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Cyber dating abuse victimization among secondary school students from a lifestyle-routine activities theory perspective

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Abstract

Controlling one's romantic partner through digital media is a form of cyber dating abuse. In order to design effective educational campaigns, a deeper understanding of how some young people become victim of this type of abuse within their romantic relationships is warranted. This study is the first to adopt a lifestyle-routine activities theory perspective toward online romantic partner monitoring, by looking at whether secondary school students' risky digital lifestyle and their digital media use are linked to a higher chance of being controlled by a romantic partner, taking into account gender, age, and the length of the romantic relationship. The data of 466 secondary school students (71.0% girls, $n = 331$) between 16 and 22 years old ($M = 17.99$ years ; $SD = .92$) who were in a romantic relationship are analyzed. Linear regression analysis suggests that engagement in online risk behavior, the length of the romantic relationship, engagement in sexting with the romantic partner, and the amount of social networking site use were significantly linked to victimization of digital controlling behavior. The results are important to practitioners, as they indicate that messages about safe internet use should be incorporated in prevention and educational campaign with regards to cyber dating abuse. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Cyber dating abuse; dating violence; controlling behavior; lifestyle-routine activities theory

Introduction

The widespread use of digital technologies has created new ways for dating violence perpetrators to target their victims. Cyber dating abuse is defined as “the control, harassment, stalking, and abuse of one’s dating partner via technology and social media” (J. Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014). One of the scarce studies on its prevalence found that 26% of teenagers in a dating relationship reported being a victim, and 11.8% admitted being a perpetrator of cyber dating abuse (J. M. Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). In another study 22.3% of teenagers reported cyber dating abuse victimization and 17.5% being a perpetrator (Temple et al., 2015).

Digital technologies offer perpetrators of offline dating violence additional ways to humiliate the partner publically (Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, boyd, & Lenhart, 2013). It has been found that posting an intimate picture or an insult online instead of offline might cause more harm, because online communication is more permanent, easily accessible and shareable (Dick et al., 2014). Online abuse also differs from offline dating abuse in that the perpetrator can target the victim 24/7 without having to be physically present (J. Zweig et al., 2014). Moreover, due to the absence of the victim’s direct (non-verbal) reactions, perpetrators might also feel less inhibited about engaging in abusive behaviors (cf. Suler, 2004).

Studies indicate that cyber dating abuse victimization among adolescents is linked with experiences of offline dating violence. Online types of abuse might be an extension of offline forms of violence (Korchmaros et al., 2013). In a qualitative study by Baker and Carreño (2015) teenagers indicated that digital technologies elicited feelings of jealousy and monitoring behavior, and that digital forms of dating abuse were linked with offline arguments and offline abusive behaviors. A recent longitudinal study among adolescents by Temple et al. (2015) established that being a victim of physical dating abuse was predictive of

becoming a victim of cyber dating abuse one year later, which suggests that cyber dating abuse might concur with offline forms of abuse.

Teenage dating abuse is considered a public health concern (Teten, Ball, Valle, Noonan, & Rosenbluth, 2009). Victims of traditional forms of dating violence during adolescence have an increased risk of being involved in abusive relationships as adults (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Moreover, cyber dating abuse victimization has been associated with on average higher feelings of depressive symptoms and feelings of anxiety (J. Zweig et al., 2014).

Lifestyle-routine activities theory

In order to design effective prevention and educational campaigns, more information is warranted about factors that increase one's risk of becoming a victim of cyber dating abuse. Lifestyle-routine activities theory could provide a framework that helps to identify factors that put young people at risk for victimization. The theory states that the chance of becoming a victim of a type of crime increases when offenders and targets converge in time and space, while guardians, who could provide protection, are absent (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2011). Additionally, engaging in a deviant or risky lifestyle can put individuals at risk for victimization as it often occurs in contexts in which guardianship is absent (such as the supervision of adults) (Gover, 2004). Previous research found, for example, that young adults who engage in sexting, an online risk behavior, were more likely to experience unwanted online contacts or harassment (Reyns, Burek, Henson, & Fisher, 2011).

The present study

The present study focuses on the factors that could increase young people's risk of being controlled by their romantic partner through digital technology. Examples are:

exercising control via digital media by monitoring the partners' interactions with others (such as reading messages and monitoring social media accounts) (Baker & Carreño, 2015; Stonard, Bowen, Walker, & Price, 2015), or sending multiple messages throughout the day to control what the partner is doing at that moment (Stonard et al., 2015).

