

College Students' Perceptions of Intimate Partner Cyber Harassment

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Abstract

Little is known about cyber harassment in general, and in order to understand more about online harassment among intimate partners, it is important to examine people's perceptions of this new form of aggression. Using Johnson's typology of relationship violence as a guiding framework, the role of technology in partner violence was explored using data from five focus group interviews. Six themes emerged from the analyses, four of which revealed that this partner violence typology accounted for the aggressive use of technology in dating relationships. The remaining themes centered on the ways in which online harassment differs from offline violence. These findings have important theoretical implications and may inform future prevention and intervention efforts.

Introduction

TECHNOLOGY HAS drastically altered the ways in which people communicate. Instead of speaking to someone face to face, messages can be conveyed through a variety of technological means, including text messages, e-mails, and wall postings on social networking Web sites. Despite the relative ease with which individuals may correspond with one another, there is a darker side of technology because these communication methods can be used to stalk and harass individuals.¹⁻³ One form of online violence is cyberstalking, which is repeated computer-based threats and/or harassment that would cause a reasonable person to be concerned for his or her safety.⁴⁻⁶ Examples of cyberstalking, also called cyber or online harassment, include sending unsolicited or threatening e-mails, posting hostile Internet messages, and obtaining personal information about the victim without his or her consent.⁷⁻⁹ Few studies on cyber harassment exist,^{10,11} however, this form of aggression is relatively common among certain groups, such as college students: almost one third of undergraduate students reported experiencing some form of computer-based harassment.⁹

Although there have been several anecdotal accounts of relationship aggression occurring in cyberspace, and former intimates are often online perpetrators,^{10,12} there is a dearth of information on the ways in which technology is employed to intimidate intimate partners.⁶ Additionally, researchers have not examined whether contemporary violence theories such as Johnson's^{13,14} typology of intimate partner violence can account for the aggressive use of technological innovations. According to this typology, there are four distinct forms of couple aggression that are based on the degree of control and

violence present within a relationship: situational couple violence (SCV), intimate terrorism (IT), mutual violent control (MVC), and violent resistance (VR). Because scholars have not specifically examined the use of technology in perpetrating partner violence, it is unknown whether Johnson's typology of violence, which has generally been used to explicate face-to-face interactions, can explain this form of victimization. Furthermore, the unique aspects of online compared to offline harassment among intimates have not been explored.

Because this is a new area of study, it is imperative that researchers talk to a variety of individuals, both those with and without histories of partner violence, to learn more about how newer forms of technology are utilized to stalk and harass others. These perceptions will help researchers understand more about aggressive technological behaviors among young adults in intimate relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of technology in college partner violence with five focus group interviews of undergraduate students. Respondents were asked their perceptions of how electronic forms of communication may be used to perpetrate relationship aggression, and Johnson's typology of violence was used as a theoretical framework for these analyses. Specific features that may be unique to online harassment were also investigated. Determining the ways in which intimate partners harass each other using technology will perhaps inform future prevention and intervention efforts.

Methods

Previous studies have not exclusively focused on intimate partner cyber harassment among young adults, and it is

important to understand college students' perceptions regarding this issue. Other researchers have examined students' perceptions of partner violence and cyberbullying, noting that it is important to ensure whether current measures adequately capture youths' understanding of this social problem.^{1,2,15} As such, focus group interviews, which promote self-disclosure in an environment that is more natural than that provided in individual interviews, were conducted in this exploratory study. Modeled after previous research on dating violence,¹⁶ the interview guide began with an introductory question and then transitioned to open-ended questions specifically about college partner violence. For example, the participants were asked to reflect on what behaviors constitute partner violence and how technology can be used to perpetrate intimate partner aggression. The assistant moderator took detailed notes during the focus group interviews. Each session was audiotaped, and a professional transcriptionist later transcribed the tapes verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the respondents in the results section.

For the present study, five focus group interviews were conducted: three female-only and two male-only groups. Participants included a convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled in sociology and communication studies courses. Approximately eight people attended each session for a total of 39 respondents. The respondents received course credit for their participation in the 60- to 90-minute focus group interviews. Ages ranged from 18 to 23 years ($M = 20.34$ years), and participants had an average of 3 years of college education. The majority of the sample was White (87%); the remaining participants self-identified as Black, Hispanic, Asian, and biracial.

