"I Never Did Those Things They Said!": Image, Coercive Control, and Intrusion From Former Partners' Technology-Mediated Abuse

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The pervasive nature of the internet and social media presents new dynamics for abuse perpetrators engaging in obsessive relational intrusion practices. Drawing on Katz and Aakhus's (2002) Theory of Apparatgeist, we explore how abuse victims understand the "spirit" of technology when used against them. Victims' (N = 187) qualitative responses were analyzed to uncover meanings attributed to technology-mediated abuse after leaving their violent partners. Primary themes of harassing intrusion and coercive control were understood by participants in a number of ways – both overlapping and distinct. We discuss these findings in terms of victims' primary identity concerns related to presenting versus perceived selves.

Introduction

Because intimate partner violence (IPV) research in the U.S. began in the 1970s, increased availability of and access to interactions afforded by internet and other technologies have altered the nature of these interpersonal relationships. And, although specific platforms vary over time, online social networks remain a significant attraction. The contemporary infrastructure of mobile technologies gives users constant access to these networks as well as various other means (e.g., synchronous text messaging, emailing) of contact with others (Lepp et al., 2013).

Clearly, the pervasive nature of technology allows users – particularly those desiring constant contact – to reach receivers in ways never before possible (see Eckstein, 2020 for an exhaustive typology of current IPV technology practices). However, the point at which this ubiquitous contact crosses a line for current and former relational partners, particularly those with a violent history, remains vague. Outside of interpretations of known harassment, when a target is *un*aware of technologies being used against them, how and when does monitoring and/or regulating someone's mediated communication constitute ongoing abuse? In this study, we draw on traditional media theorizing and more current IPV constructs to ground our study of that technology usage. We then examine victims' qualitative reports of abusive, technological communication with/from former[i] abusers post-relational dissolution.

Traditional Understandings of Communication and Abusive Relationships

Who and What: Coercive, Intrusive Communication in Relational Dissolution

Who is Involved?

A plethora of research exists on negative relational dissolution practices both in married and unmarried relationships, with a large focus on how control is used during romantic relationships (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1992; Harvey & Karpinski, 2016; Kellas et al., 2008; Lee & Sbarra, 2013; Roberts, 2005; Sahlstein & Dun, 2008; VanderDrift & Agnew, 2011). However, fewer studies in interpersonal, relational fields examine how ex-partners maintain control after the relationships ends; such work tends to be the domain of violence-based scholars (especially those focusing on coercive control and/or intrusion; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000).

With the understanding that abuse in any form is grossly underreported, prevalence meta-analyses have shown at least 23.1% of women and 19.3% of men in global English-speaking nations alone had experienced physical violence from a romantic partner (Desmarais et al., 2012). In the U.S., over 45 million people (35.6% of all women, 28.5% of all men) will experience physical abuse from a romantic partner at least once in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). Physical violence, psychological abuse, and coercive control often go hand-in-hand (Tanha et al., 2010), even in online contexts (Yahner et al., 2015). Further, whereas control tactics exist in a majority of ongoing abusive relationships, even absent physical violence, the inverse is not typically true; where physical violence occurs, it is rare to not also see coercive control tactics present (Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2009). Thus, psychological abuse (including coercive control tactics) is one of the most commonly experienced forms of violence in abusive relationships – affecting at least 113 million people in the U.S. alone (Black et al., 2011). The prevalence of this abusive communication is especially disturbing in light of the fact that abuse recipients consistently report the psychological trauma from intrusive coercion (i.e., *not* physical violence) as a worst aspect of their victimization (Crossman et al., 2016; Williamson, 2010).

What is Involved?

IPV relationships are characterized by varying levels of physical and/or psychological abuse tactics. *Physical abuse* involves behaviors intended to injure or otherwise harm; it can also be used to (intentionally or as a side-effect) control. *Psychological abuse* includes a wide variety of sub-categories such as verbal abuse (i.e., communication intended to directly attack), emotional abuse (i.e., communication intended to harm, scare, and/or control), and economic abuse (i.e., limiting or controlling resources necessary for

functioning). Common to all of these abuse tactics is the element of control or exerting power over another, whether through actual communication or the threat of such.

