

REVISTA IBEROAMERICANA DE
PSICOLOGÍA Y SALUDRevista Oficial de la Federación Iberoamericana de Asociaciones de Psicología (FIAP)
[Official Journal of the Latin-American Federation of Psychological Associations]

Emotional Dependence and Partner Cyber Abuse through Social Networks in Spanish University Students

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• Recibido: 31 - 07 - 2021 • Aceptado: 09 - 12 - 2021

ABSTRACT. The cyber abuse of a partner in young people is increasingly normalized and is associated with maladaptive relational patterns. *Objective:* Analyze the relationship between emotional dependence and control of the partner through social networks in the sentimental relationships of young people. *Methods:* 627 Spanish university students with an age range between 18 and 26 years ($M = 21.27$; $SD = 1.72$) participated in this study. Participants were evaluated in emotional dependence, risk of addiction to social networks, and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. *Results:* Significant and positive relations were obtained among emotional dependence, cyber-control and victimization of online aggression. Likewise, it was found that boys exercised more control online towards their partners and that girls with emotional dependence had greater risk of addiction to new technologies. *Conclusions:* The link between emotional dependence and cyber-abuse in the couple is established, so that the need to promote proposals for prevention and psychosocial intervention is emphasized.

KEYWORDS: Emotional Dependence, Control, Online, Partner Cyberabuse, Young people.

Dependencia emocional y ciberabuso a través de las redes sociales en estudiantes universitarios españoles

RESUMEN. El ciberabuso de pareja en jóvenes cada vez está más normalizado y se asocia a patrones relacionales desadaptativos. *Objetivo:* Analizar la relación entre la dependencia emocional y el control de la pareja a través de redes sociales en las relaciones sentimentales en jóvenes. *Método:* Han participado 627 universitarios españoles con un rango de edad comprendido entre los 18 y los 26 años ($M = 21.27$ años, $DT = 1.72$). Los participantes fueron evaluados en dependencia emocional, riesgo de adicción a las redes sociales e internet y ciberacoso perpetrado y victimización de ciberacoso. *Resultados:* Se obtuvieron relaciones estadísticamente significativas y positivas entre la dependencia emocional, el cibercontrol y la victimización de agresiones online. Los chicos ejercen más control online hacia sus parejas y las jóvenes con dependencia emocional presentan mayor riesgo de adicción a las nuevas tecnologías. *Conclusiones:* Se establece la vinculación entre dependencia emocional y ciberabuso en parejas de jóvenes, de modo que se incide en la necesidad de promover propuestas de prevención e intervención psicosocial.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Dependencia Emocional, Control, Online, Ciberabuso de Pareja, Jóvenes.

Our way of living and interacting socially is changing as a result of the use of the new information and communication technologies (ICT) (Álvarez & Moral, 2020; Espinar et al., 2015). Among the youth, social networks are perceived very positively way since they facilitate

communication and self-disclosure (Jaen-Cortés et al., 2017). However, socialization through ICT has also caused numerous negative effects, among them the emergence of new forms of violence (Borrajo et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel et al., 2018). Certainly, research on different modalities of online partner surveillance has increased as shown in several reviews and studies (Frampton & Fox, 2021; Kaur et al., 2020; Rus & Tiemensma, 2017), although some authors warn about a lack of conceptual consensus in this matter (Dhilon & Smith, 2019).

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Citar como/Cite as: Moral, M. V. y Prieto, P. (2022). Emotional Dependence and Partner Cyber Abuse Through Social Networks in Spanish University Students. *Revista Iberoamericana de Psicología y Salud*, 13(1), 15-27. <https://doi.org/10.23923/j.rips.2022.01.051>

One such sort of online surveillance is *partner cyber-abuse* (PCA), which is defined as a set of repeated behaviours that are perpetrated by a subject with the aim of monitoring, undermining or causing harm to their partner (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018). Such behaviours are characterized by the presence of violence and control (Fissel et al., 2021; Muñiz et al., 2015). PCA can be manifested as electronic hostility, intrusiveness, electronic humiliation and electronic exclusion. The highest victimization occurs between the ages of 16 and 29 (Vázquez & Pastor, 2019), with an increased risk of becoming a victim of online abuse as the private information the subjects publish about themselves increases.

PCA's most frequent expression is *abuse by control*, a set of behaviours by which subjects invade their partner's intimacy in order to obtain information about them and to favour the maintenance of the relationship in the face of the potential emergence of extradiadic rivals (Tokunaga, 2011). Specifically, exchanging or stealing passwords as well as monitoring partner's friendships and publications in the networks seem to be the most common forms of control (Martín et al., 2016). The exchange of private contents constitutes a test of trust among young people (Jabaloyas, 2015) and the abuse of control is highly normalized in this context. Social networks allow for an easy monitoring of the activities of others (Reed et al., 2017), aggravating extant control behaviours, especially after couple breakups (Martín et al., 2016). Also, young people with emotional dependence have a characteristic cognitive profile with coping strategies such as denial (Moral & González, 2020) or attribution of lower responsibility to the aggressor (Garrido-Macías et al., 2020). Certainly, young people involved in an abusive relationship are more dependent and show a dysfunctional internalization of guilt and justification mechanisms, even in episodes of sexual violence in intimate relationships (Garrido-Macías et al., 2020). In relationships based on an archetypal vision of love and romantic myths, and even more so if they involve violence, cyber-control mechanisms represent mechanisms associated with power

games and have a base of identity conflicts (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013; Fox & Waber, 2013; Hertlein & van Dyck, 2020; Marcos et al., 2020). Such identity conflicts and cyber-control mechanisms are exacerbated in the cases in which there are affective-dependent bonds between the subjects (Moral et al., 2017) and in those that involve digital control violence (Mera et al., 2021; Pérez-Gómez et al., 2020).

