



Cyber Partner Abuse: Recognizing Patterns and Breaking the Cycle

Ritu Singh^{1*} and Manisha Mehra¹

¹Department of HDFS, College of Home Science, G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Uttarakhand, India.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author RS designed the paper and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors RS and MM managed the analyses of the study. Author MM managed the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

In present era, virtual and real worlds have become profoundly interwoven and cyber-mediated communications have permanently altered the dynamics of every relationship. Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) makes communication process more progressive and dynamic enhancing emotional intimacy and commitment in relationships. But, at the same time they present various threats and abuse. It incites individuals into publicizing their personal lives [especially intimate matters]. This has led to conceptualization of various modes for perpetrating intimate partner violence or in simpler terms cyber partner abuse. This form of abuse involves practices such as stalking, spamming, posting intimate information to embarrass or humiliate the partner and so on. The purpose of this study was to systematically review the existing literature on cyber partner abuse. This review examines the characteristics and conceptualizations in the cyber partner abuse literature as well as the major topics the research has explored. This will help in early detection of such crimes and strengthening of support systems for victims through provision of direct services and policies.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: ritu.singh07@gmail.com;

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sociability in the contemporary world has been profoundly altered with the advent of technology. Relationships mediated by cyber communication have enabled new spaces for aesthetic, sexual and affective-amorous exchanges. Researches indicate that ICT helps enhance emotional intimacy, self-disclosure and commitment in relationships [1,2]. Additionally, ICTs assist in maintaining personal connections and interactions [3].

However, the medium for helping us keep connected to our loved ones does not come without its pitfalls. It can also serve as a conduit for practicing discrimination and violence, bullying and abuse especially in intimate relationships referred to as intimate partner abuse. Incidents of such nature may range from threats to insults, humiliating, defaming or even controlling the partner's cyber mediated communications. Today, social media and cinema glorify acts of stalking and harassing, making the romantically engaged individuals confuse abusive behaviors involving control and intimidation as justified romanticized view of love. Various forms of emotional and psychological abuse are referred to as "partner being possessive or being mildly annoying, controlling or jealous". These acts are looked at as demonstrations or proof of love for the partner. Several scholars have found out that youngsters could be more vulnerable to relationship abuse misinterpretation due to their imagined and skewed view of love [4].

Cyber partner abuse challenges the existence of fundamental human rights of an individual. It inflicts damage to the physical, mental, psychological well-being of the partners in intimate relationships. Prior researches in this field provide evidence of increased depression and anxiety levels associated with such form of abuse leading to greater ambiguity in relationships; unstable and indifferent attachment styles; deviant behaviors and high levels of animosity; and perceived stress levels far higher than those triggered by conventional aggressions [5]. Investigation of various means employed by an individual to control and monitor his/her partner include consistently visiting the partner's profile, reading comments of their friends on their posts, reviewing photos/ status updates and/or their relationships, or trying to control the other

through their profile in a social network [6]. The increasing availability of and ease of access to personal information online, especially through popular social networks such as Facebook, also facilitate incidences of cyber harassment, with minority and marginalized groups often at the receiving end [7].

In India, official statistics maintained by the National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB] about cybercrimes record very low levels of incidence of technology-mediated Violence against Women (VAW). In 2014-2015, according to NCRB, only about 10% of cybercrimes reported for this period pertain to offences against women/offences of a sexual nature. Similarly, in 2014-2015, the National Commission of Women registered merely 178 complaints of cybercrimes against women. A 2016 survey on Violence Online in India conducted by the Feminism in India portal on 500 individuals [97% women and 3% trans-genders] found that 58% of respondents "had faced some kind of online aggression in the form of trolling, bullying, abuse or harassment". But 38% of those who faced such violence did not take any action [8]. Study of cyberviolence via WhatsApp in India found that 10.7% survey respondents had received harassing messages, 7.6% received violent images, and 11.5 % had received sexually explicit or obscene images via WhatsApp [9]. There are studies that suggest that men are as or more likely to experience cyber violence [For instance, 'flaming' or 'snooping'], but the psychological and physical consequences of such abuse are reportedly more severe for women [10,11].

