



## 'You Can't Actually Escape It': Policing the Use of Technology in Domestic Violence in Rural Australia

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### Abstract

The abuse of technology by perpetrators of domestic violence is 'spaceless'; however, in this article, we argue that experiences of and responses to *digital coercive control* are shaped by both the *place* (geographic location) and *space* (practical and ideological features of a location) that a victim/survivor and criminal justice agency occupy. We examined this issue by conducting interviews and focus groups with 13 female victim/survivors in regional, rural and remote Australia. All participants had contact with police as part of their help-seeking for domestic violence, and some suggested that officers sometimes paralleled perpetrator behaviours, resulting in a narrowing of women's 'space for action'. We conclude that, in the interests of protecting and empowering women, socio-spatial frameworks must be considered by practitioners and researchers, and there should be a concerted effort to expand resourcing and training for justice agencies beyond the cityscape.

### Keywords

Digital coercive control; technology-facilitated violence; violence against women; domestic violence; rurality.

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## Introduction

Digital media and devices are increasingly used by perpetrators of domestic violence to coerce and control survivors. Most commonly, targets are current or former intimate partners. Children, friends, family members and subsequent partners can also be direct or collateral victims. These harms are enacted by offenders in particular jurisdictions but are *spaceless*—that is, not bound to any one area. Victim/survivors are exposed not only *wherever* but *whenever* they access digital media or devices. The heavy presence of technology in our lives (providing opportunities for social, civic, work and education engagements) means technology-facilitated abuse seems inescapable. Features of platforms, hardware and software—as well as overt and covert offending behaviours—create a sense of perpetrator ‘omnipresence’ and ‘omnipotence’. The ways that technology shapes survivor experiences and responses to violence must be recognised but so must the role of spatiality, more broadly (Harris 2016; Harris & Woodlock 2019; Woodlock 2013, 2017). The connection between ‘place’, ‘space’ and ‘spacelessness’ has been largely overlooked in studies of digital abuse (DeKeseredy 2021a, 2021b). This is a significant oversight because, in non-urban zones, spacelessness, place and space restrict women’s help-seeking and ability to exit relationships (their ‘space for action’) (Farhall, Harris and Woodlock 2020; Kelly 2003; Sharps-Jeffs, Kelly and Klein 2018) and may elevate the risk of fatal violence, as we discuss in this article. In the interests of protecting and empowering victim/survivors and regulating and preventing domestic violence, justice regulations of digital harms in different locations warrant attention.

In this article, we explore regional, rural and remote women’s accounts of technology-facilitated abuse, which we term ‘digital coercive control’ (DCC), and invocation of police agencies in efforts to address these harms. We begin by outlining conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to understand DCC as ‘spaceless violence’: the behaviours to which our participants were subjected and how DCC, as well as geographic and social features of non-urban areas, may limit their ‘space for action’ (see also Farhall, Harris and Woodlock 2020). We then provide an overview of our project and the methodology adopted for conducting interviews and focus groups with female victim/survivors in three Australian states (New South Wales [NSW], Queensland and Victoria). In exploring our findings, we then discuss the role of place: how both landscapes and perpetrators can extend geographic isolation and how geography can exacerbate barriers encountered by victim/survivors.

The notion of visibility is examined because those in non-urban areas may be more likely to be found by perpetrators and known by those to whom they disclose and report violence than in bigger, metropolitan areas. We also examine the concept of space: how ideologies, actions and actors that manifest in a place foster, excuse and legitimate DCC against women and bolster abusive networks and abuser allies. In the final section of this article, we investigate women’s experiences of engaging police. While some classed these as positive encounters, many participants felt that state regulations were limited or deficient, suggesting there is scope to enhance these interventions. In closing, we question how the operations of regional, rural and remote agencies are spatially constrained and can affect women’s encounters with justice agencies.

## Spaceless Violence and Space for Action

Technology-facilitated abuse is an extension of violence that is perpetrated in the relationship. It cannot be divorced from other strategies employed and behaviours exercised by abusers (Woodlock 2017). We propose that the phrase ‘digital coercive control’ (see Harris and Woodlock 2019; Woodlock et al. 2020) is employed to refer to the use of devices and digital media to demean, harass, threaten, abuse and stalk partners or ex-partners or associated targets (family members, friends and subsequent partners). The term specifies the method (digital), intent (coercive behaviour) and effects (control), and, in referencing the concept of ‘coercive control’, we emphasise how DCC is situated in a wider setting of sex-based inequality (Harris and Woodlock 2019; Hester 2010; Stark 2007) and governed by and reinforces other structural inequalities and marginalisation (Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019). Coercive control, as a framework, emphasises dynamics and patterns of abuse, capturing manifestations that are more readily problematised or criminalised as well as those not typically deemed to be ‘serious’ or violations of laws

(Harris and Woodlock 2019). This is important because, as discussed in this article, when disclosing DCC to state agents, victim/survivors frequently report that DCC is considered 'less' than and divorced from other forms of domestic violence.

