

Digital Footprints and Broken Bonds: Identity Theft, Surveillance, and the Erosion of Autonomy in Marital Cybercrimes

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ABSTRACT: This investigation centers on the alarming increase of digital surveillance and identity theft in marital relationships and the adverse effects of these cybercrimes on trust, personal autonomy, and emotional security. The study's findings indicate that significant psychological harm befalls the victims of these newfangled crimes. The author found several studies that showed such harm leads to anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder in some victims. The study also reveals that technology gives abusers new avenues by which to exert control over their partners. The research brings to light the urgent requirement for legal safeguards, therapeutic solutions, and an enlightened public consciousness, all centered on the phenomenon of digital abuse. This study adopts a cyberpsychological perspective to make the not-so-obvious point that digital abuse is much more than technological misbehavior; it is a serious infringement on the relational and emotional health of the individual. This report concludes that understanding the dynamics of digital abuse, much like understanding the dynamics of any other kind of abuse, is fundamental to figuring out how best to prevent, recover from, and legally redress this infringement.

KEYWORDS: marital cybercrimes, digital surveillance, identity theft, cyberpsychology, emotional abuse, cyberstalking, online harassment, revenge porn, stalkerware

Introduction

Digital footprints are the set of activities that users perform on the internet or traces they leave related to browsing history, social media accounts, contacts, and other messages. In the modern world, where most people rely on digital tools for communication with their partners, such footprints have only grown in importance, as Aiken and Gawande (2021) note. The footprints may be misused in a marital context, leading to cybercrimes such as identity theft and other related digital surveillance. Such crimes have become common in romantic partnerships, undermining trust and separateness (Aker & Aiken, 2021; Chethiyar et al., 2021).

Cyberpsychology is used to understand criminal tendencies and their effects on the brain in such activities. According to Aiken et al. (2019), it is important to examine how such types of abuse, particularly cyber surveillance and identity deception, oppress and erode the tenets of agency and relational stability. Concerning the influence on the individuals, such methods are stressful since they violate their privacy, undermine trust, and make their emotions vulnerable.

Therefore, this paper shifts its focus towards digital footprints, surveillance, and identity theft as other types of abuse in marital relationships. It reflects on the manifestation of such actions for social consequences, focusing on self-determination loss, trust violation, and emotional intrusion.

The Role of Digital Surveillance in Marital Abuse

Digital surveillance is one of the essential components in the contemporary management of power in marital relationships. Drew and Webster (2024) claim that there are different forms of digital tracking that abusers employ to monitor their partners' actions. Some techniques include GPS tracking, hacking into devices, and monitoring activities on social media platforms. These are usually surreptitious, with the abuser attempting to infiltrate the partner's account to access their information. As pointed out by Davidson et al. (2021), spying and tracking applications make such abusive behaviors possible since they enable the perpetrator to dictate the daily functions and interactions of a partner.

The effects of privacy violations on the victims of digital surveillance are far-reaching. According to Lazarus et al. (2023), victims suffer increased anxiety and stressful emotions because they remain under surveillance. This means that the perpetrator puts the victim in a position of feeling that they are constantly being surveilled, and thus, their independence and privacy are compromised. Especially the latter type of abuse can profoundly undermine the victim's self-esteem and the concept of their identity. For victims, social isolation may follow, and they feel the need to check at every corner for the next spying act. It can physically harm the victim and mentally affect them for the worse by developing long-term health issues like depression and PTSD, which makes it challenging to escape the abusive relationship.

Examples of real-life situations show that digital surveillance is accurate and relevant in marital abuse. For instance, Wang and Topalli (2024), presented a case where a spouse hired someone to install spyware to monitor the other spouse's movements and activities on the internet, leading to severe emotional harm. Tamarit-Sumalla, Malpica-Lander, and Fernández-Cruz (2022) focus on victims being harassed through digital stalking, mainly through the social media accounts of the partners, where the perpetrator controls and exploits their page. These cases show examples of how technology can be used to hurt another person mentally and keep them caged in an abusive relationship. The technological networking abilities

widen in diverse capacities, and the growth of digital abuse only increases the amount of psychological harm experienced by victims of these relationships.

