Technology-facilitated abuse:
National survey of Australian adults' experiences

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ANROWS

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National survey of Australian adults' experiences

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Acknowledgement of lived experiences of violence
ANROWS acknowledges the lives and experiences of people affected by technology-facilitated abuse who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), Lifeline (13 11 14) and, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 13YARN (13 92 76).

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
GPS	Global positioning system
IBSA	Image-based sexual abuse
IRSD	Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage
LGB+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and additional self-described sexualities
LGBTQ+ and intersex	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and additional self-described sexualities, including intersex
LOTE	Languages other than English
NCAS	National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey
PAG	Project advisory group
TFA	Technology-facilitated abuse

Glossary

Cissexism	A form of sexism based on gender identity and expression. It refers to discrimination against people whose gender is different to the gender they were assigned at birth, and the privileging of cisgender people over trans and gender-diverse people.
Coercive control	A course of conduct aimed at dominating and controlling another person. It can be viewed as an assault on autonomy, with the use of both physical and non-physical tactics to gain control over every aspect of a victim's life. The term captures the ongoing, repetitive and cumulative nature of domestic and family violence.
Dick pic	A photograph of a penis sent through the internet, often as a form of "sexting" to entice sexual relations. However, dick pics in the context of TFA are often unsolicited and sent without consent of the receiver.
Doxxing	The act of revealing private information about someone online without the consent of that person, usually with the intent to harass, threaten or seek revenge.
Gaslighting	A form of emotional abuse and manipulation where someone causes a victim to question their own thoughts, memories and perception of reality. It can lead a victim to a loss in confidence and self-esteem, make them question their mental and emotional stability, and make them dependent on the perpetrator.
Global positioning system (GPS)	The network of satellites that provide location information on a variety of devices including phones, computers and cars.
Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)	The non-consensual creation, distribution or threatened distribution of nude and sexual images, also known as "image-based abuse".
Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD)	A general socio-economic index that summarises a range of information about the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area. Unlike other indexes, this index includes only measures of relative disadvantage.
Perpetrators	Those who have engaged in technology-facilitated abuse (TFA). We recognise that the victim and survivor and perpetrator dichotomy is not always clear, and some perpetrators we spoke with were also victims and survivors of TFA. We do not seek to contribute to the othering of those who engage in TFA; rather we seek to better understand the complex drivers of TFA perpetration.
LGBTQ+ and intersex	An inclusive term to refer to sexuality- and gender-diverse communities. In some places, the shorter acronym LGB+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and additional self-described sexualities) is used, where reporting on research focused on sexuality separately from gender-diverse populations.
NCAS	National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey, administered to the Australian population (16 years and over) every four years to gauge community knowledge and attitudes towards violence against women and gender equality.

Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA)	The use of mobile and digital technologies in interpersonal harms such as online sexual harassment, stalking and image-based abuse.
Victims and survivors	We use the term "victims and survivors" when we refer to those who have experienced TFA. We use this to recognise the harm experienced by those we spoke to, but also their resilience. We recognise that not all people who experience TFA will use these terms for themselves, but it allows us to recognise the complexity and non-linear nature of many of our participants' experiences.

Executive summary

Introduction and background

Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) is a wide-ranging term that encompasses many subtypes of interpersonal violence and abuse utilising mobile, online and other digital technologies (Department of Social Services, 2019). These include harassing behaviours, sexual violence and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), monitoring and controlling behaviours, and emotional abuse and threats. Australian research has shown that TFA is a growing concern for service providers responding to domestic, family and sexual violence in particular (see Flynn et al., 2021), however to date, little is known about the extent of these harms within the Australian community.

This report presents findings from Stage III of a national project examining the extent and nature of, and responses to, TFA within the Australian community. Consistent with the current Australian policy focus of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (Council of Australian Governments, 2011), the project is particularly concerned with deepening understanding of the gendered nature of TFA victimisation and perpetration. By "gendered nature", we refer to the ways in which the extent of differing types of abuse, the impacts on victims and survivors, and relationships in which TFA occurs can vary according to the gender of the victim and survivor and/or perpetrator.

Aims and method

The larger national study addresses an overarching aim to examine the extent and nature of, and responses to, TFA within the Australian community. It comprises three discrete research stages across a two-year period (2020 to 2022). Stage III, the focus of this report, aims to:

- establish reliable national prevalence frequencies for the extent of victimisation and perpetration of key forms of TFA (by prevalence we mean the percentage of persons in the population who have experienced or engaged in TFA during their lifetime)
- deepen understanding of the gendered nature of TFA
- examine the characteristics associated with TFA perpetration.

In order to address these aims, a nationally representative survey of Australians aged 18 years and over was conducted, with the assistance of the Social Research Centre. Ethical approval was sought and received from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to conducting the survey (Project no.: 26771).

The Social Research Centre undertook recruitment and administration of the survey through a combination of their Life in Australia™ panel and an additional booster sample via an opt-in online panel to supplement the overall sample. Life in Australia represents a methodologically rigorous online panel exclusively using random probability-based sampling methods. This enables results from Life in Australia surveys to be generalisable to the Australian population.

The total initial sample comprised 4,586 Australian adults. Transgender, non-binary, intersex and/or another gender identity (n=21), as well as a further three respondents who did not disclose a gender identity, were excluded from statistical analyses resulting in final sample of 4,562 (women: n=2,499; men: n=2,063). However, the experiences of the 21 gender-diverse respondents, while not statistically comparable, are described separately in the results.

Results

This research found an overall high lifetime prevalence of TFA victimisation (one in two Australians) and TFA perpetration (one in four Australians). TFA victimisation was associated with higher levels of psychological distress, consistent with moderately severe mental ill-health. We found TFA occurs in a range of contexts, with approximately one in three TFA victimisation experiences reported occurring in a current or former intimate partner relationship in participants' most recent experience (36.7%, n=852).

TFA victimisation

Australians (18 and over) who were most likely to have had *any* lifetime TFA victimisation experiences included three

in four LGB+ Australians surveyed; three in four young and middle-aged adults (18 to 44 years); two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and three in five Australians with disability. Those respondents who scored higher on digital participation measures were also more likely to have experienced TFA victimisation.

TFA perpetration

Australians (18 and over) who were most likely to have engaged in *any* lifetime TFA perpetration included two in five young and middle-aged adults (18 to 44 years); two in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and one in three LGB+ Australians. Those respondents who scored higher on digital participation measures were also more likely to have engaged in TFA perpetration.

Gendered nature of TFA

Women were significantly more likely to experience TFA *perpetrated by a man* rather than a woman in their most recent TFA experience. This gendered pattern was further reflected in the relational contexts of TFA victimisation, whereby more women than men experienced TFA from an *intimate partner or former partner*. Women were significantly more likely than men to report emotional and psychological impacts of TFA, as well as experiencing co-occurring abuse from the same perpetrator. Women generally reported seeking formal and informal support more than men.

Implications for policy and practice

- Efforts to address TFA need to be integrated into our response and prevention strategies across multiple forms of violence, abuse and inequality. There is a clear need for awareness and education campaigns to improve the capacity of Australians to be effective first responders to family, friends or acquaintances who may experience TFA.
- Much TFA occurs in the context of intimate relationships, which illustrates the vital importance of adequately resourcing support services to provide tailored responses to TFA where it may overlap with domestic and family violence. Indeed, it is crucial that TFA by a current or former partner is understood as a potential risk indicator for multiple forms of domestic and family violence.

- The most severe impacts on TFA victims and survivors occur in the context of patterns of abusive behaviour from the same perpetrator, and most commonly, these are experienced by women. As such, it is apparent that policy and practice seeking to respond to or prevent violence against women must continue to address the disproportionate impacts of TFA as it intersects with gender.
- Importantly, gender is not the only predictor of TFA. Some of the most marginalised groups within Australia are those with the highest prevalence of experiencing TFA – in particular, young adults, sexuality and gender minorities, people with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This indicates the need for formal responses as well as services that provide support in relation to TFA, and the need to ensure that they are ready and able to cater to the different needs and contexts of diverse TFA victims and survivors and perpetrators.

Limitations and future research

This research project's primary aims were to establish a reliable estimate of the prevalence of TFA within the Australian community and to deepen the understanding of the gendered nature of TFA, and in particular its impacts on women. As such, there were limitations in terms of the detail and scope that this research could attend to. Future research might consider looking at abuse types and the role technology plays within these, rather than isolating TFA as the focus of the study; intersecting identities beyond gender to create a deeper understanding of those who are disproportionately impacted by TFA; and incidence rates to better understand high frequency and repeat victimisation.

Conclusion

This research suggests that TFA is a serious problem, occurring in a range of relational contexts, with wide-reaching effects. Prevalence was found to be high, with one in two Australian adults (aged 18 and over) having experienced victimisation at least once in their lifetime, and one in four having engaged in TFA perpetration. This research established there are clear gendered dimensions to TFA victimisation, and in the nature of TFA perpetration. However, gender was not the

only predictor of TFA victimisation, with other marginalised groups being disproportionately affected, suggesting that while a gender-based understanding of TFA is important, the experiences of these other groups should also be a core focus in future policy, practice and research.

Introduction and background

Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) refers to interpersonal violence, harassment and/or abuse that is conducted utilising mobile, online and/or digital technologies. It is a wide-ranging term that can encompass many subtypes of abuse, including harassing behaviours, sexual violence and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), monitoring and controlling behaviours, and emotional abuse and threats.

Australian research has shown that TFA is a growing concern for service providers responding to domestic, family and sexual violence in particular (see Flynn et al., 2021), however to date, little is known about the extent of these harms within the Australian community. This report presents findings from Stage III of a national project examining the extent and nature of, and responses to, TFA within the Australian community. Consistent with the current Australian policy focus of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (Council of Australian Governments, 2011), the project is particularly concerned with deepening understanding of the gendered nature of TFA victimisation and perpetration. By "gendered nature", we refer to the ways in which the extent of differing types of abuse, the impacts on victims and survivors, and the relationships in which TFA occurs can vary according to the gender of the victim and survivor and/or perpetrator.

We use the term "victim and survivor" when we refer to those who have experienced TFA. We recognise that not all people who experience TFA will use this term for themselves, but it allows us to recognise the complexity and non-linear nature of victim and survivor experiences (Kelly et al., 1996). We use the term "perpetrator" when we refer to those who have engaged in TFA. We recognise that the victim and survivor and perpetrator dichotomy is not always clear, and some perpetrators are also victims and survivors of TFA. We do not seek to contribute to the othering of those who engage in TFA; rather, we seek to better understand the complex drivers of TFA perpetration. Specific aims and research questions are discussed further below, but first, the next section provides a brief overview of the background literature.