DCC is an umbrella term encompassing a range of behaviours (Harris and Woodlock 2019, 2022). It can refer to the use of technology to enact other forms of harm (like sexual abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse or in-person stalking) (Barter et al. 2017; Marganski and Melander 2015). DCC can also include—but, we stress, is not limited to—using technology to send or post communications intended to defame or harass, cause an unauthorised function or impair an authorised function on a device or digital media account, dox, commit image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) (creating and/or distributing intimate images without consent), perform identity theft or impersonation and stalk (Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019; Harris 2020; Harris and Woodlock 2022). To facilitate DCC, perpetrators may access a victim/survivor's actual or virtual property using force, coercion, deception or stealth (Dragiewicz et al. 2019; Harris and Woodlock 2019, 2022; Woodlock 2013, 2017).

Some of the aforementioned acts may be observed in an abusive relationship or present in (and accepted and regarded as innocuous in) non-abusive relationships. For example, the use of video call functions or Skype or Zoom platforms may foster connections between parties and be considered both beneficial and benign. However, we have heard of perpetrators asking children to use such audiovisual communications to gain intel about access points and security at women's residences or women's activities post-separation (Harris and Woodlock 2022; see also Dragiewicz et al. 2019). Thus, the context in which DCC occurs cannot be overlooked. This is also because DCC is individualised to affect a specific target. Calling at certain times or using certain words, for instance, can be ominous and evoke fear because of the meaning it holds for a victim/survivor.

DCC is especially invasive because technology facilitates spatial and temporal intrusions that are enacted with little respite, which severely inhibit women's freedoms 'by explicitly and implicitly curbing their behaviour' and abilities to respond to violence (Farhall, Harris and Woodlock 2020: 182). As we propose in this article, their 'space for action' (Kelly 2003; Sharps-Jeffs, Kelly and Klein 2018) is further constricted by the geographical and social features of non-urban communities. We draw on these concepts in this article to consider how spacelessness, place and space may be used to limit a woman's freedom when navigating criminal justice responses to DCC.

## **Project Overview**

Our project evolved from our previous work that assessed how perpetrators, victim/survivors, advocates and practitioners used technology in the context of domestic violence. Woodlock's (2013) study was significant in gathering the largest national data, at the time, from victim/survivors and support workers about how technology-facilitated abuse manifested in intimate relationships. Her survey revealed that perpetrators used digital media and devices to intimidate, isolate and dominate women (see also Woodlock 2017). George and Harris's (2014) study was not focused on technology but domestic violence in regional and rural areas more broadly and found that rurality influenced experiences of and responses to harm. George and Harris (2014) reported that perpetrators, women and practitioners were using technology for enacting or addressing domestic violence. Harris (2016) also charted the socio-spatial effects of technology-facilitated violence and discussed opportunities for using technology to seek or provide assistance and advocacy. Building on this research, our project *Spaceless Violence and Advocacy: Technology-Facilitated Abuse, Stalking and Service Provision (Spaceless Violence)* (Harris and Woodlock 2022) investigated women's experiences of technology-facilitated domestic violence in regional, rural and remote areas.

## Methodology

We position domestic violence as gendered and sexed (see national data in Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018; Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network 2018), recognising that women are disproportionately affected by this phenomenon, which is overwhelmingly enacted by male perpetrators. Additionally, we understand that domestic violence is underscored by structural, sex-based inequalities and unequal distributions of resources, opportunities and power (Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety and VicHealth 2015). Accordingly, we adopted a feminist perspective for our approach (both theoretically and methodologically). Feminist readings of domestic violence emphasise that, despite misconceptions, it is not only (or necessarily) physical abuse that is performed by a perpetrator. More accurately, domestic violence can be understood as an exercise of power (often leveraging structural sex and gender inequalities), consisting of patterns of controlling and coercive behaviours rather than isolated incidences. This can include (but is not limited to) manipulation and emotional, psychological, financial, physical, sexual or technology-facilitated abuse and is often accompanied by threats or threatening behaviours that are intended to terrorise, dominate and entrap a victim/survivor (Harris and Woodlock 2022; Stark 2007).

