



This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits adaptation, alteration, reproduction and distribution without further permission provided the original work is attributed. The derivative works do not need to be licensed on the same terms.

SPECIAL ISSUE • Digital technologies and gender-based violence –
mechanisms for oppression, activism and recovery

article

Coercive control and technology-facilitated parental stalking in children's and young people's lives

Anna Nikupeteri, anna.nikupeteri@ulapland.fi
University of Lapland, Finland

Emma Katz, katze@hope.ac.uk
Liverpool Hope University, UK

Merja Laitinen, merja.laitinen@ulapland.fi
University of Lapland, Finland

Knowledge of technology-facilitated abuse and stalking has increased in recent decades, but research on how children and young people are exposed to these behaviours by their parent is still lacking. This article examines how technology-facilitated parental stalking manifests in children's and young people's everyday lives in contexts where parents have separated and fathers/father-figures have stalked mothers as part of post-separation coercive control. The article analyses materials from 131 stalking cases dealt with by district courts in Finland from 2014 to 2017 in cases that involved a relationship (dating, cohabitation or marriage), separation/divorce, and one or more children. Analysis of these court decisions identified that children and young people were exposed to three manifestations of technology-facilitated parental stalking: (1) Threats of violence and death; (2) Intrusive and obsessive fatherhood; and (3) Disparaging and insulting motherhood/womanhood. These findings underline the following contextual factors that are important for professionals to consider in identifying and helping children and young people exposed to parental stalking: technology enabling constant coercive and controlling abuse, technology in maintaining abusive parenthood, and technology in magnifying gendered tactics of abuse. The article argues that children's exposure to and vulnerability to technology-facilitated parental stalking must be more widely recognised.

Key words technology-facilitated stalking • coercive control • post-separation • children/young people • mothers

Key messages

- Children in cases of technology-facilitated parental stalking should be seen as victims/survivors in their own right.

- The potential for technology-facilitated parental stalking and abuse against children and mothers should be considered in all cases of previous domestic violence/coercive control and parental separation.

To cite this article: Nikupeteri, A., Katz, E. and Laitinen, M. (2021) Coercive control and technology-facilitated parental stalking in children's and young people's lives, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol 5, no 3, 395–412, DOI: 10.1332/239868021X16285243258834

Introduction

This article explores how technology-facilitated parental stalking can harm children's and young people's lives. Utilising Finnish court case files, we illuminate how children and young people are exposed to parental stalking when technologies are used to perpetrate and reinforce stalking as a form of gender-based violence. In our study, technology was a facilitator of stalking that encompassed a pattern of repeated, intrusive behaviours – such as following, harassing and threatening acts – that caused fear and distress in victims (Logan and Walker, 2017; Woodlock, 2017).

This article creates a bridge between the research literature on technology-facilitated stalking and the burgeoning field of children and coercive control research. Technology-facilitated stalking research has hitherto mainly focused on young people, who are particularly vulnerable to peer- or dating partner-perpetrated online stalking because of their extensive use of social networking sites (Reyns et al, 2012; Khader and Chan, 2020). What has not been studied is how children and young people may be exposed to technology-facilitated stalking perpetrated by their parent. Similarly, technology-facilitated stalking has not yet been foregrounded in the literature on children and coercive control. It has already been established in this literature that children are harmed not just by witnessing fathers' violence against mothers, but also via the range of coercive control tactics that domestic violence perpetrators often use – including psychological/emotional abuse, economic abuse, continual monitoring and micromanagement of activities, and isolation from sources of support (for example, Overlien, 2013; Katz, 2016; Callaghan et al, 2018; Feresin et al, 2019; Haselschwerdt et al, 2019). Our focus on how children and young people are exposed to technology-facilitated stalking by fathers/father-figures opens up important new avenues of enquiry in the coercive control literature.

We have used materials from stalking cases handled by Finnish district courts from 2014 to 2017 to identify three dimensions of technology-facilitated parental stalking seen in contexts of father-perpetrated coercive control. These are: (1) Threats of violence and death; (2) Intrusive and obsessive fatherhood; and (3) Disparaging and insulting motherhood/womanhood. We explore how dimension (1) can undermine children's relationships and mental wellbeing and hinder the child's education and employment prospects, how dimension (2) can communicate a continuous sense of threat in children's lives, as children were approached coercively and instrumentally as part of the perpetrator's pursuit of the adult female victim; and how dimension (3) could undermine children's positive views of their mother, by presenting her in

upsetting and shaming ways that exploited culturally-dominant ideas of feminine transgression. We close by outlining contextual factors that are important for law enforcement and social welfare professionals to consider when encountering this form of abuse.

Coercive control, technology-facilitated stalking and children

The distinction between on-line and off-line stalking is porous (Sheridan and Grant, 2007; Southworth et al, 2007; Ahlgrim and Terrance, 2021; Harris and Woodlock, 2019), and the digital dimension can heighten the common impacts of stalking (Aghtaie et al, 2018; Marganski and Melander, 2018; Henry et al, 2020). Stalkers can use digital data to identify the victim's location, making themselves 'omnipresent' and intensifying the continual fear felt by both adult and child victims (Nikupeteri and Laitinen, 2015; Woodlock, 2017; Worsley et al, 2017; Elklit et al, 2019). Meanwhile, victims may, for example, avoid events or meetings that could appear on social media (Woodlock, 2017; Douglas et al, 2019; Al-Alosi, 2020; Woodlock et al, 2020). Moreover, there is a risk that technology-facilitated stalking may escalate to homicide (for example, Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board, 2017).

