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Exploring police attitudes on victims' delayed reporting and victim blame in technology-facilitated IPV

Stavros Chatzisymeonidis^{1*} and Afroditi Pina²

Abstract

Background setting Cyberstalking, now conceptualised as one of the forms of technology-facilitated intimate partner violence (TFIPV), has seen an exponential rise in recent years. TFIPV victims may hesitate and delay reporting cyberstalking to the police for various reasons (e.g., lack of recognition, thinking that it may be a waste of time, hoping it will stop etc.) and thus potentially influence how investigating police officers perceive their credibility and responsibility. This study investigates the recognition of cyberstalking as a crime among police personnel and the potential effect of reporting delays on police officers' attitudes towards the victims.

Methods An online survey was conducted with 108 police officers in the UK, who were presented with a vignette illustrating one of three almost identical scenarios, differing only in the time of reporting (after one month, after six months, after 12 months). Subsequently, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their recognition of the case as cyberstalking and their attitudes towards victims. All police officers had received predetermined police training at various levels. In addition to these police training programmes, a minority of officers (27) had attended the specialised training programme on intimate partner violence, Domestic Abuse (DA) Matters, while the majority (81) had not.

Results Among the officers who completed the aforementioned special training, all except one recognised the case as cyberstalking; contrastingly, out of 81 officers without such special training 28 expressed uncertainty, whereas three did not recognise it at all. The victim's delay to report cyberstalking had a significant effect on police officers' victim blaming levels. The gender of police officers and their police training level were not identified as moderators of the relationship between victim's delay in cyberstalking reporting and victim blaming.

Conclusions These findings highlight the importance for enhanced recognition and understanding of cyberstalking among police officers, particularly through specialised training programs. The study underscores the importance of addressing attitudes towards victims with the goal of improving police responses to TFIPV.

Keywords Reporting delay, Police, Cyberstalking recognition, Victim blaming attitudes

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a prevalent and persistent problem globally, despite efforts in health promotion to raise awareness (Power et al., 2006). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines IPV as “behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours” (WHO, 2010, p.11). Simultaneously, the advancement of technology has provided perpetrators with new means to monitor, stalk, control and threaten their partners in online environments (Freed et al., 2017; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock, 2016), resulting in the emergence of a phenomenon known as technology facilitated IPV (TFIPV) (Leitão, 2019; Pina et al., 2021a).

Scholars argue that TFIPV is an extension of IPV and should be classified within typologies that align with offline forms of abuse, including sexual, verbal, and physical violence (Pina et al., 2021a). TFIPV encompasses a range of behaviours, either overt or covert, occurring in public or private settings, with the primary objective of exerting control over the victim, violating their privacy, or damaging their reputation. These behaviours may manifest individually or concurrently (e.g., monitoring activity and sending harassing messages (Freed et al., 2019). Based on these behavioural patterns, research identifies four main types of TFIPV: cyberstalking, online harassment, image-based sexual abuse and indirect non-sexual abuse (Dardis & Gidycz, 2019; Huber, 2023; Lopez-Cepero et al., 2018; Martellozzo et al., 2022; Pina et al., 2021a; Watkins et al., 2018).

Although all types of TFIPV are of paramount importance, recent emphasis has been given to cyberstalking incidents involving current or ex-intimate partners. This may be primarily attributed to a surge of 300% in reported cases of cyberstalking in recent years, as documented by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2021). Similarly, Bracewell et al. (2020) found a significant increment in cyberstalking during the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. According to the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research in the UK, cyberstalking is defined as “a course of action that involves more than one incident perpetrated through or utilizing electronic means, that causes distress, fear or alarm” (Maple et al., 2011, p.4). This definition aligns with provisions outlined in the UK Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, which places a series of acts or omissions referring to cyberstalking (e.g. monitoring the use by a person of the internet, email, or any other form of electronic communication) in the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 regulating stalking offences. These involve behaviours that threaten, control, insult or harass the victim (Dardis & Gidycz, 2019; Henry et al., 2018; 2020; Reyns et al., 2012; Strawhun et al., 2013). Such behaviours have

been found to have detrimental effects on the victims’ well-being (Dreßing et al., 2014) and are often associated with conflicts, aggression (Kellerman et al., 2013; Schnurr et al., 2013) and domestic homicides (Todd et al., 2021).

