ADV behaviours were only problematic when they occurred outside of dating relationships (e.g. when a sexually explicit picture is shared in person or forwarded to others, or a previous partner hacks into the other’s Facebook account without the implicit consent of the account owner). Furthermore, some female adolescents reported that sharing passwords shows a sign of trust and a healthy, committed relationship and is therefore not perceived as a problematic behaviour (Lucero et al., 2014).

Help-seeking

Views that technology-assisted ADV is sometimes acceptable may explain the low levels of reporting and help-seeking among adolescents with such experiences. Less than 10% of victims of technology-assisted ADV reported seeking help in Zweig et al.’s (2013) study. Picard (2007) similarly found that the majority of young people who had been asked to engage in sexual activity (82%), been harassed or embarrassed on a SNS (78%), or been repeatedly checked up on via email or text messaging (72%) by a dating partner report that they did not tell their parents. The most common reasons reported for this were that the young people did not believe that the behaviours were serious enough to justify telling an adult or because of fears that parents may limit or take away their computer, mobile phone or prevent them from seeing their partner (Picard, 2007). As adolescents under the age of 16 are not recognised in the UK government definition of domestic violence (Home Office, 2012), they may feel deterred from help-seeking and excluded from formal support.

Nevertheless, as for adult victims of IPV, there are various websites that offer information on relationship abuse, resources and support for victims that may provide adolescents with alternative routes to in-person help-seeking such as loveisrespect.org and breakthecycle.org, although these are typically developed in the US. An app and website was developed by young people for young people as part of the Safeguarding Teenagers Intimate Relationships project where adolescents can get information about healthy relationships, explore their own attitudes and behaviours and assess risks using interactive technology (STIRitApp, 2020). The use of technology has also been developed in the form of serious game-based primary interventions to raise awareness and change attitudes towards dating violence in adolescents (Bowen et al., 2014). Adolescents have also highlighted that technology can be used to record or capture evidence of technology-assisted abuse (which could also capture offline abuse), enabling victims to report it and provide authors with proof of the incident(s) (Stonard, 2019b).

Policy recommendations in the literature

Technology-assisted IPV and stalking has been recognised as a serious offence that must be responded to as such by professionals with effective practice, policy and legal responses needing to
be developed (Woodlock, 2014, 2017). If the role of technology in IPV/ADV is not recognised, this inhibits a full understanding of the issue and the subsequent responses to help-seeking and support offered, both practical and legal. Further training is needed for professionals who work with victims of technology-assisted IPV/ADV, in addition to cooperation with the telecommunications industry and smartphone developers to assist women to use technologies safely (Woodlock, 2014). This may require innovative cybersecurity responses and the development of new tools to combat the issue (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). It has been argued that there needs to be more clarity regarding what technological platforms are currently doing to combat technology-assisted IPV, in addition to a need for a shared understanding and international consensus about what platforms should be doing to address the issue and whether such responsibilities should be required by law, given the difficulties surrounding jurisdictional differences (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). There would then be a need for more regulation to monitor and enforce such standards as a requirement of laws and policies that aim to address the issue (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Women’s Aid (2017) suggest that there is a need for criminal and civil measures to address technology-assisted IPV, along with improvements and clearer guidelines in how online providers prevent, prohibit, and respond to such crimes. The difficulty is that even if perpetrators were targeted by social media platforms (e.g. by suspending accounts, etc.), the ease in creating new accounts and disguising one’s identity due to the anonymity afforded by online communication tools means perpetrators may find another way to reach their victims and continue their abusive and controlling behaviour.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the nature and role of technology use in IPV that occurs within both adult and adolescent romantic relationships, its prevalence, unique features, attitudes towards it, and its impact, while considering the influence of gender in such experiences. Consideration for the role of technology in prevention and intervention has also been given, along with attention towards recommendations in the literature for moving forward in tackling the issue. A detailed summary of some of the key implications for policy, practice and research arising from this chapter are summarised next.

Critical findings

• A range of technologies and digital communication tools are used in the perpetration of abusive, controlling, and monitoring IPV/ADV behaviours such as with mobile phones, social networking applications and tracking devices/software.
• Technology-assisted IPV/ADV is often experienced alongside offline IPV/ADV.
• The prevalence of technology-assisted IPV/ADV is substantial and might be explained by the accessibility, affordability and instantaneous nature of technology-facilitated methods of communication as well as the availability of personal information online.
• Technology-assisted IPV/ADV is thought to be gendered, with experiences of victimisation and its impact being worse for females than for males, although some research findings have been mixed.
• Attachment anxiety is thought to influence the perpetration of technology-assisted IPV/ADV behaviours in an attempt to re-establish proximity.
• Technology-assisted IPV/ADV is sometimes viewed as being less serious than offline IPV/ADV and may be normalised or tolerated in intimate relationships.
• Technology-assisted IPV/ADV can have a devastating impact on victims physically, psychologically, socially, relationally and financially, as well as affecting their daily routines,
employment and parenting. At the most extreme, it can result in the death/murder of the victim. Its impact can also result in some unique consequences for victims as a result of the technology used.

- Victims of technology-assisted IPV/ADV often do not seek help.
- Technology may provide intervention opportunities in terms of help-seeking and recovery but victims and professionals must be trained on how to use technology safely.

**Implications for policy, practice and research**

- A need for governments, legal responses, and practitioners to take technology-assisted IPV/ADV seriously and for this to be recognised in official definitions.
- Recognition of (technology-assisted) ADV among young people below the age of 16.
- Awareness campaigns for victims to educate about technology-assisted IPV/ADV and to encourage help-seeking.
- Training for professionals working with victims of (technology-assisted) IPV/ADV in order to understand the nature of this method of abuse, identify potential victims, and to respond effectively in supporting victims safely.
- Requirement for the technological platforms, telecommunications industry and smartphone developers to take responsibility for the abuse that occurs via their services/products, and to support and assist victims to use technologies safely.
- A need for more consistent and comprehensive measures of technology-assisted IPV/ADV in order to make comparisons between studies.
- Further research into the impact of and attitudes towards technology-assisted IPV/ADV.
- Consideration of race, class, geographical location (i.e. rurality), sexuality and disability in the experiences and impact of technology-assisted IPV/ADV.
- Research regarding how technology can be used in reporting, help-seeking, accessing support and gathering evidence in order to inform future practical and legal responses of technology-assisted IPV/ADV.

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