A particular tactic of technology-facilitated stalking, as a form of gender-based violence by men/fathers against women/mothers, is for perpetrators to discredit mothers in online spaces in ways that utilise hegemonic ideas of transgressive femininity. Because they reflect the powerful and deep-rooted currents of sexism in wider society, existing both online and offline, these constructions serve as 'battering rams' in demolishing women's social reputations. For example, by denigrating the woman as a 'bad mother' in front of community and public audiences, the perpetrator weakens their victim while simultaneously presenting themselves as a 'good' father/father-figure. Undermining the woman's maternal role and the child-mother relationship, such online-offline humiliation is a significant tactic of post-separation coercive control (Holt, 2017; Feresin et al, 2019; Humphreys et al, 2019; Monk and Bowen, 2020).

Previous theorisations of cyberspace are helpful in crystallising how technology aids abusive fathers/father-figures in creating these effects in a post-separation context. Khader and Chan (2020) define cyberspace as being characterised by a collapse of time-space barriers, by many-to-many connectivity, and by anonymity/changeability of online identities: meaning that, respectively, an individual can contact others near-instantaneously despite geographical distance, can communicate to many others simultaneously, and can assume a multiplicity of different guises. For abusive fathers/father-figures post-separation, physical distance is therefore less of a deterrent, harmful effects can be spread widely (for example, by broadcasting messages about the victim), and disguises can be used to track the victim and direct threatening and harassing behaviour towards them (for example, Harris and Woodlock, 2019).

As regards responses to these effects, a key recent paradigm shift has been the move away from how victims can limit their lives to make their situation more tolerable (for example, by disengaging from social media), and towards how impacts can be made on perpetrators as well as on professional and societal responses/practices. Disconnecting from digital space (for example, by blocking contacts, changing contact details, or closing accounts) deprives victims of freedom to participate in the digital realm,

intensifying isolation and disconnection from help and support (Douglas et al, 2019; Al-Alosi, 2020; Woodlock et al, 2020). The underlying core problem that requires intervention is perpetrators' behaviour, and its roots in social norms and values that produce gender inequalities and facilitate men's violence against women and children (Heward-Belle, 2017; Monk, 2017; Monk and Bowen, 2020).

For children and young people in particular, access to digital space can be fundamentally important. It can extend their opportunities to create and maintain relationships, enhance self-esteem and sexual self-exploration, and facilitate self-care in difficult circumstances (Valkenburg and Peter, 2011; Wilson, 2016). Yet such access for children and young people simultaneously carries risks of harm. In recent decades, adult coercive control perpetrators have increasingly used digital technologies as part of their post-separation stalking of ex-partners (for example, Sheridan and Grant, 2007; Woodlock, 2017), with potential negative implications for any children of the separated couple. Perpetrators often exploit children in their stalking behaviour, and children can also be targets of stalking themselves. The father's/father figure's stalking behaviour produces feelings of insecurity and fear in children and severely constrains their everyday lives (Nikupeteri and Laitinen, 2015; Elklit et al, 2019). However, so far we lack knowledge of how children can be exposed to the technology-facilitated aspects of stalking perpetrated by a parent in this post-separation context.

Meanwhile, increasing our knowledge base around how children are affected by such technology-facilitated stalking can augment our existing knowledge of children and coercive control. We already understand much about how coercively controlling men/fathers tend to continue and even escalate their abuse after partners separate from them, and usually continue to play substantial and largely negative roles in their children's lives (Holt, 2015; 2017; Feresin et al, 2019; Humphreys et al, 2019; Katz et al, 2020). Because of perpetrators' ongoing campaigns of violence, stalking and threats, children and young people have described being unable to leave the home for fear of fathers attacking their mother and kidnapping them, constant worry about pet safety and doors and windows being locked, difficulty sleeping, lack of school attendance, and having to relocate to different areas multiple times (for example, Overlien, 2013; Callaghan et al, 2018; Katz et al, 2020). Some of these fears may be especially potent when children and young people have a sense of how technology can be used by perpetrators to facilitate their malicious actions, such as by tracking them and their mothers when they flee to a new location.

Humphreys et al's (2019) Australian study found that, post-separation, domestically violent men usually have frequent unsupervised contact with their children and tend to parent them in abusive ways, including subjecting them to emotional/verbal/psychological and sometimes physical and sexual abuse. Underlining the high risks that these fathers pose to the behavioural, cognitive and emotional development of children, these fathers often use the same abusive, manipulative and controlling behaviours with their children as they do with their partners/ex-partners (Callaghan et al, 2018; Humphreys et al, 2019; Katz et al, 2020).

Several studies highlight the acute difficulties that mothers experience when family courts order them to facilitate post-separation contact between domestically violent fathers and children; contact that is harmful to children, but that courts believe is in children's best interests (for example, Holt, 2017; Bergman and Eriksson, 2018; Feresin et al, 2019). For example, Holt's Irish research (2017: 3) concludes that 'the continued presence of domestically abusive men, post separation, may

compromise the child's recovery from the experience of domestic abuse, due to re-traumatisation through the continuing abuse'. Children's recoveries are also affected negatively by efforts often made by these fathers to undermine children's relationships with mothers, such as by denigrating, blaming and shaming mothers in the presence of children (see also Katz et al, 2020; Monk and Bowen, 2020). Holt's (2017) research suggests that, when we consider the reality and not the rhetoric of post-separation contact between domestically abusive men and children, the danger and harms it causes will tend to outweigh any benefit it could produce. Uncovering technological dimensions of these harms may help to reaffirm that message in a new and important way.