Notably, cyberstalking primarily affects female victims (Begotti et al., 2020; Dreßing et al., 2014; Sheridan & Grant, 2007), who employ various coping strategies in response to such incidents (Amar & Alexy, 2009). Some victims opt to modify their daily routines and engage in uncommon activities, such as reducing internet usage, to evade the perpetrators, while others adopt a passive approach and ignore cyberstalkers (Begotti et al., 2022). Nonetheless, most cyberstalking victims adopt proactive tactics to address these incidents, seeking informal support from trusted individuals or formal support by reporting the case to social networking site administrators or the police (Alexy et al., 2005; Fissel, 2021a, b; Reno, 1999).

Despite seeking formal support and reporting cyberstalking cases to the police, many TFIPV victims have expressed disappointment with the support provided by police personnel (Leukfeldt et al., 2019; Worsley et al., 2017). According to Leukfeldt et al. (2013), such dissatisfaction primarily arises from the limited understanding and handling of online offences by the police. For example, the report of Storry and Poppleton (2022) brought to light that many cyberstalking victims feel their claims are trivialised or disbelieved by the police (with some accusing officers of lacking empathy during the reporting process), leading to traumatic experiences. These findings are consistent with Martellozzo et al. (2022), who suggested that the inadequate management of cyberstalking incidents by the police may result from the disparity between new modes of online abuse and the traditional tactics employed by police officers to address offline abuse.

With respect to crime reporting, prior literature has indicated a strong relationship between the perceived severity of offense and victims’ decision to report (Cass & Mallicoat, 2015; Clay-Warner & McMahon-Howard, 2009; Fisher et al., 2003; Saxton et al., 2020). This relationship is consistent with pioneering work by Gottfredson and Hindelang (1979), who analysed data from the USA National Crime Survey and found that the severity of offence constitutes a primary factor in influencing the victim’s decision to seek police support. However, many victims often hesitate and delay reporting severe offences like cyberstalking to the police for various reasons, such as the fear of harassment continuation (Rosalili et al., 2021), the stalkers’ anonymity (Goodno, 2007), the lack of trust to the authorities (Martellozzo et al., 2022), as well as the negative responses of the police (Powell & Henry, 2018). Delayed reporting may complicate the task of evidence collection for police officers, potentially affecting

their attitudes toward victims. Similar to jurors' perceptions in severe crimes such as sexual assaults (Ellison & Munro, 2009), officers may develop doubts regarding victims' responsibility and credibility. However, it remains unknown whether the delays in reporting cyberstalking cases between intimate partners influence the police officers' attitudes towards victims' responsibility.

Prior studies have explored the subject of police officers' victim blaming from different angles, particularly in the context of online abuse. For instance, research (Millman et al., 2017; Zvi & Shechory-Bitton, 2020) has revealed that officers tend to hold victims (at least to an extent) accountable for their ordeal, arguing that victims are failing to undertake necessary precautions to protect themselves online, or self-disclose information online that can put them in danger, and as a result, these behaviours may undermine police investigations. Similarly, Huber (2023) identified victim blaming attitudes among officers who underestimated the severity of online abuse and failed to acknowledge victims' needs during investigations. According to Chang (2020), the underestimation of cyberstalking incidents might be attributed to gaps in police training, particularly in recognising the nature and severity of such cases.

After officers have joined the force in the UK, they receive police training at various levels in order to effectively investigate offline and online crimes (Bryant & Bryant, 2015). This includes 11 standard police training programmes divided into three main levels (basic, moderate, high), which can be seen in Table 1.

Additionally, to the above predetermined police training, the charity SafeLives on behalf of The College of Policing developed a specialised training programme, named "DA Matters", after the report of HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in 2014 stressing the need for improvements in how the police respond to domestic violence (HMIC, 2014). The primary objective of this victim-centered training programme is to have a long-lasting effect

on the police culture and behaviours, enabling officers to improve their response to domestic violence incidents (including cyberstalking between intimate partners). Although the evaluation results were promising in 2019 (e.g. increased arrests due to coercive control between intimate partners; DA Matters, 2019), there is no further evidence regarding its long-term impact. Currently, 26 out of 43 police forces in England and Wales have been licensed to deliver this specialised training to their front-line police personnel. Approximately 75% of the licensee police personnel have completed this specialised training (College of Policing, 2022).

