

Digital Monitoring Behaviours from a Social Learning Perspective

Aims

Dating violence is an important public health issue. The behaviour is no longer limited to physical spaces. Several forms of dating violence can also be perpetrated through the Internet and the smartphone. Digital monitoring behaviours are a form of cyber dating abuse. Few studies have applied theoretical frameworks to gain a deeper understanding of cyber dating abuse. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the extent to which perceived social norms about cyber dating abuse, witnessing controlling behaviour among parents, and the endorsement of gender stereotypes are linked with adolescents' engagement in digital controlling behaviours. Current research on cyber dating abuse is largely descriptive in nature and lacks a theoretical approach. Applying a theoretical framework allows the identification of the theoretical variables that are associated with engagement in the behaviour, and provides additional insights into why the behaviours take place.

Key Findings

- Among the theoretical variables, the study found a significant relationship between the perceived social norms of peers with regard to the behaviour, having observed controlling behaviours by one's father, and having a higher endorsement of gender stereotypes were significant correlates of engagement in controlling behaviours. Having observed controlling behaviours by the mother was not associated with engagement.
- The findings highlight the need for prevention efforts to address and lower the influence of perceived social norms. Some strategies could include addressing these group norms and the norms relating to cyber dating abuse, and teaching adolescents how to deal with peer pressure with regard to controlling their romantic partner.
- The results suggest that youth who grow up witnessing digital monitoring behaviours within their families might believe that this is an appropriate way to cope with concerns about faithfulness and jealousy in their own romantic relationships.
- The findings underscore the need for prevention and intervention efforts to discuss and challenge the traditional gender stereotypical beliefs that might facilitate dating violence.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a sample of 1187 students (61.3% girls, $n = 728$) from 7 secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium. The paper reports on analysis of data from a subsample of 466 students (71.0% girls) who were in "a romantic relationship with someone or had a romantic partner" at the time that the study was conducted. The respondents were between 16 and 22 years old ($M = 17.99$ years, $SD = .92$). Standard multiple regression analysis was performed with SPSS v. 22.0 to assess which variables most strongly related to controlling their partner through digital media.

Background

This study focuses on digital monitoring behaviours among teenage couples. Examples of digital monitoring behaviours include: accessing email messages or social media accounts without the partner's consent, controlling when the partner was last online through applications such as Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, sending multiple messages or calling multiple times in a row (5/10/20/30 times in an hour) to control where their partner was, and sending messages via the Internet or the mobile phone to check what they were doing. This study uses a social learning theory perspective which explains how beliefs and interactions with role models and important others could drive individuals' engagement in deviant behaviours.

Source Van Ouytsel, J., Ponnet, K., & Walrave, M. (2017). Cyber dating abuse: Investigating digital monitoring behaviours among adolescents from a Social Learning Perspective. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Online ahead of print, 1-22. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0886260517719538>

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