In the IPV field, *coercive control* is typically characterized as patterned behaviors used by a perpetrator to dominate and manipulate a (current or former) partner (Stark, 2009). Implicit in this abuse strategy is the perpetrator's constant contact and/or monitoring of the victim because constant monitoring is necessary to plan and implement control of a partner's everyday activities, interactions with friends and family, access to education, and economic resources. For IPV victims, these behaviors often continue even after relational dissolution (Crossman et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2012).

Continued contact between ex-partners is common among many types of romantic partnerships (Dardis & Gidyc, 2017). Described in both abusive and non-abusive contexts as *unwanted pursuit behaviors* (UPBs) or *persistent pursuit* (Davis et al., 2012; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000), this non-consensual contact intended to renew a romantic relationship may be used to re-institute both explicit, official and/or implicit, unsanctioned "relationships" with a former partner. UPBs are particularly prevalent among partners who wish to control and/or gain some form of retaliation against the other (Mumm & Cupach, 2010), often for leaving them. Partners are much more likely to use UPBs following relational termination if they engaged in abusive behaviors during the relationship (Dardis & Gidyc, 2017).

When any continual communication is perceived as persistent or invasive, it becomes known as (obsessive relational) *intrusion*, or control/interference "that demands attention, diverts energy…from priorities, and limits choices" (Wuest et al., 2003, p. 600). Beyond being monitored/stalked[ii], intrusion also includes intentional strategies to make a target feel threatened or uneasy and/or behaviors to make their life more difficult. Intrusive communication may involve a former partner's continued abusive behaviors, the health outcomes resulting from that abuse (and from prior violence in the relationship), the accompanying help-seeking costs (e.g., money, time, effort, interference, stress), and all other resulting "undesirable changes to patterns of living" (p. 600).

This interference may occur as *unknown intrusion*, when the recipient finds their life made more difficult but is unaware the abuser is the one facilitating it. For example, Eckstein (2020) detailed cases such as third-parties (both human and technological) reaching out to invade the lives of the victim (e.g., spamming, group-facilitated attacks) or to frame him/her for illegal activities (e.g., false reports, "swatting"). This type of intrusion is perhaps more prominently perpetrated with the use of new technologies than it was prior to these mediated tools. In contrast, interference may also occur

in the form of *harassing intrusion*, when the recipient is aware of the sender. Examples include someone constantly contacting a victim via email or phone, sending them messages, or posting about them in online social networks (Eckstein, 2020).

Perhaps most important for victims' lives, recipients consistently report intrusion as one of the worst experiences of IPV victimization and one of the greatest barriers to obtaining help and truly getting "out" of their abusive situation (Sheridan et al., 2019; Wuest et al., 2003). Its effects on victims' lives are amplified by the fact that, although stalking is but one comparatively minor aspect of intrusion, stalking is illegal (although its definition and the promise of consistent prosecution vary tremendously) in many U.S. states whereas intrusion is not[2].

Further, victims of these UPBs are often advised by well-meaning others to not let the abuser see that they are affected by the behaviors. Victims – who are often admonished by professionals, friends, and family to "not give them the satisfaction," "don't let them see it hurts you," or "rise above it and it won't bother you that much" – may attempt to show they are unaffected by UPBs (Muldoon et al., 2016; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Tanha et al., 2010). However, when faced with victims' disinterestedness, perpetrators often begin to engage in "rumination" and subsequent "flooding," which can provoke perpetrators' anger and/or jealousy, in turn leading to an increase of even more UPBs (Spitzberg et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, the still-legal act of intrusion is today facilitated by media in previously unheard-of ways and levels (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Norton et al., 2018).

Where and When: Mediated Contexts

Where it Occurs

Contemporary mediated technologies afford perpetrators a multitude of ways in which to engage in abusive communication. In the first fully comprehensive study of the topic, Eckstein (2020) detailed all of the means/methods and tactics of technology-mediated abuse (TMA) in IPV contexts, including: preventing or prohibiting a partner's access to technology (and as such, communication with others – effecting both isolation and limitation of economic and support resources), humiliating or damaging their reputation via social media, and engaging in monitoring/stalking behaviors that may (not) include threats and attacks. Although we now have a more complete understanding of the full range of IPV abusers' practices, a necessary next step is to understand how victims actually understand and frame the receipt of such TMA communication tactics when used to facilitate coercive control and intrusion in post-dissolution contexts. Understanding how victims perceive and manage coercive, intrusive TMA may shed light on the ongoing efficacy of traditional communication theories of perceived media use.