Existing research highlights that the propensity for victim blaming is influenced by observer-specific traits, such as gender (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). Specifically, several studies have found that male observers tend to display more severe victim blaming attitudes concerning crimes committed in offline environments, such as rapes and sexual assaults, in comparison to female observers (Kanekar et al., 1985; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2017). Some scholars have argued that this may also be the case for crimes in online environments such as non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, commonly known as 'revenge pornography' (Bothamley & Tully, 2018; Zvi, 2022a; Zvi & Shechory-Bitton, 2020). Nonetheless, it is essential to note that some studies have reported either contradictory findings to this trend (Cameron & Stritzke, 2003), or no difference between male and female observers in victim blaming attributions (Davies et al., 2009; Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995; Yarmey, 1985).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, this study aims to investigate police officers' levels of engagement in victim blaming in cyberstalking between intimate partners, and recognition of a case as cyberstalking, focusing on the impact of the DA Matters specialised training programme, victim delay to report, gender of officers and level of police training. The following hypotheses will guide this investigation:

Ha. It is expected that the police officers who have completed the DA Matters special training programme will demonstrate higher levels of cyberstalking recognition ratings compared to their colleagues without such specialised training.

Hb. Delayed cyberstalking reporting is expected to have an effect on police officers' levels of victim-blaming.

Hc. The relationship between victim's delay to report cyberstalking and victim blaming will be moderated by the gender of officers.

Hd. The relationship between victim's delay to report cyberstalking and victim blaming will be moderated by the level of police training officers have received.

Table 1 UK Police training levels

Level	Training Programme
High	The Investigation of Serious and Complex Crime/Incidents - PIP2
High	The Investigation of Volume Crime - PIP1
High	Detective Inspector Development Programme - DIDP
Moderate	Review Officers Development programme - RODP
Moderate	Crime Scene Management and Coordination - CSMC
Moderate	Crime Scene Investigator Learning Programme - CSILP
Moderate	Sexual Offence Investigative Techniques Training - SOITT
Basic	Initial Crime Investigation Development Programme - ICIDP
Basic	Initial Management of Serious Crime - IMSC
Basic	Initial Police Learning Development Programme - IPLDP
Basic	College of Policing - COP

By examining these hypotheses, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how police officers perceive cyberstalking incidents between intimate partners, ultimately informing the development of more effective police responses for victims of TFIPV.

Methodology

Participants

The current survey was conducted between mid-February and early July 2023. Participants were current police officers from various police forces across the UK, regardless of their rank and years of service. Police officers for whom a misconduct case was pending against them were not included. Several power analyses were conducted using G*Power Software version 3.1.9.7 (Erdfelder et al., 1996; Faul et al., 2007), to determine the sample size of participants required to examine the study's hypotheses. While we had multiple key statistical analyses with different tests, each *a-priori* power analysis is reported close to the corresponding type of statistical analysis in

the **Results** section, following the recommendations by Giner-Sorolla et al. (2024).

Next, contact was made with several police forces via their head offices, requesting the distribution of an electronic survey link to their police personnel through their official emails. As the police are a complex population to reach with multiple demands on their time, snowball sampling was also utilised to identify additional police officers individually within the community. The participation in the survey was voluntary, and identifiable details were not collected to ensure participants' anonymity. In total, 108 police officers participated in the survey, comprising 51 (47.2%) males and 57 (52.8%) females. For the practical purposes of this study, the 11 predetermined police training programmes were further classified into three main levels based on police rank (basic=unspecified staff & police constables, moderate=sergeants to inspectors, high=inspectors to superintendents). For a comprehensive overview of the main characteristics of male and female police officers who took part in this study, please see Table 2.

Table 2 The Police officers' characteristics in relation to gender

Main Characteristics	Total	Gender	
		Male	Female
Age	$M=37.4$ $SD=6.94$	$M=38.5$ $SD=7.06$	$M=36.5$ $SD=6.75$
Police rank	$N=108$	$n=51$	$n=57$
Superintendent	2 1.9%	1 2%	1 1.8%
Chief Inspector	3 2.8%	3 5.9%	0 0%
Inspector	8 7.4%	5 9.8%	3 5.3%
Police Sergeant	54 50%	21 41.2%	19 33.3%
Police Constable	40 37%	21 41.2%	19 33.3%
Unspecified Staff	1 0.9%	0 0%	1 1.8%
Years of service	$M=12.55$ $SD=6.89$	$M=13.33$ $SD=7.31$	$M=11.85$ $SD=6.48$
Police training levels*	$N=108$	$n=51$	$n=57$
Basic	22 20.4%	13 25.5%	9 15.8%
Moderate	64 59.2%	23 45.1%	41 71.9%
High	22 20.4%	15 29.4%	7 12.3%
DA Matters special training	$N=108$	$n=51$	$n=57$
Yes	27 25%	16 31.4%	11 19.3%
No	81 75%	35 68.6%	46 80.7%
Victim blaming score	$M=15.04$ $SD=2.93$	$M=14.81$ $SD=3.06$	$M=15.24$ $SD=2.82$

