

ISSUES & INSIGHTS

Artificial Intelligence, Coercive Control, and Foreseeable Risk in Domestic and Family Violence Contexts

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Artificial intelligence technologies are being integrated into digital systems at a pace that exceeds the development of regulatory and social safeguards. Generative tools present significant risks to the vulnerable and may magnify risks to those already subjected to abuse.

Although comprehensive quantitative data on the prevalence of AI-facilitated abuse is not yet available, a strong analytical framework for anticipating risk exists within established research on domestic and family violence and technology-facilitated harm. Reflecting on the extant literature, it is reasonable to suggest that AI is likely to intensify established patterns of coercive control for people already experiencing vulnerability.

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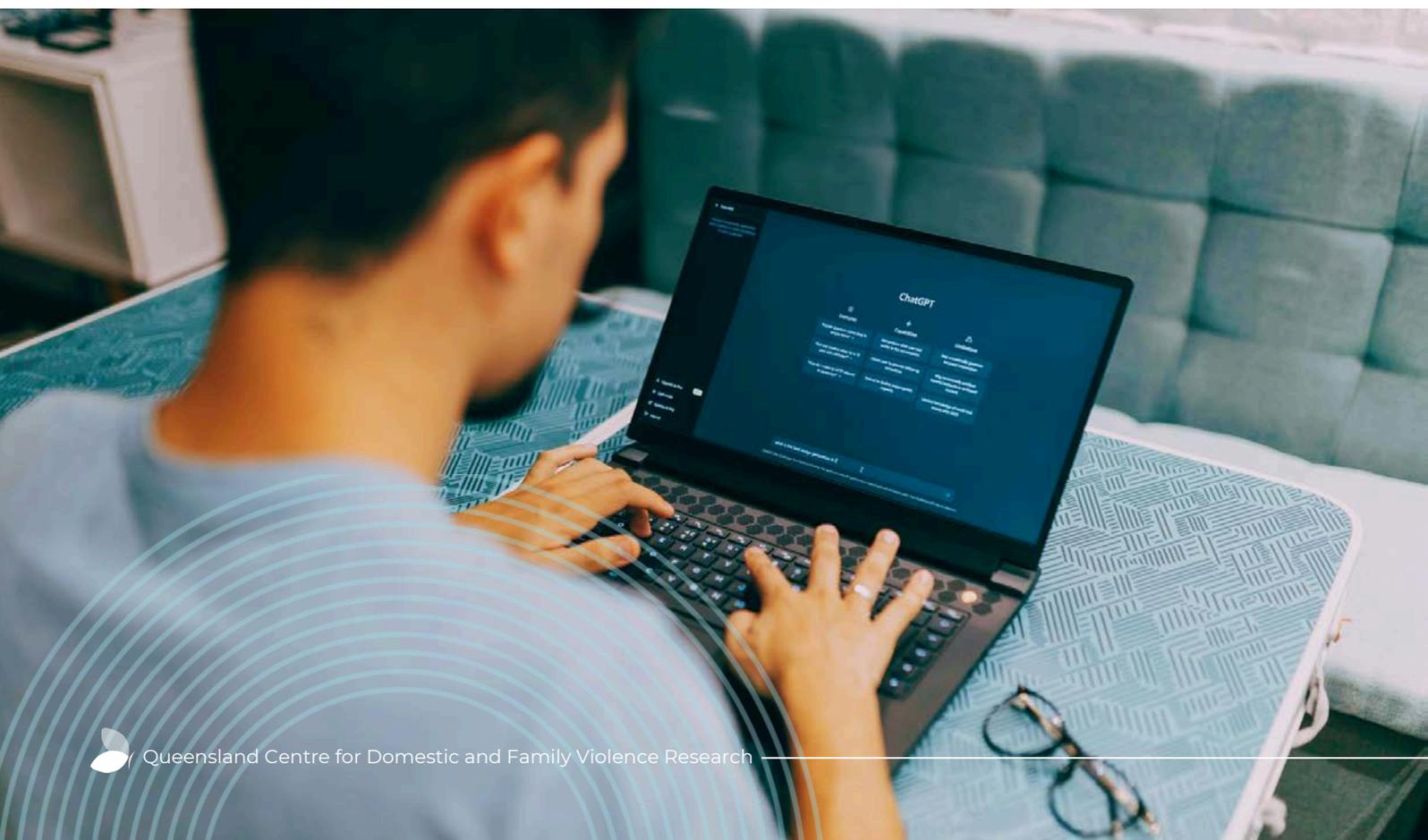


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Domestic and family violence is increasingly understood as extending beyond physical harm. Australian legal and policy frameworks now recognise coercive control, psychological abuse, and technology-facilitated behaviours as central features of abusive relationships. Research has consistently shown that digital technologies are used by perpetrators to monitor, intimidate, and control partners across time and space. Dragiewicz et al. (2018) describe this pattern as *technology-facilitated coercive control*, highlighting how emotional, psychological, and technological abuse intersect through everyday digital tools such as smartphones, social media platforms, and shared online accounts.