The qualitative data analyses were centered in the interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of viewing participants' subjective worlds and recognizes the existence of multiple realities.¹⁷ The focus group interview transcriptions were imported into ATLAS.ti, a data management software program. The data were analyzed deductively first and coded according to Johnson's typology of partner violence (SCV, IT, MVC, and VR). Data that did not meet the criteria for Johnson's typology were then reserved for inductive analysis. *In vivo* codes were used to delineate the different themes. The findings were verified through a collaborative data conference with colleagues who have interpretive data analysis experience and member-checking procedures.

Results

Partner violence in cyberspace

During the different focus group interview sessions, participants discussed a wide variety of psychologically aggressive behaviors among intimates, such as stalking in cyberspace, posting incriminating photos and videos, and texting harassing messages. These threatening behaviors were similar to those described in Johnson's¹⁴ typology of violence (SCV, IT, MVC, and VR). The violent relationship types served as the thematic categories for describing partner violence in cyberspace.

Situational couple violence "It will cause a big fight." SCV refers to aggressive behaviors that arise within the context of a particular situation that rarely escalate to severe forms of

violence and are not generally connected to a general pattern of control.¹⁴ Minor forms of violence, such as slapping or grabbing a partner, are usually associated with SCV.¹³ Although many researchers have focused solely on the actions that occur, it may also be important to consider other aspects of the violent situation, such as the initial cause of this type of conflict. Several respondents, such as Justin, described how exchanges through various forms of technology served as a precursor to conflict:

My friend, his girlfriend, she was—she was terrible in the fact that she would—she always wanted to see his phone because she liked to read the text messages and stuff. . . . He told me that they got in a fight because he went to the bathroom and his phone was there, and she, like, went through all of his text messages. And if there was just like one girl, like, "Hey, what's up?" Even if they were just friends, she would just flip out. And it was—their relationship, that's kind of why it didn't really work is because she didn't want—wouldn't let him see her phone, but she wanted to see his.

In this relationship, text messages from females other than a girlfriend preceded a particular conflict. Tiffany also mentioned that one of her friends checks her boyfriend's phone, and "if he's called other girls, it will cause a big fight." Although it is unclear what type of argument ensued and whether emotional or physical violence occurred, others, such as Sam, speculated that "reading your partner's text messages from somebody else could lead to a violent situation, more verbal, I guess would be a big one." Different forms of technology, such as cell phones, allow people to view their loved one's private conversations, which may spark a violent altercation. Interestingly, these participant quotes highlight an overlap in online and offline harassment. Although the messages from other people were sent electronically, the actual arguments between partners occurred in person. Because these arguments began within the context of a specific situation, these incidents were labeled as forms of SCV.

Intimate terrorism: "I'm always in your inbox." IT, which occurs when one partner systematically uses a broad range of violent and controlling tactics within an intimate relationship such as economic subordination, threats, isolation, and physical aggression,^{13,14} is a form of violence that may also exist through new forms of technology. Although a partner may not engage in physical violence using technology, individuals in relationships plagued by IT also experience the unilateral use of controlling techniques such as monitoring behaviors that may occur through using cell phones and social networking Web sites. One form of controlling behavior discussed was when one partner constantly monitors the location and/or activity of the other partner. Some respondents mentioned that partners have used electronic devices such as LoJack (Ryan) or global positioning systems technology (Sarah) to track the physical location of their significant others. For example, Kellie described the following situation that includes control through monitoring behavior:

Or like if you're out with friends one night and someone is just, like, constantly texting you, like, "Where are you at?" "What are you doing?" "Who are you with?" "I know you're with someone else." Like, it's just, like, being controlling, you know, like, they're trying to act like they care about you, but it's still, like, they're being controlling over the situation.

Similarly, Paula described an extreme situation when a boyfriend monitored the online activities of his former girlfriend:

After they broke up, he had access to her banking records on the Internet. ... He could go online, and he changed her mailing address so her mail went to him. ... He completely controlled all this because he could do it because of the Internet. And he had access to her bank records, and he knew her passwords, so her privacy was completely blown out of the water. ... It took her forever to rebuild something because of a bad relationship.