Note. M =Mean, SD =Standard Deviation, $p<.05^*$

Research design and procedure

Initially, participants accessed the research materials through a Qualtrics link, where they were presented with a brief research description, followed by a consent form. Upon providing consent, officers were requested to complete a form capturing basic characteristics including gender, age, police rank, years of service, level of police training (i.e. COP), and whether they had received specialised training in IPV (Yes vs. No).

This study employed a between-subjects design, through which each participant was randomly assigned to one of three nearly identical vignette conditions that depicted a cyberstalking case between intimate partners after completing the sociodemographic form. The sole distinction between the vignettes was the time frame (one month, six months, 12 months) after which the victim decided to report the cyberstalking case to the police against their intimate partner. The vignettes were accompanied by a concise questionnaire exploring two parts: (a) whether the case was recognised as a cyberstalking crime or not and (b) the attitudes of police officers concerning the victim's responsibility in the case. Finally, all participants were fully debriefed.

Materials

Cyberstalking vignette

Each participant read one of three almost identical cyberstalking vignettes specifically created for this study, featuring a victim named "Emma", who was subjected to cyberstalking by her intimate partner, named "Sam". It is worth noting that the storyline was constructed based on true facts to mirror a realistic case handled by

police officers. The scenarios differed solely in the time of reporting (after one month, after six months, after 12 months) and an example of the prototype was as follows:

Sam (33) and Emma (24) met for the first time when the former wanted to buy a flat and the latter was working as a real estate agent. After a couple of dates, they started a romantic relationship. However, Emma was still thinking about her ex-boyfriend, and she asked Sam to take a break for a while. She wanted to take some time to be with herself and clear her mind regarding her past. Although Sam accepted Emma's position, he was devastated. He became jealous and distressed when he started watching her activity on Instagram (stories and photos) and joining the same pages. During the week that followed, Sam sent about 20 messages to Emma asking her to meet at least one more time. Although Emma left his messages on read many times, she finally accepted to meet him close to her work. She explained to him that she was not ready to move forward with something serious and wanted some time to be with herself. Sam told Emma he only wanted to help her overcome her past, but he would never bother her again. However, he was still watching her Instagram activity and was desperate while realizing that she had distanced herself from him. Sam, after that meeting, sent Emma about 20 short video messages communicating his sadness at watching her having a great time with friends. He also sent her emails saying that he could no longer live without her and was considering harming himself or taking his life if she did not give him a chance to be with her. After one month had elapsed, Emma decided to report the case to the police.

Cyberstalking recognition and attitudes towards cyberstalking victims

Upon reading the scenario, all participants were required to answer a question indicating whether they recognised the dispute case between intimate partners as cyberstalking or not. Subsequently, participants completed a victim blaming scale to evaluate the extent to which Emma was responsible for the cyberstalking perpetrated by Sam, her intimate partner. The victim blaming scale comprised six

items adapted from previous research (Grubb & Harrower, 2009), modified to align with the purposes of the current study. Participants rated their agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), in response statements mentioned in Table 3. A victim blaming score was computed by calculating the sum of participants' ratings, with higher scores indicative of a greater degree of victim blame. Given the presence of unequal factor loadings, the reliability of the scale was computed using the coefficient omega (McDonald, 1999; Hayes & Coutts, 2020), indicating a satisfactory level ($\omega=0.78$).

Ethics

The study obtained approval from the Institutional Psychology Research Ethics Committee (REC) under Ethics ID: 202316750142348252 and adhered to the UK Data Protection Act 2018. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential. To ensure anonymity, police officers were requested to assign a unique 6-digit personal identification number (PIN), which could be used in the event that a participant wished to withdraw their data at a later stage.

Data preparation

Data were analysed employing R Software version 4.3.1. All statistical tests were two-tailed, and the chosen level of statistical significance was set at 0.05. The sampling distribution of the total sample ($N=108$) was assumed to be normally distributed based on the Central Limit Theorem since the condition of sample ($N\geq 30$) is met (Anderson, 2010). The percentage of missing values for the selected variables were less than 10% in total, and therefore did not constitute biases in estimates (Dong & Peng, 2013). The use of boxplots and Cook's distance estimates did not reveal any univariate or multivariate outliers, respectively (Aguinis et al., 2013; Leys et al., 2019). The models' results were not influenced by skewness, as the condition of sample ($N\geq 10$) was met (Schmidt & Finan, 2018). Means and standard deviations can be found in Table 1.