Research data and method

Court decisions on stalking

This nation-wide study is part of a Finnish project entitled *Children's Knowing Agency in Private, Multiprofessional and Societal Settings – the Case of Parental Stalking*, concerning children's and young people's knowledge and agency in cases of parental stalking.¹ The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Lapland. The article analyses court decisions on stalking given between 2014 and 2017, collected from all 27 Finnish district courts. Stalking was criminalised in Finland in 2014 (Criminal Code ch 25 s 7 a). Finnish law defines a stalker as:

a person who repeatedly threatens, observes, contacts or in another comparable manner unjustifiably stalks another so that this is conducive towards instilling fear or anxiety in the person being stalked, shall, unless an equally or a more severe penalty is provided elsewhere in law for the act, be sentenced for *stalking* to a fine or to imprisonment for at most two years.

There were 419 decisions on stalking during the four-year period. Of these, there were 139 cases which involved a relationship (dating, cohabitation or marriage), separation/divorce and one or more children. All of the relationships were heterosexual. Reflecting the typical balance in stalking behaviours in intimate partnerships (and the wider incidence of coercive-control based domestic violence, where women are commonly the victims and men the perpetrators – see Stark and Hester, 2019), only eight (5.8%) of these 139 cases comprised a female stalker and a male victim. With these eight cases being excluded in this study, the total number of cases analysed is 131.

The data included court decisions on stalking and all trial materials including pre-trial investigation records (encompassing psychological assessments, examination of witnesses, SMS messages, emails and photographs). The trial materials show how courts described and interpreted stalking, and also the extent and ways in which courts have considered children's viewpoints within their evaluations. The children were recognised by courts as an injured party in only 13/131 of the cases. The trial materials captured children's involvement in fathers'/father figures' stalking behaviours, as narrated through written evidence mostly by their abused mothers but also by abusive parents, witnesses, and professionals such as doctors and social workers. It is therefore possible to reconstruct from the case files how children were exposed, directly or indirectly, to the fathers'/father-figures' technologically-facilitated stalking.

Data analysis

The data analysis was content-oriented, beginning with a reading of all case files related to stalking (N=419), and coding them in an Excel spreadsheet. The coding included the basic information of each case, for example the duration of stalking, punishment, who was the injured and accused party, and children's possible involvement. This first phase enabled an identification of cases which involved post-separation parental stalking where men were stalking women and children (N=131). The second phase involved a closer reading of the material involving parental stalking and children, and tabulating, in another Excel spreadsheet, the following thematic codes: acts of stalking, child's relationship to the perpetrator and how stalking appeared in and affected children's everyday lives, contacts with authorities, whether the child's experience was considered in the judgment, and general relevant points concerning the stalking behaviour and judicial process.

The third phase of analysis focused on the data where technology was mentioned. These were examined from children's and young people's perspectives, focusing on how technology-facilitated parental stalking had manifested in children's and young people's everyday lives. We were interested in how temporal/spatial, social and cultural aspects were connected to technology-facilitated parental stalking (Patton, 2002: 438). This analysis helped to categorise the three dimensions elaborated in the study: (1) *Threats of violence and death*, (2) *Intrusive and obsessive fatherhood*, and (3) *Disparaging and insulting motherhood/womanhood*. To illustrate these dimensions, examples from the case files will now be explored. The data examples are anonymised, and identifying details about the individual cases are excluded/changed.

Technology-facilitated parental stalking in children's and young people's lives

Variety of technology-facilitated parental stalking

The analysis of the trial materials shows that technology appeared in the cases of stalking in three ways: unwanted contacts, sharing information and gathering information. In each of these, there could be variations in how the perpetrator was using technology, who they were targeting, how they were doing so, and what they were attempting to accomplish (see Table 1).

All 131 cases involved some use of technology in the stalking behaviour. The most frequent form of technology-usage was unwanted contact via SMS or WhatsApp messages and/or phone calls. Sharing information was the second most frequent, with perpetrators seeking to reach a wider audience in harming women and children. Gathering information, which occurred in the data to a lesser extent, describes how perpetrators tracked victims covertly (Khader and Chan, 2020). For example, in seven cases it was mentioned that the perpetrator had installed spy software in a woman's or child's mobile phone, affixed a spy device to a woman's car, or used or threatened to use GPS data in tracking the woman and/or her children's location. Characteristically, the contacts and other acts were repeated and continuous. For example, in one case, the perpetrator sent over 3,000 messages to the victim during a three-month period. The content of the contacts was often a mixture of non-violent messages, threats of violence, and death-threats. All of these forms of technology-facilitated stalking behaviour by fathers/father-figures were perceived by victims (that is, the ex-partner and children)

Table 1: The variety of technology-facilitated parental stalking

	Use of technology	Targets	Contents and motives
Unwanted contacts	Sending SMS, WhatsApp messages and emails, making phone calls, voice messages, sending private messages in social media platforms (for example, Facebook, Snapchat), creating and using pseudo profiles	Ex-partner, children, victim's relatives, friends	Threats, raise fear, control issues related to taking care of children and visiting them, property and separation issues
Sharing information	Writing texts and sharing written and visual material in social media platforms (for example, Facebook wall, Instagram, LinkedIn), making phone calls, sending messages and emails, communicating through pseudo profiles in social media	Ex-partner, wider audience, victim's loved ones, kindergarten and school staff, colleagues and employees	Tarnishing the reputation, humiliating, showing control, publishing the victim's private information or sexualised content without consent, disseminating false information about the victim
Gathering information	Installing or threatening to install spy software in cars or mobile phones, taking photos of children and/or ex-partner, identity theft, hacking bank accounts, e-mail or other internet/on-line accounts	Ex-partner, children	Monitoring, controlling, harming, hindering victim's activities

as inappropriate, insulting, distressing, threatening and often terrifying. In most cases, the behaviour was targeted at mothers, affecting children indirectly. However, the data also include cases where the behaviour was targeted directly at children. Next, we elaborate our three dimensions of technology-facilitated parental stalking.

