The prevalence and overlap of technology-assisted and offline adolescent dating violence

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Adolescent Dating Violence (ADV) is characterized by psychological, emotional, physical and sexual victimization among adolescents, and has been recognized as an important issue globally In the United Kingdom, for example, prevalence rates for physical and sexual ADV are as high as 30%, rising to 72% for psychological and emotional victimization. With the recent increase to use of technology-based communication (e.g., email, social media, instant messenger) among adolescents, instigating violence electronically has been recognized as a new form of/context for ADV; for example, posting sexual pictures of a partner online or cyberbullying. The term the authors use for this form of aggression is Technology-Assisted Adolescent Dating Violence (TAADV). In recent studies, the prevalence rate of TAADV victimization has been between 12%-56%. However, not a lot is known about experiences of TAADV.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- TAADV may have unique consequences due to the nature of online communication.
- Opportunities for constant contact through online communication tools may increase the frequency of TAADV.
- It is important to understand the overlap between on- and offline ADV in order to improve future policy, practice and research.
- Technology does provide new opportunities for victimization and/or perpetration.

The purpose of this study was to explore the prevalence of TAADV and ADV among British adolescents, and to understand adolescents' role in TAADV and ADV (i.e., victim, perpetrator or both). Finally, the authors wanted to know the extent of the overlap between TAADV and ADV experiences.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

469 adolescents (52% female; 88% White British) between 12 and 18 years old were recruited through schools, youth clubs, and snowball sampling (i.e., recruiting through already enrolled participants) in Central England. Parents/guardians were informed about the research and were allowed to withdraw their children from participating. For this study, participants were only included if they reported having a dating relationship in the past year (59%; n = 277) and if they provided answers for all questions used in this paper. Participants completed a questionnaire which consisted of 12 abusive, threatening, monitoring or controlling TAADV behaviours such as insults, embarrassing or humiliating a partner, mean or hurtful comments, or sharing a partner's personal information or pictures. These behaviours could have been experienced or instigated via a range of technologies such as phone call, text, instant messenger, social networking sites, video chats, etc. Participants also completed the Controlling Behaviors Scale which asked 12 questions about controlling offline ADV in the past year, such as making threats to harm or leave a partner and restricting the amount of time a partner spends with friends or family. Fifteen questions from the Safe Dates scales were used to measure past year offline physical ADV victimization and perpetration, such as scratching, slapping, and kicking, and responses ranged from "never" to "ten or more times". Finally, demographic data were collected (e.g., gender, age) and questions about dating experiences were asked (e.g., if they currently had a boyfriend or girlfriend).

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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Approximately three-quarters of adolescents (72.6%) reported experiencing any TAADV at least once in the past year (range across behaviors, 12-56%). The most common technologies through which TAADV was experienced were text messages, social networking sites and instant messaging. A smaller proportion of adolescents (49.6%) reported perpetrating any TAADV (range, 5-34%). The most common behaviours experienced and instigated by youth in this study were contacting a partner to check their whereabouts, checking a partner's messages, and insults and putdowns. There was not a significant difference in overall experiences or use of TAADV between males and females in this sample; however, females were more likely to be identified as victims only for sexual TAADV as compared to males. These results support other research which suggests that there are gender differences in sexual ADV.

For offline ADV, 36%/43% were victims/perpetrators of controlling ADV, and 25%/14% were victims/perpetrators of physical ADV. These findings are important as they suggest that TAADV is in fact prevalent among British youth, and may be even more prevalent than offline ADV. One possible explanation for this is how easily accessible technology is for youth and how much time they spend using it, creating increased opportunities for online abusive behaviour.

A total of 29% of adolescents reported having some involvement in sexual TAADV. Most of these were victims only (21%) , followed by perpetrator-victim (7%) and perpetrator only (1.1%). There was also a significant difference for victims of sexual TAADV, where more females reported being victims than males. Further, 72% of adolescents reported some form of involvement in non-sexual TAADV. Just under half (47.8%) were perpetrator-victims, followed by victims only (23.7%) and perpetrators only (0.7%). There was a significant relationship between the overlap of controlling ADV and TAADV for males, but further tests between groups (victim, perpetrator perpetrator-victim, none) were not significant.

Finally, around two-thirds of adolescents who reported experiences of TAADV did not report experiencing controlling or physical ADV in the last year. This may suggest that technology facilitates new forms of victimization and instigation for teen dating violence that were not possible before. It may also suggest that some adolescents prefer more indirect methods of abuse, or that adolescents have limited time together in person and spend more time communicating online.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

The results of this study have several important implications. Even though there was some overlap between those who experienced offline ADV and TAADV, there were some individuals who experienced only TAADV. This means that technology may have created new forms of/contexts for abuse that did not previously exist, and future research should explore the implications of these new forms of cyber violence for adolescent well-being. As technology is intertwined in most of our lives, future research should also consider the longitudinal impact of both TAADV and ADV and how the two may impact and/or influence one another over time (i.e. does one lead to the other?).

For practitioners, it is important to recognize that both online and offline violence in romantic relationships do co-occur, making it important for practitioners to assess for both when working with youth. These findings can also help inform prevention, intervention, and psychoeducational programs for youth, caregivers, and practitioners about healthy relationship communication vs. abusive, controlling, and obsessive communication in both online and offline settings. Adolescents should be taught skills to set healthy boundaries with their partners to enhance positive relationships and learn to recognize when unhealthy behaviours begin to emerge.

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