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*Research article*

## **“That was terrifying!”: When 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women experiencing intimate partner violence are stalked**

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**Abstract: Background:** Stalking reflects a lesser-studied form of intimate partner violence (IPV; e.g., physical abuse) that may occur pre- and postseparation between two or more partners, incurring lifelong pervasive health impacts on those involved. Intersectionality theory elucidates how Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual (2SLGBTQQIA+) individuals’ and rural women’s identities are oppressed by society, thus subjecting them to unique IPV experiences. Therefore, this study aims to explore how stalking manifests among 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals and women living rurally with lived experiences, both of which are underrepresented groups in current stalking literature. **Methods:** We used secondary data from two IPV studies conducted among 2SLGBTQQ+ (no intersex or asexual participants) individuals and rural women (n = 29). We interviewed 2SLGBTQQ+ (n = 18) and rural women (n = 11) who resided in Alberta, Canada and experienced IPV via semi-structured, qualitative approaches. A thematic analysis was guided by intersectionality theory to analyze the data, applying inductive and semantic approaches. **Findings:** Of the 29 participants, 15 were stalked by their abusive partners and 9 reported on the negative impacts of being stalked. Rural women and 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals were mainly stalked via physical forms of stalking and cyberstalking, respectively. We describe other forms of stalking and the ineffectiveness

of legal systems in those seeking support for stalking. The impacts of stalking (e.g., hypervigilance) were so profound that the feeling of being stalked persisted, which we termed phantom stalking. **Significance:** 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals predominantly experienced stalking through technology and rural women experienced stalking in more public or physical forms, which stemmed from intersections with community and geographical factors, respectively. We posit the notion of “phantom stalking” and discuss and differentiate it from other psychiatric diagnoses. Additionally, we provide important recommendations related to legislation, education, safety, and research.

**Keywords:** intimate partner violence; 2SLGBTQQIA+; rural; stalking; intersectionality theory

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## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization describes interpersonal violence as violence between two or more people, which can be further divided into different subtypes, including intimate partner violence (IPV) [1]. IPV includes physical, emotional, sexual, verbal, cultural, spiritual, religious, and financial abuse or neglect [1]. According to self-reported data collected by Statistics Canada in 2018 [2], more than 12% of women and 11% of men experienced some type of IPV in that year, which is likely underreported due to economic concerns, gender norms, and feelings of shame, uncertainty, or fear. Considered a public health concern, IPV can impact several facets of life including mental and physical health, financial and educational outcomes, and children’s development [1]. Stalking, which is related to some degree of surveillance and monitoring, is a lesser emphasized form of proximity-seeking IPV that is equally detrimental to one’s quality of life [3,4]. Occurring most prominently following the end of the relationship, stalking becomes more apparent as the relationship progresses [3], which allows the abusive partner to maintain some form of connection to their partner, alongside power and control, as illuminated through the cycle of abuse [4]. The more subtle nature of stalking leads to decreased recognition, undermining the capacity for individuals to seek appropriate care [4]. In Canada, this form of IPV is also scarcely touched on in legislation, being briefly alluded to under Criminal Harassment Code 264 [5]. It is important to ensure that formal supports and judicial systems have comprehensive understandings and clear guidelines on what constitutes as stalking to provide individuals the support they require.

From a population health perspective, social forces (e.g., geographic isolation, homophobia) can uniquely impact specific groups to result in diverse experiences of stalking, including women living rurally and individuals identifying as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, or another sexual or gender minority (2SLGBTQQIA+) [6], thus prompting further examination. For women living rurally and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, intersectionality theory can elucidate underlying societal factors and social forces that interact and contribute to observed stalking outcomes [7]. Intersectionality theory posits that individuals’ oppressions are diverse and uniquely experienced and that identities result in an axial positioning within society that affects how individuals are perceived and treated (i.e., discriminated versus supported) [7]. It reflects how social settings, pressures, and behaviors rooted in systemic privilege discriminate against certain identities; in practice, it aims to detangle health inequity by reversing the ability for oppressive acts to continue by those more traditionally in power [7]. When examining stalking among 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals and women living rurally, other oppressions (e.g., ethnic

identity) can further intersect to impact experiences of stalking [7]. For example, two studies conducted by Kattari and colleagues revealed how racial, ethnic, and (dis)ability factors affected the experiences of trans and gender-non conforming individuals when accessing various social services [8,9]; the application of intersectionality theory helped to elucidate additional identities that impacted help-seeking above and beyond gender. Since women living rurally and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals are comprised of diverse identities and experiences, it is paramount to apply intersectionality theory to capture how stalking manifests most accurately among them.

### *1.1. Intimate partner violence among rural women*

Though Statistics Canada reports similar occurrences of IPV among urban and rural women (12%) in the past year based on self-reported data [2], data collected from police reports in 2019 indicated that rural women had a 1.8 higher odds of experiencing IPV in the past 12-months compared to their urban counterparts [10]. As families in rural communities can be more patriarchal, women living rurally may experience increased stigma or shame that undermine self-reporting of their IPV experience [11], explaining the observed higher prevalence of IPV through police-reported data as compared to self-reported data. The increased isolation akin to rural living may enable abusive partners to easily monitor their partners, disconnect them from their social networks, and use firearms and cultural factors (e.g., language barriers) as points of control [11]. Moreover, rural service provision for IPV is challenged by availability and diversity, therefore preventing women from accessing specialized supports [12]. The close-knit nature of rural towns can undermine anonymity and confidentiality when seeking support, potentially resulting in degrading, gossiping behaviors and outsiders' disbelief that the abusive partner engaged in the disclosed behaviors [11]. These geographic factors, which greatly differ from urban settings, reduce rural women's likelihoods of reaching out to and receiving support for their experiences of stalking and IPV.

When considering stalking more specifically, a Canadian-based study elucidated a 44% higher likelihood for females to experience stalking compared to males [13], which is likely to be higher for those living rurally. Through intersectionality theory, stalking experiences are expected to be further compounded by other social oppressions. For example, Brownridge (2008) revealed that the odds of Indigenous women experiencing IPV in Canadian rural areas compared to urban areas were 4.7, whereas non-Indigenous women had a 0.6 odds of experiencing IPV in rural areas compared to urban areas, reflecting an approximate 8-fold increase in the odds ratio for Indigenous women living rurally relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts [14]. Newcomer women living rurally can also experience cultural shock, discrimination, and language barriers, further isolating them and increasing their risk of experiencing stalking [15]. As nearly 20% of individuals residing in Alberta, Canada, live in rural communities [16], examining stalking in these areas, particularly among women, is important to identify how abusive partners may leverage geographic and patriarchal gender factors to engage in stalking behaviors more readily and to consider help-seeking barriers.