According to the UN report, 95% of cyber abuse in the form of aggressive behavior, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images are targeted towards women basically attempted by their partners or former male partners. A study carried out by the Association for progressive communications on 700 cases on technology-assisted violence against women revealed that in 40% cases the victim is familiar with the perpetrator [12]. The problem becomes even more complicated when the abuser is or in past has been in an intimate relationship with the victim. Intimate partner abuse is seen as an intractable interpersonal conflict inadequate for police attention and inappropriate for prosecution and substantive punishment [13]. Because of the element of intimacy involved in the relationship,

victim himself/herself tries to keep it out of public eye. In a study, consultation by police about cyberstalking investigations revealed that, where the perpetrator was an ex-partner, officers tended to blame the victim/survivor for the stalking, and to suggest that her vulnerability was increased by the amount of information she shared online and her reluctance to change her online behavior [14]. Additionally, victims who were stalked after obtaining a protective order experienced more overall violations and more severe violence than victims who experienced ongoing violations but who were not stalked, even after controlling violence and other relevant factors for past history [15].

Online sociability appeals to most of the people today because a large part of their identity or sense of belongingness incorporates the use of Internet, which they use to express and portray themselves. Online technologies incite individuals to engage in unmasking intimate parts of their life willingly and without any critical or protective filtering. This results in sharing of content that can be accessed around the globe even months or years later and can have serious implications in their lives. Know-how of cyber-culture can foster understanding regarding measures to empower ourselves. It would enable people's understanding to reflect critically on the risks involved in displaying their intimate moments. It is important to promote responsible use of ICT as tools of communication in intimate relationships. There should be awareness regarding modes by which cyber mediated partner abuse can be perpetrated. Additionally, awareness regarding and accessibility to formal and informal support systems is crucial so that individuals feel socially and legally empowered. Platforms such as special cells and helpline numbers can be effectively used to report such cases only when the individuals are first made aware of their rights. This can be done by organizing awareness-raising programs at all levels. Cyber abuse should be treated as a matter of public concern rather than a private one. Risk factors of cyber partner abuse must be identified keeping in mind socio-cultural contexts.

2. DEFINITION

Digital domestic violence is a broad term that covers a wide range of behaviors, such as psychological coercion, intimidation, encompassing acts of psychological and physical hostility and assault such as, threatening, insulting or humiliating the intimate partner [16].

The term may be interchangeably referred to as intimate partner cyber stalking or intimate partner cyber harassment.

3. MODES OF CYBER PARTNER ABUSE

Cyber partner abuse includes but is not limited to exploitation in various aspects of life, i.e., sexual, psychological, economic, social and emotional. The loophole in this phenomenon exploited the most by perpetrators is lack of general awareness regarding what all encompasses this new expression of abuse and effective strategies to prevent it. The perpetrators take advantage of the anonymous nature of the internet to humiliate and harass their partners. A wide range of activities fall under this domain, such as; attempting to control partner's use of social media, posting intimate content without consent, stalk, monitor or threaten, pressurizing to share intimate photographs, posting abusive comments and so on. Some are mentioned below:

3.1 Stalking

It is unwanted and repeated monitoring which is targeted to make the victim threatened. Having a prior history of intimacy may provide the stalker with a wider array of tactics to employ during the stalking. Stalking by intimate partners is potentially very threatening because the abuser knows the victim's strengths and weaknesses very well [17].

3.2 Hacking

It is unauthorized access to the other's computer or mobile phone, paving way to manipulate and modify computer software or smartphone to access personal information. The abuser may also engage in changing passwords and settings, posting private pictures, and so on hampering with the identity of the victim [17].

3.3 Defamation

It is the insulting, offending and causing harm to the reputation of an individual by communicating fabricated information including libel, which entails written published statements (also involves statements made public through social networking), and slander, which covers spoken statements [17].

3.4 Voyeurism

It is spying on personal activities of the other person. Cameras placed in washrooms,

changing rooms, ceiling fans, flower vases, etc may be used to record and publicly share intimate moments of a person's life. The abuser can use these for sexual gratification or defaming the victim if she does not submit to his demands. Very often, related type of harassment called "revenge porn" or the online posting of sexually explicit pictures or videos of an individual without their permission may also be the case [18].

3.5 Abusive Sexting

It is sending or forcing to send sexually explicit or provocative texts to the other person. Sexting may be used as a relationship maintenance strategy, or a form of foreplay, and may enhance the relationship. But these intimate conversations are supposed to be consensual and kept private [18].