Identity Theft within Marital Relationships

Domestic identity theft is defined as a situation where one spouse in the marriage fraudulently gains the other's confidential information, like accounts, passwords, and other information resources, to dominate the partner or use the information maliciously. This betrayal can happen in many ways, including financial and cybercrimes such as fraud or cyberstalking. Offei (2021) states that identity theft in intimate relationships starts with the violation of the computationally intervened resources or shared platforms, which undermines privacy and breaks trust. This makes the victim helpless and overwhelmed because their identity online or in terms of finances is violated and ill-used by someone the victim has reasons to trust most.

Marriage identity theft can be perpetrated by various methods, which may not be easily identifiable. The primary tactics employed by abusers include using a single or joint account to access confidential details. Sometimes, they may abuse the level of reposed confidence in a marriage and use technology to intimidate or dominate a partner. Examples include intrusion into personal mail or business emails, installing malware to cause mischief or theft, embezzling, or tracking the targets' affairs by faking an online persona. They also inflict considerable emotional distress on the victims apart from violating their privacy rights. Dickinson and Wang (2024) that the target does not easily detect such a breach because such technologies are easily accessible. Thus, the violation is deepened when one realizes they are being manipulated.

Psychologically, there exists a deep level of violation when one is a victim of identity theft in marriage. This loss is not only of money but also a complete breach of psychological safety. According to Abubakari (2024), feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability are relatively common among victims; they can experience various forms of negative emotions, for instance, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. These psychological effects can adversely affect the victim's chances of healing from the losses they suffered socially, within the relationship, and online. According to Dickinson, Wang, and Maimon (2023), such emotional effects can be more extreme and include social isolation and stress, which influences well-being.

Further, the culture of victim shaming puts more psychological pressure on victims. Sometimes, members of society, people around the victim or friends, and even relatives may start doubting the victim, actively seeking justice themselves, or even trying to avoid an attack (Abubakari, 2024). This may take time to heal because victims end up developing guilt and shame within themselves, complicating the emotional recovery process. As stated by Dickinson and Wang (2024), such cultural norms and expectations hinder the affected individuals from reporting the

incidents, leading to a repetition of abuse and emotional suffering beyond the identity theft crisis.

The Psychological Consequences of Digital Overreach

Personal victims of digital overreach, including surveillance and identity fraud, suffer severe emotional and psychological barriers. The authors Aiken et al. (2019) note that psychologically, abuse entails significant harm, and cognitive discomfort, confusion, and negative emotions are steadily aversive (Bilz et al., 2023). These people cannot trust each other again or feel that their privacy is respected, which evokes grief in the emotional life cycle. In turn, the victims may experience increased levels of anxiety, depression, and pervasive fear for their lives since they are aware that their private lives are constantly under surveillance. It is worse when the abuse is at the hands of a known partner, and as such, safety becomes an illusion: perhaps the victim can only feel endangered even in their own home.

The cognitive impact is not limited to emotional areas, for the victims of digital abuse lose their ability to have personal agency and manage their lives. According to Davidson et al. (2021), this results in a high level of psychological vulnerability and instability. Victims tend to experience increased psychosis and feelings of helplessness as they try to find their way in a world where their actions may be controlled or tricked. This can lead to depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, where the person feels helpless in dealing with life's demands. In some instances, victims may doubt their sanity. This makes them even more susceptible to manipulative tactics employed by the abuser.

Moreover, the independence of the victim is significantly limited since the perpetrators are also using technology to encroach on their privacy. According to Aker and Aiken (2021), this encroachment on personal privacy reduces self-esteem and self-identity. The control the abuser has over the digital life through targeted devices or social media platforms establishes dependency on the victim. This element isolates the victim and makes them more dependent on the abuser for emotional and physical needs, thus diminishing self-determination. The victim may also become gradually convinced that they cannot do anything without the consent of the abuser, which places them in what may look like a cage (Bilz et al., 2023).

