Perpetrator perceptions on the emotions and motivations driving their technology-facilitated abuse: a story completion study

Barwon Health

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INTRODUCTION

Technology-facilitated abuse in relationships (TAR) has become a widespread social problem and has a significant impact on victim-survivors. Most contemporary evidence focuses on victim/survivor, advocate and practitioner perspectives, rather than perpetrators whose emotions or motivations for choosing this form of abuse are important to understand. Without an understanding of the factors that drive the use of TAR, there is little opportunity to disrupt these harmful behaviours and prevent this form of abuse from occurring. Addressing this deficit, this study explored perpetrator discourses on emotions and motivations associated with engaging in TAR.

OBJECTIVES/AIMS

The aim of this research was to investigate perpetrator perspectives on emotions and motivations that might influence their harmful use of technology within their intimate relationship.

METHODS

A novel approach was taken to exploring the emotions and motivations influencing a decision to use TAR. In recognition of the difficulties associated with engaging perpetrators of abuse, we adopted the story completion method, a research approach that has gained increased popularity when exploring topics of a sensitive nature[1,2,3,4]. Story completion offers a method of studying respondents' beliefs and perceptions about a given topic by inviting them to respond to hypothetical scenario[5]. Participants are invited to complete a story presented from a 'story stem'; the method proposed that story completions represent participant's own behaviours from a distance[2,4].

Recruitment

Purposive recruitment was used. Eligibility to participate required participants to be at least 18 years of age, living in Australia, not in a current relationship, and to have not been in a relationship for at least three months.

Procedure

There were a total of eight story stems created for study participants[5]. All story stems provided a brief partial scenario which participants were invited to complete in at least 250 characters.

PARTICIPANTS
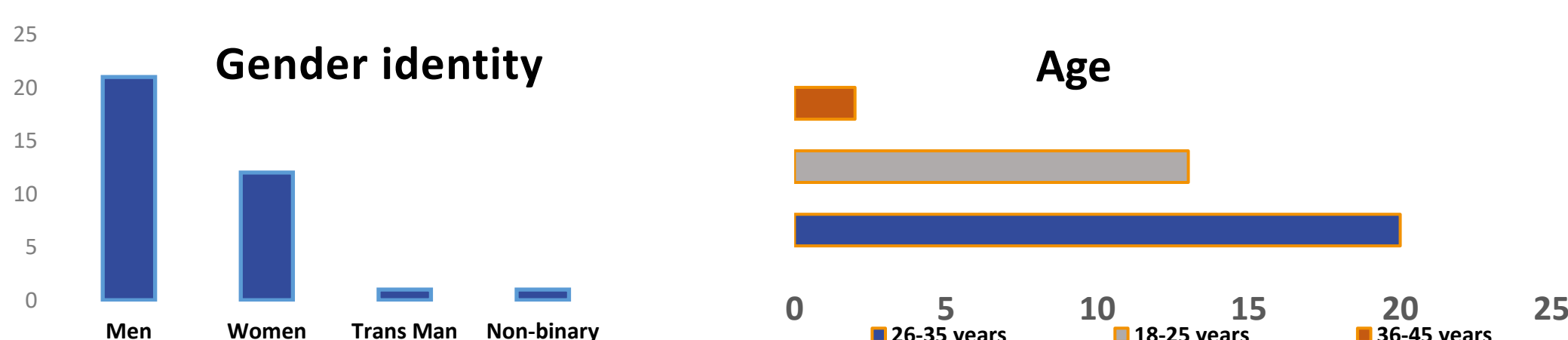
RESULTS

Three main themes   70 Stories

Abusive behaviours and negative emotions

Multiple emotions may influence/precede the choice to use TAR; the most frequently mentioned emotions were anger, fear, suspicion of betrayal, and sadness.

The anger tended to vary in intensity from *"feeling the anger build"* to extreme anger *"Sam instantly felt that he was going to die of anger."*

The sadness spoken about tended to be in relation to perceptions that a partner had betrayed the character, rather than sadness causing inappropriate behaviours or responses *"he was sad and broken."*

A loss of trust, a desire for control

Relationship concerns or a loss of trust often drives the choice to use TAR behaviours. Addressing suspected betrayal was also provided as justification *"it will be better than always wondering if Alex is cheating."*

Story characters went to considerable length to deceptively monitor their partners: *"Sam writes down all the passwords so he can check that Ash doesn't change them later… then adds an app he heard about called Life360 so he can see where Ash is all of the time. Worried Ash might find the app, he hides it in with a heap of exercise apps... He then remembers that he can locate Ash if he installs a running app he is already using so he downloads that too…"*

Inhibitors of abusive behaviours

There was recognition that pursuing TAR can create harm, complicates relationships, upset partners, and foster mistrust. *"I might check Alex's cell phone and laptop, but… If I do this, my relationship with Alex will be more difficult to reconcile."*

Trust was seen as foundational in a relationship: *"I respect the privacy of my partner. I think that in a relationship, partners need to trust each other. There must also be free space."*

Some reflected on TAR with guilt: *"Lee has only looked at a phone of her partner once, when Alex was sleeping... She felt so guilty and breathless she put it back."*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Potential exists through education and behaviour change initiatives, to help perpetrators reflect on their intended harmful behaviours and desist from TAR. Through incorporation in safety by design approaches, the findings may also assist technology designers in preventing and disrupting harmful behaviour. Additionally, understanding perpetrator's emotions and motivations for engaging in TAR may assist first responders and those working to better support victim-survivors

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