Integral to feminist approaches is the foregrounding of victim/survivor voices and experiences (Laing, Humphreys and Cavanagh 2013) and recognising the expertise and experiences of practitioners (Woodlock 2017). In essence, feminist research methods provide cognisance of women's experiences as they conceptualise them. To do so, we conducted semi-structured interviews with victim/survivors, which is a medium that allows for in-depth explorations of voices and perspectives that have historically been excluded and marginalised. This provided insights into particular issues and cohorts as opposed to generalisable findings (see Hesse-Biber 2007). We secured institutional ethics approval (University of New England Approval Number HE16-243; QUT Ethics Approval Number 180000036) and were guided by best practice ethical and safety guidelines (World Health Organization 2001) and our past work with non-urban victim/survivors (George and Harris 2014).

We recruited participants who had specifically experienced technology-facilitated abuse and engaged the justice system to respond to violence. Women were approached through domestic violence services where they were current or former clients. This ensured women were supported pre- and post-interview and that risks were ameliorated and managed with support workers. However, this strategy is limited because many women subjected to domestic violence do not use services. An additional issue was that we relied on (often overburdened and under-resourced) agencies in non-urban regions to locate potential participants and were reluctant to put further strains on workers. We engaged multiple agencies and conducted 13 interviews. One focus group was held with two interviewees, extending issues that arose in interviews, particularly around barriers in help-seeking and regulating harm.

Safe communication protocols were developed with participants and support workers, which was key given that the abusers had previously weaponised and accessed women's devices and digital accounts. Women were interviewed at service offices that were familiar and comfortable places or over the phone, as arranged by practitioners. Plain language information was provided that outlined the information about the project, research aims and benefits, participation in the research, withdrawal and complaint processes and storage of participant information. Women received an honorarium that acknowledged their contributions to the project, and services received a donation that recognised their time and efforts in sourcing participants. With participants, we developed plans for the interviews and focus groups and managed various scenarios that might arise, such as if they became distressed. Thematic analysis was completed using NVivo (King, Horrocks and Brooks 2019; Saldaña 2012). Using the method outlined by King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019), interviews were first coded descriptively, such as 'GPS [global positioning system] used to track', then interpretively, such as 'victim-blaming by police'. Each researcher read and analysed the data, which was compared and contrasted to the other researcher's analysis. We worked together to formulate the structure for descriptive and interpretive codes. Double coding provided verification of our approach. Pseudonyms were used and some details were changed to protect the women's privacies and identities.

## Participants and Rurality

In all cases, women identified an abusive male intimate partner as the primary perpetrator (although others may have been identified for colluding with or assisting an abuser or enacting harm). Of the 13 women who participated in our research, 12 had children. Participant ages ranged from 26 to 50, with an average age of 33. There were four participants from Victoria, six from NSW and three from Queensland. The majority of the participants were born in Australia (69%), and of this group, 15% identified as Aboriginal and 54% as non-Aboriginal. Of those born overseas, 8% identified as South American (Bolivian), 8% were from Asia (India) and 15% were from New Zealand.

All women lived in rural, regional or remote locations (as defined primarily using physical measurements—the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) system, which is most commonly employed in Australia—as well as social identification made by services and participants about what constituted a regional, rural or remote zone). In essence, regional, rural and remote locations are those outside capital cities and urban places. In ARIA+, these are differentiated by ‘remoteness’ (road distance to service centres). Recognising social constructs of rurality is also useful because as well as geographic, demographic and economic factors, rurality is a symbolic landscape and ‘a state of mind’: ‘a mental place as well as a physical place’ (Hogg 2016: 130). Our lens allowed us to recognise both administering coding (ARIA+) and the women’s and workers’ conceptualisations of what constitutes a regional, rural or remote precinct. This could be in relation to many factors, such as the size, features, infrastructure, industries, structures, dynamics or values of communities. For ease, we use the word ‘rural’ to encompass all these locations. Some participants were in small regional (such as coastal) locations, but many resided in rural farming areas. Others were based in more remote, isolated communities.

While using a singular term to refer to our sites, collectively, we emphasise that there is great diversity within and between regional, rural and remote locations. These are not homogenous areas but have different geographies, industries, resources and levels of wealth, makeup, structures and cultures (George and Harris 2014; Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2006). Further, these are not unchanging places. Migration, for instance, can bring demographic shifts that change the average age, cultural and linguistic diversity of the population and transform sociopolitical and religious compositions. Additionally, we agree with Hogg and Carrington (2006: 180) that gender constructs in rural communities—while not monolithic—can have unique features and meanings, where masculinity is ‘constructed more narrowly around heteronormative concepts’ than urban communities, which ‘subordinates others through practices of domination that historically have relied on the exercise of violence’. This does not mean that all rural men use violence or that all rural women are oppressed, but that we should investigate how place, gender and power might interconnect and facilitate violence (see also DeKeseredy 2021b).