In this study, we aim to investigate cyber dating abuse victimization from the lifestyle-routine activities theory perspective, by looking at whether a risky digital lifestyle, and exposure to a perpetrator are linked with being more controlled by their romantic partner, after taking into account gender, age, and the length of the romantic relationship. Online risk behavior consists of behaviors such as talking to strangers online, or disclosing personal information to strangers online (Lobe, Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Vodeb, 2011). Following the theory, we might expect that youth who engage in online risk behaviors, run a higher risk of becoming a victim of cyber dating abuse. The chances of cyber dating abuse victimization might also be higher when young people are more frequently exposed to a perpetrator through their use of social networking sites and by having access to social media without supervision of guardians through smartphones and mobile data plans. This technology allows the offender to contact the victim throughout the day. Moreover, young people might not have to share their smartphones with other family members as opposed to other devices such as tablets or laptops. Consequently, victims of cyber dating abuse might be less likely to be supervised or monitored by their parents or other guardians.

Methods

Sample and procedures

The data are part of the *Teen Digital Dating Survey* and were collected from March to May 2015 in 7 Flemish secondary schools. In every school, classes from the last two years of secondary education participated and in one vocational school, classes from the additional seventh year of vocational education have also completed the survey. In Flanders, the students

from this seventh year of secondary school education enroll for an additional school year to master a trade or profession. They are subject to the same schedule, rules, and classes than other high school students. The inclusion of secondary school students from the seventh year explains why some students in our sample are up to 22 years old. The final sample comprised of 1187 secondary school students (61.3% girls, $n = 728$). Respondents were asked if they were currently in a romantic relationship with someone or had a girlfriend/boyfriend (39.3% yes, $n = 466$). The values and analyses reported in the remainder of article are based on this sample of 466 students (71.0% girls, $n = 331$) between 16 and 22 years old ($M = 17.99$ years ; $SD = .92$). Before the survey was conducted, participants were assured that their answers would remain anonymous. They were asked to return their questionnaires in a sealed envelope. The study protocol was approved by the Ethical Committee of [name removed for purpose of blind peer review].

Measures

Dependent variable

The scale measuring victimization of digital controlling behaviors (*Cronbach's* $\alpha = .76$) consisted of four items that asked respondents to rate whether they had been a victim of controlling behaviors by their current romantic partner in the six months prior to the survey, measured on a scale from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*. The items were adapted from the control dimension of the *Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire* (Borrajó, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015). They assessed whether the respondents had experienced that their romantic partner: 1) had viewed their e-mail messages, messages on their cell phone, or their account on a social networking site without their permission ($M = 1.59$; $SD = 1.02$); 2) had checked when they were last active on applications such as Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp ($M = 1.79$; $SD = 1.18$); 3) had sent messages through the Internet or the mobile phone to control with whom they were together and what they were doing ($M = 1.81$; $SD =$

1.14); and 4) had called them or sent messages multiple times in a row (5/10/20/30 times an hour) through the Internet or the mobile phone to control where they were or with whom they were together ($M = 1.37$; $SD = .82$). Mean scores were used in the further analysis.

Independent variables

Length of the romantic relationship was measured by asking “how long they had been together” with the person that they had indicated to be in a romantic relationship with or identified as their current girlfriend/boyfriend (0 = *less than a week* to 5 = *more than six months*, $M = 4.22$; $SD = 1.20$).

Online exposure to offenders was operationalized by measuring the respondents’ access to *digital media* and *their use of social networking sites*. Two items assessed whether respondents had access to a *smartphone* (94.8% yes; $n = 442$) and a *data plan for their smartphone* (82.6% yes; $n = 384$). Furthermore, it was assessed how often respondents *used social networking sites* ($M = 6.18$; $SD = 1.66$) on a scale from 0 = *never* to 8 = *more than 7 times a day*, as this might increase their chance of being controlled through these media.

The online risky lifestyle was assessed by three items of an online risk behavior scale (*Cronbach’s $\alpha = .62$*) (Lobe et al., 2011). The behaviors included looking for new friends on the internet ($M = 1.73$; $SD = .96$), adding people to their friends list or address book that they had never met face-to-face ($M = 2.19$; $SD = 1.02$), and sending personal information to someone that they had never met face-to-face ($M = 1.38$; $SD = .75$). Respondents rated whether they had engaged in these behaviors in the six months prior to the study (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). Mean scores were used in the further analysis. As an additional risk behavior, respondents were asked if they had engaged in *sexting* with a romantic partner. Sexting was defined as sending a sexually explicit picture (naked or half-naked) of oneself to the romantic partner through the internet or the mobile phone (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014). Because few respondents had on average engaged in sexting, the responses were

recoded in 0 = *never engaged in sexting* and 1 = *engaged in sexting* (23.4% engaged in sexting; $n = 108$).

Results

The analyses were carried out using SPSS v.22.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). Standard multiple regression analysis was performed to assess which variables most strongly related to being controlled by their partner through digital media. The regression model is presented in table 1.