Results

Recognition of cyberstalking in relation to the DA matters special training

A chi-square test of independence was performed to investigate whether there is a relationship between the DA Matters special training programme and the recognition of the case as cyberstalking. An *a-priori* power analysis for sample size estimation was conducted and revealed that a total sample of $N=108$ participants would be needed to detect by convention a medium effect Cohen's $w=0.30$, with 80% power using a chi-square hypothesis test of this design with $\alpha=0.05$. The analysis revealed

Table 3 Victim-blaming scale

Questions	
1.	To what extent do you agree the woman acted carelessly?
2.	To what extent do you agree the woman led the man on?
3.	To what extent do you agree the woman's behaviour was responsible for the man's behaviour?
4.	Although you do not know much about the woman in this scenario, to what extent do you agree her character was responsible for the dispute with the man?
5.	Overall, to what extent do you agree the woman was responsible for what happened with the man?
6.	Taking into account both the woman's behaviour and character, how responsible was she for the dispute with the man?

Table 4 The Cyberstalking recognition in relation to DA Matters

	Sample	DA Matters special training		$\chi^2(2, N=108)$
		Yes	No	
Cyberstalking Recognition	<i>N</i> =108	<i>n</i> =27	<i>n</i> =81	11.62**
Recognised	76 (70.4%)	26 (96.3%)	50 (61.7%)	
Not Recognised	3 (2.8%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.7%)	
Do not know	29 (26.9%)	1 (3.7%)	28 (34.6%)	

Note. $p < .01^{**}$

Table 5 Contrasts *p*-values

	<i>B</i> Coefficient	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Intercept	14.55	0.46	31.63	<0.001***
Time frame: 6 months	0.05	0.66	0.08	0.935
Time frame: 12 months	1.53	0.68	2.24	0.027*

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .001^{***}$. *SE*=Standard Error

a significant association between these two variables, $\chi^2(2, N=108)=11.62, p=.003$, with a medium effect size Cohen’s $w=0.33$. Based on the aforementioned observed medium effect size, an *a-priori* power analysis was additionally conducted to estimate the sample size needed to replicate the same effect. The analysis established that 95 participants would be adequate to achieve 80% power given $w=0.33$ and $\alpha=0.05$. Among officers who completed the aforementioned special training, the vast majority (96.3%) recognised the case between intimate partners as cyberstalking, with only one officer responding “do not know” (3.7%). Similarly, among officers without such special training, a majority (61.7%) recognised the case as cyberstalking, followed by those who were uncertain (34.6%), while a tiny minority did not recognise the scenario as cyberstalking (3.7%). (See Table 4).

Victim blaming in relation to delayed cyberstalking reporting

A one-way ANOVA/GLM model was employed to examine our second hypothesis. Our *a-priori* power analysis for sample size estimation returned that a total sample of $N=156$ participants would be required to detect by convention a medium effect partial *eta-squared*=0.06 with 80% power using a one-way ANOVA hypothesis test of this design with $\alpha=0.05$. Considering

that only $N=108$ participants took part in the study the results below should be interpreted with caution. Our model revealed a significant effect of delayed cyberstalking reporting on police officers’ victim blaming levels, $F(2, 105)=3.13, p=.048, \eta^2=0.06$. In particular, police officers indicated significantly greater victim blaming levels towards the scenario where the victim decided to report the case after 12 months ($M=16.08, SD=3.05$) than when the victim reported the case after one month ($M=14.55, SD=2.92$) ($p=.027$). However, there was no significant difference on police officers’ victim blaming levels between the victim who decided to report the case after one month and after six months ($p=.935$). (See Table 5 for contrasts *p*-values).

Moderation analyses

Two linear regression models with interaction terms (moderations) was conducted to examine our next two hypotheses. An *a-priori* power analysis indicated that a total sample of $N=82$ participants would be necessary to detect by convention a medium effect partial $R^2=0.09$ with 80% power using a moderation hypothesis test of this design with $\alpha=0.05$.