## Regional, Rural and Remote Women’s Experiences of Digital Coercive Control

In our research, women were subjected to various forms of DCC that were not distinct from but mirrored those observed in urban studies (Dragiewicz et al. 2019). However, as we explore later in this article, there were distinctions between the effects and risks posed by DCC for our cohort because of where the women resided. In *Spaceless Violence*, as has been reported elsewhere, technology was part of perpetrator control and intimidation tactics. All women reported that perpetrators abused, threatened and harassed them through text messages and phone calls. Almost all (85%) said that social media was utilised, and over half (62%) were tracked and monitored via GPS. Perpetrators made threats to women, their friends and families and to self-harm. Kira’s account of DCC was typical in our research. She was subjected to DCC during the relationship, and the perpetrator demanded that she be always contactable through her phone. If she did not reply to a text message quickly enough or answer his calls, the abusive messages and threats would increase. Kira explained:

He was very controlling—always had to know where I was, constantly calling me to know what’s happening. If I didn’t answer my phone for a period of time, then I was accused of

cheating on him or something like that. It'd be threats to harm himself if I didn't answer or if I wasn't with him or something happened.

The use of emails to abuse and threaten was disclosed by almost half the women (46%). Women also reported perpetrators enacting IBSA (46%) in efforts to humiliate, menace and shame. This involved non-consensual creation, distribution or threats to distribute intimate images. Shelly's ex had 'inappropriate' photos of her that he refused to delete and threatened to distribute: 'Just saying, "I've got a whole memory stick full of photos of you, if you want to get smart, I'll post them"'. Almost three-quarters of the participants (69%) discussed incidences of sexual abuse in their relationships, often involving technology.

Women experienced gendered and sexualised abuse. Threats of rape and calling women 'sluts' and 'bitches' were common. Monica shared that, after ending the relationship, her former partner spread rumours that she was having 'gang bangs' and would send her text messages at all hours. She 'received messages, and they were horrid. Disgusting language. "You're a selfish fucking slut"'. Monica described high levels of contact, recalling that 'a couple of times a week I'd receive them and I'd be home in bed asleep, and I'd wake up to all these messages, like, 12, 15 messages and 20 missed calls. It didn't stop straight away. It went on for a few months after we separated'. These messages were sent to women and their families and friends. Cody said that her ex-partner would send their daughter text messages if she refused to see him, saying, 'don't be a slut like your mum'.

It was not only the content of the text messages and calls that were alarming. Women were distressed by the large number of calls and texts they received (up to several hundred a day). Louise's former partner:

used to send me 10 text messages in a row before [I'd reply] back and things. It was full-on harassment with phone calls all the time. I'd get phone calls at 4 o'clock in the morning that, phone call after phone call, and if I'd tell him to stop, like, it would be [no] chance the first time. I wouldn't keep doing it and things like that. Full on.

The DCC women endured occurred during their relationships and post-separation. For many in our study, there was an escalation of abuse at separation, challenging the myth that women can 'escape' violence after leaving the perpetrator. After Kira ended the relationship, 'it became stalking and more threatening. This was where the technology came into play more so', using various channels (such as texting, phone calls and social media messages). The volume of digital contact was oppressive. 'It was constant', she explained, 'I wouldn't be surprised if it was a hundred a day. It was very, very frequent'. Kira said he made threats to fatally harm others: 'to kill my nieces, my family'. Many women we consulted described being subjected to overt DCC. Sometimes perpetrators were upfront about the range of applications and devices they used to contact and surveil women, often in efforts to show their reach (although they may have employed further tactics that they did not disclose). At other times, perpetrators used technology covertly in ways that women had not detected.

Technology-facilitated stalking mainly occurred post-separation and involved GPS trackers and access to geographic data on women's and children's devices. Natalie's ex digitally tracked her location covertly, although he admitted doing so when speaking to one of her friends. He would just appear where she was, creating a sense of entrapment. She described being:

in some random supermarket and he'd just be behind me, or I'd be in some bushy area ... he'd just appear in random places ... just behind me ... [so] I just had the nervous tic of looking over my shoulder every five seconds because I didn't know where he'd pop up.

Technology was most often engaged to facilitate in-person stalking, with perpetrators drawing on information obtained digitally to monitor, follow and intimidate women.

