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Using technology to control intimate partners: An exploratory study of college undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which a sample of 804 undergraduates at a large southeastern university used communication technology (e.g., cell phone, email, social network sites) to monitor or control partners in intimate relationships and to evaluate their perceptions of the appropriateness of these behaviors. Results of the online survey revealed that half of both female and male respondents reported the use of communication technology to monitor partners, either as the initiator or victim. Females were significantly more likely than males to monitor the email accounts of their partners (25% vs. 6%) and to regard doing so as appropriate behavior. Limitations and implications are suggested.

1. Introduction

Use of technology is rampant among today's young adults. Ninety-three percent of millennials (those born in 1982 or later), ages 18–28, have a cell phone and use the Internet regularly; 62–88% of young adults regularly text and 72% use social networking sites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). College students also embrace the use of communication technologies such as mobile phones, short messaging services (SMS), email, instant messaging, and social networking sites in record number (Martin & Crane, 2007; Neilsen, 2009). While these innovations and increased accessibility to them have afforded various social benefits and conveniences for college students, they have also provided a mechanism for the increased potential for interpersonal intrusion (Finn & Banach, 2000; Kandell, 1998; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002) to the point of obsessive relational intrusion (Cupach, Spitzberg, & Carson, 2000). This research explored the extent to which a sample of college students reported using communication technology to monitor or control partners in their intimate relationships and to evaluate the degree to which they viewed such behavior as appropriate.

Among college and university students, the use of text messages, emails, cell phones, social network postings and webcams are popular technological tools for beginning, escalating, and maintaining romantic relationships. Researchers such as Lee (1998), Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser, and Tucker (2007) and Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) have documented the interpersonal use of technology by the modern day college student. While communication technology has become a vehicle for students to initiate, maintain and escalate their relationships with each other, these same technologies also make college students more accessible and thus more susceptible to interpersonal intrusion and, in extreme cases, controlling behaviors (Avins, 2000; Martin & Crane, 2007; Neilsen, 2009; Sharples, Graber, Harrison, & Logan, 2009). These technologies may also be used to harass or abuse a partner, particularly female college students and young adults (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005; Bocij & McFarlane, 2002; Gregorie, 2001; Southworth et al., 2007; US Department of Justice, 1999, 2001). For example, Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) found that at least 30% of their respondents experienced some sort of cyber-based unwanted pursuit. Short and McMurray (2009) concluded that harassment by texting is more prevalent than other forms of offline harassment. Alexy et al. (2005) noted that the person most likely to cyberstalk an individual was a former intimate partner.

Further evidence of abuse by means of communication technology is from Finn (2004) who found that ten to fifteen percent of 339 students had received repeated threatening, insulting, or harassing emails or Instant Messenger (IM) messages. Other questionable uses of technology include checking the history of a partner's email or cell phone accounts, making an excessive number of cell phone calls to partners, sending an excessive number of text messages, checking a partner's social networking sites (My Space or Facebook) to monitor activity, using GPS/cell phone locators/Google maps to monitor a partner's whereabouts, using webcams to monitor a partner's activities, using SpyWare to monitor a partner's computer, and insisting on knowing passwords of a partner's accounts.

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Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) noted in their study on stalking behavior that one of the insidious implications of using communication technology is that some of the behaviors engaged in are relatively indistinguishable from acceptable relational or courtship behaviors. For example, the use of frequent text messaging in early courtship is initially regarded as evidence of romantic interest. However this same behavior may eventually be used and viewed as annoying, obsessive, harassing or even as cyberstalking when the relationship ends. Lee (1998) noted that being in love blurred the victim's perception of whether or not they were being stalked. The current study also provides insight into the issue of victims lacking objectivity when assessing appropriate and inappropriate online behaviors.

The line between what is appropriate and what is intrusive is unclear. Current literature lacks research data on the college population's use of technology as a medium for controlling behaviors. The current study was designed to document the extent to which college students over use, or inappropriately use, technology in their romantic relationships, the extent to which college students report that their romantic partners have used technology in this way to monitor or control them and the degree to which these various uses of technology is regarded as appropriate in romantic relationships. This study also examines the properties of the newly created Controlling Partners Inventory (CPI) within a sample of 804 college undergraduates. Questions of reliability, factor structure, and levels of technological control and monitoring by various demographic variables will be addressed in this report. The research questions for the study are: (1) Do college students use various communication technologies to monitor or control partners in intimate relationships? (2) Are college students the victim of such monitoring or controlling behaviors? (3) What are the demographics of students who are both the initiators and the recipients of this type of behavior? (4) What are the validity and reliability of the CPI-Self/Partner scale?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 804 undergraduates (a 62% response rate) from a large southeastern university. Ages ranged from 18 to 23 ($M = 19.12$) years. Regarding race, 77% of the sample self identified as white, 14% as black, and 9% as "other" (Latino, Asian–American, and American Indian). Of those indicating gender, 500 participants (67.1%) were females and 245 (32.9%) were males, compared to the university's profile of 62% female and 38% male (Office of Institutional Planning, Assessment, & Research, 2009).

