Cyber and Offline Dating Abuse

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 The increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and networking has promoted the occurrence of different forms of victimization, specifically in terms of interpersonal interaction (e.g., cyberbullying or online risk-taking behaviour), which also includes cyber dating abuse (CDA). Some studies report that CDA is an extension of offline dating abuse (ODA).

1. Introduction

The use of communication and information technologies (ICT) is currently part of the daily routine of many adolescents and young adults. The wide variety of digital and technological tools currently available, such as text messages, numerous social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr or Twitter), email, mobile phones and the use of a webcam, among others, allows young people to easily establish an online dating relationship [1], and is also a simple way to be connected with the loving partner, aiming to express affection [2]. However, digital practices and extensive network use also trigger additional problems associated with the disinformation about the risk of using these specific tools. The research on the relevance that ICT may have in promoting violence and cyber violence has greatly increased in recent years worldwide. It has been reported that ICT contribute to making adolescents and young people more susceptible to interpersonal intrusiveness, thus endorsing different forms of victimization such as cyberstalking [3], cyberbullying [4], sexting [5] and cyber dating abuse (CDA) [1][6][7], among other forms of online victimization.

CDA is one form of victimization practiced through ICT use, consisting of a form of control and harassment by the dating partner [8]. Considered a multidimensional construct, CDA can involve multiple abusive behaviours through digital practices. Examples are daily control and surveillance of the dating or ex-dating partner; sending/posting offensive or humiliating comments to/of the dating partner; sending emails or messages containing different threats; and/or posting photos [1][9] thus integrating different abusive typologies. The literature reports the existence of a continuous effort to establish CDA abusive typologies, although with little consensus. The review developed by Gámez-Guadix et al. [10] identified the following typologies: cyber control or monitoring (e.g., the need to know, at all times, the whereabouts of the dating partner and where he/she is); cyber harassment (e.g., repeated and insidious calls); and cybernetic and psychological aggression (e.g., insults, threats and humiliations). Other authors, such as Watkins et al. [11], outlined different CDA typologies (e.g., psychological cyber aggression, sexual cyber aggression and cyber aggression). CDA direct aggression, which includes behaviours to harm victims through direct attacks (e.g., threats, insults or dissemination of private information), and control CDA, as a means of cybernetically monitoring social relationships and the entire behaviour of victims, constitute two other cited recurrent typologies [12][13][14]. The many studies [7][14][15][16][17] focusing on these two types of abuse report a greater preponderance of CDA control behaviours in relation to partners, when compared to CDA direct aggression behaviours.

Despite the high variability in prevalence rates, worrying percentages of CDA victimization and perpetration by young people have been reported. A systematic review of 44 studies on young CDA victims, carried out by Caridade et al. [18], found the minimum rates of victimization and perpetration to be around 6% and the maximum rates of victimization and perpetration exceeding 90% (92 and 93.7%, respectively). The critical review of CDA measures by Brown and Hegarty [19] found perpetration rates among youth ranging from 6 to 91%. Another review of 21 studies investigating digital dating abuse, made by Stonard et al. [20], found victimization and perpetration rates of around 55%, also showing that victimization ranged from 12 to 56% and perpetration ranged from 12 to 54%. Peskin et al. [21] also found that 15% of the participants involved in their study had already perpetrated some kind of abuse throughout their lives, using the social networks. The studied research, e.g., [18][20][22] allows to conclude that CDA investigations have produced results that may be considered as conflicting and which are also difficult to interpret. This can be attributed to the lack of consensus in

relation to the terminology used, the operationalization of variables and the tools used to measure CDA, as well as to the methodological characteristics of the studies (e.g., sample size, sampling context, selection method or time interval considered) [10][18][19][20][22]. The literature has also documented the existence of CDA reciprocity. Associations between CDA victimization and perpetration have been reported by several studies investigating reciprocity, e.g., [11][14][23][24], and this reciprocity also happens in traditional dating violence [25].

Considering the context in which dating violence occurs, it is essential to better understand the meaning and motivation behind this type of abuse, as well as to design effective preventive strategies and intervention policies at the institutional level. International research has documented that many abusive behaviours in traditional dating relationships [26] involving ICT use [27][28] are attributed to a context of "play" or "joking". The studies that document a higher prevalence of control CDA [16][17] have also reported that the belief in romantic dating myths among adolescents is behind this type of abuse. Jealousy, commonly perceived as a sign of love in affective relationships, is an example of that. Other studies [29][30] have also identified the partner's jealousy and anger as important explanatory elements in the context of the partner's intimate aggression. In the study developed by Rodríguez-Domínguez et al. [28], comprising a sample of 206 Spanish high school students, it was also found that the attitudes and beliefs based on sexism and jealousy motivated the occurrence of early dating violence, thus transcending the virtual space. This evidence was also corroborated in a Portuguese study carried out by Santos and Caridade [31], where jealousy as well as individual and partner self-control abilities (impulsivity/aggressiveness) were the most mentioned indicators by the participants, as the main causes of dating violence.