The spacelessness of DCC meant that women felt ‘there wasn’t ever a break from it ... you can’t actually escape it’. As Kira explained, while other forms of abuse (e.g., emotional, psychological, physical and sexual abuse) are ‘normally said to your face, ... I had to be present for that to happen’:

when it came to technology, it didn’t matter where I was; he was able to access me ... you never got to escape, which I hadn’t experienced before because every other type of abuse I was able to ... it ended at some point.

How DCC manifested and the women’s responses to DCC were also shaped by the place and space they occupied.

### **Digital Coercive Control and Place**

The spacelessness of DCC affected the women’s experiences, but so did their area of residence, which, following de Certeau (1984), we characterise as a ‘place’, a fixed (rural) location. The victim/survivors highlighted the effects of distance when responding to DCC because they were often far from informal and formal supports as well as medical assistance, especially in more remote areas (see also Gallup-Black 2005; Wendt 2009). Infrastructure in non-urban regions can be lacking, which can exacerbate alienation. Public transport networks (where they exist) are fragmented at best, and private transport is typically expensive or absent (Coorey 1988). It is not uncommon for abusers to restrict women’s travel by siphoning petrol, selling or impeding access to vehicles (Loxton, Hussain and Schofield 2003; Pitt, Maidment and Crichton-Hill 2019), as women in our study revealed, and this is, we argue, a technology that abusers readily control and coopt.

Perpetrators used other strategies to compound geographic isolation and reduce women’s opportunities to seek assistance. Lola’s ex persuaded her to relocate to an outlying property (a farm) from a house that had been closer to ‘town’. Encouraging women to leave work or work in family businesses can also represent attempts to confine women. Natalie explained: ‘[I] got quite isolated and I went to work for him and left my job ... it became 24/7 contact’. Technology can offer secluded women avenues to seek aid and information. Thus, digital media has been harnessed by domestic violence organisations with limited capital and can extend their reach and capacity. This is attractive to overburdened and under-resourced services that rely on tenuous governmental funding or sporadic contributions from the private sector (Harris, Dragiewicz and Woodlock 2021). However, in our study, the victim/survivors were more likely to use technology to connect with informal supports. Natalie had ‘a good amount of friends’ and so would be ‘on the phone, or I’d be texting, and that was my outlet for a crazy situation’. Unfortunately, not all women felt safe doing so. Lola was ‘too scared to use it [technology]. I just couldn’t reach out to people ... I didn’t want to use it just in case’.

The risks signalled by some forms of DCC women have experienced—and posed by perpetrators restricting access to technology—must be considered alongside barriers and risks associated with rurality. While perpetrators could, in essence, sequester women in smaller areas, rural victim/survivors are more visible when help-seeking than their urban counterparts, which can be a deterrent to disclosing abuse. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this issue further, but we note that several participants shared that their abuser was a former police officer or had close associations with police, which complicated their confidence in police and ability to formally respond to DCC. This is worrying because justice responses can—ideally—provide interventions that prevent harm and lethal violence. In Australia, video links have been used to enable rural victim/survivors to appear in specialist courts remotely, and similar technologies could be used to connect women with police in other areas, particularly specialist police (George and Harris 2014). The potential of technology to facilitate and bolster justice responses is worth exploring, especially if it allows women to engage specialist police in other areas who have no relationship with or knowledge of the victim/survivor or offender.

In non-urban areas, women can be more readily discovered and targeted by their abusers than in urban areas. Kira suspected her ex stalked her post-separation via technology and in-person. He found her in the

regional area she moved to and ‘followed me around for the day, so to be able to find me would suggest he was able to locate me pretty easily’. It could also be easy for ‘abuser allies’ (people who back an abuser, enable their abuse and may assist or participate in abuse both offline and online) (see Bancroft 2003) to locate rural women. Shelly’s former partner had friends that assisted his surveillance practices and abuse. She described encountering a girl her ex knew every time she went to the gym who would ‘grab her phone’ on seeing Shelly. Immediately, Shelly would receive a barrage of abusive messages from him that referenced her movements and activities.

The danger of lethal violence can be elevated for non-urban women and amplified by the expanse between a woman’s residence and first responders. Alarmingly, what would be an assault in an urban area could become a homicide in a rural area simply because of delays in receiving medical assistance (Harris 2016). There is little data on homicide rates by zone in Australia, but international research suggests that compared to urban places, homicides are highest in rural places (Gallup-Black 2005). Threats involving and the presence of weapons is a homicide flag (an indicator of lethal risk) (see Logan, Shannon and Walker 2007), and weapons are more present in rural landscapes (George and Harris 2014). Other homicide flags such as intimate partner stalking (see Logan, Shannon and Cole 2007), coercive control, obsessive contact and threats to kill or self-harm can be evidenced through technology (Harris 2020). Indeed, abusive and obsessive contact and stalking by technology have been identified as emerging trends in domestic and family violence homicide and filicide cases (Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board 2017; Harris and Woodlock 2022; NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team 2017).

