



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# Technology- facilitated abuse in relationships

Engaging those using harmful tech behaviours:  
A story completion approach

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# Background and Introduction

This study used the story-completion method to explore perpetrators' discourses on the emotions, motivations and technologies used when engaging in technology-facilitated abuse in relationships (TAR).

## What is Technology-facilitated Abuse in Relationships (TAR)?

TAR includes the misappropriation of technologies to intimidate or control and is commonly referred to as digital coercive control (Harris & Woodlock, 2019), cyber dating abuse (Rocha-Silva et al., 2021) or digital dating abuse (Brown & Hegarty, 2018). Harmful technology-facilitated behaviours are often used to support other methods of abuse including stalking. Frequently used TAR behaviours can include harassment, tracking, stalking, doxxing, non-consensual sharing of personal details and photographs/videos, impersonation, and other harmful actions that can shame, harass, intimidate and manipulate the target (Brown et al., 2021; Woodlock, 2017).

The health impact of TAR on victim-survivors is onerous (Fiolet et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2022), especially for youth (Brown et al., 2021). Those experiencing TAR can endure feelings of fear and distress (Brown & Hegarty, 2021) and mental health consequences such as depression and anxiety (Cripps & Stermac, 2018; Woodlock et al., 2020). TAR has been identified as an emerging trend in domestic and family violence (DFV) homicide and filicide cases (Harris, 2020).

## The need for this project

The voices of victim-survivors are important in TAR research, particularly in determining therapeutic outcomes. In addition, to protect victim-survivors we need to understand how to inhibit the use of abusive TAR behaviours in order to disrupt harmful patterns and challenge abusive conduct before they occur. Understanding the emotions and motivations that influence an individual's decision to use TAR, is essential. So too is understanding the technologies being used when the decision is made.

This knowledge will enable the technology industry to develop mechanisms to intervene, interrupt and prevent harmful behaviours. It will also inform important targeted responses from the sector.



# What we did

## Methods

### Story completion method

We used the story completion method in our study. Story completion is a novel form of narrative enquiry often used for sensitive topics where the content of the research is either socially objectionable or may even address illicit activities (Gravett, 2019; Clarke et al., 2019). It has therefore been used among some “hard to reach” populations (such as those who use abusive behaviours) and for exploring uncomfortable or sensitive topics (Clarke et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2017; Mackinnon, 2020).

Participants were provided with two story “stems” which created hypothetical scenarios/story plots (Clark et al. 2017), which participants were asked to complete. Most participants wrote in the third person however some wrote in the first person, and some alternated. Stories may reflect participants’ real underlying motives and desires, or merely present-day discourses to which participants are exposed (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995).

## Recruitment

### Online recruitment

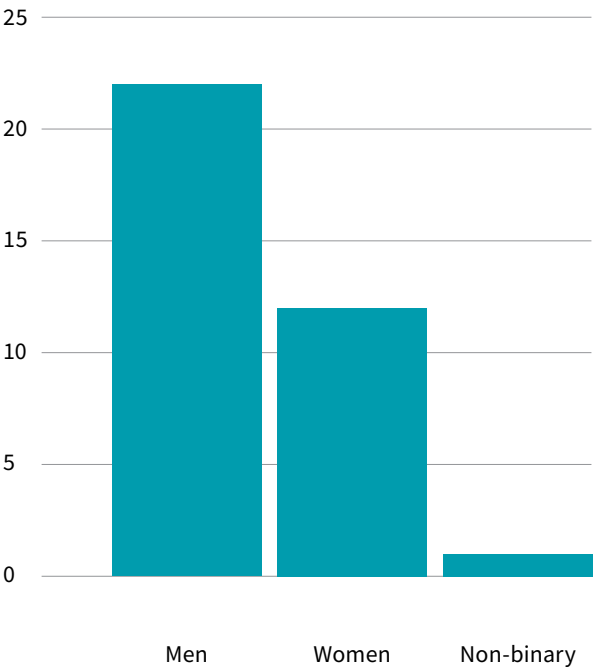
Participants were recruited online. Advertisements displaying a QR code to the research site were placed across a combination of social media platforms, organisational newsletters, and community organisations.

The site detailed the purpose of the research, the story completion method and the inclusion criteria (above 18 years of age, having experience of using harmful technology behaviours, and not in a relationship for at least three months).

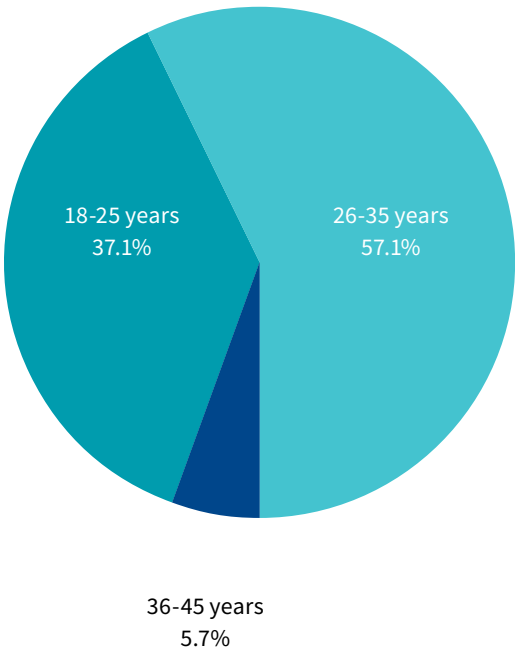
Interested individuals could download a Plain Language Statement and read the online consent form prior to consenting to participate. Consenting individuals were asked to create a unique identifier which was later used to validate their identity as a participant. On completion of these steps participants progressed to a Qualtrix survey to respond to demographic questions and two story stems.