### *1.2. Intimate partner violence among 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals*

In 2018, Statistics Canada reported a greater past 12-month prevalence of IPV among sexual and gender minority women (20%) [17] and men (21%) [18] relative to heterosexual women (12%) [17] or men (11%) [18], representing a near 2-fold higher prevalence among sexual and gender minority

individuals. Though data pertaining to the prevalence of stalking specifically among sexual and gender minorities in Canada is difficult to locate, as it is often categorized under emotional abuse or coercive control, a community-based study of 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals conducted in the United States reported the stalking prevalence at 15% [19]. However, this prevalence value is likely to be underestimated, as a lack of confidence in formal social supports [13], alongside concerns regarding their privacy and the stalking experience being discussed by the broader community (as discussed through the minority stress model) [20], can exacerbate and undermine 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals' self-reporting of their stalking experiences.

Misconceptions and discrimination toward 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals may further compound stalking experiences and help-seeking behaviors. Some misconceptions include that the following: (1) same-sex relationships are regarded as equivalent, and therefore, the abuse is perceived as perpetrated equally (termed "mutual conflict"); (2) IPV is linked to gender rather than power; and (3) IPV only occurs within heterosexual relationships [21]. Abusers may leverage the unique identities of 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals to employ unique forms of IPV such as threatening to out them [21]. Additionally, 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals are at an increased risk of experiencing stalking and IPV because of oppressive social forces (e.g., homophobia) [22]. For example, 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals often experience healthcare disparities due to a reluctance of accessing healthcare related to deficient 2SLGBTQQIA+-oriented training, stigma, and structural oppression that permeates within the healthcare system [21]. This is likely to be exacerbated in different contexts, such as rural locations [23], or regions that have stricter laws regarding sexual and gender diversity expression [24]. These risk factors demonstrate that 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals can experience unique factors in relation to stalking and IPV, making them another important group to consider in the discourse of IPV.

### *1.3. Rationale and purpose of the research*

The predominance of cisheterosexual values and approaches that persist in today's society underlie many health inequities that 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals continue to experience, which likely influences how stalking occurs and is navigated by 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals [21]. Moreover, this emphasizes the need for additional research on stalking among sexual and gender minorities to raise awareness among service providers who continue to maintain cisheterosexual understandings of intimate partner relationships. Furthermore, the degree of isolation, the lack of service provision availability and diversity, and the extent of stigma in rural communities present unique opportunities for abusers to stalk women living rurally [11,12]. This is exacerbated due to patriarchal standards that provoke gender-based violence and health inequities [25]. Despite existing research on stalking as a form of IPV, stalking as a form of IPV among Canadian 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals and rural women continues to be an understudied topic; it is important to fill this gap in the literature since abusers may leverage the vulnerabilities that 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals and rural women experience to employ unique forms of stalking.

We sought to elucidate how stalking manifests as a form of IPV during and following the end of an intimate partner relationship among rural women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals residing in Alberta, Canada, from the perspective of those with lived experiences. More specifically, we aimed to identify which behaviors abusive partners used to stalk their 2SLGBTQQIA+ and rural women partners via qualitative methods. We did not seek to compare the stalking experiences between 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals and rural women, but rather to help fill an important gap in Canadian

literature regarding how stalking manifests based on their lived experiences. More specifically, we hoped to perform the following: (1) provide service providers and broader community members with a better understanding of stalking behaviors that are most likely to occur among 2SLGBTQQA+ individuals and women living rurally; (2) bring light to unique stalking behaviors that may not be commonly thought of; and (3) elaborate on a form of IPV that is often understudied or less emphasized in the current body of research, particularly in Canada.

## 2. Methods

Two, separate mixed-method research studies were conducted that focused on broader questions of IPV experiences including perceptions of IPV, help-seeking experiences, and interventions, services, programs, and recommendations for addressing IPV among 2SLGBTQQA+ and rural women groups [26,27]. We did not specifically ask questions pertaining to stalking in either study; however, such behaviors and experiences arose from their narratives and were deemed important by our research team. This secondary analysis employed a thematic analysis to uncover the participants' perspectives of, and meaning attributed to, their lived experiences of stalking. Intersectionality theory guided the study's results and discussion to consider how different oppressions in relation to one's identity influences lived experiences of stalking and to better inform policy recommendations [7]. A table that defines important terms is provided (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Important terms and definitions.

Term	Definition
2SLGBTQQ+	An individual identifying as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any other individual not identifying as cis-heterosexual [7].
Rural women	Individuals who identify as a woman residing in a rural town with a population of less than 20000 [28].
Intimate partner violence (IPV)	Violence including physical, emotional (reflecting any psychological form of abuse), sexual, verbal, cultural, spiritual, religious, and financial abuse and/or neglect that occurs between two or more intimate partners [1].
Stalking	A form of IPV that involves surveillance and monitoring to restrict freedom, maintain control, and prevent connections with others [4].
Phantom stalking	Termed by our team. A form of ongoing postseparation IPV wherein individuals who experienced IPV believe they are continuing to be stalked when they are not; the absence of stalking was confirmed by those experiencing IPV. It overlaps with a heightened fear that the abusive partner could again engage in such behaviors. It is distinct from both a purely dissociative experience as well as re-experiencing an intrusive memory, dream, or dissociative reaction that had previously occurred during their IPV relationship, feeling real (see Supplementary materials Table A).

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Term	Definition
Identity abuse	Forms of abuse targeting one's identity; this might involve degradative comments toward or invalidation of one's identity, such as gender or sexual orientation [29].
Spiritual abuse	Spiritual abuse entails forms of abuse that use spiritual contexts to manipulate or attack individuals experiencing IPV, enabling coercive control of these individuals [30]. Though sharing overlap with religious abuse, it is distinctly focused on the realm of spirituality [30].
Religious abuse	Religious abuse entails the manipulation of religious traditions or ways of knowing to coercively control individuals; for example, this might entail scriptures of how one should act based on religious duties [30].
Legal abuse	Abuse that is unique to legal settings, such as the intentional perpetuation of legal problems to remain in contact with ex-partners [31].

### 2.1. Setting and participant eligibility

As a province in Canada and the geographic setting for this study, Alberta is considered a prairie province. Alberta is the fourth largest province in Canada and uses a provincial healthcare system. At the time of this study, most individuals residing in Alberta were below 15 years of age, had a moderate median total income (~\$45000 CDN) when above 15 years of age, were non-immigrants, and were non-visible minorities [32]. Findings from Statistics Canada revealed that aside from the territory regions in Canada (which are characterized by large geographic regions, small populations, and longer distances to urban areas), the three prairie provinces, including Alberta, reported the highest rates of gender-related homicide of women and girls [33].

Individuals were eligible to participate in the 2SLGBTQQIA+ study if they self-identified as a 2SLGBTQQIA+ individual, resided in Alberta during their experience(s) of IPV, were 18 years or older, experienced their IPV within the last 10 years, and were no longer living with their abusive partner. Individuals were eligible for the rural women study if they self-identified as a woman, lived in a town with <20000 individuals during the time of the abusive relationship, resided in Alberta during their experience(s) of IPV, were 18 years or older, experienced their IPV within the last 10 years, and were no longer living with their abusive partner. We recruited the participants using posters in libraries, community centers, and service provider agencies. Since no intersex or asexual individuals were involved in the study, we used the 2SLGBTQQ+ acronym throughout the remainder of the paper to increase the accuracy of our findings and discussion. When possible, we provided specific information regarding sexual and gender identity to decrease generalization to the entire community.