Katz et al. (1973) argued that media use can largely be understood by looking at the individual needs of users. Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasizes audiences are active and thus, goal directed; people react to media based on their perceptions of its effectiveness in meeting (or hindering) their personal media goals. This theory also accounts for the fact that people's varying needs may not always be met by media; in some cases, media may even be an obstacle to meeting goals throughout life. Supplementing these premises, Apparatgeist Theory (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) provides additional insight into the role of technology in people's lives. Essentially, technology is much more than its design and its affordances – it instead takes on a "spirit" of its own that is simultaneously socially constructed. Users create specific meanings and norms which govern how they use the technology and serve to create its patterns of behavior.

Research applying these theories has demonstrated a multitude of reasons people use technology. One such motivation salient to current purposes is that of constructing and controlling identities or projected images. Technology users construct social identities varying in the degree to which they entail what Goffman (1959, 1967) called *perceived* (who we feel we "truly" are) and *presenting* (how we want others to see us) selves.. Extending Goffman's principles to online contexts, the ubiquitous nature of the internet has made it such that individuals "need to strategically control the information they display" (Yang & Brown, 2016, p. 403) as they present their *face*, the interacting performance of both perceived and presenting selves (Goffman, 1967). Although people typically present the most positive aspects of their lives for others to see (and use technology best aiding those presentational face needs), they may not always be able to control their public performance, given others' freedom online. In other words, what happens when a user's "need" is to surveil and/or manipulate the presenting self of another, or to *altercast* another publicly? Further, in what ways do these actions play out in a highly mediated world?

When it Occurs

Harassing intrusion and coercive control clearly occur online and may be particularly prominent in IPV contexts in the form of technology-mediated abuse. As noted by Eckstein (2020), the fact that such behaviors occur publicly means the otherwise-hidden nature of abuse is made doubly stigmatizing. Victims must then balance not only the repercussions of direct psychological abuse, but also the shame, embarrassment, and social fallout associated with those behaviors becoming public (Eckstein, 2016a; Goffman, 1963). Because of technologies' ubiquity, the victim often lacks a space to which they can retreat, away from the abuser. Thus, a system of badgering and abuse, devoid of an escape route, is created.

As cyberbullying, trolling, doxxing, and other online attacks (e.g., swatting, happy slapping) in general have increased, the way internet and mobile technologies are perceived by users is equally affected. The Theory of Apparatgeist (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) suggests this is a function of both the users' (and community-built) perceptions and the nature of the technology itself (i.e., online social networks' public, ubiquitous, and pervasive presence). Through their interactions with this media form, users create a sense of what are normative and non-normative behaviors as they relate to their mediated interactions. These norms govern how and when technology should be used. The infrastructure of modern technologies allows for communication on a consistent, and perhaps, potentially intrusive basis. Ubiquitous media (such as that created by smartphones containing social media apps) can "severely erode privacy at both the individual and societal levels" (Katz & Aakhus, 2002, p. 301). In other words, evolving technologies (and changing uses of/for it) necessitate a re-examination of what users consider appropriate or normative contact.

Modern users exist within a system of *perpetual contact*, whereby one is always accessible (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). This perpetual contact can lead to unexpected and inappropriate modes of interaction, especially when occurring in the already invasive, persistent, and coercive context of abusive relationships – whether with current, ongoing, and/or "former" partners. Relational partners create norms for interaction during the course (and during potential dissolution) of their relationship which undoubtedly include mediated channels (Kellas et al., 2008; Sahlstein & Dun, 2008). These patterns and norms may extend beyond relational dissolution or, alternatively, communication otherwise considered "acceptable" in a current relationship may be perceived as a violation after the relationship has ended (Roberts, 2005). The face threat of being shunned, as happens with ex-partners, can lead rejected partners to seek ways to recapture their perceived self-image. One way to potentially address face needs in a romantic dyad is to attack or modify the "self" presented by the ex-partner.

