



Full length article

Electronic displays of aggression in teen dating relationships: Does the social ecology matter?[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 July 2016

Received in revised form

14 October 2016

Accepted 17 October 2016

Keywords:

Teen dating violence

Electronic aggression

Adolescents

Social ecology

Coercive sexting

Cyberstalking

ABSTRACT

Electronic and online forms of communication play a central role in the social lives of adolescents. The increased connectivity provided by electronic communication has allowed for the distal engagement in a set of negative behaviors such as bullying, harassment and stalking known collectively as electronic aggression. Recent research has explored the use of electronic aggression within teen dating relationships. This study sought to expand on that research by examining the influence of the social ecology on electronic aggression in these relationships. Survey data from 727 middle and high school students who reported a dating history in the past year found significant associations between elements of the social ecology and the perpetration of electronic dating aggression (EDA). Parental involvement and perceived safety in the community were linked to decreased rates of EDA perpetration, while Adverse Childhood Experiences were connected with a greater likelihood of perpetrating EDA. The findings suggest a number of sites within the social ecology for environmental modification to protect against EDA within teen relationships.

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1. Introduction

Electronic and online forms of communication now play a central role in the social interactions of adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Collectively, electronic communication allows for the distal engagement in a range of behaviors that previously required physical proximity (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012). Of heightened concern is that adolescents, defined in this study as youth ages ten to nineteen, currently and frequently use electronic and online communication to harass, humiliate, or threaten their peers and partners (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Furthermore, increasing numbers of adolescents report being victims of this new form of violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n. d.). While a number of terms have been put forward to define this type of behavior, such as Internet harassment and cyber-bullying (Kiriakidis & Kavoura,

2010), for the purposes of this discussion, *electronic aggression* will be used to encompass a broad range of violent and abusive behaviors that are carried out electronically (David-Ferdon & Feldman Hertz, 2007). David-Ferdon and Feldman Hertz (2007) define electronic aggression as types of aggression and harassment (teasing, making fun of someone, spreading rumors, or making threatening or aggressive comments) that emerges through a variety of electronic communication mechanisms such as e-mails, chat rooms, micro-blogging, instant messaging, social media, texting apps, and videos or images posted on websites or sent through cell phones (Hertz & David-Ferdon, 2008).

1.1. Electronic dating aggression and teen dating violence

Within the context of electronic aggression, most research investigates the role of technology in bullying between classmates and peers (cyber-bullying) and documents that the prevalence of students reporting cyber-bullying ranges from 9.1% to 23.1% for perpetration and from 5.7% to 18.3% for victimization (Gan et al., 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Less is known, however, about the role of electronic and online communication in aggressive behavior among adolescents involved in dating relationships. The literature on teen dating violence primarily focuses on emotional,

[☆] The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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physical, and sexual aggression (Vagi, Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015; Young, Grey, & Boyd, 2009). Indeed, the numbers are compelling. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), approximately 10% of American students report experiencing physical dating violence and 25% report verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual dating violence annually.

More recently, research has emerged that examines the role of electronic communication relative to abuse in teen dating relationships (Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014). Draucker and Martsof's (2010) qualitative study ($N = 56$), highlights several ways that youth use electronic communication as a mechanism to perpetrate dating aggression, such as arguing, monitoring the whereabouts of a partner or controlling their activities, as well as emotional aggression toward a partner. Zweig, Dank, Yahner and Lachman's (2013) study ($N = 5647$) found that over a quarter of students in current or recent dating relationships reported being victims of some form of electronic dating aggression (EDA) within the prior year, and 1 out of 10 students reported perpetrating EDA.

The individual-level correlates of EDA have also been explored. Zweig, Dank, Yahner, and Lachman (2013) found that boys were more likely to perpetrate sexual EDA, while girls were more likely to perpetrate non-sexual forms of EDA. In a study of high school students and EDA ($N = 703$), Reed, Tolman, Ward, and Safyer (2016) found that while girls perpetrated EDA more frequently than boys, attachment anxiety was positively associated with EDA perpetration regardless of gender.

1.2. Social ecological framework

Given the nascent research on EDA, understanding the risk and protective factors associated with these behaviors is the first step in prevention and intervention efforts. The current study attempts to fill the research gap by examining risk and protective factors for EDA in teens within the multiple levels of the social ecology.