3.6 Photo Morphing

It is downloading someone's pictures from social media sites using fake identity and uploading and circulating them after editing [19].

3.7 E-Mail Spoofing

It is creation of email messages with forged sender address. So, the message seems to have come from someone other than the actual source [20].

4. MOTIVES BEHIND CYBER-MEDIATED ABUSE

In any criminal activity, motive is the key element that explains the reasons or triggers behind the act. In intimate relationships, motives behind abuse may stem from feelings of entitlement and indifference with the partner. Motives can be broadly categorized as: coercive or expressive ones.

4.1 Coercive Motives

Coercive motives are planned, instrumental in nature. The abuser tries to gain control by asserting power over the partner. These encompass a range of behaviors exhibited to harm, punish, and instill fear by assaulting, threatening, humiliating and intimidating the victim. Threats also alternate with the perpetrator's acts of compassion, making it impossible for the survivor to step out of the vicious cycle. Individuals experiencing coercive control are often isolated from friends, family, or other support systems; entrapped within the

relationship due to financial, logistical, social, or emotional barriers to escaping; and fearful for not only their own safety but that of family members and other people in their network [21,22,23]. Coercive control can instill fear even in the absence of physical violence and can continue after the relationship ends [24]. 'Technology-facilitated coercive control' is assumed in reference to the use of devices and digital media to stalk, harass, threaten and abuse partners or ex-partners and children [25].

4.2 Expressive Motives

Expressive motives are often emotional responses, the ones that are impulsive and instinctive and may manifest in the form of anger, frustration, jealousy and so on. Men's intimate partner violence (IPV) is inspired by a wish to govern their partners. In comparison, abuse by women against their husbands frequently happens in self-defense or in the case of escalating conflict. The four most important self-reported explanations for perpetration of IPV by women in romantic relations are psychological [e.g. issues with violence, tension, or depression], rule breaches [e.g., frustration with the behavior/response of spouses, not enforcing the correct 'rules' for interpersonal relationships], seeking respect and conformity [e.g. willingness to achieve enforcement-change behavior], and restoring facial danger e.g., use of identity/self-image abuse [26].

5. WHY DO SUCH CASES GO UNREPORTED?

There are numerous reasons behind cyber partner abuse not being reported. Few among them are as follows:

5.1 Treated as an Interpersonal Conflict

Many a times it is looked at as merely the heightened state of disagreement between couples in their "private sphere". Hence, the formal [eg. police] and informal [eg. neighbors, friends] support systems do not find it relevant enough to intervene.

5.2 Irrational Ideas about Love

Irrational ideas or myths include the belief about the existence of a perfect person for each individual, the belief that jealousy is a sign of love, or the belief that loving someone gives one the right to abuse that person e.g., controlling everything he or she does [27]. Preposterous

concepts about love makes one overlook the elements of emotional constancy, composure and long term commitment that love actually encompasses.

5.3 Lack of Awareness

There is lack of knowledge about the legislative measures criminalizing these practices fine tuned with knowledge about psychological and technical measures to cope with such situations.

5.4 Insensitive Investigative System

In India, due to the unique stigma associated with the sexuality, women are often refused to register complaints against the perpetrator. Women believe that preventive strategies against cyber partner abuse hold them responsible and it eventually comes down to closing their accounts, changing their contact number and refraining from actively engaging in online platforms.

5.5 Fear of Blame and Embarrassment

Victim/survivors are often reluctant to seek assistance as they are ashamed and afraid that they will not be believed [28]. In the Smart Safe study, 56 per cent of victim/survivors did not seek help, with 85 per cent stating that they did not disclose their experience because they were embarrassed [29].

5.6 Self-Protection

The amount of damage caused to a person's psychological well-being in turn incapacitates them to take stand for themselves due to lack of self-confidence and trust. What might be interpreted as a women's inaction may in turn be the product of a measured calculation of how to defend themselves and their children [30].

5.7 Self-Blame

It is common among victims of partner violence to blame themselves which acts as a significant barrier to help-seeking. The power of control over what happens to us is challenged by victimization in any form and further deters our ability to defend ourselves. The more serious a victim perceives an assault to be, the more likely she is to call the police and activate formal help-seeking mechanisms [31].