A common normative practice in post-relationship dissolution is the use of social media to express oneself and manage identities (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013; Slater, 2007). When done in terms of a presenting relational identity, this "self" presentation (implicitly or explicitly) involves a partner. In other words, public audiences naturally assume someone's status post-breakup is directly related to (and thus, tied up in the identity of) the other person in that relationship (Muise et al., 2009). In order to frame their own relational identities, people must necessarily altercast their partner's identity (Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963). A by-product of this supposed "self"-expression is that both users *and* their implicit

targets (i.e., ex-partners) can receive negative feedback on their performance. Although even seemingly non-attacking messages can have detrimental effects when posted without context and/or displayed publicly, ex-partners' messages intended to attack or control are particularly effective via social media.

Some research examines how social media image-presentations affect victims, but these studies have largely looked at the direct effects of intentional, obvious attacks (e.g., cyberbullying; Brody & Vangelisti, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2018; Martinez-Pecino & Duràn, 2019). Therefore, research to date primarily focuses on mediated psychological abuse in its directly communicated "verbal abuse" form. The more implicit tactics technologically communicated to coercively control and/or harassingly intrude on victims' lives remain largely unexamined. People in partners' shared social networks may not be privy to hidden meanings or shared understandings of communication between former partners; thus, abusers often perpetrate these covertly abusive tactics publicly without any repercussions to themselves (Eckstein, 2020). In light of these practices, looking only at the surface-value or content-level-meaning of messages posted online would not reveal how the prior (or changing) norms within a couple's relationship influence the actually harmful relational-level-meaning of that ostensibly innocuous message. To fully understand the "spirit" or apparatgeist of social media technology as constructed in such IPV contexts, we proposed the following research question:

> RQ: How (and why) are technology-mediated messages from former partners perceived by IPV victims as intrusive and/or controlling when communicated publicly and/or privately?

Methods

Sampling & Participants

We sent out social network emails and posted online solicitations in general and violence-related web forums to recruit people who self-reported experiencing physically and/or psychologically abusive behaviors while with (and from) a current or former romantic partner. Part of a larger data collection project obtaining 495 respondents, a subsample of individuals (N = 187; n = 67 men, 120 women) indicated having experienced their abuse via technological means and provided open-ended data regarding the nature of this abuse. Our study's primary sample, this responding group ranged in age from 18 to 56 years (M = 39.42, SD = 13.16); were primarily White (85.6%), multi-racial (5.9%), or Latinx (4.8%); and mainly reported having completed some college (36.4%) or an earned bachelor's degree (28.3%).

These participants' abusive relationships, consisting of both male (n = 123) and female (n = 64) perpetrators, lasted from less than

one month to 36 years (*M* = 6.88 years, *SD* = 6.89, *Mdn* = 5.00). Victims reported having been "out" of this relationship, on average, 7.14 years (*SD* = 7.11; *Mdn* = 5 years), although this ranged from still being "with" their abusive partner to having been out of the relationship up to 33 years. All but one of these participants indicated they were still in contact with their abusive partners via various technologies.

Procedures & Analyses

Data were derived from an open-ended inquiry regarding ways a romantic partner used technology to "threaten, accuse, or hurt" them during and/or after their relationship. Each person's response was examined in terms of the participants' larger experiences, detailed by them in other qualitative and quantitative responses related to their victimization (see Eckstein, 2016b, 2016c for more info on those data). We chose to focus on each participant's responses as a whole – rather than solely using data from that one question on its own – to understand the larger context of each person's interpretation.

Further, contextualizing these responses amidst the other patterns and norms of their abusive relationship (á la Garfinkel, 1967), aligns particularly well with an Apparatgeist theoretical foci on socially constructed meanings of/by technologies. People engage in many practices to manage their identities and exert social control over their environment as they see it. Garfinkel (1967) argued that to understand others' social construction processes, it is necessary view messages as *indexical*, or subject to divergent meanings across different circumstances. Therefore, we employed (and report results based on) Glaser's (1978) methods which embed *axial* analyses within critical or *theoretical* analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Basically, our analysis process examined victims' words not only according to their literal, content-level meanings, but also according to the person-specific contexts (situated within the "whole picture" of their survey data) in which they were used.

Data revealed several ways IPV victims experienced TMA from former, abusive partners. Because the nature and full range of these tactics/behaviors mirrors what is already extensively detailed elsewhere (e.g., see Eckstein, 2020; Matthews et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2019), we focus here on the *interpretation by victims* of those tactics.

Findings

Participants discussed technology-mediated abuse (TMA) abuse behaviors as occurring both during the relationship and continuing post-relational dissolution. Previous research confirms that abusers who perpetrate during the relationship are significantly more likely to engage in such behaviors post-relational dissolution

(Dardis & Gidyc, 2017). In our study, intrusion and coercive control experienced during their relationship did not end post-dissolution.