### 2.2. Data collection

Four individuals conducted interviews (SK, JN, SM, and OG) using semi-structured interviews. All interviewers had educational backgrounds or experiences related to social services or sciences and underwent interview and sensitivity training led by an expert senior academic author (KN) who had extensive experience in qualitative methods with individuals experiencing vulnerabilities. A second expert senior academic (NL) checked-in with the authors following the initial interviews to provide feedback and to discuss areas for improvement. If requested, we provided the participants with the

interview questions prior to participating and asked the participants if they preferred a female interviewer via email prior to the interview to increase their comfort during interviews. We conducted interviews via telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distance requirements. To maintain anonymity, we asked the participants to avoid using any identifying names (e.g., ex-partner's name) and removed any identifiable information from the data files. All the participants received a small honorarium (\$25) for their participation. Each interviewer asked the participants about their demographic data at the start of the interview. When interviewing the women living rurally and 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals, we asked similar questions about the nature of the abuse and their help-seeking actions and experiences; however, some questions were more contextualized on living rurally or on sexual and gender identities (See Supplementary Materials, Interview Guides). Probes were used to help saturate the data and to help the participants remain on track with the original question being asked; however, we refrained from using probes unless necessary, rather using prompts such as “could you please elaborate on that” and “you mentioned x/y, did you find this form of support helpful or unhelpful” to enrich the data. We audio-recorded the telephone interviews and immediately uploaded all recordings to OneDrive with a two-factor password encryption system; once successfully uploaded, we destroyed all recordings from the recording devices. Interview lengths ranged from 25 minutes to 2.25 hours. We first completed transcription manually; however, we obtained ethical approval to transcribe the final interviews (n = 8/33) via Otter.ai [34], which is an online platform that uses artificial intelligence to transcribe meetings or interviews. To increase confidentiality and privacy, we immediately transferred all Otter.ai transcribed interviews to OneDrive and then destroyed the transcripts from Otter.ai. Additionally, we reviewed all the transcripts for accuracy. To organize the transcripts, we assigned identification numbers to each participant to maintain anonymity.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Three authors (SK, JN, and SM) completed an analysis of the interviews via a thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes [35]. This started with two reviewers (JN and SM), who were also part of the interviewing process, and who noticed and sought for patterns of meaning in the data. We were interested in examining stalking given its understudied nature in the IPV literature, particularly relative to other forms of IPV such as physical and emotional abuse [36]. Further, stalking during and following the end of the relationship became a potential interest of research during data collection through inductive investigations; however, stalking could not be confirmed as an overarching concept until all phases of the data analysis were completed. Therefore, after becoming familiar with the data, the reviewers started to identify initial codes using the participants' words. Next, these codes were sorted and collated under an overarching theme. Then, the themes were reviewed and refined to determine if they could complete the following: (1) could be collapsed into one another to create one unified theme; (2) could be broken down into separate themes; or (3) could be reworked into a new theme [35]. Then, a third author (SK) reviewed all the interviews and processes of the thematic analysis by the initial reviewers to increase rigor by reducing the subjectivity and increasing the saturation of the data. The use of a thematic analysis ultimately supported the emergence of various stalking behaviors through the lived experiences of the 2SLGBTQQ+ and rural women participants.

While analyzing the transcripts, we employed intersectionality theory as the guiding theoretical framework to be more transparent in our findings [7]. As the 2SLGBTQQ+ study was composed of a diverse representation of genders, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic groups, we tried to provide

background information regarding the participants' experiences (e.g., we added information such as age) while still respecting the participants' privacy and anonymity. Additionally, we provided a participant characteristic table to summarize the demographic information of the rural women and the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals. By using this approach, we hoped to increase the transparency of our findings and from whom they derived from.

In relation to this, we also described our findings based on intersecting oppressions to better contextualize the IPV experiences.

### 3. Findings

Of the total participant pool ( $n = 29$ ), most self-identified as 2SLGBTQQ+ ( $n = 18$ , 62%) and the rest as women living rurally ( $n = 11$ , 38%). The majority of the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals identified as either lesbian or bisexual ( $n = 9$ ), as white ( $n = 11$ ), and as either "female" ( $n = 6$ ) or as trans ( $n = 4$ ; Table 2). The mean age of the 2SLGBTQQ+ participants was 29 years ( $\pm 7$  years). Of the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals interviewed, all had completed some post-secondary education, with the majority having completed some university courses or an undergraduate degree ( $n = 11$ ), followed by some college training or a college diploma ( $n = 6$ ), and one participant who had completed a graduate degree. Most of the 2SLGBTQQ+ participants were employed ( $n = 12$ ; 9 full-time), while one was a student and the other five were unemployed. Their annual incomes ranged from CAD \$0 to \$140000, with a mean of \$45706 ( $\pm$  \$37145; one participant did not provide their income amount). When asked about disabilities, 11 of the 2SLGBTQQ+ participants expressed experiencing either physical (i.e., scoliosis, endometriosis, fibromyalgia) or mental (i.e., anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) health disabilities.

**Table 2.** Participant demographics.

Demographic variable	2SLGBTQQ+ ( $n = 18$ )	Rural women ( $n = 11$ )
Age (mean, SD, range; years)	29, $\pm$ 7, 20 to 43	42, $\pm$ 14, 23 to 66
Race (n)		
White	11	10
Asian	2	0
Indigenous	3	0
Biracial	1	0
Hispanic	0	1
Not answered	1	0
Sexual orientation (n)		All 11 rural women described their relationship in the context of a cisheterosexual relationship
Lesbian	5	
Gay	1	
Bisexual	5	
Pansexual	1	
Other*	6	

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Demographic variable	2SLGBTQQ+ (n = 18)	Rural women (n = 11)
Gender (n)		All 11 self-identified as a ciswoman
Female	4	
Male	1	
Transman/male	2	
Transwoman/female	2	
Cis/cisgender/cisgender female	2	
Two-spirit	1	
Genderfluid/queer	2	
Other*	4	
Children (n)	N/A (not asked)	
0		4
1		1
2		0
3		2
4		2
5		2
Education (n)		
High school	0	2
Some college or undergraduate school	39	0
Undergraduate degree or college diploma	56	9
Graduate degree	6	0
Annual household income in Canadian dollars (n)		
\$0 to \$24999	6	4
\$25000 to \$59999	5	2
\$60000 to \$99999	4	1
\$100000 to \$200000	2	2
Not answered/did not know	1	2
Employment status (%)		
Unemployed	5	5
Student	1	0
Employed part-time or contract	3	2
Full-time	9	4

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Demographic variable	2SLGBTQQ+ (n = 18)	Rural women (n = 11)
Has a disability? (%)		N/A (not asked about)
Yes	11	
No	7	

Note: Other\* includes a mix of two or more sexual orientations or gender, respectively. SD: standard deviation.