CDA could be considered as an extension of Offline Dating Abuse (ODA), something that has motivated several empirical studies to investigate the relationship between these types of abuse, e.g., [7][12][16][17].

2. Prevalence of Dating Abuse

The participants acknowledged the greater use of ICT (99.4%) to communicate and relate to their dating partners, with a predominance of the use of messages (58.9%) and some social networks (e.g., Instagram). These results confirm that adolescents and young adults have access to different forms to search and share information, also corroborating the extent and importance that the digital practices have in their daily routines [1]. The results also highlight the benefits of maintaining a healthy relationship in terms of connection, which, in turn, may also be translated into a higher risk of experiencing and/or perpetrating some forms of online abuse, including CDA [16].

As also reported by other relevant international studies, e.g., [20][32][33], we found high indicators in terms of CDA victimization (38.2%) and perpetration (42.2%). These results are lower than those found in a Spanish study by Cava et al. [16], with 68.8% of teenage girls reporting some ODA and also lower than the results of another Portuguese study by Caridade and Braga [15] using the same instrument, which found 59.2% by CDA victimization and 66.9% by CDA perpetration. As found in the study developed by Borrajo et al. [12], also with the same instrument, victimization and aggression for control CDA were higher (38.2% vs. 43.4%) when compared to CDA victimization and direct aggression (8.1% vs. 15.6%). Once again, these indicators are lower than those found in the aforementioned Portuguese study by Caridade and Braga [15], with respect to both victimization and aggression by control (58.8% vs. 62.3%, respectively) and victimization and perpetration by direct aggression (18.0% vs. 14.7%). It is important to highlight that the indicators of victimization and perpetration of control CDA are consistent with other international studies, e.g., [1][34], reporting rates below 50%. The increase in control CDA, when compared to CDA direct aggression, may be explained by the fact that it is a cyber abuse typology that includes abusive behaviours (e.g., persistent messaging or partner surveillance), being less explicit and therefore more acceptable by young people. It is also perceived as a sign of love or jealousy, as reported by Francis and Pearson [35].

The existence of this close connection between ODA and CDA has also been found in several previous relevant international studies, e.g., [12][16][36][37][38][34][33][39]. In effect, the literature has been conceptualizing CDA either as a form of psychological abuse, frequently related to face-to-face intimate violence [40], or as an extension of ODA [41]. Jealousy has a positive significant association with control ODA victimization and emerged as an explanatory variable of control CDA perpetration, explaining 26% of the variance. These results seem to demonstrate, once again, the role that certain myths about love, namely the distorted and unrealistic view of young people about jealousy as being essential and natural in a dating, may have in increasing the experiences of victimization and perpetration in intimate relationships [42].

Finally, different risk factors, with diverse weights, were found for the CDA typologies control CDA and CDA direct aggression, as previously found by Cava et al. [16] in a Spanish sample. Verbal–emotional and control ODA victimization were the main risk factors of control CDA victimization in this study, explaining 47% of the variance, followed by both

control ODA and physical ODA perpetration, explaining 26% of the variance. With a lower weight (around 16%) are the victimization and perpetration by control ODA in explaining control CDA perpetration. Regarding CDA direct aggression, verbal–emotional ODA victimization is the main explanatory variable of control CDA victimization, with a variance of 29%, and jealousy and control ODA victimization are the main risk factors of control CDA perpetration, explaining 24% of the variance. A longitudinal study developed by Temple et al. [39] showed that the CDA experiences tend to coincide with ODA involvement, concluding that adolescents and young people who are victims in one context (e.g., physical-to-face abuse) present a higher risk of victimization in the other context (e.g., ICT use), with detrimental implications for the adolescents' psychosocial adjustment and developmental pathways.

3. Conclusions

We provide some enlightenment of the relationship between ODA and CDA and could be of explicit importance to improve the design of prevention strategies and intervention policies in this context, particularly attending to the role of official authorities and specific legislation in this field. Accordingly, it becomes increasingly necessary to integrate ICT knowledge into dating violence prevention programs in schools, but also to integrate all dating violence-related issues into broader programs that aim to reduce all forms of cyber aggression at an official level, which may also involve public recreational spaces.

The demonstrated co-occurrence of CDA and ODA signals the importance of necessary additional strategies at the institutional level to encourage a more cautious use of ICT, aiming to prevent specific situations between dating partners that are able to trigger the reported abusive behaviours.

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