Background literature

For the purposes of this project, TFA is understood as interpersonal violence, harassment and/or abuse that is conducted utilising mobile, online and/or digital technologies. These can include *harassing behaviours* (such as sending offensive, distressing and/or damaging communications towards or about a person online); *sexual and image-based abuse* (such as coercing online sexual acts or creating/sharing sexual imagery without consent); *monitoring and/or controlling behaviours* (such as unauthorised access to digital devices, gathering information about a person, or seeking to restrict them); and *emotional abuse and threats* (such as sending communications that threaten harm to the person or others; Flynn et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2020). This section provides a concise summary of research to date regarding the prevalence, correlates and relational nature of these forms of TFA. Due to the limited data available in the Australian context, we draw from international sources. It is important to note that these studies occurred in different social and cultural contexts to Australia and are thus not necessarily comparable, however they are useful in providing an initial understanding of TFA.

Harassment

Technologies provide a unique set of tools for engaging in a wide range of harassing behaviours, enabling individuals to reach multiple victims and survivors, across geographic and temporal barriers, all while potentially remaining anonymous (Powell & Henry, 2015). Technology-facilitated harassment (often referred to as "online harassment", "internet harassment" and/or "cyber harassment")[1] refers to offensive, distressing and/or damaging communications towards or about a person online (see e.g. Beran & Li, 2005; Bossler et al., 2012; Finn, 2004; Lwin et al., 2012). In some instances, such behaviour may constitute criminal conduct (such as under the Australian *Criminal Code Act 1995* [Cth] s 474.17: "using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence"). Furthermore, where the harassing behaviours are repeated and cause a victim and survivor to feel fearful for their safety, they may further constitute criminal offences, such as stalking.

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1   Some researchers have further used the term "online harassment" interchangeably with the term "cyberbullying" (e.g. Beran & Li, 2005), however we avoid the concept of bullying here as it arguably minimises the potential criminal nature of many forms of harassment.

In addition to the criminal nature of many forms of technology-facilitated harassment, there are also a range of psychological, emotional and other harms that victims and survivors can experience following such harassment, including fear, stress, anxiety, depression, panic attacks and lower self-esteem (see e.g. Lindsay et al., 2016). It can also have a silencing effect on victims and survivors with people ceasing or restricting their use of online platforms (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021).

Studies have found online harassment to be a common experience. An Australian study of adults (18 to 54 years; *n*=3,000) found 44 per cent of respondents had experienced some form of online harassment or abuse (Powell & Henry, 2015). A US study of adults aged 18 and above (*n*=3,893) found online abuse and harassment reported by 41 per cent of respondents, however this rose to 64 per cent for adults under 30 years, suggesting this is a more common experience among younger populations (Pew Research Center, 2021). The study also found a growing rate of more severe forms of harassment such as physical threats, stalking and sexual harassment, growing from 15 per cent in 2014 to 25 per cent in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021). A replication study of online harassment among college students in the United States (*n*=342) suggests that rates of victimisation are increasing, almost tripling from 15 per cent in 2004 to 43 per cent in 2012 (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012). Cyberbullying has also been documented as a widespread problem among school-age children, with a study of youths (12 to 17 years; *n*=1,454) in the United States reporting that as many as 72 per cent of respondents had experienced online bullying in the past year (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

Studies analysing self-reported perpetration of online harassment are limited and most focus on cyberbullying (including online harassment and aggression) among school-age children and adolescents. Selkie et al.'s (2016) systematic review of 58 unique studies of adolescents (10 to 19 years) in the United States found perpetration rates between 1 and 41 per cent. They also found studies reported between 2 and 16 per cent of respondents identifying as both victims and survivors and perpetrators of cyberbullying.

While general population surveys have found rates of online harassment between men and women to be similar (Powell & Henry, 2015), or even higher among men (Nadim & Fladmoe,

2021; Pew Research Center, 2021) studies indicate that online harassment is gendered in particular ways. Women have been found to be more likely to experience specific forms such as online sexual harassment and stalking (Pew Research Center, 2021; Powell & Henry, 2015), and harassment directed towards their gender (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021). Women also report greater impacts, such as being more likely than men to be upset by the experience (Pew Research Center, 2021; Powell & Henry, 2015), and are more likely than men to experience fear as a result (Lindsay et al., 2016). Powell and Henry (2015) also found men are more likely to be the perpetrators in online harassment experienced by women. Additionally, significantly higher rates have been found among LGBTQ+ and intersex populations. For instance, in the United States, the Pew Research Center (2021) found 70 per cent of lesbian, gay or bisexual people have experienced online harassment. Finn's (2004) study of undergraduate students in the United States (*n*=339) found gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex students were twice as likely to experience cyberstalking or email harassment from strangers compared to heterosexuals. Powell and Henry's (2015) study also suggests LGBTQ+ and intersex individuals may experience different and targeted forms of harassment, finding non-heterosexual people were more likely to experience harassment based on their gender and/or sexuality. The Pew Research Center (2021) study also reported racial and ethnic differences in people's experiences, with almost half of Hispanic adults in the United States experiencing online harassment, compared to 40 per cent of white and 37 per cent of Black adults.

Sexual and image-based sexual abuse

IBSA refers to the non-consensual taking and sharing of, or threats to share, nude or sexual images (Henry et al., 2021). While the unlawful distribution of images is not a new problem, technology has provided avenues for IBSA to happen on a larger scale (Flynn & Henry, 2019; Flynn et al., 2021). All Australian jurisdictions (except Tasmania) have introduced specific laws addressing IBSA against adults which cover recording, distributing, or threatening to record or distribute intimate images without permission, with penalties of up to three years in prison (Flynn & Henry, 2021). Studies have documented wide-ranging mental health implications for those experiencing IBSA, including post-traumatic stress

disorder, suicidality, anxiety and depression (see e.g. Bates, 2017; Rackley et al., 2021; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). However, McGlynn et al. (2021) argue that IBSA harms range far beyond medicalised frameworks, including harms that threaten a victim's and survivor's sense of security, autonomy and safety.

IBSA prevalence varies between studies depending on what behaviours are included and which populations are studied. A survey of a nationally representative sample by eSafety (2017) found 11 per cent of Australians aged 18 years and over (*n*=4,122) have had a nude or sexual photo or video posted online or sent on without their consent. Another survey of a nationally representative sample of people in the United States aged 18 and above (*n*=3,044) found 13 per cent of respondents had someone share or threaten to share sexually explicit images of them without their consent (Eaton et al., 2017). However, IBSA prevalence significantly increased in Henry et al.'s (2020) study of people aged 16 to 64 years (*n*=6,109) in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom when "someone taking a nude photo of you without your consent" was included, with 33 per cent of respondents reporting experiencing this IBSA behaviour, increasing overall IBSA lifetime prevalence to 38 per cent.

Studies on self-reported IBSA perpetration have found varying rates. Ruvalcaba and Eaton's (2020) study of people in the United States aged 18 years and over (*n*=3,044) found one in 20 reported perpetrating non-consensual pornography. Powell et al.'s (2019) study of Australian residents aged 16 to 49 years (*n*=4,053) found 11 per cent of respondents reported having engaged in some form of IBSA, while Henry et al.'s (2021) study found 17 per cent (*n*=1,070) of respondents reported engaging in at least one form of IBSA across Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Rates were significantly higher among younger respondents (16 to 39 years; 23%) than respondents aged 40 to 64 years (11%).

The impact of gender on IBSA victimisation rates varies between studies, with some finding similar rates between men and women (Henry et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2018; Powell & Henry, 2017), others finding higher rates among women than men (eSafety, 2017; Eaton et al., 2017), and some finding higher rates among men than women (Borrajo et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2016). However, a closer look at the data in terms of IBSA impacts and intersectional factors such as sexuality

demonstrates that IBSA has clear gendered dimensions. Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2020) found that women reported lower psychological wellbeing scores (such as anxiety and depression) compared to men who had experienced IBSA. Powell et al.'s (2018) study of Australian adults aged 16 to 49 years (*n*=4,274) found women (81%) were more likely than men (73%) to report a range of negative impacts including feeling annoyed, humiliated, depressed, angry or fearful. They also found men (81%) were significantly more likely than women (48%) to say their most recent experience of a nude or sexual photo being taken without their permission was funny or flattering, or they were okay with it. Self-reported perpetration studies have found men are significantly more likely to have engaged in IBSA behaviours (Henry et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2019). Powell et al. (2018) also found that women were significantly more likely than men to experience IBSA from a current or ex-partner, and IBSA has been found to primarily take place in the context of current or previous intimate partner relationships (Henry et al., 2021).

Studies have also found higher prevalence of IBSA in LGBTQ+ and intersex communities, though the proportions reported vary considerably. Henry et al. (2021) found that 56 per cent (*n*=383) of LGB+ respondents had experienced one or more forms of IBSA compared to 35 per cent (*n*=1,923) of heterosexuals. eSafety (2017) also found significantly higher rates of IBSA among LGB respondents (19%) compared to heterosexuals (11%). Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2020) found that gay men had higher rates of victimisation than heterosexual men, and bisexual women had the highest rates of victimisation among all groups. Studies have also found LGB+ individuals are more likely than heterosexuals to self-report IBSA perpetration (Henry et al., 2021; Powell, Scott, Flynn & Henry, 2020), and Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2020) found higher rates of IBSA perpetration among gay men compared to heterosexual men. Additionally, eSafety (2017) found higher prevalence among cultural minority groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous Australians (25% vs. 11%) to experience someone sharing a nude or sexual image of them without their consent. They also found higher rates among respondents who speak languages other than English (LOTE) at home (19% vs. 11%).

Monitoring and controlling behaviours

Technology has allowed greater access to those wanting to monitor and control others, particularly as apps and devices have become more affordable and accessible for consumers. Common technologies used to monitor, and control, include GPS trackers and geolocation software to keep track of a victim's and survivor's location; spyware and keyloggers to monitor and control the victim's and survivor's use of technology and social media; and audio bugs and hidden cameras to monitor a victim's and survivor's physical interactions (Eterovic-Soric et al., 2017).

Controlling and monitoring behaviour using technology is most commonly referred to as cyberstalking. All Australian jurisdictions have stalking legislation, with punishments of up to 10 years' imprisonment, however monitoring behaviour such as unwanted contact may have other criminal consequences (as discussed earlier in the online harassment section). Cyberstalking has significant impacts on those who experience it. It can make the victim and survivor feel they have no privacy, security or safety, eroding the spatial boundaries of abusive relationships and creating a sense of omnipresence and being trapped (Fraser et al., 2010; Woodlock, 2017). Prolonged hypervigilance and fear as a result can have psychological impacts such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, and victims and survivors may restrict their use of technology, rupturing their social connections (Woodlock et al., 2020).