Threats of violence and death

The case files include a considerable number of instances in which perpetrators' use of technology-facilitated stalking involved making death threats or threats to cause injury. Such threats should be viewed seriously, with previous research indicating a major risk of these being translated into action (for example, [Spitzberg and Cupach, 2014](#); [Monckton Smith, 2020](#)). The threats were most often made via SMS, WhatsApp messages, emails or phone calls, or by sharing information on social media. Perpetrators often targeted their threats at children and their mothers, and, when threatening children, did so most often via the mother:

The perpetrator threatened the child in his messages to the mother: 'If you tell the police then I will change the game so that the child is the one that has to be afraid.' (Investigation notice, 110)

The mother described the content of the messages, and at the hearing she showed one of the messages concerning their child where he threatens his/her life. (Investigation notice, 226)

Perpetrators also in some cases threatened children's/mothers' acquaintances and loved ones, such as a woman's new partner, parents or work colleagues:

He called the mother and threatened to hurt one of her loved ones by saying many times during the phone call that ‘I’ll take one of you. I’ll take the most loved one.’ (Judgment, 375)

Another ploy used by some perpetrators was to assert that the mother’s behaviour had led to them contemplating suicide. Assuming the guise of ‘vulnerable-victim’ (Katz et al, 2020), perpetrators in these cases could manipulate children by burdening them with the moral responsibility for preventing this from happening.

The mother said that in addition to the messages that he sent to her, he sent three messages to their child with content that was inappropriate and harmful for him/her. In these messages he warned the child that if s/he was not at home at 6pm then the next time the child saw him it would be in a coffin. (Investigation notice, 201)

Last summer we were with the woman and her children in an amusement park, and she got messages incessantly. The worst of the messages was that he [perpetrator] threatened to kill himself. He also sent the same kind of messages to the children, putting the blame on the mother for how he was about to do something to himself. (Witness, minute of the hearings, 240)

Alongside person-to-person messages and contacts, perpetrators could use social media to raise fear in victims and create an ominous atmosphere. For example, in one case the perpetrator published an image on Facebook with the child juxtaposed next to a gun. The case files show how the father/father-figure could also threaten the child via technology even while the child was physically present, for example during visits at his home.

In the first summer after our separation when the child was at his place he sent me a message ‘book the church for Sunday because I will probably kill the child today.’ (Minute of hearings, 226)

During the child’s weekends with the father, and at other times, the perpetrator has, via the child’s phone, threatened to come to his ex-wife’s home and abuse her and her new partner. In the presence of the child he threatened to kill the mother by shooting her, and warned that she and her new partner would be attacked by his friends who have criminal records. The child has said many times to the father that s/he does not like his behaviour but he hasn’t stopped. (Investigation notice, 252)

Besides threats of violence, the trial materials reveal other types of technology-facilitated harm by perpetrators. These could include impacts on children’s wider life-chances in education or employment.

The perpetrator sent a fabricated message containing false information to the child’s internship place, which could have harmed the child’s relationship with the internship provider. The perpetrator has also tried to phone the

child and sent him/her vague messages on Facebook. Due to his actions, the child has twice changed his/her phone number, dropped out of school in the locality and does not want to be in the locality. (Judgment, 341)

Overall, fathers'/father figures' technology-facilitated threats of violence and death created a distressing lived experience for children. Such threats could prevent children from having physically and emotionally safe everyday lives and relationships in the present, while also creating obstructions to their success in the future.

Intrusive and obsessive fatherhood

The trial materials describe fathers'/father-figures' intrusive and obsessive behaviour towards their children, and fathers' underlying motives concerning their ex-partner. Evidence from the court files shows perpetrators' obsessive fixation with maintaining unwanted, technology-facilitated forms of contact (for example, [Spitzberg and Cupach, 2014](#)). In many cases, previously-agreed contact schedules were being infringed, and there was no legitimate purpose for fathers to be attempting to maintain contact in the way they were.

At times there have been several text messages, and part of them has been clearly inappropriate, being unrelated to the care of the child and the right to meet them [...]. The fact that the text messages have been the accused's only way to communicate with the injured party does not justify sending the messages. (Judgment, 41)

Children's use of technology was exploited by fathers to manipulate the mother and maintain abuse against her. In one case, the father had sent a message to the child saying that his motive for being in contact was to persuade the mother to (falsely) state that she had lied to the police and while testifying in the district court. In other cases, exploitation was gratuitous, malicious, sustained and sophisticated. For example, father/father-figures could enroll children as photographers documenting their mother's life, providing a continual stream of photographic data to be used as a weapon against her.

He asks children to take photos of me and my friends and what I'm doing. After getting the photos he forwards them, for example, to my ex-boyfriend. [...] All the messages he sends to the children have nothing to do with the children, but he tries to exploit the children in order to get information about me. (Minutes of hearings, 240)

Fathers/father-figures could also make children 'ventriloquist's dummies' by sending messages to the mother from the child's phone, purportedly from the child themselves.

The woman has said that she received several inappropriate SMSs from the perpetrator, and he has also sent SMSs from the child's mobile phone. The content of these messages could not have been written by a child; they are clearly written by an adult. (Judgment, 126)

Children's safety and wellbeing was also a pretext for action by the perpetrator. This could take the form of sending links to online videos to remind the ex-partner of his presence, following the child to photograph their activities, or, unbeknown to the child and ex-partner, installing 'high-tech' spyware and tracking devices on phones or vehicles (Navarro, 2016).

According to [the perpetrator] the links that he had sent to YouTube and YLE-areena [an online channel of the Finnish Broadcasting Company] are related to his child's and the ex-partner's relationship and child's wellbeing. (Investigation notice, 14)

The father has followed and monitored the child in his/her classroom during the classes for two hours and photographed the child in the class. (Judgment, 106)

At the hearing he said that he installed the device in a woman's car. He said that he did this because he was worried about her movements and their child. He said that he got the device so he could do a child welfare report. (Investigation notice, 23)

Mothers spoke of the emotional toll caused to children by perpetrators' continued and excessive contact with them.