## Who participated?

### Gender identity



### Age



# What we found

## Three themes relating to emotions and motivations

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021) generated three overarching themes from participant stories.

The first theme **Abusive behaviours and negative emotions** explores the anger, fear and/or sadness that sometimes informed a resolution to use technology in harmful ways. Suspicions often led to searching for the “evidence” needed to confirm what the story actors often believed themselves to know. **A loss of trust, a desire for control** describes motivations for using TAR in the relationship, demonstrating that doubts about a relationship may be linked to using TAR to control it. Finally, **Inhibitors of abusive behaviours** explores stories about avoidance of using TAR behaviours, illuminating the promise of preventative programs, sound technological design, and rigorous training, leading to safer online experiences in the future.

While we cannot make clear distinctions between men and women based on this small dataset, we noted that stories written by women described anger less and feelings of insecurity more. Women’s stories were also more likely to describe choosing not to use TAR. Differences between men’s and women’s accounts of emotion could reflect gender distinctions between the intent, impact or effect of behaviours observed in research elsewhere.

## Use of technology to harm

Technology uses described in the stories that represent potentially harmful behaviours:

- Use of life-logging software as spyware and trackers to monitor location
- Using unauthorised access to messages or social media posts by the victim-survivor themselves or their friends, to monitor social interactions
- Searching for data such as social interactions, private documents and financial information, potentially constituting monitoring and stalking
- Non-consensually accessing and retaining images
- Deleting search history to mask technological access







# Recommendations

## Policy

### Technology Development

That **Government** continue to **encourage technology developers** to draw on the eSafety Commissioner's **Safety by Design** initiative, including 3 overarching principles, as the foundation for all technology designed to be marketed in Australia.

That **technology developers** **create and adhere to policies** informed by an understanding of the industry role in **preventing and disrupting the use of harmful behaviours**.

## Practice

### Technology Development

With the aim of raising awareness and deterring harmful behaviours, that **technology developers** ensure their technologies are **capable of recognising, creating and presenting nudges and prompts** to users at the time the users exhibit 'red flags' alongside evidence of escalating emotions, and potentially use **AI to further detect and intervene in TAR**.

That **technology developers** **engage with all service users in design**.

That **technology companies** consider offering **voluntary DFV and TAR training and referrals** for those in public-facing roles.

## Research

### Technology Development

That **technology companies** invest a portion of their budget in **Safety by Design to advance online safety awareness and training, policy and practice** (this should be informed and guided by paid sector involvement).

That **researchers** continue to **explore and evaluate ways to engage with perpetrators of TAR** to understand how to interrupt harmful behaviours.

## Response

That **TAR content** be incorporated into existing training and there are opportunities for professional development on this topic for **first responder** industries.

## Response

That **all sectors** support advocates who are campaigning to raise awareness regarding TAR and its impact.

## Response

That **researchers** work with **specialist services and the justice system** to build **understanding of victim-survivor pathways and needs**.

## Prevention

That **Government** require **all healthy relationship programs** (from primary school and beyond) to include educational **components on TAR** and its impact.

That **Government** develop **social marketing campaigns** that challenge cultures, norms, attitudes and beliefs that foster and enable TAR.

## Prevention

That **service providers** delivering primary prevention programs provide **education on the increasing role and impact of TAR** within relationships.

## Prevention

That **researchers** engage with those working in **primary prevention to determine the best methods for raising awareness of and counteracting TAR**. This should include gender and social norms online, to understand broader risk, protective and influencing risk factors as to why some engage in TAR and others do not and to foster positive behavioural change.

people who perpetrate violence are identified and are used to guide practitioner training and program development.

Policy	Practice	Research
<p><b>Justice System</b></p> <p>That police, courts and corrections operational policies and guides incorporate TAR in material pertaining to sexual, DFV, and stalking and surveillance.</p> <p>That the justice system establishes simple legal and technical mechanisms for victim-survivors to hold technology companies accountable for devices/tools that it could be reasonably foreseen would be used for abuse.</p> <p>When reviewing existing laws, <b>policy makers and regulators</b> include the potential of technological tools for enacting harm.</p>	<p><b>Justice System</b></p> <p>That (regular, ongoing) training is provided to police, courts and corrections about how technology is weaponised in the context of sexual, domestic and family violence and stalking and surveillance; risk factors associated with TAR; intervention orders and breaches by technology; investigation, prosecution, and offender management strategies relating to TAR.</p> <p>That the justice system ensures TAR perpetrators undergo mental health assessment and treatment as part of sentencing.</p>	<p><b>Justice System</b></p> <p>That researchers explore how <b>TAR can be used as intel in risk assessment</b> (including in relation to separation) and <b>offender management processes</b>.</p> <p>That research is translated promptly and <b>shared effectively</b> (such as through open access publications) with justice and legal practitioners.</p>
<p><b>Behaviour Change Programs</b></p> <p>That TAR content be <b>included and addressed in Behaviour Change Programs</b> throughout the duration of group-work.</p>	<p><b>Behaviour Change Programs</b></p> <p>That service providers embed TAR in <b>organisational Behaviour Change Program Manuals</b>.</p>	<p><b>Behaviour Change Programs</b></p> <p>That research is conducted with practitioners to ensure TAR <b>educative and program needs are met</b>.</p> <p>That research is conducted with program participants to ensure the <b>strategies and motives</b> of people who perpetrate violence are <b>identified and are used to guide practitioner training and program development</b>.</p>

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