There is a lack of empirical research looking at the rates of cyberstalking in Australia. However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Personal Safety Survey* (2016) of adults (*n*=21,242) found that 12 per cent of people have experienced stalking, with higher rates among women (17%) than men (7%). Lenhardt et al.'s (2016) nationally representative survey of Americans aged 15 years and over (*n*=3,002) found that 8 per cent of Americans have been cyberstalked; 14 per cent have had someone monitor their online or phone activity without their permission; 7 per cent have had someone read their texts or emails without permission; and 9 per cent have had someone use social media, GPS or other technological tools to track their location. They found women were twice as

likely as men to report victimisation, with rates particularly high for younger women (under the age of 30; 20%), and LGB people were almost four times as likely (31%) to experience cyberstalking compared to heterosexuals (7%). There are few studies of cyberstalking perpetration, with many being limited to college student samples in the United States. For example, Reyns' (2019) study (*n*=1,310) found 5 per cent of respondents engaged in cyberstalking, with similar rates between men and women. Lyndon et al.'s (2011) study (*n*=411) found 50 per cent had stalked an ex-partner on Facebook, with this number likely so high due to the wide behavioural factors included by the researchers as to what constitutes stalking, such as looking through an ex-partner's photos on Facebook to find pictures of their new partner.

Studies have found that stalking and monitoring are mostly commonly experienced in the context of intimate partner relationships (Baum et al., 2009; Lenhardt et al., 2016). Scholars argue that technology is becoming increasingly important to the dynamics of domestic and family violence (Douglas et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2020). A survey with frontline domestic violence practitioners in Australia (*n*=442) found that 99 per cent of respondents reported having clients who have experienced technology-facilitated stalking and abuse (Woodlock et al., 2020). Messing et al.'s (2020) analysis of three studies with survivors of intimate partner violence (*n*=1,137) found that 60 to 63 per cent of survivors had experienced technology-based monitoring, harassment or cyberstalking from intimate partners. Attention in research is shifting to recognise how monitoring and controlling behaviours using technology interact with the dynamics of domestic and family violence, however empirical research is still limited.

Emotional abuse and threats

Another area receiving increasing attention is perpetrators' use of technology to perpetrate emotional abuse and send threats in the context of domestic and family violence. The ongoing pattern of abuse in relationships – which can be both physical and non-physical, and include emotional abuse and threats – has been conceptualised under the term "coercive control". Coercive control refers to behaviours designed to exert power and dominance over a partner which can have serious and long-lasting effects for victims and survivors (Stark, 2007). Technology is increasingly recognised as playing an integral part in coercive control, with this subtype also referred to as technology-facilitated coercive control or digital dating abuse (see e.g. Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Ybarra et al., 2017). Technology can enable emotional abuse to take place regardless of the physical location of the victim and survivor or perpetrator (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2021).

Emotional abuse in the context of domestic and family violence involves manipulative behaviour to coerce, control or harm, including behaviours such as undermining confidence, blame, humiliation, intimidation and twisting reality. Perpetrators may do this through technology using phone calls, text messages, email and social media (Woodlock et al., 2020). In Australia, the only state that has offences criminalising conduct that constitutes coercive control is Tasmania, which enacted the *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tas) introducing the criminal offence of "emotional abuse and intimidation" (s 9). This legislation addresses emotional abuse or intimidation as well as economic abuse. However, coercive control legislation is currently being considered in other Australian states and territories (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2020). Emotional abuse and threats via technology may also constitute a breach of an intervention order in the context of domestic violence, however, as Woodlock et al. (2020) found, emotional abuse can be difficult to prosecute as threats are often covert and only have specific meaning for the victim and survivor, and are therefore not deemed serious enough for police to follow up on.

Little quantitative research has been conducted on technology-facilitated coercive control in Australia, however Woodlock et al.'s (2020) study with domestic violence frontline practitioners (*n*=442) found that the use of technology by perpetrators to threaten victims and survivors increased from 2015 to 2020. Verbal abuse over the phone increased from 32 per cent of practitioners seeing this "all the time" in 2015 to 45 per cent in 2020. The use of text messages, email or instant messages to threaten increased from 33 per cent of practitioners observing this "all the time" in 2015 to 57 per cent in 2020. Ybarra et al.'s (2017) nationally representative study with Americans (aged 15 years and over; *n*=3,002) examining the prevalence of intimate partner digital abuse found 9 per cent of respondents who had been in a romantic relationship reported being

psychologically or emotionally abused by a romantic partner online, with equal rates between men and women. While coercive control has primarily been theorised as a problem of men's violence against women and an extension of gender inequality (Stark, 2007), research is beginning to recognise the occurrence of coercive control in same-sex relationships. Frankland and Brown's (2014) survey with adult gay and lesbian men and women in Australia (*n*=184) found that 4 per cent had engaged in coercive control, and 6 per cent had experienced coercive control from a partner. As Dragiewicz et al. (2018) argue, patriarchal gender norms operate in all relationships, and more research is needed to examine technology-facilitated coercive control in non-heterosexual relationships. Indeed, more empirical research is also needed to better understand the dynamics of technology-facilitated emotional abuse and threats outside of the context of intimate partner relationships and the dynamics of other correlates such as race and ethnicity.

Conclusion

In summary there is currently a knowledge gap with respect to the prevalence of TFA within the Australian community. Studies so far have tended to focus on specific types of TFA, such as image-based abuse or online sexual harassment, rather than scoping the prevalence of TFA more broadly. Further, most studies have focused on victimisation with very few studies investigating the prevalence of TFA perpetration. This report seeks to address these knowledge gaps through establishing a reliable national prevalence estimate of the extent of lifetime TFA victimisation and perpetration in the Australian community, and deepening our understanding of the gendered nature and individual characteristics associated with TFA.

Project aims

This national project aims to examine the extent and nature of, and responses to, TFA within the Australian community. It comprises three discrete research stages conducted across a two-year period from 2020 to 2022. In Stage I, we examined the nature of TFA from the perspective of service sector workers and gained their insights into some of the barriers to responses to and prevention of TFA (see Flynn et al., 2021). In Stage II, we explored the lived experience of both victims and survivors of TFA and those engaged in perpetration behaviours, revealing both the range of experiences of TFA and the lasting impacts for some victims and survivors (see Flynn, Hindes & Powell, 2022).

The aims of Stage III of the project, and the focus of this report, are threefold: first, to establish reliable national prevalence for the extent of victimisation and perpetration of key forms of TFA, namely, technology-facilitated harassment, IBSA, monitoring and controlling behaviours, and emotional abuse and threats; second, to deepen understanding of the gendered nature of TFA; and third, to examine the individual characteristics that are associated with TFA.

Methodology

Research questions

To address its research aims, Stage III of the study responds to the following specific research questions:

1. What are the extent and characteristics of TFA *victimisation* in the Australian community (aged 18 years and over)?
2. To what extent, and in what ways, does TFA victimisation differ according to gender?
3. What are the extent and characteristics of TFA *perpetration* in the Australian community (aged 18 years and over)?

Survey instrument

The survey instrument was developed in consultation with the project advisory group (PAG; see below), and with adaptations from existing instruments.[2] In particular, the TFA items were drawn with permission from the Technology-facilitated Abuse in Relationships (TAR) scale developed by Brown and Hegarty (2021), IBSA items first developed by Powell and Henry (2017, 2019), the Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS) developed as part of the *National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey* (NCAS; Webster et al., 2018), the Kessler (K6+) Psychological Distress Scale, and selected items from the Digital Inclusion Index (Thomas et al., 2018). The resulting instrument thus encompassed six question modules, which are each described further below. Ethical approval was sought and received from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to conducting the survey (Project no.: 26771).

Demographics

Respondents answered questions on demographic items, including their age, gender, sexuality, LOTE spoken at home, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, and disability status. Postcodes were also collected and used to allocate respondents to the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Lower scores indicate respondents reside in a local area with greater disadvantage featuring, for example, many households with low incomes, little to no qualifications, unemployment, and/or low-skilled occupations.

TFA victimisation

Respondents answered a set of questions with 30 items describing unwanted, harassing and harmful behaviours that they had ever experienced either online or via any digital devices, such as mobile phones, tablets, laptop or desktop computers, gaming consoles and/or telephones. The items were primarily drawn from the TAR scale developed by Brown and Hegarty (2021), with some adaptations to item wording for the IBSA items for consistency with those first developed by Powell and Henry (2017, 2019). Example items include where someone has "threatened on a digital device to physically hurt you", "monitored your location with tracking software", "pressured you on a digital device to engage in sexual acts", and "sent you threatening messages through a digital device" (α=69).

The original TAR scale was designed for measuring TFA in the specific context of intimate and dating relationships, and presented four factor groupings which Brown and Hegarty (2021) labelled "humiliation", "monitoring and control", "sexual coercion" and "threats". For this research, respondents were instructed to consider *any* unwanted, harassing and harmful behaviours via digital devices – whether from a current or ex-partner, a family member or friend, another known person, or a stranger – with respondents subsequently asked for further details about their most recent experience. As such the samples between the two studies are not directly comparable, and it is to be anticipated that there might be some differences between the factor structure here and that initially reported by Brown and Hegarty (2021). In the current research, factor analysis did not result in a clear factor structure. As such, results have been reported in thematic groupings, based on a combination of the original factor structure found by Brown and Hegarty (2021) and considerations of the legal categories of some behaviours. Responses were coded and summed to create four abuse type variables – *harassing behaviours*, *monitoring and controlling behaviours*, *sexual and image-based abuse*,[3] and *emotional abuse and threats* – as well as a binary "any lifetime" TFA victimisation (yes/no).

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2   The survey instrument is available on request to the first author.

3   Sexual coercion and image-based sexual abuse items were grouped together under a "sexual and image-based abuse" type.

After responding to the 30-item set, respondents who had disclosed any experience of TFA were asked a series of follow-up questions, including whether they had experienced these behaviours in the previous 12 months (since March 2020) and, if so, whether they felt that factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic were associated with aspects of their experience; the gender and relationship, if any, to the perpetrator in their most recent experience; the impacts on them of their most recent experience; whether the same perpetrator had engaged in a set of co-occurring abusive behaviours towards them; and any actions taken in response to the most recent TFA incident.

TFA perpetration

Respondents answered questions adapted from a set of 30 items from the TAR scale developed by Brown and Hegarty (2021) describing unwanted, harassing and harmful behaviours that they had ever *engaged in* either online or via any digital devices, such as mobile phones, tablets, laptop or desktop computers, gaming consoles and/or telephones. As with victimisation, the items were primarily drawn from the TAR scale developed by Brown and Hegarty (2021), with some adaptations to item wording for the IBSA items for consistency with those first developed by Powell and Henry (2017, 2019). Responses were coded and summed to create four abuse type variables – *harassing behaviours*, *monitoring and controlling behaviours*, *sexual and image-based abuse*, and *emotional abuse and threats* – as well as any lifetime TFA perpetration. Example items include whether a person has engaged in behaviours such as "changed an aspect of a person's online profile without permission", "pressured a person to share their password(s) with you", and "sent someone unwelcome nude or sexual images" (α=.84).

After responding to the 30-item set, respondents who had disclosed any use of TFA behaviours were asked a series of follow-up questions, including the gender and relationship, if any, to the victim and survivor in their most recent experience, and the applicability of a set of possible motivations in using the behaviours (such as "I wanted to annoy the person" and "I wanted to frighten them").