We found that victims across our sample constructed similar narratives related to intrusion and control of ongoing (i.e., post-dissolution) abuse tactics in terms of an overall "image" the abuser attempted to create and foster. According to these victims, abusers were able to construct victims' self-image both publicly and privately. Due to the high degree of saturation achieved in these reports, in the following sections, we rely on exemplar quotes to represent key ideas expressed by a majority of respondents, with any exceptional cases described accordingly.

How: Public Image Control and Victims' Presenting versus Altercast Selves

A majority of responses spoke to the face concerns of TMA. Victims felt their abusers attempted to construct particular identities for them via public altercasting. Social media was a primary mechanism for these attempts, which simultaneously served as coercive control via direct and indirect manipulation. As these tactics are not new or exclusive to IPV victims, we direct our focus to interpreting how respondents perceived/understood them by emphasizing *their* (i.e., the victims') social construction of the Apparatgeist.

One common direct tactic involved abusers using the public nature of online forums as a way to blackmail respondents. For example, when participants reported former partners who "threatened to put up nude pictures…in embarrassing situations on the internet," they largely perceived these tactics (depending on the context) as the abuser seeking compliance (a) to exert power and/or (b) as a means of harassingly intruding, when it was repeatedly threatened. This latter method was felt by victims to be highly effective in instilling ongoing fear and uncertainty in their lives, as it was something that could be "held over" them and revealed publicly at any future point.

A second form, one that victims interpreted as direct coercion, was shown when abusers, in efforts to control victims' post-relationship lives, used technological surveillance against them. This was perceived as accomplishing both harassing intrusion and coercive control simultaneously. For example, ex-partner/s "created a shadow account on my computer" or "required me to get online with AIM when home, so I couldn't get on computer without him knowing." Because IPV victims (like everyone) lean on technology to maintain contact with family members, friends, or supportive others, a common way for abusers to control the victim *and* their relational identity narrative is to control the technology (e.g., see Edwards et al., 2015).

A third TMA behavior was felt by victims as both intrusion *and* an effective indirect form of image control. Again exemplifying

many reports, victims reported their ex-partners posted "all over the internet that" they (i.e., the victims) were "hiding money, cheating, and abusing [them] when I wasn't." As one respondent mentioned, "We went to counseling 4 times in 11 years, the last 3 times I had to beg her to go, and every time we went to counseling they told her I was not abusive but she told people [online] I was anyway." Technological platforms hide (and frequently lack repercussions for) nonverbal deception cues (Walther, 1996). Abusers harness this aspect of technology to maintain a particular narrative about their victim. These victims viewed this tactic as particularly effective because any response to these messages on their part was believed to be "sinking to their level," "engaging with someone I didn't want to have in my life, giving him what he wanted [i.e., ongoing relational ties]," or felt to be perceived by an online audience as "just exes bickering, not the actual abuse or lies it was."

Even when they did attempt to respond or "clear my name," victims encountered replies from the social network – or even from the abuser who initiated the topic – to not "air their dirty laundry" or "defame me [the abuser] or else." Such responses not only silenced the victim, but also then appeared to increase any stigma they felt for having been involved in an IPV relationship. Indeed, prior studies show that it is when IPV victims attempt to disclose "their side" of an abusive relationship that they encounter the most stigmatization – a factor many victims report as a reason for having stayed with their abusive partners in the first place (Eckstein, 2011, 2019).

A fourth tactic, communicated indirectly online but having direct effects perceived by participants, used technology to get the victim in trouble with third parties (e.g., authorities, employers, social network). For example, one partner "used my [the victim's] position as webmaster who has done adult sites to accuse me (to the police) that I had 'child porn' on my computer, so it may be confiscated/examined." Other victims mentioned similar tactics, such as when an ex "stole equipment, put defamatory information on it and turned over to lawyer" or another abuser infiltrated a social media account to implicate the victim in a crime: the abuser "hacked my MySpace account, sending herself an email, to violate a restraining order. MySpace deleted the account when she stated I'd violated the restraining order, and MySpace will not give ANY evidence of what happened, because the account was deleted, per policy." Because these people, like many in our study, relied on their technologies *and* other people (e.g., clients, professional networks) as primary sources of income, the effects of this tactic on the lives of victims were multiplied such that emotional or verbal attacks became coercively controlling and economically abusive. Even the messages posted by victims during this fraught time became ammunition for abusers. In addition to creating false narratives, abusers

(un)intentionally formed arguments based on messages taken out of context, as one woman's soon-to-be-ex-spouse would accuse her "of cheating *because of* [emphases added] Facebook wall posts/messages" – a tactic that became more severe (than "mere" verbal abuse) because she was going through a child-custody battle at the time.