We emphasise that these homicide flags were observed in our cohort. Obsessive tendencies were evident in the frequent and high-volume level of messages sent; threats made to women, their family members and to self-harm issued through information communication technology; and stalking evidenced by the monitoring of women’s devices and digital profiles and tracking of their movements and communications using technology. Consequently, we maintain that the perils of DCC *and* place need to be examined by justice agents, and we caution that space should also be examined.

### **Digital Coercive Control and Space**

To gain insights into the perpetration and regulation of DCC, we cannot overlook the actions, actors, philosophies and expressions of power that occupy and occur in a place at a given moment. We characterise this as ‘space’. Following de Certeau (1984), we define space as a ‘practiced place’, maintaining that both practical (geographical) and ideological components of communities are worthy of attention (see also Harris 2016). While talking about space, some participants lamented the sense of homogeneity and conservatism in their communities and told us they felt overlooked when in need or like they could not ask for assistance because they were ‘outsiders’. This was especially true for women who identified as ethnically, culturally or linguistically diverse in their predominately white communities and those who were considered ‘alternative’ in lifestyle, appearance or identification as criminalised women.

Priya was denied access to most channels of assistance because she was on a temporary visa and had no friends or family in Australia. She described feeling invisible and ignored (by police and other residents) when experiencing homelessness after leaving her ex, despite being hypervisible because of her identity as an outsider and because she was heavily pregnant (on the visibility and risks faced by immigrant women in rural locations, see Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service 2006). She said:

I was sleeping [in public places], but no one ask[ed] if there was a problem. For two or three nights, I spent without anyone, just sleeping in the road with my big tummy, pregnant.

Lola felt police had dismissed her when she disclosed violence because she and her friends were ‘alternative’ in style, especially in her community, where tattoos and piercings did not feature widely. She told us:



the people you're with get overlooked because of their appearance. I think if I had gone [to the police station] alone, they would have taken me a little more seriously, but I wouldn't have been brave enough on my own.

Perpetrators sometimes exploited women's fears that they would not be helped because of their supposed differences. Cody's former partner mentioned her convictions in abusive and threatening text chains, so she worried that 'if I go to the police, "oh, you're convicted of this and that, are you?", so if I ever show anyone, it's like they'll question me'.

Women also highlighted gender roles and dynamics in rural areas, which could be invoked to foster and facilitate DCC and garner abuser allies. We maintain that these ideologies and networks should be recognised as impediments to exiting abusive relationships. Examining malignant peer support structures, DeKeseredy (1990; see also DeKeseredy and Schwartz 1993) suggested that, in patriarchal societies, abusive men may have like-minded allies who formulate, share and reinforce values that support violence against women and provide resources and guidance to enact this violence. On how this manifested, Kira spoke about her past victimisation (as a child in the family context, being sexually assaulted as a child and adolescent, and experiencing domestic violence as an adult) and said:

I grew up in a very small community ... once one [person] started [engaging in violence], it was kind of a trend where males in the community would just, I guess, jump on board.

She described how others engaged in abuse (including IBSA), provided contact information to her abuser after she changed her phone number and supported her abuser's narrative (that he did not subject her to sexual violence but instead that they had consensual sex).

Bancroft (2003) talked about how abusers challenge women's narratives by justifying, minimising, denying or excusing their actions, and we found that this happened offline and online. Women stressed that digital campaigns mounted by their abusers garnered support in their real-world communities. Kira's ex 'spread messages [face-to-face and on social media] to other people, and they all thought I was doing the wrong thing'. Lola's former partner used Facebook to keep 'up the appearance for everyone', portraying the image of a loving family man and projecting that he 'was a really good person' while disputing her allegations of violence. Social media was a forum for abuser allies to demonstrate their support, publicly, on Facebook profile pages, and privately, in Facebook Messenger chats (that featured both members of his family and Lola's family).

Cody's abuser used Facebook to build networks of sympathisers, which included her family members. Abuser allies were recruited or elected to engage in DCC. Women reported that, after being blocked on devices or prohibited from contacting women on protection orders, allies sometimes provided access to their phones and social media accounts so abusers could continue to harass and threaten women. Though distressing, many of the aforementioned behaviours could not prompt justice interventions but, where there were breaches of protection orders, the assistance of abuser allies complicated matters. Women often suspected others were involved or that abusers used other people's devices or digital media profiles; however, establishing the burden of proof was difficult. Unfortunately, police regulations of DCC in non-urban areas is challenging and, many women contend, flawed.