6. COUNTER MEASURES TO MITIGATE CYBER PARTNER ABUSE

Most of the victims/survivors of cyber partner abuse tend to live in isolation, and this is intentionally structured and reinforced by the abuser. The victims are vulnerable to a wide range of psychological disorders during and after the time period of abuse which necessitates help seeking. Help seeking process involves a wider circle of people available as informal support system in the form of family, friends, relatives, neighbors, colleagues or formal support system as police, medical care, advocates, etc. Help-seeking refers to the act of actively obtaining counsel, information, treatment, and general support in response to a problem or distressing experience which aid the healing process.

Victims of intimate partner violence, those who experienced a more serious victimization were more likely to utilize informal support networks [32]. The socio-cultural context, especially in the developing countries, like India, conditions the mindset of women in such a way that they do not resort to seeking help regarding such issues from outsiders due to fear of criticism. They eventually become isolated and blame themselves for their destiny. If the victim is provided with instrumental support by the informal support system, then it may motivate the victim to seek help from the formal support system. There are legal, technological and psychological countermeasures to address cyber partner abuse.

6.1 Legal Countermeasures

There exist certain legal provisions under Indian Penal Code and Information Technology Act which can come in aid of a person who is a victim of cyber partner abuse [33]. They are depicted pictorially and discussed in detail below:

6.1.1 Section 354A of the IPC

People posting lewd comments on social media are liable under this law and can be punished with one-year imprisonment and fine. In addition, posting/messaging content related to pornography against the will of a woman or requesting sexual favors are punishable by a fine along with three years of imprisonment under the same provision.

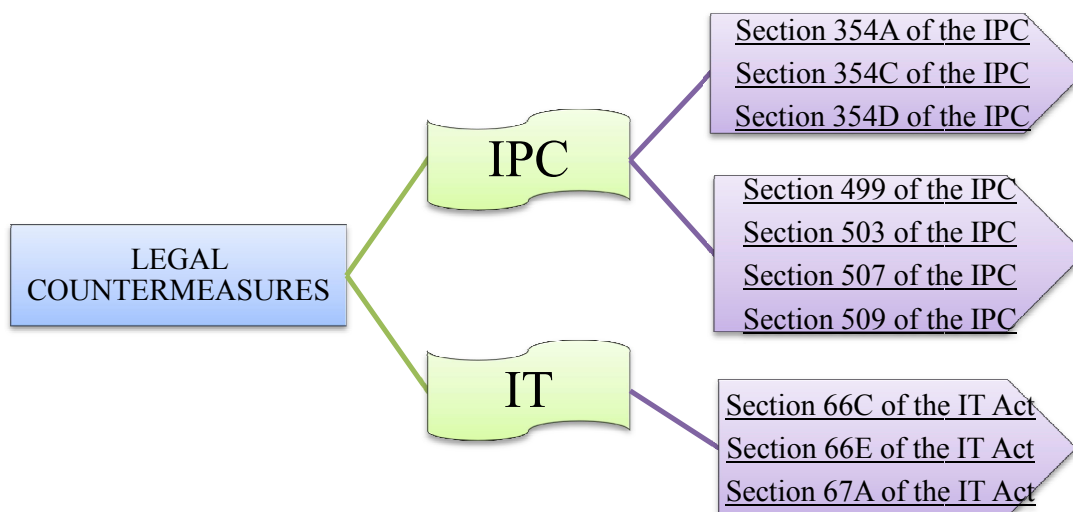


Fig 1. Pictorial depiction of legal countermeasures for cyber partner abuse

6.1.2 Section 354C of the IPC

This act deals with voyeurism which is a criminal offence under both the IPC and the IT Act. It deals with cases where a man, without the consent of a woman, captures an image/video of her engaged in a private act. Such an act is punishable by one to three years of imprisonment along with a fine. This provision can be referred to especially in cases when the woman does not expect to be observed by the accused.

6.1.3 Section 354D of the IPC

This provision of the IPC deals with what is commonly referred to as “online stalking”. The provision covers the grounds of a situation in which an effort is made to approach a woman via the phone, e-mail or some other means of digital communication with the purpose of ensuring personal relations given her obvious disinterest. Such an act is punishable with three years of imprisonment on the first count followed by five years of imprisonment on the second count both of which are in addition to a monetary fine.

6.1.4 Section 499 of the IPC

Any individual who believes that his/her reputation is being harmed by a visible representation published on the internet can invoke this provision which exclusively accounts for remarks on social media or obscene images

or videos posted for public consumption. Under this provision, defaming a woman online will land the perpetrator in jail for a period of two years.