Main effects and interaction of police officers’ gender and victim’s delay to report cyberstalking on police officers’ victim blaming

A moderation model was conducted to examine whether the gender of officers moderates the relationship between the victim’s delay in reporting cyberstalking and victim blaming. The main effects from a separate linear regression model included the victim’s delay to report the cyberstalking case, $B=0.72, 95\% \text{ CI}(0.03, 1.41), p=.042$ and officers’ gender $B=0.18, 95\% \text{ CI}(-0.95, 1.31), p=.748$. However, only victim’s delay to report cyberstalking emerged as a significant predictor of police officers’ victim blaming levels. The interaction of these two variables was not found to be significant, $B=0.13, 95\% \text{ CI}(-1.26, 1.53), p=.852$. The final model did not reach statistical significance, indicating a small to medium effect size, $R^2=0.04, F(3, 104)=1.61, p=.094$ (See Table 6). Thus, the results did not identify the gender of officers as a moderator of the relationship between victim’s delay to report cyberstalking and victim blaming. Nonetheless, considering the observed small-to-medium effect size of the final

Table 6 Moderation analysis: Victim’s Delay to Report and Officers’ Gender on Victim Blaming

Effects	<i>B</i> Coefficient	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		<i>p</i> -value
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Intercept	13.74	2.28	11.32	15.39	<0.001***
Victim’s delay to report	0.72	0.35	0.03	1.41	0.042*
Officer’s gender	0.18	0.57	-0.95	1.31	0.748
Victim’s delay * officer’s gender	0.13	0.70	-1.26	1.53	0.852

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$. *CI*=Confidence Interval; *SE*=Standard Error; *LL*=Lower Limit; *UL*=Upper Limit.

model, an *a-priori* power analysis was additionally utilised to estimate the sample size required to replicate this effect. The analysis returned that a sample of $N=191$ participants would be sufficient to achieve 80% power given $R^2=0.04$ with $\alpha=0.05$.

Main effects and interaction of police training and victim's delay to report cyberstalking on police officers' victim blaming

A second moderation model was conducted to examine whether the predetermined police training moderates the relationship between victim's delay to report cyberstalking and victim blaming. The main effects from a separate linear regression model involved the victim's delay to report the cyberstalking case $B=0.64$, 95% CI (0.00, 1.29), $p=.050$ and police training $B=-1.45$, 95% CI (-2.27, -0.62), $p=.001$. Victim's delay to report cyberstalking positively, and police training negatively, predicted officers' victim blaming. However, the interaction of these two variables was not significant, $B=0.34$, 95% CI (-0.68, 1.36), $p=.513$. The final model was statistically significant, displaying a medium to large effect size, $R^2=0.15$, $F(3, 104)=5.94$, $p=.001$ (See Table 7). Consequently, the results did not identify the predetermined police training as a moderator of the relationship between victim's delay to report cyberstalking and victim blaming. Similarly to the rationale of our first moderation hypothesis test, an *a-priori* power analysis was also conducted to estimate the sample size needed to replicate this effect. The analysis revealed that a sample of $N=47$ participant would be required to achieve 80% power given $R^2=0.15$ with $\alpha=0.05$.

Discussion

The phenomenon of TFIPV has been primarily examined through the accounts of victims and support workers (Clevenger & Navarro, 2021; Flynn et al., 2023; Pina et al., 2021a; Short et al., 2015). Although the police have a key role in combating cybercrimes (Wall & Williams, 2013), and are expected to act with fairness and impartiality towards victims to ensure their support and the provision of compelling evidence during investigations (Bryant & Bryant, 2015), there is a paucity of evidence regarding police responses to TFIPV. Generally, victims' satisfaction with police responses to disputes within intimate

partner relationships ranges from 60 to 80% (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003; Lewis et al., 2000; Peirone et al., 2021; Statistics Canada, 2016; Stephens & Sinden, 2000). Nevertheless, there are some IPV victims dissatisfied with the way they are treated by the officers (Gillis et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2013), including victims of online abuse incidents such as cyberstalking (Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Short et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2021; Storry & Poppleton, 2022). Therefore, this study attempted to explore the perceptions of police officers towards victims who are cyberstalked by their intimate partners and to examine specific factors may influence these perceptions (and ultimately their responses to these incidents).