The total variance explained by the model was 14.6%. Engagement in online risk behavior ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) was the strongest predictor followed by the length of the relationship ($\beta = .15, p < .01$), engagement in sexting ($\beta = .14, p < .01$) and the amount of social networking site use ($\beta = .01, p < .05$). Smartphone ownership ($\beta = .02, p = .705$), the use of a mobile data plan ($\beta = -.02, p = .663$) and the control variables gender ($\beta = -.04, p = .406$) and age ($\beta = .07, p = .406$) were not significantly linked to being controlled by a romantic partner.

Discussion

Digital technologies provide dating violence perpetrators with another way to harass their victims. This study focused on factors that contribute to becoming a victim of digital controlling behavior from a lifestyle-routine activities theory perspective.

The results indicate that young people's engagement in online risk behaviors is the most important predictor of becoming a victim of their partner's digital controlling behavior. Sexting with the romantic partner is also significantly related to victimization. This finding might be explained by the assumption that youth who engage in online risk behavior are often more in online situations in which guardianship is absent (e.g., supervision by their parents). Another explanation might be that they could also be less aware of the importance of

protecting their online profiles and digital devices which might create opportunities for perpetrators to access their personal information. Our findings are also in line with research on traditional dating violence victimization which established a link with engaging in a risky lifestyle, and which situated traditional dating violence within a larger risk behavior pattern (Vézina et al., 2011). Therefore, educational initiatives about cyber dating abuse victimization could focus on providing information about safe internet use. They could for example discuss the risks of sharing one's passwords or the pin codes with a romantic partner and they could also discuss privacy measures to limit the access. Our study used a general measure of online risk behavior. Future studies could use a more specific scale with items adapted to the relational contexts (i.e., sharing a password/login code for the smart phone with the romantic partner) to identify specific types of online risk behaviors that might be related to victimization.

This study also found a link between the time that youth spend on social networking sites and becoming a victim of controlling behaviors. This is consistent with the lifestyle-routine activities theory as more time spent on these sites, creates more opportunities for perpetrators to contact their victims (e.g., to ask what they are doing). Moreover, as victims potentially create more content and engage in more contacts with others by using social networking sites frequently, they might unintentionally make it more interesting for perpetrators to control their partner's online content. Future research could focus on whether certain types of behaviors on social networking sites, such as frequently posting pictures with others or using the chat function are more likely to elicit victimization. To better understand the perpetrator's perspective, research could focus on whether there is a temporal link between the partner's use of social networking sites and cyber dating abuse perpetration.

Directions for future research and limitations

This study focused on cyber dating abuse from a routine-activity perspective in order to better understand the factors that contributed to victimization. This enabled us to provide suggestions for how victims can better protect themselves against abuse. However, rather than focusing on victims, prevention efforts could also focus on preventing cyber dating abuse from happening in the first place and address the behavior from the perspective of the perpetrators. Additional research on cyber dating abuse is warranted as, to the best of our knowledge, much remains unknown about the social, relational, and individual antecedents of cyber dating abuse perpetration. Studying cyber dating abuse perpetration from different theoretical perspectives would add to our understanding of these behaviors in cyberspace, and, more importantly, allow us to determine which theoretical variables are most likely to predict cyber dating abuse perpetration. This would enable practitioners to tailor their education efforts to these specific contexts and the characteristics of the perpetrators, and prevent these behaviors from happening in the first place. Much remains also unknown about how adolescents regard behaviors classified as abusive by researchers. It is largely unknown if these behaviors are also perceived as such by adolescents. For instance, exploratory research found that interpersonal surveillance was regarded as unproblematic by adolescents, whereas adults would classify this behavior as abusive (Baker et al., 2010). Furthermore, studies could focus on the development of evidence-based interventions that raise awareness about controlling behaviors and that address the relational context that triggers or even could encourage these types of abuse. Likewise, the effectiveness of existing prevention programs that address dating violence and healthy relationship in reducing cyber dating abuse could be investigated.

When interpreting the results of this study, some limitations should be kept in mind such as the use of self-reports, a predominantly female secondary school student sample, the use of a convenience sample and the cross-sectional nature of this study. Despite these

limitations, this study enhances our understanding of cyber dating abuse victimization. It contains important implications such as the necessity of incorporating internet safety within cyber dating abuse educational initiatives and the need for more research on the specific types of online risk behaviors that might increase victimization.

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Table 1: Multiple linear regression coefficients predicting victimization of controlling behavior

	Victimization of controlling behavior				
	B	SD	β	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p</i>
Socio-demographics					
Gender	-.07	.08	-.04	-.83	
Age	.06	.04	.07	1.58	
Length of the romantic relationship	.11	.03	.15	3.42	**
Online exposure					
Smartphone ownership	.07	.18	.02	.38	
Having a data plan	-.05	.10	-.02	-.44	
Social networking site use	.05	.02	.10	2.07	*
Online risky lifestyle					
Online risk behavior	.32	.05	.28	6.00	***
Engagement in sexting	.26	.09	.14	2.98	**
Constant	-.80	.72		-1.11	
$R^2 = .162$					
Adjusted $R^2 = .146$					