



Gender matters: Experiences and consequences of digital dating abuse victimization in adolescent dating relationships



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ABSTRACT

Digital dating abuse (DDA) behaviors include the use of digital media to monitor, control, threaten, harass, pressure, or coerce a dating partner. In this study, 703 high school students reported on the frequency of DDA victimization, whether they were upset by these incidents, and how they responded. Results suggest that although both girls and boys experienced DDA at similar rates of frequency (with the exception of sexual coercion), girls reported that they were more upset by these behaviors. Girls also expressed more negative emotional responses to DDA victimization than boys. Although DDA is potentially harmful for all youth, gender matters. These findings suggest that the experience and consequences of DDA may be particularly detrimental for girls.

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Dating violence continues to be a pressing social issue for today's youth. It has been defined as actual or threatened physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional abuse of a current or former dating partner, including stalking, and can take place in person or electronically (Center for Disease Control, 2012). Although estimates vary widely, recent national data report that 9.8% of high school aged adolescents experienced physical abuse from a dating partner in the past year (Centers for Disease Control, 2009). Experiencing abuse in early romantic relationships is associated with detriments to physical and mental health, and abuse at a young age has been linked with experiencing further relationship abuse across the lifespan (see Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002 for reviews). As digital media use, or the use of social media and mobile phones, becomes increasingly widespread among youth, its role as a context and tool for unhealthy and abusive dating behaviors is being explored (e.g., Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, Calvete, 2015; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2016; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013a).

Problematic uses of digital media in dating relationships

Digital media use in adolescence is frequent, varied, and integrated into daily life and relationships. Most (77%) of adolescents have a cell phone, and almost all (95%) of teens age 12–17 are on the Internet (Lenhart, 2012). Teens are also avid users of social media. Most (80%) of teens ages 12–17 have a social networking profile (e.g., Twitter) (Lenhart et al., 2010).

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Digital media have both positive and negative impacts on young people's social relationships. As a positive force, digital media can facilitate the maintenance and strengthening of relationships, widen social circles, and connect isolated or marginalized youth with on-line communities (e.g., for sexual minority and/or racial minority youth) (McEwan, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). However, digital media may also put youth at risk for problematic dating experiences. Digital media have moved previously private dating interactions into public spaces, giving dating partners constant access to each other, providing the ability to monitor a partner's activities, and spreading information instantly to entire social networks (Draucker & Martsoff, 2010; Melander, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). Mobile phones may create pressure to be "perpetually connected" and make it difficult for partners to manage communication rules and boundaries (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). The experience of digital dating may also be subjective, and qualitative research with teens has shown that there is not yet consensus about what kinds of digital behaviors are "healthy" and "unhealthy" (Stonard, Bowen, Walker, & Price, 2015). The additional exposure of private interactions that are broadcast publicly to social networks may, in severe cases, assist abusive partners in attempts to gain and maintain power and control over their dating partner.

Problematic dating behaviors using social media and mobile phones can include monitoring someone's activities and whereabouts, controlling who they talk to and are friends with, threats and hostility, spreading embarrassing and sexual photos with others, and pressuring for sexual behavior. Drawing from the existing literature, we chose to call these behaviors "digital dating abuse" (DDA) (Futures without Violence, 2009; Reed et al., 2016; Weathers & Hopson, 2015). These problematic behaviors have been alternatively labeled "electronic aggression" (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007), and "cyber dating abuse" (Borrajó, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015; Borrajó, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda et al., 2015; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013a, 2013b), among other terms (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014; Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, boyd, & Lenhart, 2013; Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden, & Lucero, 2014; Marganski & Melander, 2015).

The emerging literature suggests that DDA is pervasive among adolescents. Among high school students, over 1 in 4 reported being a victim of digital dating abuse (Zweig et al., 2013a). Another report found that 46% of 615 youth age 14–19 had perpetrated DDA (Korchmaros et al., 2013). The review by Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, and Price (2014) reported that findings of DDA victimization rates ranged from 12 to 56%, and rates of DDA perpetration ranged from 12 to 54%. While differences in samples and DDA measurement may account for some of this variation, these rates are roughly comparable to off-line reports of dating violence (Stonard et al., 2014).

In our conceptualization of DDA, we typically focus on a *pattern* of behaviors rather than isolated negative relationship behaviors; however, we recognize that some behaviors can be harmful and abusive if they occur only once (e.g., pressure to engage in sexual activity, threats of physical harm through digital messages). Intent to harm is an important element of abuse, but behaviors occurring outside of the conscious or explicit intent to harm might also be abusive. Studies have also shown that digital dating abuse behaviors were associated with and predict off-line psychological and physical dating violence among adolescents and college students (Brem, Spiller, & Vandehey, 2014; Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014; Marganski & Melander, 2015; Reed et al., 2016; Zweig et al., 2013a). These studies support that digital media may be a new context for dating violence, and DDA can exist within a constellation of problematic off-line abuse tactics.

Gender and digital dating abuse

Research on rates of dating violence by gender are mixed. Many studies report equal rates of perpetration by boys and girls (Archer, 2000; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; White, 2009), whereas other research reports higher rates of sexual abuse perpetration by boys and higher perpetration of verbal, emotional, and physical abuse by girls (Espelage, Low, Anderson, & De La Rue, 2014; Forke, Myers, Catallozzi, & Schwarz, 2008). However, girls have been found to be more likely to experience severe dating violence, suffer injuries as a result of dating violence, and experience greater psychological distress resulting from victimization (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Molitor & Tolman, 1998), indicating that gender differences in dating violence are complex (White, 2009).

These mixed gender findings are also reflected in DDA research among adolescents and college students (Bennett et al., 2011; Reed et al., 2016). Men and boys may be more likely to engage in threatening and pressuring digital behaviors, especially those involving sex, whereas other research suggests that girls may use monitoring and possessive behaviors more frequently (e.g., Lucero et al., 2014; Stonard et al., 2015). Reed et al. (2016) found that college men were more likely than college women to report threatening to distribute embarrassing digital information about their dating partner and were more likely to report pressuring their dating partner to take a sexual photo or video. Zweig et al. (2013a) found that adolescent boys were also more likely than girls to perpetrate sexual DDA behaviors (e.g., pressure to send sexual photos).

Responses to DDA experiences may also differ by gender. Bennett et al. (2011) found that college men reported lower levels of anticipated distress from intrusive digital dating behaviors than women. Reed et al. (2016) found that women reported more negative emotional responses (such as "embarrassed" and "scared") to receiving a sexual digital photo than did men. In a focus group study of 23 teens by Lucero et al. (2014), girls tended to normalize frequent digital monitoring behaviors, whereas boys frequently discussed their frustration with these behaviors. Girls also discussed password sharing as a sign of trust, albeit with some potential consequences, whereas boys talked about password sharing with more trepidation (Lucero et al., 2014). These findings were supported by a recent focus group study of 52 adolescents by Stonard et al. (2015), in which

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