GEAS

Respondents answered the 18-item GEAS as developed by Webster and colleagues (2018) for the 2017 NCAS. Items ask respondents to rate their agreement with a range of statements indicative of attitudes supporting gender inequality across both public and private life, such as "Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household", "Women often flirt with men just to be hurtful", and "In the workplace, men generally make more capable bosses than women" (5-point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was α=.84, indicating good internal consistency. Items were summed to create an overall score between 18 and 90, with higher scores indicating greater attitudinal support for gender inequality.

Kessler (K6+) score

Respondents answered questions from the 6-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6+), which is a self-report measure used to assess risk for serious mental distress (such as anxiety and depression) in the general population. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had six different feelings or experiences during the past four weeks (5-point Likert scale: 0=none of the time, 1=a little of the time, 2=some of the time, 3=most of the time, 4=all of the time). Example items include how often did you feel "that everything was an effort" and "so sad that nothing could cheer you up?" (α=.75). Items were summed to create an overall score between 0 and 24, where a score of equal or greater than 13 indicates significant psychological distress, and a score of equal or greater than 5 indicates moderate psychological distress (see Prochaska et al., 2012).

Measures of digital participation

Respondents answered questions including three sets of items measuring key aspects of digital participation. These were frequency of internet access (7-point Likert scale where 1=less than monthly, 2=once a month, 3=every few weeks, 4=one to two days a week, 5=three to five days a week, 6=about once a day, 7=several times a day); frequency and breadth of participation across a range of online activities, such as streaming content, online banking, social media and online dating (7-point Likert scale where 1=less than monthly, 2=once a month, 3=every few weeks, 4=one to two

days a week, 5=three to five days a week, 6=about once a day, 7=several times a day; α=.90); and attitudes items from the Digital Ability Sub-Index (Thomas et al., 2018) including "Computers and technology give me more control over my life" and "I go out of my way to learn everything I can about new technologies" (5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree; α=.44). Item ratings were summed to create an overall digital participation score, where higher mean scores indicate greater frequency and breadth of digital participation as well as attitudinal confidence in one's digital abilities. Cronbach's alpha for the overall digital participation score was α=.87, indicating good internal consistency.

Recruitment and sample

The Social Research Centre, a subsidiary of the Australian National University, was engaged to administer the survey including respondent recruitment. The Social Research Centre undertook recruitment and administration of the survey through a combination of their Life in Australia™ panel and an additional booster sample via an opt-in online panel to supplement the overall sample. Life in Australia represents a methodologically rigorous online panel exclusively using random probability-based sampling methods. This enables results from Life in Australia surveys to be generalisable to the Australian population. Life in Australia has a further advantage over other research panels as it includes people both with and without regular internet access. Those who are not comfortable completing surveys over the internet or do not have access are able to participate in surveys via telephone.

For this project, a total of 4,288 active panel members were invited to take part in the survey; 3,369 completed the survey, resulting in a completion rate of 78.6 per cent. Overall, a majority took part by accessing the survey from an email invitation link (85.5%), and one in 10 (13.8%) accessed the survey from an SMS invitation link, in total representing 99.3 per cent of participants. Additionally, a booster sample was recruited to increase the overall sample size, improving the capacity of data analyses to examine differences between sub-population groups. For the booster, invitations were sent to 29,421 panellists, and 1,217 completed the survey, resulting in a completion rate of 4.1 per cent. Both the main sample and

the small booster sample were weighted and then integrated into a single sample set for analyses. The Social Research Centre undertook weighting to calibrate the combined sample with the Australian population drawing on population distributions from the 2016 Australian Census (including age, gender, state/territory, LOTE spoken at home and level of education). The method for weighting was regression calibration (Deville et al., 1993), implemented in R (R Core Team, 2021) using the survey package (Lumley, 2021).[4] This method reduces the extent of potential bias due to factors such as unequal chances of selection or survey non-response. All respondents received a nominal compensation for their time (a retail voucher to the value of $10) to complete the survey.

The total initial sample comprised 4,586 Australian adults. Transgender, non-binary, intersex and/or another gender identity (n=21), as well as a further three respondents who did not disclose a gender identity, were excluded from statistical analyses resulting in final sample of 4,562 (women: n=2,499; men: n=2,063; additional sample demographics provided in Table B1, Appendix B). As the same sets of statistical analyses could not be applied to the small group of 21 gender-diverse respondents, these experiences are instead described separately in the results.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using IBM SPSS (version 26) and proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to report on frequency of TFA behaviours. Second, bivariate analyses were conducted to examine whether there were significant differences according to key *demographic*, *attitudinal* (GEAS) and *behavioural* (TFA victimisation or perpetration experiences, digital participation score) variables. In order to address the focus of the project, as expressed in its aims and research questions, particular attention was paid to examining whether there were gendered differences in either the extent or nature of TFA. Finally, multivariate modelling (binary logistic regression using the Enter method) was conducted to determine the significant correlates of lifetime TFA victimisation and TFA perpetration, with 10 independent variables entered into

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4 For further information on weighting of sample surveys, refer to Valliant et al. (2013).

the model (namely: gender, sexuality, age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, LOTE, disability, GEAS, digital participation score, IRSD, and either TFA victimisation or perpetration as relevant).

Project advisory group

At the initiation of the project, a PAG (see Appendix A) was convened to bring together the perspectives of researchers, practitioners, advocates and policymakers from relevant government, non-government and technology company stakeholders. The PAG members provided feedback and advice on the overall project design, as well as instrument design for each stage of the project. This included advice both at scheduled meetings and via email on matters such as research methods, design of research tools, recruitment processes, analysis of findings, and the implications of key findings for policy and practice.

Results

Results are presented in three parts, each addressing the specific research questions of Stage III. In Part I, we report on the overall extent and nature of TFA victimisation. In Part II, we examine the gendered nature of TFA. In Part III, we report on the overall extent and nature of TFA perpetration.

PART I:

TFA victimisation

Overall extent of TFA victimisation

The findings of this research demonstrate that experiencing *any* TFA victimisation in their lifetime is incredibly common among Australian adults. Overall, one in two (51.0%, *n*=2,325) Australians surveyed had experienced at least one of the TFA behaviours surveyed at some point in their lifetime (women: 51.1%, *n*=1,276; men: 50.8%, *n*=1,049; see Table B2, Appendix B).

The most common types of TFA victimisation experienced were first and foremost *monitoring and controlling behaviours* (33.7%, *n*=1,537), followed by *emotional abuse and threats* (30.6%, *n*=1,394), *harassing behaviours* (26.7%, *n*=1,216) and, lastly, *sexual and image-based abuse* (24.6%, *n*=1,120). There were significant differences for some of these abuse types according to gender, which are examined in Part II.

Characteristics of TFA victims and survivors

Australians (18 and over) who were most likely to have had *any* lifetime TFA victimisation experiences were:

- sexuality-diverse populations: almost three in four (72.7%, *n*=315) of those identifying as LGB+ disclosed at least one TFA victimisation experience
- young and middle-aged adults (18 to 44 years): almost three in four of those aged 18 to 24 years (71.5%, *n*=201) and those aged 25 to 34 years (70.4%, *n*=442) disclosed any TFA victimisation, while three in five (61.1%, *n*=518) of those aged 35 to 44 years also had these experiences
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: seven in 10 (69.9%, *n*=51) who disclosed an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status reported at least one lifetime TFA victimisation experience
- Australians with disability: almost three in five (57.0%, *n*=811) of those disclosing a condition that restricted their daily activities (such as communication, mobility or self-care) reported at least one TFA victimisation experience
- perpetrators of TFA: 87.3 per cent (*n*=917) of respondents who disclosed perpetration of TFA also had victimisation experiences. Conversely, 39.4 per cent (*n*=917) of those who reported TFA victimisation also self-disclosed TFA perpetration (see Part III for further details). Overall, of

the total sample, one in five Australians (20.0%, *n*=917) had both experienced TFA victimisation *and* engaged in perpetration behaviours.

Digital participation was also associated with TFA victimisation experience, such that victims and survivors of TFA had greater mean *digital participation* scores (M=63.89, SD=14.31) compared with non-victims and survivors (M=55.84, SD=13.67), where *digital participation* reflects greater frequency of internet access, greater variety and frequency of online activities, and positive attitudes towards their digital abilities. There were no significant differences according to other key characteristics, that is, whether respondents lived in capital cities or other regions of their state or territory, spoke LOTE at home, or were male or female, nor were their significant differences according to GEAS or IRSD (discussed further in Part II; see also Tables B2 and B3, Appendix B).

A logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of gender, sexuality, age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, LOTE, disability, GEAS, digital participation score, IRSD and any TFA lifetime perpetration on the likelihood that respondents reported experiencing any lifetime TFA victimisation. The logistic regression model was statistically significant ($\chi2(10)=1166.82$, p < .001). The model explained 30.1 per cent (Nagelkerke $R2$) of the variance in TFA lifetime victimisation and correctly classified 69.2 per cent of cases. Overall, the model found that age, sexuality, disability, digital participation and TFA lifetime perpetration were each significant predictors of TFA lifetime victimisation, when controlling for other variables in the model. Increasing age was associated with a decreased likelihood of TFA lifetime victimisation. LGB+ respondents were 1.68 times more likely than heterosexual respondents to report experiencing any lifetime TFA victimisation. Respondents disclosing disability were 1.42 times more likely than those not disclosing disability to report experiencing any lifetime TFA victimisation. Respondents self-reporting ever engaging in TFA perpetration behaviours in their lifetime were 1.87 times more likely than those not reporting lifetime TFA perpetration to report experiencing any lifetime TFA victimisation. Finally, higher digital participation scores were associated with an increased likelihood of TFA lifetime victimisation. These findings confirm the significance of age, sexuality, disability, digital

participation and TFA perpetration (as reported above) in understanding TFA victimisation.

Relational contexts of victimisation

Victims' and survivors' relationships with the perpetrator of their most recent experience of TFA varied widely. The most common were as follows:

- More than one in three victims and survivors said the TFA occurred in a current or former intimate partner relationship (36.7%, *n*=852). Of these, almost one in four said the TFA was perpetrated by a person who was an intimate partner at the time (23.4%, *n*=543) and more than one in 10 said the TFA was perpetrated by a former intimate partner (13.3%, *n*=309).
- One in five said the TFA was perpetrated by strangers or unknown people (20.0%, *n*=465).
- One in 10 said the TFA was perpetrated by a family member of the victim and survivor (11.0%, *n*=255).
- One in 10 said the TFA was perpetrated by a friend the victim and survivor knows face-to-face (10.3%, *n*=239).

Less common were other relational contexts such as:
- acquaintances (7.1%, *n*=165)
- work colleagues or ex-colleagues (6.8%, *n*=158)
- friends known online only (3.5%, *n*=82).