According to Bronfenbrenner's social ecological framework (1977), the individual is not only influenced by his or her biologically determined ontogenetic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex) but also his or her immediate settings (e.g., home, school) or interactions and by the interrelations among the various settings and interactions of his or her immediate environment (e.g., relations with parents, peers/friends, and intimate partners). More specifically, this theoretical framework posits that youths' behavior is influenced by a range of nested contextual systems, such as family, peers, and school environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Although complex, the social-ecological framework provides direction for examining the complexity of EDA. This framework is particularly germane because it allows for an investigation of the direct, indirect, and combined influences of the social contexts on EDA (Espelage, Rao, & De La Rue, 2013). For the current study, a social ecological framework is applied in the examination of the antecedents of EDA.

1.2.1. Parents

Social learning theorists purport that children subjected to inconsistent parenting behavior may learn aggressive tactics, which could later be used in close relationships, such as dating (Lavoie et al., 2002). Thus, youth who experienced inconsistent parenting behavior, such as low level of parental monitoring during childhood, are predisposed to engage in coercive dating relationships during adolescence (Vagi et al., 2013). Longitudinal research conducted by Lavoie et al. (2002), which included a sample of 717 Canadian boys, found that perceived low level of parental monitoring during childhood influenced the probability of perpetrating aggressive behavior in dating relationships.

Additionally, research findings document that experiences of

maltreatment during childhood place children at risk of perpetrating dating aggression during adolescence (Lavoie et al., 2002; Sappington, Pharr, Tunstall, & Rickert, 1998; Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001). Simons et al.'s (1998) longitudinal study found that parental physical abuse was correlated with dating aggression during adolescence, suggesting that parent-to-child physical punishment specifically teaches children that it is both legitimate and effective to physically assault those you love (Simons et al., 1998, p. 475). Wolfe et al. (2001) also reported from a sample of 1419 adolescents, that boys with histories of maltreatment were 2.8 times as likely to use threatening behaviors and 3.4 times as likely to inflict physical aggression against their dating partners. However, findings on the link between maltreatment and dating violence perpetration appear to be inconsistent (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997).

A number of research findings also suggest that youth exposed to marital violence during childhood have the propensity to perpetrate dating aggression as adolescents or young adults (Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay, & Wanner, 2002; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004). Using a longitudinal prospective design, mother-child pairs from violent and nonviolent homes ($N = 208$), Lichter and McCloskey (2004) found that adolescents exposed to marital violence during childhood were more likely to justify the use of violence in dating relationships. However, the researchers also found that youth with traditional attitudes of male-female relationships and who justified marital violence were significantly more likely to engage in dating aggression regardless of marital violence exposure. Gover, Kaukinen, and Fox (2008) reported from a sample of approximately 2500 young adults that childhood exposure to family violence was a significant predictor of involvement in physical and psychological dating aggression for both males and females.

These findings are consistent with the cycle of violence hypothesis, which postulates that children who experience or witness violence in the family are at a heightened risk of perpetrating violence (Heyman & Sleps, 2002). Moreover, these youth may often be rejected by their "conventional" peers and seek friendships with deviant peer groups, choosing romantic partners from these peers during adolescence, thereby increasing the risk of dating aggression (Feiring & Furman, 2000). However, studies investigating the link between family violence during childhood and dating aggression has traditionally focused on physical violence.

1.2.2. Peers

Developmental psychologists concur that adolescence is a period where youth rely less on their parents and increasingly turn to peers for support (Ayyash-Abdo, 2002). During this period, youths' attitudes and behaviors are strongly influenced by their peers, and an adolescent subculture exists within the parameters of broader society (Morris, 1996). Peer beliefs and attitudes about dating also influences adolescent dating behavior and practices (McElhaney, Antonishak, & Allen, 2008), and peers can influence aggressive behavior through direct or indirect involvement (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Foshee, Reyes, & Ennett, 2010; Stephenson, Martsof, & Draucker, 2013). Extant research has documented several peer level antecedents of dating aggression, such as poor friendship quality (Foshee et al., 2013; Linder & Collins, 2005), hostile friendship (Stocker & Richmond, 2007), and bullying (Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2012). For example, Foshee et al.'s (2013) longitudinal research (a five-wave panel study) consisting of 3412 adolescents found that students with friends who engage in dating aggression are at increased risk for perpetrating dating aggression. On the other hand, adolescents with high quality friendships are at decreased risk of dating

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