Finally, similar tactics were used to harm people's potential support resources by alienating members of their shared social networks – both directly and indirectly. A frequent occurrence, former partners "used my cell phone to send demeaning and inappropriate messages to random people in my address book." Ultimately, respondents demonstrated that an ex-partner's public posting of "defamatory blog posts" or "abusive messages that others could see" were the norm rather than the exception. It is possible that this TMA tactic was a by-product of the rumination and flooding emotions that some rejected partners experience (Spitzberg et. al., 2014), whereby they try to resuscitate their own self-image both for themselves and (intrinsically) to the public. However, having dealt with these types of tactics (or threats of such) throughout their IPV relationship, victims in this study tended to interpret this practice as intentionally abusive in a controlling manner – not as a mere ego-remedy for the abuser.

Not just IPV relationships are constrained by social norms for appropriate public disclosures post-dissolution (Harvey & Karpinski, 2016). Victims in this study perceived that these social constraints facilitated continued abuse from their partners when they either had no means of contradicting the narrative or when their supportive network's "bridges had been burned." In the end, because this defamatory communication came from their ex-partner – a person audiences view as having intimate knowledge – victims were exponentially worried, felt there was the potential for others to pay greater attention and to give more credence to the communication than if it had been posted by someone else (e.g., stranger, disgruntled employee).

Further, these types of comments, beyond being merely personally hurtful, manipulated an identity that victims had worked carefully to construct – publicly and privately, both during and after the relationship. Indeed, "the *process through which individuals communicate* an image of themselves to others is a central element in the construction of one's self and efforts to establish a reputation within a social context" (Yang & Brown, 2016, p. 402, emphases added). Abusers and victims used the same tool for image construction, with competing narratives and often differential effectiveness. Because of this, technology that can allow users to "perform optimized self-presentation" (Yang & Brown, 2016, p. 403; Walther, 1996) may work for some better than others.

The Apparatgeist is shaped not only by active users, but by passive interactants as well. When an audience projects their own relational understandings onto the messages communicated by/between ex-partners in abusive contexts, otherwise "healthy" norms can become abusive. Even if messages are obviously attacks on another, the fact that they are posted to large audiences may mitigate bystanders' responses (Brody & Vangelisti, 2016), increasing the likelihood that target-recipients will feel unsupported and alone in their victimization.

Chat rooms, message boards, and social network sites all offer social support to users who can share intimate details, which also makes them prime tools for those wishing to distort intimate impressions (Nosko et al., 2013). If users rely on technology to "escape from the constraints of routine and the burdens of problems and emotional release;" to form and maintain "personal relationships (including substitute companionship as well as social utility);" and to manage "personal identity (including personal reference, reality exploration, and value reinforcement)" (McQuail et al., 1972, p. 515), then IPV victims' uses (and personal gratifications) otherwise derived from technology can *all* be attacked with just one post.

Technology-mediated communication, when used (or threatened to be) publicly, was overwhelmingly perceived by post-dissolution IPV victims in this study as abusive in coercively controlling ways, due to its effect on their presenting self-image. Unsurprisingly, it was difficult for victims in this study to separate those presenting or altercast selves from their perceived selves.

Why: Private Identity Control, Intrusion, and Perceived Selves

Another element in this study involved the rationale victims gave for perceiving abusers' technology usage as harmful. They frequently commented on the severity of its impact when used to intentionally, directly facilitate abuse – not only as they had previously experienced it in their IPV relationship, but also in new, amplified ways brought about by post-dissolution norms. Our findings suggest these mediated interactions affected victims' sense of private, perceived selves – and thus, their corresponding interpretation and subsequent use of that same technology – in multiple ways.