As hypothesised, the proportion of police officers who recognised the case as cyberstalking was considerably higher for those who had completed the DA Matters special training programme than those without such training. A notable number of officers without such special training either expressed uncertainty about the classification of the case as cyberstalking or did not recognise it at all, whereas only one officer with the special training was uncertain. These findings lend support to the literature, which emphasises the critical need for special police training that focuses on the recognition and effective management of crimes related to online abuse (Chang, 2020; Powell & Henry, 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Flynn et al., 2021, 2023). Given the results above, it becomes evident that providing special training to officers on IPV, including TFIPV forms, may strengthen their skills and knowledge around the new modes of abuse between intimate partners in online environments.

The present research aimed to enrich the literature by approaching the issue of victim-blaming from a practical perspective related to the critical task of police investigations and collecting evidence, in light of victims' delayed reporting. The results supported the second hypothesis, indicating that the delayed cyberstalking reporting had a significant effect on officers' victim blaming. Police officers demonstrated significantly higher tendency for victim blaming, when the victim delayed reporting for more than 12 months, compared to the victim delayed reporting after one month. Surprisingly, the same tendency for victim blaming was not significant when the victim delayed reporting for more than six months compared to the victim delayed reporting after one month. This

Table 7 Moderation analysis: Victim's Delay to Report and Officers' Police Training on Victim Blaming

Effects	B Coefficient	SE	95% CI		p-value
			LL	UL	
Intercept	17.98	2.27	9.22	18.25	<0.001***
Victim's delay to report	0.64	0.32	0.00	1.29	0.050*
Police training	-1.45	0.42	-2.27	-0.62	0.001**
Victim's delay * police training	0.34	0.52	-0.68	1.36	0.513

Note. $p<.05^*$, $p<.01^{**}$, $p<.001^{***}$. CI=Confidence Interval; SE=Standard Error; LL=Lower Limit; UL=Upper Limit.

inconsistency may have arisen due to lack of statistical power (Lorah, 2020), highlighting the need for further research with a larger sample size to establish reliable conclusions. Possibly, the increment in reporting delay after a period of time may considerably increase suspicions and lead to negative perceptions among police personnel regarding the victim's credibility and responsibility. The passage of time may create an impression that the victim's experience might not have been severe enough to report promptly, potentially influencing officers' perceptions of the validity of the victim's allegations and leading to blame attribution towards the victim for not acting sooner. This finding is consistent with previous studies that examined jurors' perceptions, showing that victims who delay reporting crimes in offline environments, such as sexual assaults, are viewed less favourably compared to those who report immediately (Franiuk et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2021).

Given the observed link between victim's delay in reporting cyberstalking and heightened officers' victim-blaming, coupled with the established role of gender in judgements towards victims, this study investigated whether officers' gender moderates their victim-blaming attitudes towards victims who delay reporting cyberstalking. Although this study found that female police officers exhibited slightly higher levels of victim blaming compared to male police officers, this difference was not significant. A separate regression model showed that victim's delay to report cyberstalking was a positive predictor of officers' victim-blaming attitudes, whereas the gender of officers - as observers- was not. However, the final multivariate regression model with interaction terms revealed that the gender of officers did not moderate the relationship between the victim's delay to report cyberstalking and officers' victim-blaming attitudes. An explanation might be the role of perpetrator's gender, which was clearly a male perpetrator in the vignettes. This could have guided the participants' similar evaluations of victim blaming and explain the present findings (Lee, 2019). Furthermore, traditional gender-based stereotypes that suggest male police officers are more likely to exhibit victim-blaming attitudes towards rape victims (Zvi, 2022b) or 'revenge pornography' victims (Zvi & Shechory Bitton, 2020), as mentioned above, may not hold true for all types of victims within policing contexts. The present study's findings contrast those of previous research, which has found that the male observers display higher victim-blaming attitudes regarding crimes committed offline, like rape and sexual assault (Davies & McCartney, 2003; Davies et al., 2011, 2012; Davies & Hudson, 2011; Donovan, 2007; Howard, 1984; Schneider et al. 2009; White & Kurpius, 2002). This discrepancy may support the notion that victim blaming attitudes between male and female officers could be subject to the

online/offline nature and/or environment of a crime. Our findings are in line with Davies et al. (2009) and Schneider et al. (1994), who did not find evidence of a difference between observers' gender in victim blaming of offline crimes, as well as with those of Pina et al. (2021b), who found no differences in victim blaming towards victims of image based sexual abuse. Nevertheless, we must interpret our results with caution as our sample was underpowered.

