



## Research Report

## The development and validation of the cyber dating abuse questionnaire among young couples

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## ABSTRACT

Cyber dating abuse is a growing phenomenon that has awakened little empirical interest. This study had two objectives: (1) to analyze the psychometric properties of the Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire (CDAQ), which is an instrument developed to comprehensively measure this phenomenon; and (2) to conduct an initial analysis of the prevalence and frequency of this type of abuse. The sample consisted of 788 young people between 18 and 30 years of age (77.3% women, mean age = 22.72 years,  $SD = 4.9$ ). First, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyzes revealed a structure composed of two factors for the scales of victimization and for perpetration: *direct aggression* (an aggressive act with a deliberate intention to hurt the partner/ex-partner, such as insults or threats) and *monitoring/control* (the use of electronic means to control the partner/ex-partner; for example, the use of personal passwords). Second, the analysis of the relationship between cyber dating abuse and other variables, such as offline physical and psychological violence and cyberbullying, provided additional evidence for the construct validity of the instrument. Third, the reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) revealed an adequate internal consistency for the scale. Finally, the prevalence of direct aggression was higher than 10%, and the prevalence of control was greater than 70%, which indicate that both types of cyber abuse seem to be common behaviors among young couples. Finally, the contribution of the present study to previous empirical research and future research is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, communication and information technologies, primarily mobile phones and the Internet, have become essential elements in the relationships of young couples, representing the potential for relation maintenance, conflict or aggressions (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Kellerman, Margolin, Borofsky, Iturralde, & Baucom, 2013; Schnurr, Mahatmya, & Basche, 2013). In this context, cyber dating abuse is an emerging problem (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013) with important outcomes for the mental health of its victims (Bennet, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Ybarra, 2004). The few studies that have examined the prevalence of such abuse found that between 12% and 17% of young people admit to committing some form of cyber abuse

toward their partner (Bennet, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Boyd, & Lenhart, 2013), and between 11% and 31.5% of young people report having been a victim of such abuse (Bennet et al., 2011; Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Zweig et al., 2013). In addition, cyber dating abuse is related to other types of interpersonal aggression, such as offline dating violence (Bennet et al., 2011; Schnurr et al., 2013; Zweig et al., 2013), and cyberbullying (Cutbush, Silber Ashley, Kan, Hampton, & Hall, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011).

In contrast to the aggressions that take place in an offline context, online aggressions are characterized by the absence of geographical and temporal boundaries (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Smith, 2012). It is precisely the lack of boundaries that makes these aggressions particularly harmful for the victims (Bennet et al., 2011). Furthermore, the indirect rather than face-to-face nature of this type of aggression facilitates the contact with the victim (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Smith, 2012), which constitutes an attractive feature for those who perpetrate cyber-aggression (Melander, 2010). Finally, accessibility of the information on social

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networks like Facebook has been found to have important implications for the development of behaviors such as jealousy and confrontation between the partners (e.g., Cohen, Bowman, & Borchert, 2014).

Although attention to the phenomenon of cyber dating abuse has increased in recent years, knowledge about it is still limited. This paucity of empirical attention on the phenomenon has led to the lack of a common definition. There are also different denominations according to different authors: cyber dating abuse (Zweig et al., 2013), cyber-aggression (Schnurr et al., 2013), electronic dating violence (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011) or intimate partner cyber harassment (Melander, 2010). In the present work, we will use the term cyber dating abuse to refer both to aggressions and behaviors of severe surveillance of the partner, because it is more inclusive and widely used in the literature of partner abuse (e.g., Zweig et al., 2013).

In addition, there is a wide range of behaviors that have been used as indicators of cyber dating abuse. Namely, it includes behaviors such as the monitoring and surveillance of a partner or ex-partner (Burke, Wallen, Vail-Smith, & Knox, 2011; Lyndon et al., 2011; Southworth, Dawson, Frase, & Tucker, 2005), sending rude or humiliating comments (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Kellerman, Margolin, Borofsky, Baucom, & Iturralde, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), sending emails or threatening messages (Bennet et al., 2011; Jerin & Dolinsky, 2001; Zweig et al., 2013), and posting photos with the intention to humiliate the partner (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Lyndon et al., 2011).