I'm most distressed because he sends inappropriate messages to children. [...] At times both of the children have been emotionally and behaviorally disturbed because of his phone calls and messages. (Minute of hearings, 229)

There was also evidence of fathers' communications to children degenerating into direct aggression and threats.

The children do not always have the energy to reply to his messages, which makes the father nervous about it. Then he starts to extort the children by saying 'if you don't answer me, you won't get what I have promised to buy for you'. (Minute of hearings, 229)

Altogether, the trial materials show how fathers/father-figures demonstrated an obsession with contacting, and seeking to monitor and control, the children and ex-partner, and how this obsession was pursued by technological means. Fathers/father-figures used a variety of harmful, technological-facilitated practices which infringed previously-arranged contact schedules, violated the identity and privacy of children, and harmed children's mental wellbeing (Heward-Belle, 2016).

Disparaging and insulting motherhood/womanhood

Gender boundaries – and their alleged transgression – played a crucial role in perpetrators' actions (see for example, Heward-Belle, 2017; Holt, 2017; Monk and Bowen, 2020). The positions asserted by perpetrators were built on dominant social norms that define subservient positions for women as mothers and sexual beings,

and on conventional romantic justifications of violent acts against female partners or ex-partners as ‘crimes of passion’ (Monckton Smith, 2020). These are social norms that, fundamentally, reflect the patriarchal concept of women and children as male property (Stark, 2007) along with the concomitant idea that men have a basic instinct to covet ‘their’ women and children (Overlien, 2013). These ideas conflict with the concept of women and children as equal human beings who have a full set of human rights and freedoms, including rights to safety and freedom from abuse. In a patriarchal mindset, disparaging and insulting the motherhood/womanhood of an ex-partner is seen as justified: she has broken the socially-prescribed ‘natural order’ of the family unit by attempting to exclude the father, the ‘natural’ head of household (for example, Downes et al, 2019).

One aspect of these attacks on the adult victim’s motherhood/womanhood was the making of disparaging comments or false accusations concerning her competence and respectability (Monk and Bowen, 2020). Such defamation could be directed at a public audience, to the woman herself, and/or to the woman’s loved ones, including directly to children who, for instance, in one case received messages directly from the father calling the mother a ‘whore’. Older children using social media were also part of the audience for public defamation, which utilised the many-to-many connectivity of social media (Khader and Chan, 2020). Such denigrations could exploit the expectations placed on mothers, for example around parental care-giving.

Woman has received copies of [the] perpetrator’s Facebook posts from her friends. The perpetrator talks about the woman and complains that she does not spend time with the children. (Judgment, 131)

Such posts could represent performances of ‘admirable’ fathering, portraying the father’s care and concern in contrast to his ex-partner’s supposedly deviant motherhood (Katz et al, 2020). Perpetrators could also aim to sabotage the ‘womanhood’ (that is, gendered femininity) of the ex-partner via technology-facilitated stalking. The evidence shows fake social media profiles being used to share, and threaten to share, shaming material concerning the woman’s sexuality, body and new relationships. Children were directly or indirectly vulnerable to these (actual or impending) humiliating acts toward their mothers.

The perpetrator has sent several messages from the fake profile, in which he has threatened several times to publish naked photos of her and heightened the threat by sending intimate photos of her to the discussion thread, saying that she will suffer and criticising her as a mother. (Judgment, 355)

Her colleagues, employer, mother and child have read slanderous texts from the web. She has described feelings of embarrassment and she has been ashamed to move anywhere. [Includes approximately 1500 posts on the public discussion arenas]. (Judgment, 344)

Such tactics could undermine children’s mother–child relationships by encouraging children to form negative views of their mother (Monk and Bowen, 2020). In some cases, the father/father-figure exposed children to image-based sexual abuse

(Douglas et al, 2019) by sending sexualised material concerning their mother which the children found upsetting.

The child came to ask me on Friday morning ‘Ugh, why am I receiving these kinds of photos of you?’ The child had noticed the messages, when we came back home from the hearing. The child could not connect the messages to him, because s/he didn’t have his phone number. I looked through the messages and noticed that the sender was the ex-partner. He had previously demanded that I take photos of me and send them to him. So, some of these photos I have taken voluntarily. Now he has sent these photos and videos to my child. (Minute of hearings, 99)

I was jogging with my current partner when the car passed by. He sat in the car with a driver. He shouted out from the open window ‘fucking whore’ and took a picture and sent it to our child. The child was distressed by that message. (Minute of hearings, 151)

These examples reflect the men’s negative attitudes to both women and children (Humphreys et al, 2019). The trial materials also show how perpetrators used technology to besmirch a woman’s reputation for feminine ‘decency’ by presenting her as a drinker or drug dealer, exploiting heteronormative understandings of female ‘propriety’ that mandate that women display socially-conforming behaviour (Aghtae et al, 2018).