Impacts of TFA on victims and survivors

Overall, TFA victims and survivors (M=5.87, SD=5.40) were significantly more likely than those without TFA experiences (M=3.23, SD=4.14) to score higher on the Kessler (K6+) Psychological Distress Scale, and at a level indicating moderate psychological distress in the last four weeks. Mean psychological distress scores were higher again for those respondents who had experienced TFA victimisation in the past year (since March 2020; M=7.93, SD=6.09), as compared with all victims and survivors (M=5.41, SD=5.13).

The *most common* impacts victims and survivors attributed to their most recent experience of TFA were as follows:

- More than two in three agreed that they felt *annoyed* (68.8%, *n*=1,591).
- Six in 10 said that they felt *angry* at the person who did it (61.5%, *n*=1,421).
- One in three agreed that they felt *controlled* by the person (33.8%, *n*=781).
- Almost one in three said that they felt *humiliated* (31.9%, *n*=736).
- Almost one in three agreed that they felt *depressed* (31.9%, *n*=738).
- One in four said that they felt *afraid* (24.4%, *n*=563).

It was least common, in terms of impacts, for victims and survivors to agree with the statements that they were "okay" with the TFA victimisation (16.5%, *n*=382) or that it was "funny" (10.9%, *n*=252) or "flattering" (7.3%, *n*=169).

Experiences of co-occurring abuse

Of those respondents experiencing TFA victimisation, many also reported that the same perpetrator of their most recent incident had engaged in at least one form of additional abuse against them (46.4%, *n*=1,075). This represents one in four (23.6%, *n*=1,075) of the total sample who experienced co-occurring forms of abuse from the same perpetrator of their most recent TFA experience. Victims and survivors of TFA reported experiencing co-occurring abuse types with the perpetrator:

- trying to control or limit the victim's and survivor's behaviour (29.4%, *n*=684)
- continuing to contact the victim and survivor after being asked to stop (25.7%, *n*=598)
- causing the victim and survivor to feel afraid for their personal safety (20.1%, *n*=467)
- making threats to physically harm the victim and survivor or another person (15.1%, *n*=352)
- physically hurting the victim and survivor (6.7%, *n*=156).

Psychological distress mean scores were higher for respondents who disclosed experiencing the identified co-occurring abuse types alongside TFA from the perpetrator of their most recent incident, as shown in Table 1. A Kessler (K6+) mean score of

Table 1: Kessler (K6+) Psychological Distress Scale mean scores by co-occurring abuse experienced

	Yes		No	
	M	*SD*	M	*SD*
Trying to control or limit the victim's and survivor's behaviour**	7.69	*5.94*	5.11	*4.97*
Continuing to contact the victim and survivor after being asked to stop**	7.54	*5.99*	5.29	*5.05*
Causing the victim and survivor to feel afraid for their personal safety**	8.33	*5.87*	5.26	*5.09*
Making threats to physically harm the victim and survivor or another person**	8.62	*6.08*	5.38	*5.12*
Physically hurting the victim/survivor**	9.55	*6.24*	5.61	*5.24*

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

5 or greater indicates moderate psychological distress, while 13 or greater indicates significant psychological distress (such as significant depression and/or anxiety).

Actions taken by victims and survivors

Overall, one in three victims and survivors said that they did not tell anyone about their most recent experience of TFA (34.3%, *n*=798). A majority of victims and survivors of TFA disclosed that they did not report to police, seek legal advice nor contact eSafety[5] in response to the abuse:

- 97.6 per cent (*n*=2,270) did not report to eSafety, with 2.2 per cent (*n*=52) doing so
- 91.7 per cent (*n*=2,133) did not report to police, with 8.1 per cent (*n*=189) doing so
- 91.5 per cent (*n*=2,127) did not seek legal advice, with 8.4 per cent (*n*=195) doing so.

However, some victims and survivors did seek other forms of support or advice:

- One in 10 (11.4%, *n*=266) contacted a support service for advice, such as a helpline, counsellor or health practitioner (88.4%, *n*=2,055 did not).
- One in 10 (10.1%, *n*=235) reported the abuse to a social media company, website or other technology provider (89.8%, *n*=2,087 did not).
- Almost one in five (17.8%, *n*=414) searched online for information or advice (82.1%, *n*=1,908 did not).
- One in three (35.3%, *n*=820) sought informal support or advice from family or friends (64.6%, *n*=1,502 did not).

5   Notably, the eSafety Commissioner (formerly Office of the eSafety Commissioner) did not launch its adult victim services portal until October 2017, and it was initially designed for image-based abuse specifically; as such, fewer victims and survivors may have had awareness of this action option.

TFA victimisation of gender minority respondents

Respondents were asked which best describes their gender: man, woman, transgender man, transgender woman, non-binary, intersex, or another gender. Overall, 21 respondents selected a minority gender descriptor. These included one transgender man, one transgender woman, 15 non-binary people, two intersex people, and two people of another gender. Given the small numbers of gender minority respondents, it was not possible to statistically analyse these cases comparably within the main sample. A description of the experiences of these respondents with respect to TFA is provided here, although care should be taken not to extrapolate or generalise these findings with respect to the broader community.

Of the 21 respondents, 90.5 per cent (*n*=19) had experienced any lifetime TFA victimisation, and one in three (31.6%, *n*=6) had experienced TFA in the past year (since March 2020). The majority of victims and survivors were abused by a man (68.4%, *n*=13) and by a known person, including:

- family members (31.6%, *n*=6)
- friends known face-to-face (15.8%, *n*=3)
- an intimate partner at the time (15.8%, *n*=3)
- a former intimate partner (10.5%, *n*=2)
- acquaintances (5.3%, *n*=4).

Meanwhile, one in five (21.1%, *n*=4) said that the perpetrator was a stranger, or that they didn't know their identity.

Gender minority respondents further disclosed many experiences of co-occurring abuse from the same perpetrator of their most recent experience of TFA. For instance:

- One in three (36.8%, *n*=7) said the perpetrator tried to control them in other ways.
- One in three (36.8%, *n*=7) said the perpetrator kept contacting them after being asked to stop.
- One in four (26.3%, *n*=5) said the perpetrator made threats to physically harm them or others.
- One in five (21.1%, *n*=4) said the perpetrator made them feel afraid for their safety.
- One in 20 (5.3%, *n*=1) said the perpetrator also physically hurt them.

Furthermore, one in two (52.6%, *n*=10) said that they did not tell anyone about the experience. For those who did, most sought informal support from family or friends (36.8%, *n*=7), with very few respondents (*n*=1) making other more formal reports or requests for support or advice.

TFA in the context of COVID-19

Respondents were asked whether they had experienced any TFA since March 2020, when Australia began to be impacted by restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who had were then asked to respond to a series of questions regarding the role that they perceived factors related to COVID-19 to have had in their experience of abuse during this period.

Overall, almost one in five (18.1%, *n*=421) Australian adults surveyed had experienced at least one TFA behaviour in the year since March 2020 (females: 18.7%, *n*=239; males: 17.3%, *n*=182). Of these, a substantial minority either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with statements that COVID-19-related factors were associated with:

- the onset of the abuse (one in 10, 11.9%, *n*=46)
- increases in frequency of abuse (one in five, 21.2%, *n*=89)
- increased severity (almost one in five, 18.3%, *n*=77)
- difficulty seeking help (one in five, 20.9%, *n*=88)
- perceptions that it was harder for services to respond (one in five, 21.2%, *n*=89).

PART II:

Gendered nature of TFA

Among the key aims of this project is to deepen understanding of the gendered nature of TFA victimisation. By "gendered nature", we refer to the ways in which the extent of differing types of abuse, the relationships in which TFA occurs, and its impacts on victims and survivors can vary according to gender. In Part II, we report on findings across these contexts that demonstrate the ways in which TFA differs according to gender.

Types of TFA by gender

This research has found that the *types* of TFA experienced are shaped by gender. Around one third of all women surveyed (28.9%, *n*=722) experienced sexual and image-based abuse, compared to 19.3 per cent (*n*=398) of all men surveyed. This difference was statistically significant. However, this was not the case for other abuse types, as shown in Table 2. Indeed, men (29.0%, n=599) were significantly more likely than women (24.7%, n=617) to report experiencing harassing behaviours, while the two other abuse types showed no statistically significant differences by gender.

Gender of perpetrators

A majority of victims and survivors of TFA said that in their most recent victimisation experience the perpetrator was a man (62.1%, *n*=1,444), with 31.1 per cent (*n*=722) saying the perpetrator was a woman; 4.3 per cent (*n*=99) were unsure. A majority of women victims and survivors said that their perpetrator was a man (77.0%, *n*=983), while 17.9 per cent (*n*=229) said they were a woman, and 3.3 per cent (*n*=42) were unsure. However, for men victims and survivors, the gender breakdown of perpetrators was more balanced compared to that for women victims and survivors (women perpetrators: 47.0%, *n*=493; men perpetrators: 43.9%, *n*=461).

Relational contexts of TFA by gender

Overall, a majority of victims and survivors of TFA knew their offender in some way. Women and men victims and survivors were both most likely to report that their most recent TFA experience was perpetrated by an intimate partner or former intimate partner. However, a significantly greater proportion of women who had been a victim and survivor of TFA reported that it was perpetrated by a partner or former partner than men, as shown in Table 3. Furthermore, men victims and survivors were more likely than women to report experiencing TFA in other known contexts such as friends, work colleagues and acquaintances. A quarter of men who had been victims and survivors of TFA reported that the perpetrator was a stranger (24.5%, *n*=257) in their most recent experience, as compared to one in six women (16.3%, *n*=208). The gender breakdown for experiencing TFA in all relational contexts is shown in Table 3.

Gendered trends within demographic subgroups

Though there were no statistically significant differences according to gender for overall lifetime TFA victimisation, there were some gendered patterns in victimisation that varied when analysed within other demographic subgroups. With respect to gender within age, for instance, younger women were more likely to report lifetime TFA victimisation than their young male counterparts, while older men were more likely to report TFA victimisation than older women (as shown in Table 4). However, notably, as reported earlier, victimisation was still comparatively higher for both young women and young men compared to older Australians.

There were also significant differences between women who disclosed disability and men who disclosed disability. Specifically, women with disability surveyed (58.7%, n=485) were more likely than men with disability surveyed (54.6%, n=326) to report lifetime TFA victimisation. There were no statistically significant differences with respect to gender within other demographic subgroups of region, sexuality, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, or LOTE. However, men victims and survivors had higher GEAS scores than women victims and survivors, indicating greater attitudinal support for gender inequality. Meanwhile, women victims and survivors had higher Kessler (K6+) scores than men victims and survivors, indicating greater levels of psychological distress (see Tables B2 and B3, Appendix B).