All the rural women described their relation in the context of a heterosexual relationship (n = 11; Table 2). The mean age of the rural women participants was 42 years ( $\pm$  14 years). Half of the rural women participants were unemployed (one participant did not respond). Their annual incomes ranged from CAD \$0 to \$200000, with most under \$60000. Most of the rural women interviewed had obtained at least one post-secondary (college or university) degree (n = 8). Further, the mean number of children was 2 ( $\pm$  2). The rural women participants were not asked about (dis)abilities.

Aside from stalking, both groups described experiencing broader forms of physical, sexual, emotional, financial, spiritual, religious, and verbal abuse. More specifically, the 2SLGBTQQ+ participants mainly experienced physical (i.e., hitting, pushing) and emotional (e.g., gaslighting, guilting) abuse, coercion in the context of sexual abuse, and uniquely experienced identity abuse in relation to their sexual and gender identity. The rural women experienced physical (e.g., choking, blocking entrances) and financial abuse (e.g., controlling money), rape or assault in the context of sexual abuse, and uniquely experienced medical abuse in relation to their healthcare needs.

Our findings revealed how stalking manifested as a form of IPV during and following the end of intimate partner relationships among the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women, from the perspectives of those who experienced it. Five themes emerged, including the following: (1) isolation and physical monitoring; (2) the use of technology; (3) the ineffectiveness of legal systems in the context of stalking; (4) less common stalking behaviors; and (5) phantom stalking, which is a term that our team developed to reflect the adverse impacts that stalking has on one's health, including post-separation hypervigilance, anxiety, and ongoing rumination (Supplementary materials, Table A). Additionally, we discussed the participants' IPV experiences in relation to intersectionality theory. All quotes that support the identified themes are provided (Supplementary materials, Table B).

### 3.1. Theme 1: Isolation and physical monitoring

During and following the intimate partner relationship, seven of the 11 rural women reported that their partner isolated them and either followed them in public or approached their house postseparation. During the relationship, some described pronounced stalking behaviors that enabled their abusive partners to closely monitor them. One participant stated, "I couldn't walk out of the house without physically telling him where I was going and if I didn't... he would get on his bike and look for me..." (rural woman, 66 years). A rural woman also explained how her abusive ex-partner stalked and impacted her next intimate partner relationship: "it's not easy because I lived with one partner after and it was hard for her because he found us, in two houses... that didn't help our relationship" (rural woman, 32 years). This same participant also explained how the abusive ex-partner "showed up to the school one night [where they were working] when I wasn't aware and was banging on the door and yelling," which impacted her relationships with her work colleagues. Despite the interview questions

being similar for both studies, no 2SLGBTQQ+ individual explicitly expressed being isolated or monitored in public by their abusive ex-partner.

### *3.2. Theme 2: Use of technology*

Two lesbian (one Two-Spirit Indigenous, one Asian), one trans lesbian, one questioning, pansexual/bisexual female, and one polysexual/polyamorous non-binary Two-Spirit individual reported the use of technology to be stalked, monitored, or surveilled ( $n = 5$ ), which was more than among the rural women ( $n = 2$ ). For some, this involved turning on location services on the phone during the relationship: “She would turn my location on any kind of app that allowed for that so that she could have access to my whereabouts... there was spyware downloaded onto my desktop computer and my phone...” (2SLGBTQQ+, 39 years). For one rural woman, this involved having “to send him pictures... like, to confirm you are where you say you are” (rural woman, 31 years). Postseparation, one mentioned that their abusive ex-partners would send a plethora of messages, emails, or other forms of communications in attempt to remain in contact or to use their social media accounts to continue surveillance: “I was doing like a lot of work online at the time too and he was able to like get onto all of my old accounts” (2SLGBTQQ+, 26 years).

### *3.3. Theme 3: Ineffectiveness of legal systems in the context of stalking*

Narratives pertaining to the ineffectiveness of legal systems in the context of stalking revealed important implications for policy and the potentiality to perpetuate stalking behaviors. Six rural women and two 2SLGBTQQ+ participants described the ineffectiveness of court systems and emergency protection orders (EPOs) in relation to stalking: “he broke the emergency protective order by following my vehicle and pinning it into my parking stall” (rural woman, 33 years) and “with the restraining order, I felt like really safe with that... that this person wouldn’t hack my account... but that wasn’t true. She actually, like I have 40, 50, 60 login attempts for my Facebook... my Google account” (2SLGBTQQ+, 39 years). Additionally, the rural woman participant described how “with the court dates, you fill out things with your address on them and if he sees those court documents with the address, that’s how he finds me”, revealing that abusers were able to access their ex-partner’s information in court, which facilitated the identification of important information. However, two rural women participants (one of which also had a poor experience with regular court systems) did mention how legal “victim assistance” services and family law were beneficial, particularly as there was someone who supported them throughout the process: “family law, I think that’s where I think I found a lot more support is that, you know, we had a mediator, we had people helping me with the paperwork, we had people within the family law system that just understood it” (rural woman, 36 years) and “the lady was very awesome and caring. She was great. She went to court with me” (rural woman, 66 years).

### *3.4. Theme 4: Less common stalking behaviors*

Some stalking behaviors were less commonly described, but should nevertheless be discussed. Using a third individual to obtain information that facilitated monitoring or surveillance was described by a rural woman and a Two-Spirit, lesbian female. This was observed through an informal support for the rural woman where their abusive partner “did have a friend of his who lives in the same rural

community that I do [know was] reporting back to him, and it was very evident that my actions were being watched” (rural woman, 38 years) and through a formal support for the 2SLGBTQQ+ individual where their doctor “actually broke my confidence, and she told my partner that I was telling her that there was problems” which resulted in being “mentally and verbally assaulted” upon returning home (2SLGBTQQ+, 39 years).

Another rural woman described how their abusive ex-partner went “through my stuff, [garbage and recycling]... through everything, like everything he could just to see what he could find” (rural woman, 36 years). By going through their ex-partner’s garbage, the abusive partner was able to indirectly monitor and obtain information about them.

### 3.5. *Theme 5: Impact of stalking—ongoing fear and vigilance (phantom stalking)*

The participants described the impacts of their stalking experiences, which caused them to feel hypervigilant and to have a sense or feeling that they were still being stalked. This “phantom stalking” phenomenon, coined by this team, manifested among four rural women and one trans, gay man, one bisexual female, one Two-Spirit lesbian, one pansexual male, and one bisexual, non-binary/genderfluid woman (n = 5), which reflects an anxiety phenomenon that occurred postseparation. The following quotes exemplify the phantom stalking impacts: “I wouldn’t answer the door. I always had the blinds drawn, and my son knew to be quiet if a doorbell rang in case, you know, his dad had come to find us” (rural woman, 59 years), “I’ve lived in the same house since I was three, and now I sleep with a bat next to my bed. Nobody has ever tried to break into my house. There’s no reason for me to be doing that” (rural woman, 23 years), and “I can’t, you know independently exist on my own without feeling like I’m going to be hacked or I’m going to be followed or I’m going to be looked at or my messages are going to be read” (2SLGBTQQ+, 39 years). Another participant also touched on the vulnerability they experienced because of the stalking, such that: “I’ve never felt so vulnerable as feeling as I, I can’t have passwords of my own, I can’t have privacy of my own, I can’t, you know, independently exist on my own” (2SLGBTQQ+, 40 years). These impacts extended into subsequent relationships, such that “[my new partner and I] bought a home, we put like massive security and cameras around so that we can be protected from damage” (2SLGBTQQ+, 43 years). These participants revealed how they lived their life in ongoing fear that they were being stalked and that the abusive ex-partner would endanger them. The phantom stalking term is defined in detail in the discussion and additional quotes to support the term are provided (Supplementary materials, Tables A and B).