Artificial intelligence technologies align closely with these legacy platforms, expanding the capabilities of abusers through generative and agentic tools that enable new forms of exploitation. AI (specifically agentic technologies and generative tools in this context) has the capacity to automate surveillance, generate realistic content, and lower the barriers to creating harm, thereby mirroring mechanisms already identified in the literature on technology-facilitated abuse. Consequently, the risks posed by AI are analytically foreseeable, even in the absence of large-scale prevalence data.

One of the clearest areas of concern is image-based abuse. In Australian law, image-based abuse refers to the non-consensual creation, distribution, alteration, or threat to distribute intimate images or videos. This definition encompasses digitally altered and AI-generated material, with legal responsibility determined by lack of consent and harm rather than authenticity. Lucas (2022) demonstrates how deepfake and AI-generated imagery create new avenues for image-based sexual abuse, enabling perpetrators to produce realistic intimate images that can be used for blackmail, humiliation, or control, even where no original image exists. Popular generative AI platforms are normalising and mainstreaming AI-generated image production to ‘undress’ the unsuspecting online. They require nothing more than an image of the individual.



This technological capability intersects directly with established domestic and family violence dynamics. Research on technology-facilitated domestic and family violence shows that perpetrators frequently misuse digital tools for surveillance, harassment, and identity abuse, often through shared devices or cloud-based accounts (Douglas et al., 2019). These behaviours commonly persist after separation, undermining assumptions that physical distance reduces risk. Subsequent work highlights that such forms of abuse remain poorly recognised by law enforcement and support services, despite producing significant psychological and reputational harm (Douglas et al., 2023).

Emerging technologies further expand the scope of potential abuse. As AI-enabled systems become embedded in domestic environments, new opportunities for surveillance and intimidation arise. Winkle and Mulvihill (2024) note that smart and assistive technologies, including socially interactive robots and AI assistants, can be subverted within abusive relationships, transforming tools intended to support daily living into mechanisms of control.

The risk associated with these developments is unevenly distributed. Women, migrants, people with disabilities, First Nations peoples, and LGBTIQ+ individuals are disproportionately represented among those who experience domestic and family violence and technology-facilitated abuse. Structural barriers such as limited digital literacy, insecure immigration status, language constraints, and reliance on carers or partners compound vulnerability (Vasil & Segrave, 2023). Furthermore, Harris and Woodlock (2018) argue that digital coercive control magnifies existing inequalities by embedding abuse within broader contexts of social and economic disadvantage.

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A consistent finding across the literature is institutional lag. Law enforcement and judicial systems often fail to recognise technology-facilitated behaviours as forms of violence, particularly where harm is psychological, reputational, or cumulative rather than physical (Dunn, 2021). This gap in recognition can leave victim survivors without effective remedies, even where the impacts are severe. Scholars have therefore called for the integration of privacy law, digital safety regulation, and coercive control frameworks into domestic and family violence responses, rather than treating technology-related abuse as a discrete or technical issue (Moses et al., 2022).

Within this context, the absence of robust data on AI-specific abuse should be interpreted cautiously. Domestic and family violence is widely under-reported, and emerging forms of abuse are often identified through qualitative research and frontline experience long before they are captured in prevalence statistics. The existing evidence base on technology-facilitated coercive control provides a well-established foundation for anticipating how artificial intelligence may be misused.

From both an academic and public interest perspective, the risk is therefore foreseeable. Artificial intelligence does not create coercive control, but it has the capacity to intensify it by increasing credibility, reach, and persistence. For people already subjected to domestic and family violence, AI represents a likely extension of harm into new digital spaces.

The policy challenge is not whether evidence will eventually emerge, but whether systems respond in time. Waiting for definitive data risks repeating a familiar pattern in which harms affecting vulnerable populations are acknowledged only after they become entrenched. Recognising AI-enabled abuse as part of established trajectories of technology-facilitated domestic and family violence allows legal, regulatory, and support systems to adapt proactively, rather than reactively, to a risk that research already indicates is plausible and unevenly borne.

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