Table 2: Types of TFA victimisation, by gender

	Women		Men		Total, within sample	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Harassing behaviours**	24.7	617	29.0	599	26.7	1,216
Monitoring and controlling behaviours	32.6	815	35.0	722	33.7	1,537
Sexual and image-based abuse**	28.9	722	19.3	398	24.6	1,120
Emotional abuse and threats	31.2	780	29.8	614	30.6	1,394

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 3: Relational context of most recent incidence of TFA, by gender

	Women victims and survivors		Men victims and survivors	
	%	N	%	N
Intimate partner at the time**	24.9	318	21.4	225
Former intimate partner**	15.4	197	10.7	112
Family member	11.8	150	10.0	105
Friend, known face-to-face**	8.9	114	11.9	125
Friend, known online only**	3.9	50	3.1	32
Work colleague or ex-colleague**	5.4	69	8.5	89
Acquaintance**	8.5	108	5.4	57
Stranger**	16.3	208	24.5	257

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 4: Lifetime TFA victimisation, by age group and gender

	Women		Men		Total, within age group	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
18–24**	73.8	127	67.9	74	71.5	201
25–34**	71.1	263	69.4	179	70.4	442
35–44	61.9	281	60.2	237	61.1	518
45–54**	59.6	238	53.5	159	57.0	397
55–64**	40.1	198	48.6	202	44.0	400
65–74**	30.2	130	35.1	145	32.6	275
75 or more**	20.9	37	29.7	52	25.3	89

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Gendered impacts of TFA

Overall, women victims and survivors of TFA were significantly more likely to report emotional impacts from the most recent experience of abuse, as compared to men victims and survivors, as shown in Table 5. Women victims and survivors also reported significantly higher mean Kessler (K6+) scores than men victims and survivors, at levels indicative of moderate psychological distress.

Co-occurring abuse with TFA by gender

As mentioned earlier, respondents were asked about their experiences of a list of co-occurring forms of abuse from the same perpetrator of their most recent experience of TFA. The findings revealed significant gendered differences when it came to these patterns of identified types of co-occurring abuse. Of those respondents who had experienced TFA victimisation, one in two women (50.7%, n=644) and two in five men (41.2%, n=431) experienced co-occurring abuse from the same perpetrator of their most recent experience of TFA. Of all Australians surveyed, this represents one in four women (27.8%, n=644) and almost one in five men (18.6%, n=431) who experienced co-occurring abuse types from the same perpetrator of their most recent experience of TFA, as shown in Table 6.

Actions taken

There were some significant differences in actions taken in response to the most recent experience of TFA by gender, and an overall trend whereby women tended to seek either formal or informal support in response to TFA more so than men, as shown in Table 7.

Table 5: Impacts of most recent experience of TFA, by gender

	Women victims and survivors		Men victims and survivors	
	%	*N*	%	*N*
I felt annoyed**	73.4	*937*	62.3	*654*
I felt angry at the person who did it**	67.2	*857*	53.8	*564*
I felt controlled by the person who did it**	38.2	*487*	28.0	*294*
I felt humiliated**	36.0	*459*	26.4	*277*
I felt depressed**	34.8	*444*	28.0	*294*
I felt afraid**	29.7	*379*	17.5	*184*
I was okay with it**	11.4	*146*	22.5	*236*
I thought it was funny**	6.7	*84*	16.0	*168*
I was flattered**	5.0	*64*	10.0	*105*
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Kessler (K6+) score, any lifetime TFA**	6.30	*5.50*	5.35	*5.23*
Kessler (K6+) score, TFA last 12 months**	8.44	*6.12*	7.25	*5.99*

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 6: Co-occurring abuse experienced in most recent experience of TFA, by gender

	Women victims and survivors		Men victims and survivors	
	%	*N*	%	*N*
Trying to control or limit the victim's and survivor's behaviour	32.8	*418*	25.4	*266*
Continuing to contact the victim and survivor after being asked to stop	30.9	*394*	19.4	*204*
Causing the victim and survivor to feel afraid for their personal safety	26.3	*335*	12.6	*132*
Making threats to physically harm the victim and survivor or another person	17.2	*219*	12.7	*133*
Physically hurting the victim and survivor	8.5	*109*	4.5	*47*
Of total victims and survivors, any co-occurring abuse	**50.7**	**644**	**41.2**	**431**
Of total sample, any co-occurring abuse	**27.8**	**644**	**18.6**	**431**

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 7: Actions taken in response to most recent experience of TFA, by gender

	Women victims and survivors		Men victims and survivors	
	%	N	%	N
Reported to the eSafety Commissioner	2.0	26	2.5	26
Reported to police	9.6	122	6.4	67
Sought legal advice	9.9	126	6.6	69
Reported to a social media company, website or other technology provider	10.5	134	9.6	101
Contacted a support service for advice, such as a helpline, counsellor or health practitioner**	15.0	191	7.1	75
Sought informal support or advice from family or friends**	42.8	546	26.1	274
Didn't tell anyone about the experience**	31.0	395	38.4	403

Note: * p < .01; ** p < .001.

TFA perpetration

Overall extent of TFA perpetration

The findings of this research demonstrate that engaging in *any* TFA perpetration in their lifetime is somewhat common among Australian adults. Overall, one in four (23%, *n*=1,051) Australians self-reported engaging in at least one of the TFA perpetration behaviours surveyed at some point in their lifetime. The most common *types* of lifetime TFA perpetration behaviours engaged in were first and foremost *monitoring and controlling behaviours* (19.4%, *n*=886), followed by *harassing behaviours* (8.1%, *n*=368), *emotional abuse and threats* (6.0%, *n*=276), and *sexual and image-based abuse* (4.2%, *n*=190). Men were significantly more likely than women to self-report engaging in both *harassing behaviours* and *sexual and image-based abuse,* while women were more likely to self-report engaging in *monitoring and controlling behaviours,* as shown in Table 8. There were no significant differences between women's and men's overall engagement in any lifetime TFA perpetration behaviours.

Characteristics of TFA perpetrators

Australians (18 and over) who were most likely to have engaged in *any* lifetime TFA perpetration were the following populations:

- Young and middle-aged adults (18 to 44 years): more

than two in five of those aged 25 to 34 years (43.2%, *n*=271) disclosed participation in any TFA perpetration – significantly more so than other age ranges. Meanwhile, approximately one in three (37.7%, *n*=106) of those aged 18 to 24 years and one in three (32.5%, *n*=276) of those aged 35 to 44 years also reported engaging in TFA perpetration behaviours.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: two in five (41.9%, *n*=31) of those disclosing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status reported participation in TFA behaviours at least once in their lifetime.

- Sexuality diverse populations: more than one in three (37.9%, *n*=164) of those identifying as LGB+ disclosed participation in TFA behaviours at least once in their lifetime.

- Victims and survivors of TFA: 39.4 per cent (*n*=917) of respondents who experienced TFA victimisation also disclosed engaging in perpetration behaviours (see Table B4, Appendix B).

Digital participation was also associated with TFA perpetration engagement, such that perpetrators of TFA had greater mean *digital participation* scores (M=65.74, SD=14.84) as compared with non-perpetrators (M=58.21, SD=14.02), where *digital*

Table 8: Types of TFA ever perpetrated, by gender

	Women		Men		Total, within sample	
	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*
Harassing behaviours**	6.5	*162*	10.0	*206*	8.1	*368*
Monitoring and controlling behaviours**	22.1	*551*	16.2	*335*	19.4	*886*
Sexual and image-based abuse**	2.3	*57*	6.5	*133*	4.2	*190*
Emotional abuse and threats	5.1	*128*	7.2	*148*	6.0	*276*
Total, any lifetime TFA perpetration	24.4	*611*	21.3	*440*	23.0	*1,051*

Note: * p < .01; ** p < .001.

participation reflects greater frequency of internet access, greater variety and frequency of online activities, and positive attitudes towards their digital abilities.

There were no overall significant differences according to other key demographics such as whether respondents lived in capital cities or other regions of their state or territory, spoke LOTE at home, disclosed disability, or were a man or woman; nor were their differences according to GEAS score or IRSD (discussed further in Part II above; see also Tables B4 and B5, Appendix B). Unlike TFA victimisation, there were also no significant differences with respect to gender within the other population subgroups. However, men perpetrators again reported greater attitudinal support for gender inequality than women perpetrators, as well as reporting greater digital participation scores, and lower psychological distress levels (see Table B5, Appendix B).

A logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of gender, sexuality, age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, LOTE, disability, GEAS, digital participation score, IRSD and any TFA lifetime victimisation on the likelihood that respondents self-reported engaging in any lifetime TFA perpetration. The logistic regression model was statistically significant ($\chi 2(10)=921.37$, $p < .001$). The model explained 27.7 per cent (Nagelkerke $R2$) of the variance in TFA lifetime perpetration and correctly classified 78.3 per cent of cases. Overall, the model found that only age, digital participation, and TFA lifetime victimisation were significant predictors of self-reported TFA lifetime perpetration, when controlling for other variables in the model. Increasing age was associated with a decreased likelihood of TFA lifetime perpetration. Respondents with any lifetime TFA victimisation experience were 1.87 times more likely than those not reporting lifetime TFA victimisation to self-report engaging in any lifetime TFA perpetration. Finally, higher digital participation scores were associated with an increased likelihood of lifetime TFA perpetration. This suggests that sexuality diversity and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status (as reported above) are not statistically significant predictors of lifetime TFA perpetration once other factors such as age and digital participation are accounted for.

Relational contexts of perpetration

Survey participants identified their relationship to the victim and survivor of their most recent perpetration of TFA:

- Almost one in two (47.7%, *n*=502) said that the victim and survivor was either an intimate partner at the time or a former intimate partner. One in three said the victim and survivor was an intimate partner at the time (34.8%, *n*=366), and more than one in 10 said the victim and survivor was a former intimate partner (12.9%, *n*=136).
- One in 10 said that the victim and survivor was a friend they know face-to-face (10.9%, *n*=115).
- One in 10 said that the victim and survivor was a family member (10.2%, *n*=107).

It was less common for perpetrators to describe their relationship with the victim and survivor as:

- a stranger (6.9%, *n*=73)
- an acquaintance (5.4%, *n*=57)
- a friend known online only (3.3%, *n*=35)
- a work colleague or former colleague (3.0%, *n*=32).

Motivations of perpetrators

The *most common* motivations that survey participants gave for their most recent engagement in TFA perpetration were as follows:

- One in three agreed that they wanted to express *anger* towards the person (33.5%, *n*=345).
- Almost one in three said that they thought the person was *okay* with it (30.7%, *n*=317).
- One in five agreed that they wanted to *annoy* the person (20.1%, *n*=207).
- Almost one in five said that they wanted to *hurt* the person's feelings (18.0%, *n*=186).
- One in six agreed that they thought it was *funny* (15.9%, *n*=164).
- More than one in 10 said that they wanted to *humiliate* the person (11.3%, *n*=117).