### 3.6. *An intersectional examination of broader IPV experiences*

This section focuses more broadly on the participants’ experiences in relation to their socioeconomic status, gender identity, and sexual orientation through a visual analysis of patterns, with some quotes to exemplify the patterns. For both groups, no patterns were observed in relation to their income or education and the IPV experience.

For the rural women, the interconnections between IPV (more notably stalking) and geographic factors (i.e., privacy, IPV understandings) were prominent. Further, it appeared that informal social supports (e.g., friends) were less useful as they often showed disbelief to the disclosure: “there’s definitely some people who, friends and family too that were just like ‘Well, what did you do? How

did you cause it? Why did he do it to you? What were you doing to make it worse?’ Which is possibly, like, the least helpful things to say to someone” (rural woman, 32 years). Service provision was also scarcer, but perspectives on police responses appeared to be more mixed, with more positive outcomes being identified relative to the 2SLGBTQQ+ group. Children were also a pertinent factor in the IPV experiences, with threats of taking children and fears of losing children as pivotal factors in how the individuals navigated their IPV experience: “So like when I think about like fear of like losing my children, that was always my biggest fear” (rural woman, 36 years).

In general, as the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals identified further from the traditional binary gender classification, they often experienced more barriers with help-seeking, remained in abusive relationships longer, and emphasized increased impacts on their mental health; the implications of identifying outside of the cisheterosexual context is described by the following quote: “basically anything that can’t pass as some reflection of hetero-cis-normativity or violence perpetuated by someone not read as male for whatever reason, regardless of whether they want to be or not, I think then it’s not really taken seriously” (2SLGBTQQ+, 24 years). This pattern was often attenuated with an increasing age, though it was often perpetuated when identifying as non-white (e.g., self-identifying as Indigenous). Regardless of the diverse identities, the police did not appear to be an appropriate avenue for most 2SLGBTQQ+ participants: “when I was arrested, I don’t think they had a lot of experience with same sex relationships and domestic violence” (2SLGBTQQ+, 29 years). Rather, accessing 2SLGBTQQ+-specific resources was associated with better outcomes, further supporting the oppression that 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals continue to experience in broader healthcare and social services. In terms of geography, one 2SLGBTQQ+ individual described several occurrences of stalking as they moved from an urban to a rural region, with geographic factors likely underlying the prominence of their experience with stalking: “the shelters are significantly different up there, there’s no transportation, so it was literally very alienating” (2SLGBTQQ+, 39 years).

Of the 18 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals, 11 self-identified as experiencing a disability, which encompasses physical and mental (psychological or cognitive) health diagnoses. Anxiety (n = 4), attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (n = 3), and post-traumatic stress disorder (n = 3) were the most commonly identified types or aspects of disabilities among the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals. For many, experiences of IPV were interconnected with their disability. A 2SLGBTQQ+ participant also described how their experience of IPV was convoluted by their illness and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic: “because I’m chronically ill. Yeah, I definitely think... the cut off process was made super hard by the pandemic” (2SLGBTQQ+, 19). The rural women interviewed were not specifically asked about experiences with disabilities. However, one of the rural women expressed that the presence of a chronic health condition, coupled with the rural experience of geographical and social isolation and the lack of informal and formal support services, influenced her decision to stay with her abusive partner, as they provided physical support in caring for her children when she was ill: “my daughter said to me, she was young, she goes ‘why don’t you leave?’ and I said ‘I can’t’ because I would have to leave my son behind because I physically could not take care of him when my [multiple sclerosis] got so bad” (rural woman, 59 years).

#### **4. Discussion**

This paper aimed to describe the experiences of stalking as a form of IPV during and following the end of intimate partner relationships among two separate but marginalized groups in Alberta,

Canada: 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women. Though stalking was not explicitly asked in the larger IPV studies, participants in both studies described experiences of stalking by their former partners throughout their narratives. This behavior occurred both during the relationship and postseparation. Both groups described the profound impacts of being stalked, such that it manifested into hypervigilance and anxiety postseparation and a sense that they continued to be stalked (termed as “phantom stalking” by this team). Abusive 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals stalked their partners through diverse methods; however, stalking through technological devices predominated. For the rural women, abusive partners often used the smaller, more isolated community (i.e., geographic factors) to their advantage when engaging in stalking behaviors, thereby monitoring their partners in-person or engaging in other more publicly displayed forms of stalking. Obtaining information from a third individual (i.e., friend) and looting through one’s garbage also emerged as forms of stalking. We also draw from our findings to shed light on the ineffectiveness of legal systems and protection orders in supporting individuals that experience stalking in Canada.

An examination of IPV experiences more broadly through intersectionality theory corroborated most of the existing literature, such that non-binary, non-white, and younger 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals experienced more challenges in their IPV journeys [37]. For example, 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals who identified further from binary gender norms (e.g., genderqueer) experienced IPV for longer periods of time and reported more impacts, which is likely a reflection of the greater number and diversity of stressors that these individuals must navigate in a cisheterosexual society [38]. Similarly, research supports that 2SLGBTQQ+ racial minorities experience more vulnerabilities that increase their susceptibility to IPV than their white counterparts, which is related to the additional social oppressions that these individuals must navigate [39]. Age is also known to be a risk factor for IPV, with a reported prevalence of IPV often greater among younger individuals [37].

Most (>60%) of the 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals also self-identified as having a physical or mental health disability in our study. Other studies have demonstrated a greater prevalence of stalking among individuals who reported a disability [40,41]; however, we could not identify any specific patterns between the presence of a disability and experiences of stalking, though IPV experiences more broadly appeared to be affected by the presence of a disability. Abusive partners can leverage the diverse behaviors, healthcare utilization patterns, and needs of disabled individuals, which an able-bodied society has not equitably been designed to support, to more easily monitor or acquire information about their partners without repercussions [42]. Future studies could consider examining the interconnections between disabilities and stalking more closely to ensure that the additional vulnerabilities that disabled individuals must navigate are integrated within the interventions designed to support those that experience stalking.

Children appeared to be an important factor in the IPV experience for women living rurally. Among those with children in our study (n = 7), approximately all but one had 3 or more children, while the average in Canada in 2021 was 1.43 [43]. The greater number of children per household among families living rurally could reflect a more patriarchal system where women are expected to embody the role of motherhood [12]. Though children were not discussed specifically in relation to stalking, IPV literature reveals that abusive partners can leverage children to stalk or monitor their partners [44]. A study conducted in Australia revealed how abusive fathers connected and met with children unsupervised postseparation, used coercive behaviors similar to those used with their ex-partners to control their children, and attempted to extract information about the other parent [45]. This represents a unique, yet effective means of obtaining information about and monitoring ex-partners,

which requires further attention to ensure that family violence interventions support all members of the family, and not just the abused partner(s). For both groups, contrary to existing literature, we did not observe any patterns of stalking or IPV in terms of education or income [37].