An additional goal of this study was to shed light on the role of predetermined police training when interacting with victims' delay in reporting a cyberstalking case, on the officers' victim-blaming levels. A separate multivariate regression model initially indicated that victim's delay to report cyberstalking and police training were positive and negative predictors, respectively, of officers' victim-blaming attitudes. This finding aligns with the scholars who have concluded that police training may play a key role in addressing critical barriers such as the display of masculinity and victim-blaming attitudes by police officers during investigations (Blaney, 2010; Holt & Bossler, 2012; Lopez-Neria et al., 2019). Contrary to what was expected, the final multivariate regression model with interaction terms did not detect a moderation effect of police training between victim's delay to report cyberstalking and victim-blaming. It may be possible that the predetermined police training programmes do not sufficiently address specific aspects related to victim-blaming in TFIPV cases that include cyberstalking or delays in reporting. Existing training may have concentrated on more general issues of IPV and cybercrime rather than addressing officers' potential biases that contribute to victim-blaming.

Despite providing a novel insight into police officers' attitudes towards cyberstalking victims who delay reporting, this study had its limitations that may have influenced the findings. The participants were requested to provide answers regarding a sensitive topic, utilizing a victim-blaming scale. Therefore, the findings could appertain to socially desirable responses as the officers may have been consciously aware of the subject matter or sought to present themselves in a favorable light. It is suggested that future studies adopt short social desirability measures to control for this confound (Greenwald & Satow, 1970). The present study assigned a gender to the perpetrator of the scenario in order to be as similar as possible to real cases handled by police officers; nonetheless, this approach does not allow for examination of other variables that may influence officers' responses (i.e. homophobia) pertaining to the role of gender in victim blame (Lee, 2019). Another limitation concerns the representativeness of the information, as the officers' responses were not collected from all police forces in the UK. The findings may not fully capture the perceptions

of officers from other regions or jurisdictions not taking part, thereby limiting generalisability. Due to time constraints, data collection was based on self-selection and snowball (non-probability) sampling, which could lead to an imbalanced representation of police officers. As such, the results may not fully capture the perspectives of each UK police force that took part in the study. For the same reason, the study had a smaller than expected sample size with regards to the examination of our second hypothesis based on the power analysis outlined in the sub-section of Victim Blaming in Relation to Delayed Cyberstalking Reporting. Consequently, insufficient statistical power may have increased the risk of false negatives. Future research is encouraged to replicate these findings, with a larger sample size to shed more light in the relationship between reporting delay and victim blaming with more representative and powerful results.

Overall, understanding the influence of digital technologies on the emergence of new forms of IPV in online environments, like cyberstalking, and how victims behave in such circumstances are critical issues directly related to the effectiveness of police responses. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate the necessity of specialised training sessions for police personnel on IPV, with a specific focus on methods that facilitate the recognition of cyberstalking. Insufficient knowledge in this area is likely to precipitate the strong dissatisfaction of victims when reporting TFIPV cases to the police and consequently lead to higher rates of unreported online abuse within relationships. Additionally, it is recommended that police forces incorporate training sessions addressing the attitudes of officers towards the responsibility and credibility of victims, considering the present findings that revealed a high tendency of victim blaming in relation to reporting delays.

Future research could conceptually replicate the methodology of this study and investigate further sociodemographic and psychosocial factors that might moderate the relationship between victims' delay in reporting a cyberstalking case and officers' victim-blaming levels. As the matter of victim-blaming and risk minimisation attitudes within police culture is convoluted when it comes to online abuse, alternative variables might be also employed to examine this topic in relation to victim's vulnerability and inconsistency during investigations. For example, investigating the relationship between recurring complaints for the same TFIPV case and officers' victim-blaming levels may be promising for further nuanced understanding of case handling. Understanding how repeated reporting and withdrawal of charges by victims influence officers' attitudes could provide insights into the challenges faced by victims and the dynamics of police responses.

In conclusion, the attitudes and beliefs of police officers towards TFIPV victims remain an understudied area, despite significant calls for examination from both support service stakeholders and victims in previous studies. Nevertheless, we have some supportive data showing that specialist training improves recognition and decreases victim blaming that solidify the necessity for specialist training across different police ranks. Further investigation is necessary to expand our current knowledge and develop more targeted police training in this field. This in-depth exploration will provide empirical evidence that could enable police force educators to develop well-informed and victim-centered training programmes, aiming to substantially improve the police response in TFIPV crimes.

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Author contributions

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article due to confidentiality agreements with the participant police forces.

Availability of analytic code

The R code is available in the Open Science Framework repository, https://osf.io/q86pg/?view_only=e49ac41a27f24f3d882c59c1a635103b.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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