Still common, though with marginally less agreement, were the following motivations:

- One in 10 agreed that they wanted to *control* the person (10.9%, *n*=112).
- One in 10 agreed that they wanted to *frighten* the person (10.0%, *n*=103).
- One in 10 said that they thought the person would be *flattered* by their behaviour (10.0%, *n*=103).

Discussion and implications

The high overall lifetime prevalence of TFA victimisation (one in two Australians) and TFA perpetration (one in four Australians) is not surprising. Rather, these prevalence frequencies reflect both the rapid uptake of communications technologies across a majority of Australian society (Thomas et al., 2018) and shifts in offending behaviour making use of these technologies more generally. Likewise, it is not unexpected that young and middle-aged adults (those aged 18 to 44 years) are among those most likely to have lifetime experience of TFA, given the comparatively higher uptake of communications technologies among Australians in these age cohorts.

Gendered nature of TFA

A core focus of this project was examining the gendered nature of TFA, and in particular, the experiences of Australian women. This research reveals several key trends in relation to the gendered nature of TFA.

Women were significantly more likely to experience TFA perpetrated by a man rather than a woman in their most recent experience, while men were likely to experience TFA from either a man or a woman. This gendered pattern was further reflected in the relational contexts of TFA victimisation: a greater proportion of women experienced TFA from an intimate partner or former partner in their most recent experience compared to men. Women were significantly more likely than men to report emotional and psychological impacts of TFA, as well as being significantly more likely to experience identified types of co-occurring abuse from the same perpetrator of their most recent experience of TFA.

There was also an overall trend whereby women generally reported seeking more formal and informal support than men. While this could be interpreted to suggest that women's experiences were perceived as more serious and therefore warranted action, it may also be the case that men generally are reluctant to seek support or advice in response to TFA, as research has shown to be the case in other aspects of help-seeking (see e.g. Lysova et al., 2022). As such, these findings might reflect gendered patterns in help-seeking generally, such as compliance with rigid masculine gender roles, and/or potentially reflect gendered patterns in the severity of TFA experienced.

Together, these findings demonstrate that while overall prevalence of TFA may not differ significantly between women and men, it is women who are more likely to experience TFA:

- in the context of intimate relationships
- in patterns of co-occurring abuse from the same perpetrator
- with reported emotional and psychological impacts of the abuse.

Importantly, this is not to suggest that actions and supports are not warranted for men's experiences of TFA, or indeed for TFA that is experienced across different contexts outside of intimate partner relationships. However, what it does illustrate is the vital importance of specialist responses to TFA that are able to attend to the different patterns and impacts of TFA that are more likely to be experienced by women, such as in the context of intimate partner violence.

The findings here are important, as they represent the first known study to report on the extent and nature of TFA with a representative Australian adult sample. No research to date has been able to report on the gendered extent and nature of TFA using a method that allows for extrapolation to the broader Australian community. However, in addition to differences in the gendered nature of TFA, this research found stark differences in the overall extent of TFA for several marginalised demographics in the Australian community, the impacts of which we outline below.

Victimisation of marginalised groups

As with some prior research into digital harassment (Powell, Scott & Henry, 2020) and IBSA (Henry et al., 2021), this research has found that sexuality or gender minority groups are overrepresented among those with TFA victimisation experiences. This was also the case for respondents who disclosed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, and those who disclosed disability. Though the results for gender minority respondents should be interpreted cautiously, the patterns of TFA victimisation for these respondents were concerning with respect to their prevalence, co-occurring abuse and their relational nature.

Researchers have previously identified that for some minorities who have experienced much discrimination, harassment

and violence in public spaces, online spaces have become an important site for self-expression, community and intimacy in relative safety (Albury & Byron, 2016; Carlson, 2020). In turn, there is a documented high uptake of communications technologies among some such groups (see Carlson & Frazer, 2018). As such, some rates of both TFA victimisation and perpetration may be interpreted within this wider social context of inequality and discrimination.

Overlaps between TFA victimisation and perpetration

A further key finding of this research is the clear overlap between TFA victimisation and perpetration, such that an overwhelming majority of perpetrators of TFA have also experienced victimisation. Meanwhile, less than half of victims and survivors of TFA also disclosed engaging in some TFA perpetration behaviours. This finding cannot provide insight into whether some TFA perpetration and/or victimisation might be retaliatory, though some research suggests that retaliatory abuse might be increasingly normalised for younger populations online (see Stonard, 2020). Nonetheless, this finding is important as it suggests that care should be taken when responding to perpetrators of TFA to ensure their own victimisation experiences are responded to appropriately.

Impacts of COVID-19

Overall, a majority of respondents did not suggest that factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their experiences of TFA. This suggests that for a majority, their experiences of TFA since March 2020 were not dissimilar to other experiences of TFA in their lifetime. However, an important finding is that approximately one in 10 respondents agreed that their TFA experience in the last 12 months only started due to factors associated with COVID-19. Furthermore, one in five agreed that the TFA increased in frequency, and one in five that the TFA increased in severity. This lends additional weight to a growing body of research indicating increases in abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic response (Carrington et al., 2021; Smyth et al., 2021). It is also worth noting that one in five respondents said it was more difficult to seek help for TFA, and one in five perceived it was harder

for services to respond to TFA, due to factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This further contributes to previous work identifying that support services have indeed found it difficult to support victims and survivors of abuse during this time (Flynn et al., 2021; Pfitzner et al., 2022).

Implications for policy and practice

The findings reported here hold several key implications for our understanding of TFA, as well as how we might address these behaviours in policy and practice.

TFA is common, with more severe impacts in patterns of abuse

This research illustrates that overall, *any* lifetime experience of TFA is extremely common within the Australian community. But the research also shows that it is important to be able to make distinctions between the nature, contexts and types of abuse experienced in order to understand their differential impacts on sub-populations within Australian adults. While no TFA is acceptable, the greatest impacts on victims and survivors come when the TFA occurs within a pattern of co-occurring abuse types, with much of these taking place in the context of intimate partner relationships. This should guide the priority allocation of resources to addressing and preventing TFA in these higher risk and higher impact contexts.

TFA is not a unique form of abuse, but rather a common tactic of abusers

A key finding of this research is that TFA cannot be separated out readily from existing and well-known forms of interpersonal violence and abuse. Rather, if a person is going to engage in abusive conduct whether in the form of domestic and family violence (including coercive control), stalking, sexual abuse and/or other harassment, it is increasingly likely that technologies will be drawn on as a tactic or tool of abuse. This does not mean that TFA does not require targeted intervention and prevention responses. However, it does mean that these interventions should be tailored to the abusive contexts in which the TFA occurs. For instance, given the likelihood in domestic and family violence contexts for victims and survivors to experience multiple forms of abuse and ongoing and/or escalating abuse alongside their TFA experiences, it is crucial that TFA by a current or former partner is responded to as a potential indicator of risk in these contexts.

Support is needed to improve help-seeking for TFA

Many victims and survivors of TFA did not report their most recent experience or seek support or formal advice, despite the moderate levels of psychological distress associated with, and criminal nature of, many of these harms. This requires further action. Some victims and survivors may not have felt their experience warranted taking further formal action (such as a police report or legal advice). However, the fact that so few victims and survivors sought advice from eSafety, which provides a range of legal and non-legal options, suggests there is a lack of awareness of the responses available. It is not surprising that many victims and survivors turn first to a family member or friend for informal support, as this is common for many other forms of interpersonal violence and abuse (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). Yet this in turn suggests a need for awareness and/or education campaigns to improve the capacity of Australians to be effective first responders when a loved one discloses their experience of TFA. It is also clear from this research that support services in the community sector are currently the frontline of responses to TFA victimisation. It is vital that these support services are properly resourced and equipped to provide tailored responses (see also Flynn et al., 2020; Flynn et al., 2022).

Limitations and future research

This research represents the first known representative study of TFA prevalence within the Australian adult population. Its methodology, drawing on the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia representative panel sample, allows for robust extrapolations to be made from these findings to the experiences of the Australian community more generally. Nonetheless, as with any research, there are some limitations that may be important to bear in mind when interpreting the results and in guiding future research directions.

In order to address its primary research aims of establishing reliable prevalence estimates of TFA within the Australian community (aged 18 years and older), and of deepening understanding of the gendered nature of TFA, this survey had a wide scope of various contexts and presentations of TFA. Necessarily, this means that more detailed questions could not be asked of each individual abuse type. Given TFA as a concept appears more usefully understood as a tactic of abuse, rather than a discrete form of abuse in its own right, future research might consider focusing on abuse types and the role that technologies play within these, alongside other tactics of abuse, rather than isolating TFA behaviours as the focus of study.

Furthermore, the scope of this study was to examine the gendered nature of TFA, and in particular, its nature and impacts on women, meeting national priority focus areas under the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (Council of Australian Governments, 2011). This research establishes that there are indeed some very clear and important gendered differences in TFA victimisation, and in the nature of TFA perpetration. Yet it is also apparent that marginalised members of the Australian community, in particular young adults, sexuality and gender minorities, people with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are among those most likely to experience TFA victimisation. However, the scope of this research project was too narrow to explore the experiences of these communities in depth. As such, the experiences of these groups should be a core focus in future research.

Finally, as with much research on interpersonal violence, this research reports on prevalence of TFA (e.g. the percentage of the Australian community with any lifetime experience), rather than incidence (e.g. number of new cases over a given time period). Furthermore, additional details of the characteristics of TFA were asked for, for the most recent experience. While this allows us to better understand how many people in the community have experienced TFA, some complexity is lost in terms of understanding high-frequency victims, differences in the characteristics of past victimisation, and the gendered dimensions of repeat victimisation (see Walby et al., 2016).

Conclusion

TFA is a wide-ranging term that can encompass many subtypes of abuse including harassing behaviours, sexual violence and image-based abuse, monitoring and controlling behaviours, and emotional abuse and threats. Australian research has shown that TFA is a growing concern for service providers who have outlined the ways that the use of technology is making it increasingly difficult to respond to and prevent gendered violence. However, little is known about the prevalence of these harms within the Australian community.

This project is the first to establish a reliable national prevalence estimate for lifetime TFA victimisation and perpetration in the Australian community, using a general population sample. It found TFA to be a serious problem, with concerningly high prevalence. In terms of victimisation, it found that one in two Australians (aged 18 and over) has experienced TFA at least once in their lifetime. TFA perpetration was also found to be common, with one in four Australians self-reporting engaging in at least one TFA behaviour in their lifetime. The findings that half of Australian adults have been impacted by TFA further demonstrates that this is an issue warranting increased attention. The project also found that TFA occurs in a range of relational contexts and with wide-reaching effects. Yet much TFA occurs in the context of intimate relationships, which illustrates the vital importance of continuing to resource support services to respond to TFA where it may overlap with domestic and family violence.

This research has furthermore clearly demonstrated that the most severe impacts on TFA victims and survivors occur in the context of patterns of abusive behaviour from the same perpetrator, and most commonly, these are experienced by women. As such, it remains apparent that policy and practice, seeking to respond to or prevent violence against women, must continue to include strategies addressing TFA.