#### *4.1. Physical forms of stalking*

The manifestation of more physical forms of stalking was demonstrated by abusive partners within the rural women group, characterized by surveillance in public areas and by preventing partners from spending time alone throughout the duration of their intimate relationship. These findings are synonymous with previous research that investigated the geographically isolating disposition of IPV that rural women experienced [11,12]. Many rural settings maintain patriarchal values, which socially isolate women by pressuring them into the sole role of parenting, thus reducing their participation in the labor market and the broader community; in turn, the abusers' capacity to stalk their partner is facilitated by effectively eliminating their partner's engagement in the community [46]. Further, as infrastructure and homes in rural environments are more geographically distanced from each other, the increased isolation can reduce the likelihood for outsiders' to witness abusive stalking behaviors [12]. As abusive men often uphold positions of power within rural settings, a lack of witnessed evidence can undermine the support that rural women receive as community members, including formal supports, may struggle to believe that the abuser is stalking them; this inequitable distribution of resources and power advantageously serves the abusers, enabling them to continue stalking their partners or ex-partners without consequence [47,48]. Moreover, there is evidence that the abusers may intentionally relocate themselves and their partners to more geographically dispositioned areas to facilitate abuse and stalking (which appeared to happen for one 2SLGBTQQ+ participant in our study), thus creating new avenues for the abusers to engage in stalking and IPV without any major repercussion [49]. Overall, the abusers strategically leverage the geographic and sociocultural boundaries of rural environments to facilitate the stalking of their partners.

From a population health perspective, women living rurally who also identify as a racial minority experience even more vulnerability to stalking than their white counterparts, as white cisheterosexual men in positions of power can utilize white privilege to their advantage to avoid any grave judicial repercussions [15]. Similarly, though no participant in the rural women study identified as a trans woman or described their experience of stalking in the context of a lesbian or queer relationship, one lesbian woman from the 2SLGBTQQ+ study had relocated to a rural setting with their abusive partner; this individual described various and repeated experiences of stalking. Sexual and gender minority women who experience stalking in rural settings will concomitantly experience more barriers, challenges, and oppressions to seeking and receiving support due to the prominence of cisheterosexual values that persist in such environments [15,23], as elucidated by intersectionality theory [7]. Therefore, 2SLGBTQQ+ abusers can leverage their partner's distrust with formal supports in rural settings to stalk them without any consequences [23]. In fact, a Canadian study on correlations with stalking victimization revealed that an increasing distrust with police and with the neighborhood resulted in an increased odds of experiencing stalking (which is more likely among marginalized groups) [13], reaffirming how rural women, and those further identifying with marginalized groups, may be more vulnerable to stalking in rural than in urban environments.

#### 4.2. *The role of technology*

The 2SLGBTQQ+ participants emphasized the role of technology in their stalking experiences. Technology provides abusive partners with unique opportunities and multiple outlets to stalk their partners by anonymously accessing accounts, monitoring locations, or even pretending to be another person [50]. Whether in large or small cities, cyberstalking may be favored by abusive individuals in oppressed communities, such as the 2SLGBTQQ+ group, as it can reduce the evidence of stalking and maintain confidentiality if employed shrewdly [50]. For an already marginalized population, the multiple means through which technology can permit 2SLGBTQQ+ abusers to mask their identity when stalking their partners serve as attractive options, permitting abusers to evade formal judicial services while still feeling proximal to their partners [51]. Further, abusers residing outside of rural municipalities may be more reluctant to engage in more physical modes of surveillance as a larger population size increases the likelihood of the abusers' behaviors being witnessed [12]. Other studies support the predominant use of online dating applications by sexual and gender minorities [52]. This is particularly alarming as most dating applications, such as Tinder, Grindr, or Sniffies, utilize location services, which can provide abusive partners with some knowledge about one's life and at the very least, their general location, with little to no effort needed to acquire this information [53]. Whether through technology or in-person, stalking behaviors and their impacts are experienced similarly [54], thus warranting an equal amount of attention and gravity in policy and healthcare.

#### 4.3. *Courts systems and their effectiveness in supporting individuals experiencing stalking*

Our findings show that information provided in the court was visible to the abusive partner, thus facilitating the identification of important information by abusers and undermining the purpose of legal systems. This is a major concern as it provides the abusive partners with direct and updated information regarding their ex-partner. Further, legal environments can be strategically used by the abusers to remain in contact with their partners through the intentional prolongation of court cases and legal litigations as observed in our study, allowing the abusive partner to be in visual and physical proximity to their ex-partner [31]. Moreover, there was evidence that questioning the abused individuals' experiences of stalking in court could trigger feelings of shame, thus shaping how these individuals perceived judicial systems and often directing them to find support elsewhere (e.g., informal supports) [55]. More positively, the court systems were described as more effective when a third individual was linked to their cases to mediate the judicial process. As the judicial system is a complex one [31], providing individuals who experienced stalking with navigators appears to be an effective approach that can enable timelier support provision.

As observed in this study, abusers who are legally required to maintain a certain distance from their partners through emergency protection orders may also use legal systems as their last avenue to stalk their partners as restrictions within the actual legal environment become convoluted [31]. In fact, while past research has demonstrated the overall effectiveness of restraining orders in reducing the occurrence of IPV [56–59], other studies, including this one, have alluded to increasing difficulties with respect to restraining orders in eliminating stalking behaviors among individuals that experience vulnerabilities [60,61]. A case study conducted in Alberta revealed four major concerns in relation to protection orders and their effectiveness in supporting those that experience IPV: (1) underlying beliefs and assumptions of individuals' motives of ascertaining a protection order in the context of family law;



(2) the overrepresentation of mutual protection orders; (3) the actual enactment of the protection order and the integration of children within them; and (4) accessibility to equitable justice for those experiencing vulnerabilities [62]. All four of these concerns were alluded to in our findings, reinforcing the ineffectiveness of protection orders in supporting those that experience stalking and IPV in Alberta, Canada. As observed in our study, breaches of protection orders are completely neglected when there is no evidence to support them, which can be easily completed using technology or in rural areas where security systems are less intensive. Further, a mutual protection order was only described and granted for a 2SLGBTQQ+ and not women living rurally; though this could be due to chance, it is likely from the embodiment of the judicial system's misconceptions and challenges in navigating IPV cases when they diverge from the cisheterosexual man on cisheterosexual woman narrative, which is a phenomenon that is supported through various police vignette studies [36]. For these reasons, the abusers' use of legal environments to perpetuate stalking alongside all other forms of stalking need to be highlighted in the context of emergency protection orders to ensure that individuals that experience stalking are actually protected through their judicial systems.