### **Police Responses to Digital Coercive Control in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia**

All the women in our research had contact with police regarding DCC. Most interacted with generalist officers, but those that did receive assistance from specialist officers (such as domestic or family violence liaison officers) found them particularly helpful. Women typically had multiple interactions with the police. Overall, some participants had positive encounters but more divulged negative encounters. Regarding the latter, women were frustrated and disappointed when they felt police did not take DCC seriously, and they suspected this was because it was not physical abuse, which was considered 'real' domestic violence. Cody's account was emblematic of this. She explained that after she showed police

threatening messages from her ex-partner, they said, 'are you bleeding? Well, then you're not hurt. What do you want us to do about it? He's annoying you; block his number'. She maintained that 'police are a bit old-school in their way of thinking; you're not hurt unless it's visible'.

Like Cody, police told Shelly that DCC did not constitute domestic violence, which alarmed the specialist family violence worker assisting her. She told us:

I'd show my case manager what's going on; she'd say, "I swear that's covered in the family violence section". But then when I'd go to the police, they would just say, "we can't really charge him for lying". Because he'd ring up and say all this really nasty, demeaning stuff to me, they'd say, "we can't really charge him for calling you names", which would annoy my case manager because she'd be like, "he should be charged for that, it is family violence, and it's emotionally abusive". I just feel like men that go around doing this to people; I just feel like they just get away with it. There's no ... yeah, no major consequences for him.

Similarly, the police that Claire engaged did not regard DCC as domestic violence and refused to respond to the 22 digital breaches of her protection order, which prohibited contact. Claire explained:

So, he uses the Xbox to communicate with our eldest son and to ask him questions and ask, "Who's at the house? Where's mum?" Sends him pictures as well of him being just up the road and saying, "I wish you were here", and the police turn around and say there's not enough evidence. I'm like, "what do you mean? Here is what he has said in the text message. This is how many times he has text messaged me". They're like, "oh well, you're just going to have to learn to live with him, you're going to have to learn to deal with I". I'm like, so what does that bit of paper actually do then? It does make you feel like an absolute lunatic.

Despite police minimising DCC or viewing DCC as a nuisance but not as part of women's experience of domestic violence, participants described perpetrators who terrorised them in a multitude of ways, including behaviours and acts that are indicators of lethal risk. This included, as earlier noted, homicide flags illustrated through technology, obsessive tendencies, stalking and threats to kill or self-harm. However, participants also reported other fatality risks that were not addressed, including the perpetrator's ownership of firearms and knives and threats to harm women (or their families or friends) that referenced these weapons. Fiona knew that her ex-partner had a gun, and while officers searching his property did not find a firearm, they did find 'firearm paraphernalia, firearm bits and pieces, they found handcuffs, empty bullet shells ... knives ... large knives'; a cache of weapons that Fiona had not seen before. The perpetrator did not have a firearm license; however, like other women, she stressed that it was often easy to access guns in rural areas. Despite the homicide flags in Fiona's case, as evidenced by the DCC she was subjected to and the weaponry, a police officer discouraged her from pursuing an intervention order, claiming the situation could escalate if an order were not granted. Fiona explained:

She said, "you sure you want to do this?" She actually asked me, and I thought, now why did she say that? I said, "I need this". I need this for protecting me, you know? But she thought with the type of man he was, if the AVO [Apprehended Violence Order] wasn't granted, ... then it would give more power within himself that he kind of won; that kind of thing was where she was going with this. Fortunately, I said, "no, I do—I think this is important". Like, I did say that "yeah, I'm scared".

In contrast, in Ivy's case, the police were helpful in securing an intervention order for her after her ex-partner threatened her with a gun. The DCC she was subjected to provided evidence they used to proceed, including '25 voicemails from him abusing me with a gun, threatening my kids, threatening me'. She said, 'I showed the police the text messages, the voicemails. They believed me'. While Fiona's case was alarming, Ivy's was heartening, showcasing how DCC became part of the risk assessment process conducted by police and was key in securing a protection order. However, the identity of Ivy's abuser may have been an impetus to respond. Her former partner was a 'bikie' (member of an outlaw motorcycle gang), and,

subsequently, he was viewed as a volatile and dangerous offender. We assert that to protect women, it is vital police view DCC in the context of broader domestic violence and consider how risks can be observed, both through technology and offline. Further, while firearms (and even other weapons) may be commonplace in rural landscapes, the hazards they pose to women cannot be dismissed.