2.2. Procedure

Because there is limited research pertaining to this topic, an established instrument was not available. The researchers included five personal/demographic items (gender, age, ethnicity, class standing, and residency) to the newly developed CPI for the purposes of this study. The CPI included 18 items inquiring about whether or not the respondents had experienced or performed "monitoring" behaviors and 18 items soliciting the respondent's opinion of the appropriateness of these behaviors in an intimate relationship. For each of the 18 monitoring behaviors, participants were asked to respond to two items: "I have done this" ("CPI-Self") and "partners have done this to me" ("CPI-Partner"). The five response choices ranged from "never" to "4 or more times." Content and face validity of the instrument were established by expert researchers in the field. The data were subjected to a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to classify and construct the relationship between variables and factors. Additionally, reliability measures to assess the consistency of scores from items in the instrument were assessed. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to determine internal consistency reliability.

Participants were recruited from a personal health course required for graduation. Researchers used in-class and online announcements to ask these students to complete the anonymous survey. Responses were collected online using Qualtrics Survey Software. Receipts were generated when completed surveys were submitted. Participants received extra-credit points by presenting these printed receipts to their health instructors. The survey, consent form, and research protocols were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

3. Results

Survey results were entered into an Excel file and PASW version 18 was used to analyze the data. The female mean score for the CPI-Self was 26.28 (SD = 7.97) and the male mean score was 23.95 (SD = 8.50). The CPI-Partner mean scores for males and females were 27.66 (SD = 9.07) and 26.21 (SD = 9.65) respectively. The range for the CPI (both Self and Partner) is 18–90.

The mean CPI-Self/Partner scores by demographic groupings are presented in Table 1. According to a two-tailed t-test, females reported engaging in controlling and monitoring behavior significantly more than their male counterparts ($M = 26.28$, SD = 7.97), $t(804) = 3.83$, $p = .000$. It was also found that more females were the victims of controlling and monitoring behaviors ($M = 27.66$, SD = 9.07), $t(804) = 2.10$, $p = .036$. One-way ANOVA showed no significance for age, which the researchers suspected due to the lack of variance in age. The majority of students were only 18 years of age with 25% being 19. One-way ANOVA also showed no significance for ethnicity (black, white, or other). The results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that sophomores were more likely than freshman, juniors, and seniors to have been the victim of a controlling or monitoring partner, $F(4, 799) = 2.32$, $p = .052$. Place of residency differed significantly between groups with those living in a Greek fraternity or sorority and those living with parents having monitored or controlled a partner via online technology and also being the victim of this behavior more $F(3, 801) = 8.36$, $p = .000$; $F(3, 801) = 8.17$, $p = .000$. Post hoc analysis using Scheffe multiple comparison test showed the following groups to differ significantly ($p < .01$): "dorm" vs. "Greek house", "Greek house" vs. "off-campus", "Greek house" vs. "with parents" for those who self-reported in engaging in this behavior and for those who reported being the victim of a controlling or monitoring partner.

A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of initiating and experiencing monitoring behaviors and gender (Tables 2 and 3). A significant interaction was found between gender and checking cell phone and email histories and making excessive calls (defined by the researchers as an atypical number that made you feel uncomfortable). Female students were more likely to monitor partners' behaviors by checking call histories ($\chi^2(1) = 35.534$, $p < .01$), checking email histories ($\chi^2(1) = 32.405$, $p < .01$) and making excessive calls ($\chi^2(1) = 10.641$, $p < .01$). Conversely, females were significantly more likely to report a partner's use of technology, such as checking call histories ($\chi^2(1) = 14.513$, $p < .01$) and checking email histories ($\chi^2(1) = 12.036$, $p < .01$), and receiving excessive phone calls ($\chi^2(1) = 14.730$, $p < .01$), to monitor their behavior (see Table 3). More than 50% of females report checking social networking sites to monitor their partners, also showing a significant difference between males and females ($\chi^2(1) = 17.634$, $p < .01$). One-in-five females indicated that they monitor their partners' behavior by sending excessive emails. More than 20% of females use a partner's password to