Importantly, however, much TFA occurs outside of overtly gendered patterns. Some of the most marginalised groups within the Australian population are those with the highest prevalence of experiencing TFA – in particular, young adults, sexuality and gender minorities, people with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This indicates the clear need for formal responses, as well as services offering support in relation to TFA, to cater to the different needs and contexts of diverse TFA victims and survivors and perpetrators. This also suggests that while a gender-based understanding of TFA is important, it is not sufficient in fully accounting for TFA victimisation and perpetration and we need to be attentive to other intersecting identities.

Overall, this research demonstrates both the gendered nature and impacts of much TFA, as well as its differential prevalence for some marginalised members of the Australian community. In seeking to respond to and prevent TFA, it is vital that future policy, practice and research do justice to the experiences of these diverse groups. TFA is not a unique form of abuse, but rather a tactic of abusers that is used to target victims and survivors across a range of contexts and from a variety of backgrounds. Ultimately efforts to address TFA need to be integrated into our response and prevention strategies across multiple forms of violence, abuse and inequality.

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APPENDIX A:

Project advisory group (PAG) members

Name	Organisation/affiliation
Adrian Scott	Goldsmiths, University of London
Alex Davis	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
Alisha Elliot	Facebook
Cynthia Marwood	Victorian Sentencing Advisory Council
Jen Hargrave	Women with Disabilities Victoria
Jill Maxwell	Sexual Assault Support Services
Kara Hinesley	Twitter
Karen Bentley	WESNET
Louise Simms	Domestic Violence Research Centre Victoria
Maria Hach	Multicultural Centre for Women's Health
Matthew Parsons	Rainbow Health Victoria
Rebecca Johnston-Ryan	Victoria Police
Rosetta Lee	Women's Legal Service NSW
Rosalie O'Neale	Office of the eSafety Commissioner
Sally Goldner	Bisexual Alliance Victoria
Samantha Yorke	Google
Stephanie Francas	Our Watch

Additional data tables

Table B1: Overall sample demographics, by gender

	Women		Men		Total, within sample	
	%	*N*	**%**	*N*	**%**	*N*
Respondent region						
Capital city	68.7	*1,717*	71.6	*1478*	70.0	*3,195*
Rest of state	31.3	*781*	28.3	*583*	29.2	*1,364*
Respondent sexuality						
Heterosexual	90.8	*2,269*	90.2	*1860*	90.5	*4,129*
LGB+	9.2	*230*	9.8	*203*	9.5	*433*
Respondent age						
18–24	6.9	*172*	5.3	*109*	6.2	*281*
25–34	14.8	*370*	12.5	*258*	13.8	*628*
35–44	18.2	*454*	19.1	*394*	18.6	*848*
45–54	16.0	*399*	14.4	*297*	15.3	*696*
55–64	19.8	*494*	20.2	*416*	19.9	*910*
65–74	17.2	*431*	20.0	*413*	18.5	*844*
75 or more	7.1	*177*	8.5	*175*	7.7	*352*
Respondent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status						
No	98.6	*2,463*	98.2	*2,025*	98.4	*4,488*
Yes	1.4	*36*	1.8	*38*	1.6	*74*
Respondent LOTE spoken at home						
No/don't know	85.3	*2,132*	82.4	*1,700*	84.0	*3,832*
Yes	14.7	*367*	17.6	*363*	16.0	*730*
Respondent disability						
No/don't know	66.9	*1,673*	71.1	*1,466*	68.8	*3,139*
Yes	33.1	*826*	28.9	*597*	31.2	*1,423*
Total	**54.8**	***2,499***	**45.2**	***2,063***	**100**	***4,562***

Note: As per method, main sample excludes 21 gender-diverse participants. Some population subgroups may not add exactly to 100 per cent due to missing data.

Table B2: Lifetime TFA victimisation, by key sample demographics

Lifetime TFA victimisation	Yes		No	
	%	*N*	**%**	*N*
Respondent region				
Capital city	52.0	*1,662*	48.0	*1,533*
Rest of state	48.4	*660*	51.6	*704*
Respondent gender				
Female	51.1	*1,276*	48.9	*1,223*
Male	50.8	*1,049*	49.2	*1,014*
Respondent sexuality**				
Heterosexual	48.7	*2,010*	51.3	*2,119*
LGB+	72.7	*315*	27.3	*118*
Respondent age**				
18–24	71.5	*201*	28.5	*80*
25–34	70.4	*442*	29.6	*186*
35–44	61.1	*518*	38.9	*330*
45–54	57.0	*397*	43.0	*299*
55–64	44.0	*400*	56.0	*510*
65–74	32.6	*275*	67.4	*569*
75 or more	25.3	*89*	74.7	*263*
Respondent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status*				
No	50.7	*2,274*	49.3	*2,214*
Yes	68.9	*51*	31.1	*23*
Respondent LOTE spoken at home				
No/don't know	50.3	*1,928*	49.7	*1,904*
Yes	54.4	*397*	45.6	*333*
Respondent disability**				
No/don't know	48.2	*1,514*	51.8	*1,625*
Yes	57.0	*811*	43.0	*612*

Lifetime TFA victimisation				
	Yes		No	
	%	N	%	N
TFA perpetration (any)**				
No	40.1	1,408	59.9	2,103
Yes	87.3	917	12.7	134
Total	**51.0**	**2,325**	**49.0**	**2,237**
	Yes		No	
	M	SD	M	SD
GEAS score	33.98	29.29	34.88	33.12
Kessler (K6+) score**	5.87	5.40	3.23	4.14
Digital participation score**	63.89	14.31	55.84	13.67
IRSD	2.93	5.67	3.22	2.55

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$. Some population subgroups may not add to exactly 100 per cent due to missing data.

Table B3: Lifetime TFA victimisation, by gender within key demographic subgroups

Lifetime TFA victimisation				
	Women		Men	
	%	N	%	N
Respondent region				
Capital city	51.4	882	52.8	780
Rest of state	50.3	393	45.8	267
Respondent sexuality				
Heterosexual	48.4	1,099	49.0	911
LGB+	77.0	177	68.0	138
Respondent age**				
18–24**	73.8	127	67.9	74
25–34**	71.1	263	69.4	179
35–44	61.9	281	60.2	237
45–54**	59.6	238	53.5	159

Lifetime TFA victimisation				
	Women		Men	
	%	N	%	N
55–64**	40.1	198	48.6	202
65–74**	30.2	130	35.1	145
75 or more**	20.9	37	29.7	52
Respondent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status				
No	50.7	1,248	50.7	1,026
Yes	77.8	28	60.5	23
Respondent LOTE spoken at home				
No/don't know	50.7	1,080	49.9	848
Yes	53.4	196	55.4	201
Respondent disability				
No/don't know	47.3	791	49.3	723
Yes	58.7	485	54.6	326
TFA perpetration (any)				
No	39.9	754	40.3	654
Yes	85.4	522	89.8	395
Total	**51.1**	**1,276**	**50.8**	**1,049**
	Women victims and survivors		Men victims and survivors	
	M	SD	M	SD
GEAS score**	30.99	12.81	37.61	40.97
Kessler (K6+) score**	6.30	5.50	5.35	5.23
Digital participation score	63.11	13.87	64.84	14.78
IRSD	2.94	5.05	2.93	6.34

Note: * p < .01; ** p < .001. Some population subgroups may not add to exactly 100 per cent due to missing data.

Table B4: Lifetime TFA perpetration, by key sample demographics

Lifetime TFA perpetration	Yes		No	
	%	N	%	N
Respondent region				
Capital city	23.4	747	76.6	2,448
Rest of state	22.1	302	77.9	1,062
Respondent gender				
Female	24.4	611	75.6	1,888
Male	21.3	440	78.7	1,623
Respondent sexuality**				
Heterosexual	21.5	887	78.5	3,262
LGB+	37.9	164	62.1	269
Respondent age**				
18–24	37.7	106	62.3	175
25–34	43.2	271	56.8	357
35–44	32.5	276	67.5	572
45–54	23.9	166	76.1	530
55–64	14.2	129	85.8	781
65–74	9.2	78	90.8	766
75 or more	6.8	24	93.2	328
Respondent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status**				
No	22.7	1,020	77.3	3,468
Yes	41.9	31	58.1	43
Respondent LOTE spoken at home				
No/don't know	22.7	870	77.3	2,962
Yes	24.8	181	75.2	549
Respondent disability				
No/don't know	22.0	692	78.0	2,447
Yes	25.2	359	74.8	1,064
TFA victimisation (any)**				
No	6.0	134	94.0	2,103

Lifetime TFA perpetration				
	Yes		No	
	%	N	%	N
Yes	39.4	917	60.6	1,408
Total	**23.0**	**1,051**	**77.0**	**3511**
	Yes		No	
	M	SD	M	SD
GEAS score	34.56	25.73	34.38	32.69
Kessler (K6+) score	6.85	5.44	3.90	4.65
Digital participation score**	65.74	14.84	58.21	14.02
IRSD	2.97	5.53	3.10	4.04

Note: * p < .01; ** p < .001. Some population subgroups may not add to exactly 100 per cent due to missing data.

Table B5: Lifetime TFA perpetration, by gender within key demographic subgroups

Lifetime TFA perpetration				
	Women		Men	
	%	N	%	N
Respondent region				
Capital city	24.3	418	22.3	329
Rest of state	24.6	192	18.9	110
Respondent gender				
Female	22.8	517	19.9	370
Male	40.9	94	34.5	70
Respondent sexuality**				
Heterosexual	34.9	60	42.2	46
LGB+	42.4	157	44.2	114
Respondent age**				
18–24	25.3	101	21.9	65
25–34	16.2	80	11.8	49
35–44	7.4	32	11.1	46

Lifetime TFA perpetration				
	Women		Men	
	%	N	%	N
45–54	6.8	12	6.9	12
55–64				
65–74	24.2	596	20.9	424
75 or more	41.7	15	42.1	16
Respondent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status**				
No	24.2	596	20.9	424
Yes	41.7	15	42.1	16
Respondent LOTE spoken at home				
No/don't know	24.2	515	20.9	355
Yes	26.2	96	23.4	85
Respondent disability				
No/don't know	23.0	384	21.0	308
Yes	27.5	227	22.1	132
TFA victimisation (any)**				
No	7.3	89	4.4	45
Yes	40.9	522	37.7	395
Total	**24.4**	**611**	**21.3**	**440**
	Women perpetration		Men perpetration	
	M	SD	M	SD
GEAS score**	31.63	12.51	38.62	36.57
Kessler (K6+) score**	7.05	5.48	6.56	5.39
Digital participation score**	64.35	14.64	67.67	14.93
IRSD	3.02	4.29	2.89	6.89

Note: * p < .01; ** p < .001. Some population subgroups may not add to exactly 100 per cent due to missing data.

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