A final issue that must be raised is the difference observed between non-urban and urban police responses for one victim/survivor, Maya. Maya had engaged police both at a rural police station and a specialist family violence team in Melbourne. She felt the officers in Melbourne responded with much more concern about the DCC she experienced. When reporting abusive text messages to her local rural police station, she felt her fears were dismissed:

The police from [the rural site]; now I'd gone to them three or four times with text messages telling them I was afraid, and they were like "look, we've read the messages, he's not threatening you, he's not being nice, but he's not threatening you. We can arrange for you to stay somewhere, but it's his word against yours at the moment", which is not the right thing to say ... I really did just feel that they were like, "oh yeah, another domestic violence [claim] where the woman's crazy".

Maya was the only survivor in our study who engaged both urban and rural police, and thus, further research is needed to observe if survivors report differences between the two more broadly. However, rural-urban differences in domestic violence policing have been recorded in other research we have conducted (George and Harris 2014), and we wonder if this might be influenced by differing levels of training and expertise (see also Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2016). As previously mentioned, women in our study regarded specialist officers highly, whereas perceptions of generalist officers were more mixed and frequently adverse. Specialist officer distribution is typically determined by factors such as population sizes instead of the rates of domestic violence, even though national longitudinal studies have revealed the prevalence of domestic violence is higher in regional, rural and remote areas than in cities (Dillon 2015; George and Harris 2014). Specialist officers are less present beyond the cityscape and, where available, cover expansive jurisdictions and have heavy caseloads (Coverdale 2011; George and Harris 2014). There are disturbing consequences when criminal justice agencies are not equally resourced across landscapes. Postcode (or zipcode) justice occurs when there are spatial variances in justice outcomes depending on the location of the offence, offender or criminal justice institution (Coverdale 2011). We worry that there can be very real (and potentially devastating) effects for rural women. In the interests of protecting women, it is imperative that this matter is further investigated.

## Conclusion

Our work represents the first socio-spatial study of spaceless violence. We began by providing a theoretical and conceptual framework to examine DCC and then outlined the forms of DCC to which our regional, rural and remote cohort was subjected. We stress that while DCC is spaceless, a victim/survivor's experience of and response to harm is shaped by both the place and space they occupy. Women's space for action was constrained by place—geographic isolation—the sheer distance between their residences and informal and formal supports as well as medical assistance. Worryingly, some perpetrators sought to extend women's seclusion by relocating to more remote properties or requesting women to stay or work from home. In smaller communities, women were more visible than they would have been in urban locations. Consequently, women had little anonymity or privacy when help-seeking, and it was easy for abusers and abuser allies to find and monitor women. It was not only practical but ideological features of locations (spaces) that could entrap women and facilitate violence. Those who identified (or were identified) as outsiders often felt as though they were overlooked or dismissed when disclosing violence, which could deter women from engaging police initially or in future. Traditional gender roles and structures were also oppressive in legitimising, excusing or even assisting abusers, with allies recruited offline and, as we highlighted, online. Technology might provide channels for women to overcome such barriers, but perpetrator execution of DCC meant it was not necessarily a safe avenue.

Women experienced a raft of harmful behaviours enacted through technology, which included manifestations that are recognised homicide flags. Unfortunately, women reported that police frequently declined to respond to DCC, contending it did not constitute 'real' (physical) domestic violence. We advocate for further investigation of geographic variances between victim/survivor perceptions of police and the possibility of postcode justice. Greater training of rural generalist officers and greater numbers of specialist officers could be a gamechanger for rural women. A growing body of data (see our discussion in Harris and Woodlock 2022) has indicated that the rates of domestic violence are, on the whole, highest in regional, rural and remote Australia. Thus, expanding the resourcing (and training) of justice agencies beyond the cityscape is essential.

We also urge police agencies to recognise that DCC is part of domestic violence and that DCC can provide intel and evidence of potentially fatal violence. We stress too, that other homicide flags such as non-fatal strangulation (noting that 46% of our cohort reported this), firearm ownership and abuser threats of fatal violence (and threats to use firearms) should be recognised as signalling peril. This bears repeating because even though guns may be normalised in rural landscapes, they undoubtedly elevate women's risk of homicide (as well as filicide and familicide). We encourage police, communities and researchers to consider how place and space can constrain women's space for action and investigate preventative initiatives and responses to domestic violence that seek to overcome geographic and social barriers. Here, technology could be further harnessed. The spacelessness of technology can be used to deliver anti-violence campaigns, provide services and justice responses, and extend women's space for action.

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