He has sent messages to the children that I am out drinking. During that time, I was at home with the children. (Minute of hearings, 229)

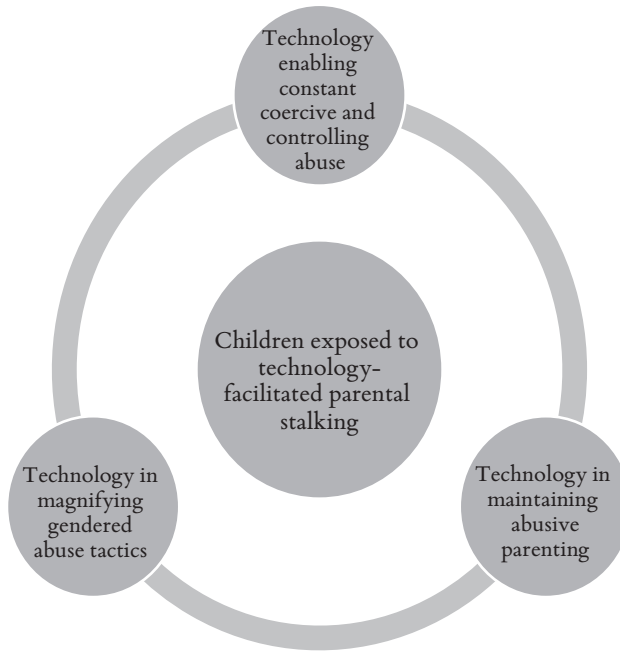
He has sent SMSs to my sister. [...] He says that I am a bad mother, have sold drugs in front of the kindergarten, and that strange people visit my home. (Minute of hearings, 383)

The trial materials therefore capture how perpetrators were able, via technology, to exploit hegemonic representations of the ‘good mother’ to exert power and control over their ex-partners and children (Heward-Belle, 2017). Perpetrators’ reputational attacks on motherhood/womanhood can be seen as part of a process of ‘grooming’ the woman’s communities and children to align with the perpetrator (Monk and Bowen, 2020). Technology provided tools for fathers to tell persuasive negative stories about their ex-partner (plausible because they reflected hegemonic ideas), and, by implication, to narrate their own moral superiority (Stark, 2007).

Contextual factors in technology-facilitated parental stalking

The three dimensions – threats of violence and death, intrusive and obsessive fatherhood, and disparaging and insulting motherhood/womanhood – have provided a multidimensional picture of how technology-facilitated parental stalking manifests in children’s and young people’s everyday lives. This section maps three key underlying contextual factors, revealed by the data across the three dimensions. These underlying factors are crucial for law enforcement and social welfare professionals

Figure 1: Contextual factors in children's exposure to technology-facilitated parental stalking



in understanding how perpetrators can use technology to cause negative effects on children and young people after parents' separation.

Figure 1 shows these three factors, related to the role of technology in: (1) enabling constant coercive and controlling abuse; (2) maintaining abusive parenthood; and (3) magnifying gendered tactics of abuse.

First, technology's enabling of constant coercive and controlling abuse is a matter of both space and time. Geographically, technology reinforces perpetrators' ability to be present in children's and mothers' everyday lives, and conduct surveillance of it, despite any spatial distance put between them (Stark, 2007). Moreover, appeasing perpetrators by giving them contact time with children does not lessen children's vulnerability to technology-facilitated abuse. Such abuse can, as shown in the dimension of threats of violence and death, occur even when children are physically present with their father. This is crucial to understanding how there is rarely a true 'post-separation' phase/period for adult and child victims/survivors of coercive control-based domestic violence. Technology enables abusive fathers/father-figures to be a constant post-separation presence in children's and mothers' everyday lives (Holt, 2015; Heward-Belle, 2016; Humphreys et al, 2019), and, especially through hi-tech monitoring technology, to communicate a continuing sense of terror (Navarro, 2016; Douglas et al, 2019).

Second, children therefore remain entangled in digital connections with abusive fathers/father-figures whose parenting practices place them at risk of significant harm (see Heward-Belle, 2016; Humphreys et al, 2019). Perpetrators can use technology to appear as admirable and caring fathers, pretending that their eagerness for contact stems from concerns about their children's wellbeing (Katz et al, 2020). Meanwhile, simultaneously, they can be using technology to perpetrate psychological and

emotional abuse against children and their mothers, creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity (Nikupeteri and Laitinen, 2015).

Third, technology-facilitated parental stalking can involve a 'process of gendering', with tactics and dynamics that are aligned with, and reproduce, broader gender-based inequalities (Hester, 2011). Technology is used by perpetrators to exploit common representations of the 'good mother' as a mechanism of coercive control (Heward-Belle, 2017). Thus, when discussing how social media and technological devices are used to perpetrate and reinforce stalking, it is critical to understand men's/fathers' abuse of women/mothers in the social context of gender inequality (Vera-Gray, 2017; Dragiewicz et al, 2018; Henry et al, 2020).

Recognising the contextual factors in children's and young people's exposure to technology-facilitated parental stalking means re-thinking 'safety work' in professional practices. Technology-facilitated threats should be considered when evaluating the risks associated with contact arrangements (see also Bergman and Eriksson, 2018): including, as discussed in the dimension of threats of violence and death, how potential homicide may be linked to technology-facilitated death threats aimed at mothers and/or children (for example, Spitzberg and Cupach, 2014; Harris and Woodlock, 2019). Protecting children involves moving away from encouraging children and young people to retreat from social media and technological devices in response to stalking as this does not deter the perpetrator, but instead violates children's human rights and excludes them from vital peer relations and online services (Al-Alosi, 2020; Woodlock et al, 2020).

In order to help children and young people exposed to technology-facilitated parental stalking, we need more effective legal/service responses which recognise children as victims and also acknowledge, and set greater sanctions for, perpetrators' harmful technologically-facilitated behaviour. Moreover, we need to address the gender inequalities emerging from societal and cultural conditions which underlie men's technology-facilitated stalking, and to dismantle the gender norms that underpin perpetrators' coercive and controlling behaviour (see also Downes et al, 2019; Henry et al, 2020).

Monk and Bowen (2020) suggest that the responses of professionals play a vital role in the success or failure of coercive control perpetrators' agendas. By scrutinising the impacts of technology-facilitated stalking on children and young people, and fully recognising that the stalking of their parent or children themselves can be traumatising for children (Elklit et al, 2019), professionals can help children and young people and their mothers to be free of this abuse. In particular, professionals should understand how tactics of technology-facilitated parental stalking are based on broader gender-based practices – similar to other forms of violence against women and children – and the array of harmful consequences that these tactics produce in children's and young peoples' lives.