#### *4.4. Impacts of being stalked: phantom stalking reflects hypervigilance and anxiety*

Our findings point to a phenomenon of “phantom stalking” occurring in both groups. It captures the postseparation impacts that individuals experience, wherein experiences of stalking during or after their intimate relationship leads to hypervigilance and anxiety that creates a sense of being stalked. It overlaps with a continuously heightened fear that their abusive ex-partner could engage in such behaviors again, thus sharing symptoms with post-traumatic stress disorder. However, in our view, it differs from post-traumatic stress disorder as phantom stalking is a new, ongoing post-separation experience rather than one which is re-experienced. More specifically, the individual who is experiencing phantom stalking does not only experience it at specific moments, but instead experiences it constantly in their everyday life. Moreover, it differs from a negative belief that no one can ever be trusted and negative thoughts of oneself, as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) [63], though it shares overlap with these terms. Lastly, individuals do not detach from their reality, as they are still in control of their functions [63]. Though paranoid ideation shares much overlap with phantom stalking, the term itself has been minimally defined [63]. We introduce the term phantom stalking (1) to better explain and characterize the experience, while avoiding the use of stigmatizing language, and (2) to hopefully enable individuals who experience phantom stalking to find comfort with a term that truly captures their experiences. We do urge for further research on the phantom stalking phenomenon to determine whether individuals feel as though the abusive ex-partner is actually physically present, which may further suggest some degree of overlap with the delusional disorder as defined through the DSM-5 [63]. The phantom stalking term is compared in detail with other DSM-5 diagnoses in the Supplementary Materials (Supplementary materials, Table A).

#### *4.5. Other forms of stalking revealed creative means to stalk*

A less common form of stalking included obtaining information from a third individual, which was achieved via both informal (i.e., friend) and formal (i.e., doctor) individuals. The use of a third individual to engage in stalking reveals an approach perhaps more unique to smaller communities such

as rural women and 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals, both of which are more likely to encounter providers that are discriminatory and dismissive of their concomitant experience of IPV and oppression within society [36,64]. By using a third individual to stalk their partners, abusive partners avoid directly retrieving information about their partner's whereabouts and livelihood while still monitoring and surveilling their partner. Other literature indicates that an increased accessibility and use of information and communications technologies permit abusers to engage others in performing stalking behaviors on their behalf [50], though there is little to suggest similar patterns with closer relationships (i.e., the abusive individual's friend). Moreover, mutual connections may facilitate such an exchange of knowledge, intentionally (or not), with little to no evidence of this occurring; this can be further accomplished if the abusers also employ coercive behaviors to manipulate their friends and family members into unknowingly providing them with information. Additionally, our findings showed that the abusers inappropriately received information about their partner from healthcare professionals, which ultimately led to more abuse. Not only did this provide the abuser with information about their partner and exacerbate the experience of IPV, but it also led to one's mistrust in the healthcare system. A lack of confidence in the healthcare system can hinder future help-seeking behaviors [65], thereby facilitating the abusers' capacity to stalk their partners without consequence. Formal supports hold an important responsibility of maintaining their patients' privacy, which is particularly important when patients disclose stigmatized experiences such as stalking.

In the rural women study, another means to stalk was achieved through rooting of one's garbage. By doing so, the abuser obtained information about their ex-partner through mail, letters, or other products that were disposed of, thus sustaining their capacity to surveil and monitor them. This may be more prominent in rural areas given that the increased level of isolation in such settings decreases the likelihood that someone will oversee the abuser going through their partner's garbage [12]. This further challenges help-seeking for experiences with stalking as a lack of evidence undermines reporting, particularly when abusive individuals are in positions of power [15], requiring attention from service providers and policymakers.

#### *4.6. Policy implications and criminal stalking codes*

We provide several important recommendations. First, stalking must be comprehensively described in legal systems to ensure that those who experience stalking from their abusive partners or ex-partners receive the appropriate assistance to reduce or eliminate these behaviors. In Canada, stalking is currently alluded to under Code 264 of the Criminal Code of Canada (Criminal Harassment), but it is not explicitly written under the code [5]. A lack of mention of the term "stalking" under this code reveals profound implications for those seeking support from judicial or healthcare systems as only surface-level descriptions are provided under the concept of harassment. The code emphasizes stalking behaviors in general language and in terms of physical or more evident monitoring, thereby failing to address more discrete forms such as stalking via technology or the less common behaviors described (i.e., use of a third individual to obtain information, looting through one's garbage, and legal stalking). From a regional health standpoint, this lack of clarity reduces the ability of individuals who are being stalked to receive adequate support, which is likely compounded for 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and women living rurally due to intersecting oppressions. Therefore, criminal codes must be altered to specifically label stalking as an illegal activity; the code needs to state all potential forms of stalking by expanding the focus from simplistic forms of monitoring and surveillance (e.g., physical

monitoring) to more discrete forms (e.g., technological surveillance) to prevent minimization or blurred perceptions.

Further, due to the omnipresence of communications technology, continual advances in internet technologies, and the abusers' differential use of technology to stalk 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women, our study's findings allude to the need for preventative and interventional strategies aimed at individuals who experience technology-based stalking. This includes increased government investments into enhancing the detection of cyberstalking (e.g., novel software) while providing individuals with free resources/media to protect their devices. Educational opportunities (e.g., inclusion of stalking in educational curriculums focused on health) can provide individuals with knowledge on how to increase their confidentiality and privacy on their devices; this may be particularly important for 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals who revealed an increased risk of experiencing cyberstalking.

Many individuals leaving abusive situations experience financial and mental health challenges which may create barriers to undertake safety planning for their households [66]. Therefore, we endorse Natarajan (2016)'s recommendation that individuals who have experienced stalking (or IPV in general) should be provided with temporary security systems to overcome financial burdens and to capture evidence of any stalking behaviors [67]. In turn, we anticipate that this may also provide a sense of security and either reduce or eliminate the severity of phantom stalking [67]. Rather than simply telling 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women that they need to obtain evidence of stalking or of an emergency protection order violation, formal supports should provide individuals with temporary resources that can enable this to happen (e.g., home security cameras). This can reduce socioeconomic disparities that marginalized groups continue to face [68], such as rural women (who are often financially controlled by their partners during their abusive relationships [12]) and 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals (who experience increased challenges that inhibit meaningful engagement in the labor market [69]).

Since emergency protection orders can be ineffective in addressing stalking, explicitly defining stalking behaviors within emergency protection orders could promote clarity. Specifying consequences for relevant violations could facilitate incarceration [70]. Further, our findings point to the need to create clearer guidelines on the permitted interactions between ex-partners within legal settings to prevent stalking. Appointing a legal representative for the abused person could help eliminate the opportunity for stalking or broader IPV forms of abuse to occur within legal settings.

Lastly, the research methodology should be carefully considered in the context of IPV research, particularly stalking, as individuals who experienced stalking may not be aware that this constitutes IPV, which is further supported by a criminal code that greatly generalizes stalking and fails to address the complex nature of such violence. Therefore, it is important that researchers begin to examine different forms of IPV more specifically in their qualitative and quantitative studies to saturate the data; for example, this study likely underestimates stalking within the two groups as questions regarding stalking were not explicitly asked. Moreover, researchers should adopt and apply intersectionality theory throughout their studies to determine how stalking and IPV uniquely manifest among different groups; for example, our findings allude to the predominance of cyberstalking among 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals, providing health professionals with a better understanding of how these individuals may be stalked by their current and ex-partners.