6.1.5 Section 503 of the IPC

Under this section, a person who assaults a woman with the intention of either upsetting her or distorting her image is liable to be convicted with a two-year prison sentence.

6.1.6 Section 507 of the IPC

Under this section, any person attempting to threaten or harass a woman through anonymous contact is liable to be punishment of two years imprisonment.

6.1.7 Section 509 of the IPC

Under this provision, a person distinctly posting sexual remarks/pictures/videos comprising of sexual insinuations on social media is liable to three years of imprisonment along with a fine.

6.1.8 Section 66C of the IT Act

Under this provision, anyone who, fraudulently or dishonestly, makes use of any other person's digital signatures, password or other unique identification feature shall be punished by imprisonment of either description for a period of up to three years, and shall also be liable for a fine of up to one lakh rupees.

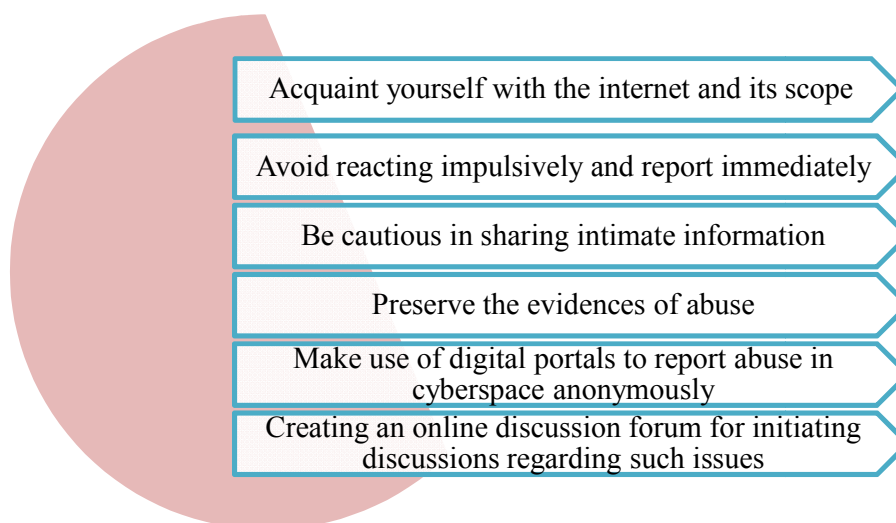


Fig. 2. Pictorial depiction of technological countermeasures for cyber partner abuse



Fig. 3. Pictorial depiction of psychological countermeasures for cyber partner abuse

6.1.9 Section 66E of the IT Act

Under this section, publishing a visual image of a person in print or electronic form that would result in the violation of the privacy of the individual would lead to three years imprisonment or a fine ranging from Rs 2 lakh to Rs 10 lakh. According to this provision of the IT Act, while the first conviction would result in three years of imprisonment, a second conviction under the same provision can lead to a jail

term spanning seven years along with a similar fine.

6.1.10 Section 67 A of the IT Act

Under this provision, anyone who discloses, transmits or causes transmission of sexually explicit content shall be punishable by imprisonment of up to five years and fines for the first conviction and up to seven years and fines for the second conviction.

6.2 Technological Countermeasures

There are various technological countermeasures listed in Fig. 2 that can help an individual reduce her chances of being victim to cyber partner abuse.

6.3 Psychological Countermeasures

Immediate addressing of cyber partner abuse is of great significance for the psychological health of its victim. Victim must follow psychological countermeasures mentioned in Fig. 3 to mitigate instances of cyber partner abuse and its implications.

7. CONCLUSION

Cyber mediated partner abuse encompasses a range of behaviors that have long-lasting and damaging effects on the victim. With the use of ICT at its core, the dynamics and boundaries of communication in relationships has become ambiguous. This has led to growing number of cases of cyber mediated partner abuse over the years. If the government would blindly leap forward with poorly crafted laws then the cases of such nature would know no bounds. Thus, strict legislative measures are to be put in place. Government should ensure educating individuals on the role of technology in mediating intimate partner abuse, what activities it covers, modes employed by perpetrators and their motives behind. Also, awareness-creating campaigns must be organized via online and offline mode encouraging especially the youth to volunteer in educating the society. Targeted audience must be made aware of their legal rights and access to formal support system.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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