Bailey et al. (2024) suggest that digital crimes such as surveillance and identity theft are not mere theft but acts infused with elements of power in that they are ways of getting authoritative control. Through technological devices, the abuser violates the victim's privacy and independence, thus ensuring the perpetrator dominates in the relationship. This results in victimology that puts the victim in a subjugated position, a state that aggravates the amount of emotional and psychological harm they experience. Physical abuse, when applied through digital technology, is another method through which the abuser effectively keeps the victim tethered to them, hence not allowing the victim to escape quickly.

Legal and Ethical Dilemmas in Digital Privacy

The criminal prosecution of marital cybercrimes, including stalking and/or identity theft, poses several legal issues. Drew and Webster (2024) opine that legal systems are currently inadequate in adapting to the ever-evolving technological domain concerning cybercriminality, leading to shortcomings in laws meant to safeguard individuals from cybercriminals. This disconnection between technological advances and the law puts many victims at risk since offenders usually take advantage of grey areas and commit the offense without being punished to the extent that they should. Over the years, technology has advanced, putting pressure on legislators to chart laws that fit the modern-day digital violating schemes in intimate relationships.

The ethical issues concerning digital surveillance in intimate relationships are no less nuanced. The common excuse given by offenders is that they were doing so to protect their partners or for security purposes. However, as Offei et al. (2022) explain, this justification can quickly transform into control, manipulation, and coercion. It becomes challenging to distinguish between bonding and invasion of privacy, which forms ethical issues for the culprits and society. Moreover, one may note that surveillance appears to have a noble purpose; however, it negatively affects the victim, causing emotional disturbance and depriving them of the right to privacy. As Chethiyar et al. (2021) pointed out, these critical ethical issues are made worse because of the digital platform's blurred boundaries; hence, it is hard for the legal framework to address them appropriately. The current laws on cyberspace privacy have not adequately addressed the issue of marital cybercrimes of espionage and identity theft.

According to Davidson et al. (2021), most legislation is archaic and does not capture modern technological devices employed in the current world. For instance, laws against stalking or invasion of privacy fail to capture all the electronic forms of abuse that could include items such as spyware and account hacking. This is a significant legislative void in handling marital cybercrimes, resulting in most victims facing no legal justice, thus adding to their powerlessness.

Challenges to legal redress compound this problem for victims of digital overreach. According to Wang and Topalli (2024), many victims fail or delay reporting abuse because they might be afraid of repercussions, lack knowledge of their rights, or do not trust that the law will protect them. Kinds of Abuse: Some of these barriers are especially notable in cases where the victim has close ties with the perpetrator or relies on them emotionally, or has reasons to fear being exposed in any way. The lack of proper legislation, followed by intricate ethical issues and psychological barriers to reporting, further complicates the situation for the victim.

Restoring Autonomy and Rebuilding Trust in the Digital Age

Reclaiming their autonomy and trying to come to terms with the new world of technology that violates their privacy rights is a daunting task for victims of surveillance and identity theft. The results by Dickinson and Wang (2024) also state that victims need to take action to regain control in the digital world. This may start with increasing the level of Digital Awareness, in which people learn how to secure their data and identity better online. Technological measures such as encrypted messaging and the use of strong passwords ensure that the abusers of perceived aggression cannot easily access these. In a sense, the abused regains control. In addition to using technology, the victims are encouraged to seek professional counseling to help solve the issues of emotional harm concerning such invasion of privacy and betrayal (Lazarus et al., 2023).

These actions show that cyber psychologists help victims deal with the consequences of abuse by endangering themselves. Aiken et al. (2019) have claimed that therapy that involves trust restoration and personal autonomy is critical for survivors of digital spying and identity fraud.

These professionals use several psychological interventions to enable the victims to overcome their trauma and regain safety. Some of the cyberpsychological interventions may include cognitive behavioral therapy to manage conditions such as anxiety, depression, and trust disorders, which are some of the most frequent experiences in victims of such incidents. These interventions are geared towards helping the victims regain control of their lives and competently deal with their relationships.

Thus, besides cyberpsychologists, other support systems are also essential in recovery processes. According to Abubakari (2024), psychiatrists, lawyers, and support groups assist the victims in regaining trust in themselves. It should be noted that legal professionals guide victims through available legal frameworks regarding digital abuse to ensure adequate legal protection. In the context of psychological recovery and support, Tamarit-Sumalla et al. (2022) also point out that places and platforms where people go and can find people like themselves are equally imperative.