While our data was collected in Finland where stalking is recognised as criminal behaviour, the descriptions of how fathers/father-figures utilise technology in perpetrating stalking behavior may be applicable in other countries, especially other western countries. In many countries, there is a risk of overlooking children's positions in judicial proceedings during separation and in post-separation parenthood where domestic violence and coercive control has occurred (for example, Hester, 2011; Bergman and Eriksson, 2018; Feresin et al, 2019). While increasing the scrutiny on perpetrators' use of technology, focus should also be given to how services

and governments can protect children and their mothers while facilitating their continued freedom to utilise digital spaces (Harris and Woodlock, 2019; Al-Alosi, 2020).

Conclusions and implications for future research

This article has argued that children's exposure and vulnerability to fathers'/father-figures' technologically-facilitated stalking of their mothers must be more widely recognised. The study illustrates how fathers'/father-figures' use of technology in stalking positions children as both direct and indirect victims of stalking, and potential targets of homicide. In future research, it will be important to explore how children and young people themselves experience perpetrators' use of technology – its power and its ability to compress and transgress time/space boundaries – and how this experience shapes the impacts of parental stalking on children and young people.

Note

¹ Project webpage www.ulapland.fi/caps

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant 308470.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the research group members Carita Lappi, Sanna Koulu and Kati Kallinen who have participated in collecting and coding the data for analysis. We would also like to thank Joseph Maslen his support in writing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References

- Agtaie, N., Larkins, C., Barter, C., Stanley, N., Wood, M. and Øverlien, C. (2018) Interpersonal violence and abuse in young people's relationships in five European countries: online and offline normalisation of heteronormativity, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 2(2): 293–310. doi: [10.1332/239868018X15263879270302](https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15263879270302)
- Ahlgrim, B. and Terrance, C. (2021) Perceptions of cyberstalking: impact of perpetrator gender and cyberstalker/victim relationship, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(7–8): NP4074–NP4093, doi: [10.1177/0886260518784590](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518784590).
- Al-Alosi, H. (2020) Fighting fire with fire: exploring the potential of technology to help victims combat intimate partner violence, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 52(May–June): 101376. doi: [10.1016/j.avb.2020.101376](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101376)
- Bergman, A.S. and Eriksson, M. (2018) Supported visitation in cases of violence: political intentions and local practice in Sweden, *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 32(3): 374–93. doi: [10.1093/lawfam/ebv011](https://doi.org/10.1093/lawfam/ebv011)
- Callaghan, J.E.M., Alexander, J.H., Sixsmith, J. and Fellin, L.C. (2018) Beyond 'witnessing': children's experiences of coercive control in domestic violence and abuse, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(10): 1551–81. doi: [10.1177/0886260515618946](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515618946)

- Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board (2017) *Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board 2016–17 – Annual Report*, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board.
- Douglas, H., Harris, B.A. and Dragiewicz, M. (2019) Technology-facilitated domestic and family violence: women's experiences, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(3): 551–70. doi: [10.1093/bjc/azy068](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy068)
- Downes, J., Kelly, L. and Westmarland, N. (2019) 'It's a work in progress': men's accounts of gender and change in their use of coercive control, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 3(3): 267–82. doi: [10.1332/239868019X15627570242850](https://doi.org/10.1332/239868019X15627570242850)
- Dragiewicz, M., Burgess, J., Matamoros-Fernández, A., Salter, M., Suzor, N.P., Woodlock, D. and Harris, B. (2018) Technology facilitated coercive control: domestic violence and the competing roles of digital media platforms, *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4): 609–25. doi: [10.1080/14680777.2018.1447341](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447341)
- Elklit, A., Vangsgaard L.A.G., Olsen, A.S.W. and Ali, S.A. (2019) Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in secondary stalked children of Danish stalking survivors: a pilot study, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(5): 725. doi: [10.3390/ijerph16050725](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16050725)
- Feresin, M., Bastiani, F., Beltramini, L. and Romito, P. (2019) The involvement of children in postseparation intimate partner violence in Italy: a strategy to maintain coercive control?, *Affilia*, 34(4): 481–97. doi: [10.1177/0886109919857672](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109919857672)
- Harris, B.A. and Woodlock, D. (2019) Digital coercive control: insights from two landmark domestic violence studies, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(3): 530–50. doi: [10.1093/bjc/azy052](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy052)
- Haselschwerdt, M.L., Hlavaty, K., Carlson, C., Schneider, M., Maddox, L. and Skipper, M. (2019) Heterogeneity within domestic violence exposure: young adults' retrospective experiences, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(7): 1512–38. doi: [10.1177/0886260516651625](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516651625)
- Henry, N., Flynn, A. and Powell, A. (2020) Technology-facilitated domestic and sexual violence: a review, *Violence Against Women*, 26(15–16): 1828–54. doi: [10.1177/1077801219875821](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219875821)
- Hester, M. (2011) The three planet model: towards an understanding of contradictions in approaches to women and children's safety in contexts of domestic violence, *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(5): 837–53. doi: [10.1093/bjsw/bcr095](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr095)
- Heward-Belle, S. (2016) The diverse fathering practices of men who perpetrate domestic violence, *Australian Social Work*, 69(3): 323–37. doi: [10.1080/0312407X.2015.1057748](https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2015.1057748)
- Heward-Belle, S. (2017) Exploiting the 'good mother' as a tactic of coercive control: domestically violent men's assaults on women as mothers, *Affilia*, 32(3): 374–89. doi: [10.1177/0886109917706935](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109917706935)
- Holt, S. (2015) Post-separation fathering and domestic abuse: challenges and contradictions, *Child Abuse Review*, 24(3): 210–22. doi: [10.1002/car.2264](https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2264)
- Holt, S. (2017) Domestic violence and the paradox of post-separation mothering, *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(7): 2049–67. doi: [10.1093/bjsw/bcw162](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw162)
- Humphreys, C., Diemer, K., Bornemisza, A., Spiteri-Staines, A., Kaspiew, R. and Horsfall, B. (2019) More present than absent: men who use domestic violence and their fathering, *Child and Family Social Work*, 24(2): 321–29. doi: [10.1111/cfs.12617](https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12617)