## 5. Limitations and strengths

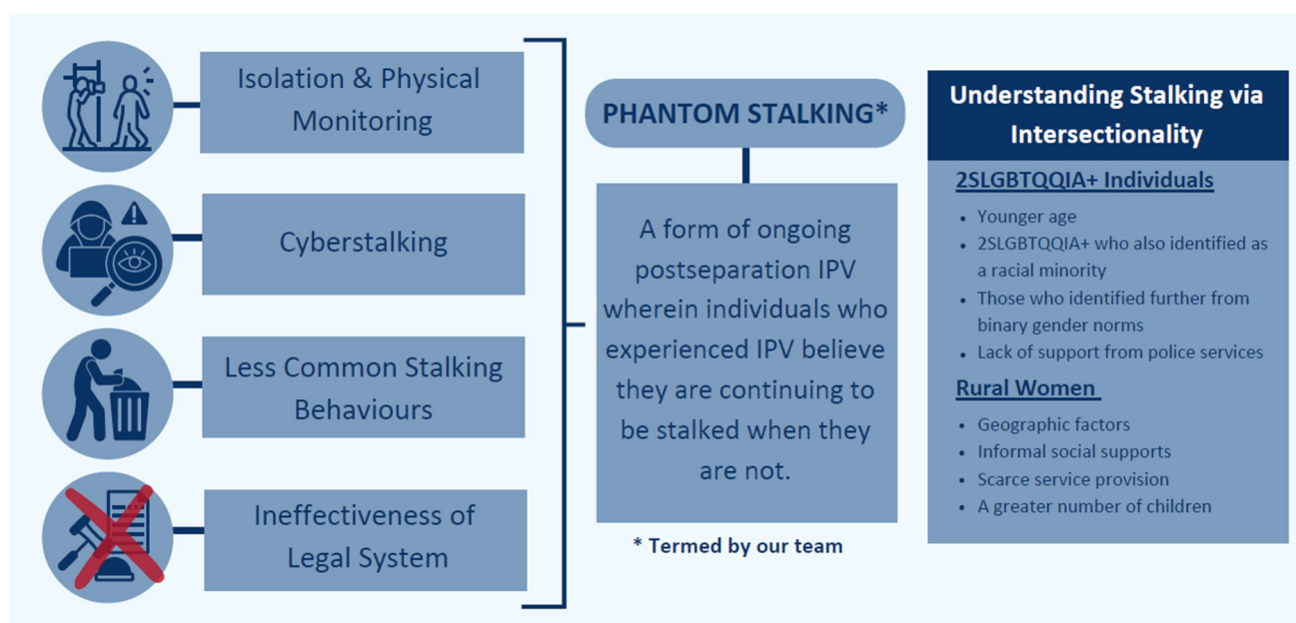
Though stalking was not of the most salient findings across the interviews, our team believed it was an important and understudied topic that should be further investigated, particularly among 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women. The semi-structured interview design enabled the participants to openly discuss their experiences of IPV, thus highlighting stalking throughout their narratives in response to questions pertaining to the nature, context, and impacts of IPV. Overall, this interview format, in conjunction with semantic analytic and inductive approaches, allowed us to identify stalking from their narratives. Though the 2SLGBTQQ+ group was diverse, small numbers of individuals for each respective gender and minority group limited the generalizability of the findings to each respective group and rather provided a more generalized description of stalking within 2SLGBTQQ+ groups, particularly as the IPV experiences likely significantly varied across different identity groups (e.g., ethnic minorities). Nevertheless, we attempted to be transparent when describing findings by providing the available participant characteristics while still maintaining confidentiality; the use of intersectionality theory was advantageous with respect to illuminating how oppressive social forces shape the experiences of stalking and IPV based on different identities. Additionally, our findings from this study can still be used as an initial understanding of how stalking manifests among rural women and 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals, setting the stage for further investigations. All the participants derived from Alberta, Canada, which further limits the generalizability elsewhere. However, regions that share similar socio-cultural contexts and legislation may draw from these findings to better contextualize stalking in their regions. As this is a qualitative study, the prevalence of IPV among these two broader groups could not be estimated. However, research on IPV and the stalking prevalence is published elsewhere [19], therefore requiring qualitative findings such as the ones derived from this study to better interpret the numbers and to understand the experiences.

Moreover, we are cognizant that some of the questions were potentially leading; however, we tried to use probes only when the participants required a further elaboration of the question being asked, some guidance in returning to the original question, or asked for examples themselves. Although we made efforts to objectively complete interviews and analyze data, this team is cognizant of the role of reflexivity and how their own values and personal experiences may have influenced the interpretation of transcripts and study findings. Nevertheless, we held frequent meetings to discuss the coding of data to reach a more objective consensus and three authors independently reviewed each transcript, thereby increasing the saturation and the rigor of the findings. Our findings from this study allude to the need for certain policy and healthcare changes, providing guidance that can positively promote regional health in Canada and in other similar sociocultural regions.

## 6. Conclusions

Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, this study aimed to describe how stalking manifested as a form of IPV among 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals and rural women, as these two groups experience health inequities due to intersecting oppressions. Both communities experienced diverse forms of stalking along with unique outcomes. We described the implications of IPV within intimate partner relationships, whereby hypervigilance and anxiety postseparation about being stalked was termed “phantom stalking”. Phantom stalking is a term that reflects the impacts that individuals who experienced stalking experience postseparation, including hypervigilance, anxiety, and a sense of

feeling as though they are still being stalked. The 2SLGBTQQ+ individuals described a prominence of technological surveillance or monitoring. The rural women participants described public and physical forms of stalking. Less common stalking themes included the use a third individual to obtain information, the use of property, and the ineffectiveness of emergency protection orders in preventing stalking. The provided recommendations should be considered to start shifting how policy and healthcare are discussed and enacted in relation to stalking as a form of IPV. It is imperative for future research to focus on the manifestation of stalking within these groups in relation to health outcomes and how they intersect with other oppressions to ensure that a more integrated approach is pursued and to help individuals who experience IPV to receive the support they need for their abusive or ex-abusive relationship (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Graphical abstract of the findings from our study.

## Author contributions

Stefan Kurbatfinski contributed to conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, validation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing editing, and approved the final submission. Kendra Nixon, Dawn McBride, and Nicole Letourneau contributed to conceptualisation, data curation, funding acquisition, methodology, resources, supervision, writing—review and editing, and approved the final submission. Jason Novick and Susanne Marshall contributed to conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, validation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and approved the final submission.

## Use of AI tools declaration

The authors declare they have not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

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## Ethics approval of research and informed consent

Prior to participating in the interviews and studies, participants provided written informed consent via signatures. Ethical approval for both studies was obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board (REB20-1461\_REN3, REB20-1241\_REN6).

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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