First, direct emotional attacks were common; respondents mentioned these instances as examples of an ongoing pattern (continued from when "together" with their partner) of abuse intended to hurt and psychologically degrade. They frequently mentioned both direct verbal and emotional attacks, exemplified by one woman's partner sending direct messages and leaving comments on Facebook "making fun" of her, saying that she should "go kill [her]self." In most cases, abusive norms for communication via technological contexts were created during the course of the victim's

relationship, which further served to influence their own self-perceptions via diminished self-esteem.

Importantly, these attacks – although direct – were not always communicated in ways obvious to an outsider, which speaks to the role of shared relational history affecting perceptions of online messages. For example, one respondent described her partner's frequent "helpful" messages (i.e., informational websites) as actually intended to demean her: "The most distinctive way technology was used was when he would give me a website to go to that'd tell me about a new weight loss product or exercise. He constantly was telling me I was fat, and he would look up web info on what I should do." Adding to victims' sense of helplessness or feelings that *they* are the ones being unreasonable or "over-reacting" (in cases where they "argue back" online, for example) was the lack of control they felt over these technologies, particularly public ones such as online forums. Victims saw this tactic's emotional abuse as compounded by technology to also be harassing intrusion when done repeatedly.

A second way technology affected victims' own perceptions of reality (e.g., crazy-making or gaslighting behaviors; Sweet, 2019) was when used as another form of harassing intrusion – either by its direct use or through its strategic removal/absence:

> …during the divorce process when he would call our home phone and leave screaming demanding messages about what he wanted me to do or not do. He acted the same way when we actually talked so I almost preferred the voice mails. I could just delete him. However, he did use technology frequently during our marriage to convey messages to avoid confrontations. He would always leave voice mail messages on our home phone, not on my cell which he knew I would answer during the day. For example, he would leave town on a regular basis without my knowledge and would just leave me a voice mail at home on a Friday while I was at work. I would get the message and call him on his cell but he would never answer. Other than what he told me when he came back on Sunday, I never really knew the truth of where he was during that weekend. He also "left" me four times during the course of our marriage and never once told me to my face. I would come home and see the message light blinking on the phone, get his message, open his drawers and see his clothes were gone. Again. I was always shocked. It was always devastating.

She was kept always uncertain; her abuser used a strategy of constant intrusion (notably, across multiple media tools, strategically chosen for particular uses) coupled with periods of intense, manipulative withdrawal. Of course, these methods are commonly used by abusers to coercively control victims (Follingstad & Rogers, 2014), but the

presence of myriad technologies further intensified victims' perceived severity of practices previously limited to in-person contacts.

Perpetual contact among partners, during and after relationships dissolve, is not unusual. But in any romantic situation (and many general, interpersonal ones), the exact same communication considered appropriate while "together" takes on an entirely different meaning post-dissolution. The pervasive nature of technology, an essential part of its apparatgeist in this context, facilitates not only an additional means of perpetration, but also modifies (i.e., increases *and* changes) the effects of that TMA.

Conclusion

Clearly, perpetrators use technology in myriad ways, both during and after the dissolution of a relationship. This study showed how victims interpret mediated communication from their former abusive partners to be an extension and amplification of norms established during the abusive relationship. In this way, not only abusers and their victims but also their online public audiences create meaning from and *for* the technologies used.

Technology is a constantly evolving landscape, and as such, needs continual exploration as it pertains to IPV. Mentioned previously, individuals are not lawfully barred from engaging in relationally intrusive behaviors. The ever-present nature of technologies, including but not limited to social media, makes this threat even more pervasive. Of course, users have power to sculpt their own performances (i.e., self-image); they can control their own social media pages' content. But they cannot control others. Until researchers, and subsequently the public and lawmakers, fully understand the breadth and depth of abusers' *and* victims' constructed apparatgeist in this context, technology-mediated abuse will remain legal.

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[1] Acknowledging that abuse does not necessarily end when victims leave abusive partners, we use the term "former" throughout to refer only to the "official" romantic relationship status of that couple, typically when the victim chooses to "finally" (again, a fluid concept in IPV relationships) leave their abusive partner.

[2] Stalking, which is seemingly acknowledged much more frequently in society than intrusion or UPBs (see Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014), is actually "merely the tip of a much bigger iceberg entailing a broad range of unwanted relationship pursuit experiences" (Mumm & Cupach, 2010, p. 707; Phillips & Spitzberg, 2011).