- Katz, E. (2016) Beyond the physical incident model: how children living with domestic violence are harmed by and resist regimes of coercive control, *Child Abuse Review*, 25(1): 46–59. doi: [10.1002/car.2422](https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2422)
- Katz, E., Nikupeteri, A. and Laitinen, M. (2020) When coercive control continues to harm children: post-separation fathering, stalking and domestic violence, *Child Abuse Review*, 29(4): 310–24. doi: [10.1002/car.2611](https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2611)
- Khader, M. and Chan, S. (2020) Unwanted attention: a survey on cyberstalking victimization, in H.C.O. Chan and S. Lorraine (eds) *Psycho-Criminological Approaches to Stalking Behavior: An International Perspective*, Wiley Series in the Psychology of Crime, Policing and Law, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, pp 77–13.
- Logan, T.K. and Walker, R. (2017) Stalking: a multidimensional framework for assessment and safety planning, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 18(2): 200–22. doi: [10.1177/1524838015603210](https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015603210)
- Marganski, A. and Melander, L. (2018) Intimate partner violence victimisation in the cyber and real world: examining the extent of cyber aggression experiences and its association with in-person dating violence, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(7): 1071–95. doi: [10.1177/0886260515614283](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515614283)
- Monckton Smith, J. (2020) Intimate partner femicide: using Foucauldian analysis to track an eight stage progression to homicide, *Violence Against Women*, 26(11): 1267–85. doi: [10.1177/1077801219863876](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219863876)
- Monk, L. and Bowen, E. (2020) Coercive control of women as mothers via strategic mother–child separation, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 5(1): 23–42. doi: [10.1332/239868020X15913793920878](https://doi.org/10.1332/239868020X15913793920878)
- Monk, L.M. (2017) Improving professionals’ responses to mothers who become, or are at risk of becoming, separated from their children, in contexts of violence and abuse, (*Unpublished PhD thesis*), Coventry: Coventry University.
- Navarro, J.N. (2016) Cyberabuse and cyberstalking, in J.N. Navarro, S. Clevenger and C.D. Marcum (eds) *The Intersection Between Intimate Partner Abuse, Technology, and Cybercrime Examining the Virtual Enemy*, Durham, NC: Academic Press, pp 125–39.
- Nikupeteri, A. and Laitinen, M. (2015) Children’s everyday lives shadowed by stalking: postseparation stalking narratives of Finnish children and women, *Violence and Victims*, 30(5): 830–45. doi: [10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-14-00048](https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-14-00048)
- Øverlien, C. (2013) The children of patriarchal terrorism, *Journal of Family Violence*, 28(3): 277–87.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Reyns, B.W., Henson, B. and Fisher, B.S. (2012) Stalking in the twilight zone: extent of cyberstalking victimization and offending among college students, *Deviant Behavior*, 33(1): 1–25. doi: [10.1080/01639625.2010.538364](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2010.538364)
- Sheridan, L. and Grant, T. (2007) Is cyberstalking different?, *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 13(6): 627–40. doi: [10.1080/10683160701340528](https://doi.org/10.1080/10683160701340528)
- Southworth, C., Finn, J., Dawson, S., Fraser, C. and Tucker, S. (2007) Intimate partner violence, technology, and stalking, *Violence Against Women*, 13(8): 842–56. doi: [10.1177/1077801207302045](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801207302045)
- Spitzberg, B.H. and Cupach, W.R. (2014) *The Dark Side of Relationship Pursuit: From Attraction to Obsession and Stalking*, 2nd edn, New York: Routledge.
- Stark, E. (2007) *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*, New York: Oxford University Press.

- Stark, E. and Hester, M. (2019) Coercive control: update and review, *Violence Against Women*, 25(1): 81–104. doi: [10.1177/1077801218816191](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218816191)
- Valkenburg, P.M. and Peter, J. (2011) Online communication among adolescents: an integrated model of its attraction, opportunities, and risks, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48(2): 121–27. doi: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.08.020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.08.020)
- Vera-Gray, F. (2017) ‘Talk about a cunt with too much idle time’: trolling feminist research, *Feminist Review*, 115(1): 61–78. doi: [10.1057/s41305-017-0038-y](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0038-y)
- Wilson, S. (2016) Digital technologies, children and young people’s relationships and self-care, *Children’s Geographies*, 14(3): 282–94. doi: [10.1080/14733285.2015.1040726](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2015.1040726)
- Woodlock, D. (2017) The abuse of technology in domestic violence and stalking, *Violence Against Women*, 23(5): 584–602. doi: [10.1177/1077801216646277](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801216646277)
- Woodlock, D., McKenzie, M., Western, D. and Harris, B. (2020) Technology as a weapon in domestic violence: responding to digital coercive control, *Australian Social Work*, 73(3): 368–80. doi: [10.1080/0312407X.2019.1607510](https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2019.1607510)
- Worsley, J.D., Wheatcroft, J.M., Short, E. and Corcoran, R. (2017) Victims’ voices: understanding the emotional impact of cyberstalking and individuals coping responses, *Sage Open*, 7(2): 1–13. doi: [10.1177/2158244017710292](https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017710292)

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.