Although the level of psychological aggression present in the situations described by Kellie and Paula seems to be much different, the underlying desire of one partner to monitor the activities of another is perhaps a form of terroristic control.

Partners can also monitor the social networks of their loved ones. Amy described a situation in which one partner decided with whom the other partner could communicate:

I've heard of, like, you have 25 guys in your phone book. "Who are they?" ... Like, go through every single one and, like, "Who is this, because if it's not your cousin, then you better delete them." No, I'm serious. One of my really good friends in high school, straight up, her boyfriend looked through her phone and was like, "Who is this?" She was like, "Oh, a friend from. ..." And he'd hit delete, and he would delete it right in front of her. Yeah, it's crazy.

Behaviors similar to the one described by Amy could be considered a form of terroristic control because the girlfriend was isolated from her social network of male friends. Furthermore, this scenario highlights how electronic correspondence with others may prompt negative offline interactions.

Partners within relationships plagued by IT may also constantly communicate with each other using technology. Continuously sending an intimate partner unwanted or excessive text messages was another way that partners exerted control. Becky discussed how a partner can maintain control through constant communication and monitoring behaviors:

I think it's probably a really big intimidation thing. Maybe it's not so much, oh, I'm standing right here telling you what to do or hitting or whatever, but I'm always in your inbox or your Facebook or whatever, telling you things or messaging you or texting you or whatever it might be. I think it's probably a huge thing. It's another way to control people, too.

Although the partners discussed above were not in the same physical location, they maintained control through constant communication. Because monitoring and constant communication using newer forms of technology provide additional ways for partners to exert continuous control, these situations are potential examples of IT.

Mutual violent control: "I've seen it go both ways." MVC occurs when both partners in an intimate relationship are violent and controlling toward each other.¹⁴ The behaviors exhibited within these relationships are similar to those in which IT occurs. James, for example, described how college partners may control one another:

I've heard plenty of stories where guys are actually the ones doing that [placing restrictions on a partner] because they feel that they have this superiority complex that they need to control their woman or some stupid thing like that. But they also put those restrictions on ... when I call you, you, like, al-

ways pick up. And then make sure you answer the phone. ... I don't see why they need to be that controlling. *But I've seen it go both ways.* I think that's probably the biggest problem with college relationships, in general, is controlling and sharing.

Another participant, Kelsey, detailed how both partners can control each other through social networking Web sites:

Boyfriends and girlfriends can probably keep a lot better tab on each other with Facebook and MySpace nowadays than they ever could before, unless they're literally with them all the time. But now, I mean, you've got a time thing that says exactly what time you talked to who and whatever.

As with IT, both partners within mutually violent couples can exert control by monitoring the behavior of one another using newer forms of technology.

Violent resistance: "Something you can hide behind." VR refers to situations in which one partner is violent and controlling and the other partner responds with violence in a manner akin to self-defense.¹⁸ Although it may be very difficult to envision situations in which a victim of violence may use technological means to combat against a violent perpetrator, a few respondents talked about situations in which this may occur. For example, Michelle mentioned that a few of her acquaintances used social networking Web sites to end their aggressive relationships:

I know a couple of girls who have been in bad relationships and they used Facebook to be like, I don't want to see you anymore. And, like, it sounds so sixth grade, but they just couldn't bring themselves to do it in person, and they didn't know what else to do.

Amy also discussed how different forms of technology may allow a victim of violence to retaliate from a safe distance away from an aggressive partner:

It's like a wall, something you can hide behind, you know. Like, sure, I said it, and sure, there's, like, documentation that I said it, but you can't hit me through my computer screen or through my cell phone. You know, what are you going to do about it?

Although Michelle and Amy did not elaborate on what their acquaintances said via technological communications when ending bad relationships, these situations could potentially involve insults and threats that would be considered psychological aggression. It is possible that individuals who feel threatened during in-person exchanges may feel empowered to strike back against a violent offender online, finding safety and security behind a computer screen. From the perceptions of both of these participants, these were potential situations in which victims responded to a partner's violent and controlling behaviors using newer forms of technology.

In summary, the different forms of psychological aggression that college students perceive to occur among couples via technology could be categorized according to Johnson's typology of relationship violence.¹⁴ Although it may be overlooked, emotional violence could be as damaging online as it is in person.