Also, regarding the subsequent measures for the victims of digital abuse, the use of integrated technology to protect valuable information is required. Dickinson and Wang (2024) noted that methods like encryption, passwords, and privacy levels were said to minimize this risk in the future. These tools prevent the offender from further use of the computer and enable the victim to regain control and regain the feeling of security. Since safety is a crucial aspect of personal liberty in the modern generation, the technologies assist the victims in regaining confidence in their environment. By doing so, the victims will be empowered to come out of cyberspace and reclaim their freedom in cyberspace and real life.

Methodology

Data Collection

To explain how such relationships affect marriages, various methods of data collection and analysis were employed to explore the issue comprehensively. According to Drew and Webster (2024), interview experiences of identity theft and digital surveillance are helpful because the subjects offer primary sources. They help the researchers take into account the consequences of several digital crimes on the victims and their mental conditions. This evidence alone makes such interviews useful in enhancing understanding of how such surveillance affects emotional well-being and gives a way of investigating structural betrayal in a relationship due to identity theft.

In addition, the participants provided self-report information through anonymous questionnaires, while the partners elicited their views of digital privacy in relationships (Wang & Topalli, 2024). This means that, through this data collection, it is better to understand people's concerns regarding digital privacy in marriage. This approach of targeting couples proves valuable because it indicates the level of awareness and behavior related to digital privacy. It is essential to assess which areas are most susceptible to exploitation and where improvements are crucial. These surveys provide statistical data that supplement some of the information obtained in participant interviews. The research used case-law scenarios of high-profile marital cybercrimes motivated by surveillance or identity theft. These case studies not only described the form of abuse but also helped to study the systematic and causal relationships between the type of abuse and its impact on psychology. These cases are helpful learning aids to enrich the study outcomes as they provide real-life experiences in which we can place the findings of this study.

Data Approach

To collect data that offers a comprehensive picture of digital abuse in marital relationships, both qualitative and quantitative research data were employed. Bailey et al. (2024) emphasize that triangulating qualitative interviews and case study data with survey findings enhances both the comprehensiveness and validity of analyses examining the frequency and psychological impact of digital surveillance and identity theft.

The qualitative part, with its thick descriptions and storytelling elements, helps to identify the emotional consequences and the victim's narration. In contrast, the two quantitative surveys provide numerical support for the distinctive claims. Such methodological triangulation enhances the study's coverage and provides angles on the extent and impact of digital abuse.

Justification of Approach

Combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies helps explore the effects of digital surveillance and identity theft in intimate relationships to the next level. Purposively, the researchers pointed out that whereas quantitative data is brief and limited, qualitative data provides profound information about experiences from the participant's own experiences, and this element is significantly essential in capturing the affective domain.

However, quantitative data gives factual and tangible information that can be generalized to a more significant population, which makes the research more accurate. This accords a qualitative and quantitative analysis, thus enabling an exploration of the issue in a manner that encompasses the personal and the communal.

Findings

Surveillance further accentuates that domestic partners have been experiencing an increased level of digital surveillance and identity theft in marriages. According to Tamarit-Sumalla et al. (2022), this type of cybercrime is on the rise, and there are variations in factors like sexual orientation, age, and class. Lazarus et al. (2023) expand and point out that the advent of technology into coupledness has brought about a rise in instances where one partner uses technology to police or dominate the other. This development underscores the imperative to locate best practices of legal frameworks and interventions to deal with the growing digital risks in marriage.

Several studies found that individuals who became targets of digital surveillance or identity theft in intimate relationships suffered significant levels of psychological distress. Dickinson et al. (2023) argue that the victims of such kinds of digital abuse are likely to develop anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, commonly referred to as PTSD. It is common for such individuals to feel betrayed and let down, and they lose trust in both their technology and their partners. As Aiken et al. (2019) pointed out, emotional/psychological loss is enormous since people will fight to build their security and positive mental health again after their privacy is breached. This lack of trust in the relationship and eroding confidence in the technology adds another difficulty to the healing process.