This above lack of consistency is accompanied by few instruments with adequate psychometric properties to measure the various aspects of cyber dating abuse, which considerably limits the study and understanding of this phenomenon. A review of the existing instruments that evaluate aspects of aggression and bullying through new technologies in dating relationships is presented in Table 1. As seen, most of the scales focus on specific types of cyber dating abuse such as, for example, excessive control behaviors on Facebook (e.g., Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011; Lyndon et al., 2011). Some instruments measure only perpetration or victimization (e.g., Bennet et al., 2011; Fox & Warber, 2013), which may limit the understanding of this phenomenon because it has been found that both offline dating violence and online harassment perpetration and victimization are often reciprocal (Archer, 2000; Estévez, Villardón, Calvete, Padilla, & Orue, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996; Swahn, Alemdar, & Whitaker, 2010). Finally, the majority of studies do not provide evidence for the validity of the scales. Two exceptions are the Controlling Partners Inventory (CPI) of Burke et al. (2011) and the Scale for Interpersonal Electronic Surveillance for Social Networking Sites (ISS) of Tokunaga (2011). Although these instruments are valuable starting points in the study of cyber dating abuse, they only focus on evaluating the control aspects of dating. Cyber dating abuse, however, has other important aspects.

Another empirical question that has received some attention is whether cyber dating abuse has any relationship with other proximal phenomena such as offline dating violence and cyberbullying. Regarding the relation with offline dating aggression, it has been argued that cyber dating abuse constitutes a form of psychological dating aggression and, therefore, cyber dating abuse and offline psychological aggressions tend to co-occur and be related (Melander, 2010; Schnurr et al., 2013). The empirical evidence to date has supported the relationship between offline psychological aggression and cyber dating abuse (Cutbush et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Zweig et al., 2013). Regarding the relationship of cyber dating abuse with cyberbullying, both phenomena share common features such as the use of technology to monitor and control another person (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). At the empirical level, it has been found that those who admit perpetrating cyber

dating abuse also tend to perpetrate cyberbullying (Cutbush et al., 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). For example, Hinduja and Patchin (2011) found that young people who perpetrated cyberbullying were three times more likely to engage in cyber dating abuse behaviors than those who did not perpetrate aggressions against their peers.

### 1.1. The present study

Previous instruments to assess cyber dating abuse have limitations, which could contribute to explaining the lack of consistency in the results obtained concerning this problem. Therefore, our first objective was to develop and validate a comprehensive instrument to measure various types of perpetration and victimization of cyber dating abuse. Assessing both victimization and perpetration allows us to gain a complete perspective of the problem. In addition, we aimed to analyze the factor structure, internal consistency, and construct validity of the instrument through the analysis of relationships with other variables that previous literature has shown to be associated with cyber dating abuse: psychological and physical offline violence (e.g., Zweig et al., 2013) and cyberbullying (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Finally, to extend the limited empirical evidence available, the second objective of this study was to analyze the prevalence and frequency of cyber dating abuse in young couples.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The initial sample consisted of 834 adults aged between 18 and 30 years. The present study included only those participants who had been in a dating relationship at some point (94.4% of the total sample). Thus, the final sample consisted of 788 young adults (77.3% women, 22.2% men and 0.5% with no indicated gender) with a mean age of 22.72 ( $SD = 4.9$ ). Of these, 73.2% currently had a partner, and 26.8% had previously been in a relationship. Regarding sexual orientation, 92.6% were heterosexual, 3.7% were homosexual, and 3.8% were bisexual. The average duration of the relationships was 32.09 months ( $SD = 52.26$ ). Overall, 4.6% of the participants described their relationship as new, 10.9% described their relationship as casual/open, 36.6% described their relationship as stable, 43.4% described their relationship as serious, and 4.6% were engaged to be married. Regarding the participants' educational level, 1.2% had completed compulsory education, 15.8% had a Bachelor's degree, 4.7% had received professional training, 66.1% held a degree in Engineering, and 12.3% had received a Masters' degree/PhD.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Sociodemographic questionnaire

We included a series of questions on age, sex, whether the participants were or had been in a relationship, sexual orientation, educational level, length of relationship, and type of relationship.

#### 2.2.2. Cyber dating abuse questionnaire

The questionnaire developed in this study consisted of 20 items that collected information about various types of cyber dating abuse, such as threats, identity theft, control, and humiliation. Each item consists of two parallel items: one for victimization and another for perpetration (e.g., "My partner or former partner made a comment on a wall of a social network to insult or humiliate me" and "I wrote a comment on the wall of a social network to insult or humiliate my partner or former partner"). The response scale used

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