Role of technology in intimate relationships

The participants also discussed aspects of online relationship aggression that may diverge from offline violence. Two

interrelated themes emerged regarding the unique features of online harassment from the remaining data: (a) quick and easy violence and (b) private becomes public. These thematic categories provided more insight into the role of technology in intimate relationships.

Quick and easy violence: "It's so easy." The first theme regarding college students' perceptions of the role of technology in partner violence focused on the speed and ease with which partners can send and receive harassing messages. Several participants discussed how technology allows individuals to stay connected throughout the day. When asked why someone would use technology to perpetrate partner violence, Alexis responded:

I think that's easier, like you said; like, not only is it constant, you can do it all the time, you know. If I had a thought during the day that I wanted to do something, you can text them right away. You don't have to wait till you see them. ... It can just be right away.

This participant perceived the speed with which text messages can be sent to be an attractive feature for abusive partners. Amy also believed that using technology to convey aggressive messages "triggers things much more quickly." For these participants, the pace of communication may have important implications for the role of technology in partner violence.

Many respondents spoke about how easily individuals may use many forms of technology and how this might be an important consideration for partner violence research. According to Richard, "It's a lot easier to harass people because it's pretty easy to send a text message or an e-mail or something." Not only are newer devices simple to use, there are also more communication options available. For example, Elizabeth mentioned the following when asked to reflect on technology's role in college partner violence:

It makes it kind of easier. Okay. Well, before text messaging or something, if somebody wanted to say something to you, you had the choice of when you wanted to talk to them or not. You could just not answer your door or whatever. But they could still be sending you those text messages and stuff like that.

In contrast to offline aggression where partners must be in the same geographical location at the exact same time, newer forms of electronic communication enable disgruntled partners to send harassing and threatening messages quickly and easily. As such, the advent of new technological innovations has provided additional avenues for conveying harassing messages and changed the speed with which they are sent and received.

Private becomes public: "You can make it sting a lot more." The final theme illustrated how arguments between couples become public domain and the consequences associated with this exposure. Several participants discussed how disgruntled partners used Internet sources such as social networking Web sites to harass and embarrass their partner. Josh discussed how former partners used these communication methods: "Just like with Internet bullying, I guess ... I'm sure that can be used to degrade somebody, like saying all this stuff about them ... maybe saying those insulting terms

online ... where everyone can see it, I guess." Similarly, when asked whether insulting comments posted online constitute partner violence, Susan said, "Yeah. ... I mean, it's definitely, you know, insulting and embarrassing, and it's public embarrassment. Definitely." From the perceptions of these participants, arguments that occurred online became public knowledge, perhaps adding another dimension to college partner violence.

Not only can friends and family members of a couple in conflict learn about a fight online, but they even join in the argument, according to the participants. Laura talked about what can happen when partners posted negative comments about each other online:

I think, like, what Facebook does is, you can make it sting a lot more, like by posting something, you know, an insult, whatever it might be, but knowing that, you know, 50 people are going to go to that site and see what you said. Like, I think you can really hurt people, maybe not worse ... but definitely hurt people, yeah.

Maria also explained, "I've seen postings like that, that are made public, and they can get pretty nasty pretty quick and involve a lot of people that shouldn't even be included in the fight." According to the participants, psychologically aggressive exchanges that once took place privately between feuding couples became public domain and may constitute emotional violence. Other interested parties were involved in the conflict when private conversations became public.

In summary, these two interrelated themes, "quick and easy violence" and "private becomes public," represented the participants' perceptions of the role of technology in college partner violence. These thematic categories highlighted how certain features of psychological aggression have changed with the introduction of newer forms of technology.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to broadly explore the implications of new forms of technology on partner violence among college students. This has been a neglected area of study that is of great significance given the increased use of technology in contemporary culture.^{19,20} Johnson's^{13,14} typology of violence served as the organizing framework for the initial analyses regarding the types of violent relationships that occur via electronic communication devices. The participants discussed different aspects of online harassment that reflected each of the categories of violent relationships, including monitoring behaviors and constant communication. The distinguishing features of each type of intimate partner violence are reflected in the discussions of the focus group participants with different forms of control occurring in relationships marked by IT, MVC, and VR and less severe and occasional aggression in couples engaged in SCV. This indicates that Johnson's typology can account not only for different types of violence (i.e., physical, sexual, and psychological aggression) but also for the means by which they occur, including both negative face-to-face and technological interactions.