Other studies also show that stereotypes of gender and demographic characteristics affect the extent of digital surveillance and identity theft. Dickinson and Wang (2024), women are more vulnerable to such kinds of cybercrime as the level of the inflicted psychological impact is known to be higher among women as compared to men. Aker and Aiken (2021) maintain that these crimes are "gendered" because male partners tend to dominate their female counterparts as a result of power imbalances. Moreover, Chethiyar et al. (2021) have provided insight into how these abuses are enabled by technology. Technology connects

people and is helpful in many ways, but it also offers an opportunity for the abuser to control their partner's movements and actions and spy on them. These developments emphasize the roles of precaution and policing as well as awareness and enlightenment in fostering an individual's technological agency and privacy rights in matters of intimacy.

Conclusion

Technological advancements, particularly in the area of photography and the spread of social networks, mainly affect the context of marital relationships in the form of digital monitoring and identity theft, which leads to severe emotional and psychological consequences. Such strategies not only affect personal decision-making but also compromise the bond that is central to interpersonal relationships. The consequences of digital abuse fall along the trajectory of betrayal, stress, and distress, which makes it almost impossible to rebuild the relationship and feel safe.

Thus, the implications for the field of cyberpsychology are that there is a dire need to understand these digital abuse mechanisms to inform the appropriate interventions and policies. This awareness elucidates the effects of digital surveillance and identity theft on the victims. It enables practitioners to develop specific therapeutic interventions to assist citizens in coming to terms with and reclaiming their freedom. It can also help lawmakers understand these dynamics to address the increasing concerns of digital abuse.

Currently, there is a need to raise awareness of this kind of abuse because it has become rampant in our society. First, there is a need for better laws that protect individuals from being spied on or having their identity stolen. Secondly, there should be better and easier ways of getting help for people who have been tagged or tracked. It is essential to add that providing individuals with knowledge on how to protect their data and privacy, as well as supporting tools for survivor recovery, can go a long way in addressing the psychological effects of digital abuse in intimate relationships.

Future recommendations

To prevent such cruel acts within contemporary marital contexts, policymakers and legal institutions must pursue significant legal and ethical reforms. More stringent legislation is necessary to protect individuals' digital identities and personal data. As established by Dickinson and Wang (2024), legal frameworks are insufficient to catch up with the setting pace characterized by emerging technologies that enable surveillance and identity fraud. This is why the penalties regarding such behaviors should be more severe to discourage such actions. According to Bailey et al. (2024), it can serve as a deterrent to make the culprit face the consequences of the harm they have caused to others. There is also a need to

address digital evidence, as attorney disclosure complexities can slow the process, and legal changes must adapt due to the growth of technology.

However, in agreement with the findings of this study, the following measures should also be considered to address and reduce the occurrence of digital abuse: Public awareness and sensitization on safety in the digital environment. Tamarit-Sumalla et al. (2022) also emphasize the need to educate people about the dangers of surveillance in relationships and identity theft. It is recommended to include information on protecting one's digital identity and personal information, and learning to identify signs of digital abuse in educational programs. This can be a proactive intervention that ensures people steer clear of abuse before it takes place. In addition, awareness campaigns could remove the barrier of shame, and victims of such experiences could comfortably report whoever harasses them without fear of being shamed.

Additionally, more cyberpsychological studies should be conducted to provide more insights into the psychosocial impacts of surveillance and identity theft. Aker and Aiken (2021) opine that current research on the emotional and cognitive effects of such abuses is somewhat lacunary; more so, studies that examine recovery paths and therapies that can be applied to the victims. Studying the impact of digital abuse on the psychological well-being of the victims could offer interventions to help establish trust and ensure that abuse victims reclaim their independence and overcome the psychological impacts of these transgressions. This study should also focus more on what treatment is being offered currently and what other treatments can be provided to address the situation that digital abuse victims go through.

Thus, combating digital abuse in intimate partnerships should not be undertaken as a single-strategy change but as a multisystem approach, including legislation, sensitization, and scholarly work. Through stricter laws on surveillance cameras, raising awareness, and a focus on the research on the consequences, society can collectively try to reduce the reliance on cameras and support the victims during their recovery.

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