The unique aspects of cyber harassment compared to offline violence were also examined. According to the focus group participants, there are two important features of technological aggression in intimate relationships: this form of

conflict is quick and easy, and matters that are typically private become public when individuals utilize electronic devices as a medium for violence. Newer forms of technology are relatively easy to use, and people are constantly accessible even if they are not located in the same geographic area.⁷ In modern society, people can be reached anywhere at any time via cell phones, personal computers, and other portable communication devices, which may intensify a victim's perceptions of vulnerability.²¹ Furthermore, although some may regard technological exchanges as private conversations, these messages may also be dispensed very quickly to a wider audience because recipients can forward these electronic communications to multiple technology users. Although psychological aggression conveyed through technology is similar to other forms of partner violence, these themes also direct attention to the differences between various forms of relationship aggression, such as the ease with which harassing messages can be sent from anywhere at any time, which may change how relationship violence occurs among younger generations.

There are other differences between online and offline communications that may have implications for partner violence research. Communications in cyberspace often lack the physical and social cues that are present in face-to-face interactions.¹ For example, the recipient of an electronic message cannot see the body language and facial expressions or even hear the tone of voice of the sender; he or she can only attempt to interpret the intended message from a known or unknown sender through a string of text, numbers, and symbols.²² A person who sends a harassing or intimidating message online is not immediately confronted with the recipient's reactions and therefore does not know the consequences of the negative communication (e.g., crying) or even whether the message was interpreted correctly.^{1,21} Moreover, those who use technological forms of communication tend to be less inhibited in their online interactions with others and may type or text things that they would not customarily say in "real life."^{4,22} Consequently, each of these aspects of newer forms of communication may impact the interpretation and content of the correspondence, potentially leading to increased online or offline harassment.

Much of the current literature on cyber harassment focuses on bullying experiences among younger individuals,^{1,2} and few researchers have examined cyberstalking among college students.^{9,10} The focus group participants in the current study indicate that cyber harassment similar to that documented in the bullying and cyberstalking literature occurs among intimate partners (e.g., harassment through text messaging). The finding that online harassment may exist between partners has important theoretical implications. Although researchers generally utilize Johnson's^{13,14} typology to explain face-to-face interactions,²³ aggression that occurs via technology can also be classified according to this typology of relationship violence. It is presently unknown, however, whether or not other partner violence theories, such as social learning theory, can account for newer forms of intimate aggression. These theories may need to be modified to account for specific relationship dynamics that occur when aggrieved partners resort to electronic harassment.

The findings of the present study also have implications for partner violence measurement and future research. Re-

searchers who study relationship violence often employ standardized measures to examine the prevalence of partner violence. These measures, however, do not constitute an exhaustive list of all forms of partner violence and do not generally incorporate technological forms of violence such as those mentioned in this study. As such, researchers may be underestimating the actual prevalence of partner violence. Although the respondents in the present study and previous research suggest that cyber harassment is linked to offline harassment and violence,^{12,24} it is also possible that electronic communications may lessen the subjective or immediate impact of these messages or perhaps even mitigate the threat of physical violence. Alternatively, constantly receiving harassing messages from an intimate partner may heighten perceptions of vulnerability and even escalate in-person violence. Because little is known about intimate partner cyber harassment, future researchers should consider technological forms of psychological aggression when conducting both quantitative and qualitative studies examining the predictors, outcomes, and contextual factors associated with relationship violence.

The current study focuses on college students' perceptions of violence; however, it is important to know more about the context of actual cyber harassment among intimates to further examine the utility of Johnson's^{13,14} typology in explaining this form of aggression. Many of the respondents were talking about their friends' experiences, and they may not have complete information about the harassing situations they described. Additionally, their subjective interpretation may not accurately reflect the actual events. Future researchers should examine cyber harassment among victims and/or perpetrators of this form of violence using diverse samples of respondents. Learning more about the ways in which intimate partners are psychologically aggressive through various forms of technology may inform prevention and intervention efforts.

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