Previous research has also examined the relationship between age, sex and the type of abuse committed. Johnson et al. (2015) pointed out the existence of a peak of both physical and psychological violence at the age of 20, after which the prevalence of abuse decreased (Martín & Moral, 2019). Contrasting results have been found regarding sex. Some studies report similar perpetration rates for both sexes (Reed et al., 2017), while others found differential types of violence depending on sex, where men tend to perpetrate sexual abuse, while psychological violence, mild physical abuse and emotional manipulation are mostly exercised by women (Romo-Avilés et al., 2019; Vázquez & Pastor, 2019). However, it is worth noting that contrary to married couples, bidirectionality has been observed in young heterosexual couples, which implies that both sexes act as aggressors, even if they do not commit the same type of abuse. In these cases, a trend towards gender symmetry has been observed, with women practising roughly the same amount of violence as men (Bonomi et al., 2012; Martín & Moral, 2019).

Regarding the causes of control, jealousy seems to be the main trigger causing control (Blanco, 2014). Young people tend to normalize jealousy, interpreting it as a proof of love and not as a problem, which is a very dangerous assumption since it may lead to primitive forms of abuse (Moral et al., 2017). Some of the myths of romantic love, such as those of fidelity and exclusivity, strongly promote jealousy since they imply the impossibility of loving more than one person at the same time and because they promote the misconception of possessiveness in love (Barrón et al., 1999; Caro & Monreal, 2017).

Such idealized love model promotes the establishment of emotional dependence, which is defined as a chronic pattern of frustrated affective demands that try to be resolved through interpersonal relationships of pathological attachment, according to Moral and Sirvent (2008). Such cases are characterised by the emergence of a very accentuated desire to interact and relate to the partner and a strong discomfort when they are absent (Rodríguez de Medina, 2013). The latter feeling, which corresponds to withdrawal or craving, is one of the factors that influence whether the dependent person will continue to be immersed in relationships involving abuses (Moral et al., 2017).

Previous research has also examined the relationship between emotional dependence and constructs such as ICT use and the presence of anxious attachment. The motivation for external approval is related to the time spent sending messages, and it has been shown that people with emotional deficiencies and sensation seekers that use ICT to obtain emotional support are under a higher risk of suffering from addiction to these technologies (Sánchez-Carbonell et al., 2008). In fact, Estévez et al. (2017) found a positive correlation between emotional dependence and excessive internet use, as well as greater abuse of ICT by young women as compared to young men. Separation anxiety and emotional dependence, have also been related to psychological abuse, which, as mentioned before, is the type of abuse with a greater presence in ICT (Del Castillo et al., 2015; Marcos et al., 2020; Martín & Moral, 2019).

Given the above, we aim here at determining whether there is a relationship between emotional dependence and partner online control, the latter being mostly committed by young women (Reed et al., 2017).

• OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

The main aim of the present study is to establish if there is a relationship between emotional dependence and partner control through social networks in sentimental relationships between young people. At the same time, the following specific objectives have been

established: a) to determine to what extent abusive control behaviours through social networks are present in young couples; b) to identify the effect of sex on the excessive use of ICT by emotionally dependent subjects; and c) to determine the effect of sex and age on the perpetration and suffering of partner online control.

We hypothesise: greater control over their partner's online activities by young people with emotional dependence as compared to non-dependent young people (Hypothesis 1); a high presence of partner control behaviours in social networks (Hypothesis 2); sex differences in the excessive use of ICTs in people with emotional dependence, with a greater ICT use by dependent young women (Hypothesis 3); and, statistically significant differences between perpetrated and victimized cyber-control according to sex and age, with the youngest women being the ones exerting the greatest online control and the youngest men being the victims of such control most frequently (Hypothesis 4).

METHOD

• PARTICIPANTS

The sample consisted of 627 participants from the Principality of Asturias (Spain), selected through an intentional snowball sampling. Participants age ranged between 18 and 26 years ($M = 21.27$, $SD = 1.72$) and 58.3% of the participants were women. Regarding sexual orientation, 489 participants identified themselves as heterosexual (78.9%), 104 as bisexual (16.6%) and 34 as homosexual (5.4%). All of the participants were at the moment studying or had finished university degrees, mainly in Health (37.3%, $n = 234$) or Social Sciences (34.3%, $n = 215$). Having had at least one relationship in the past or maintaining it at the time of the study was a necessary condition to participate.

• MEASURE INSTRUMENTS

Three standardized scales were applied to carry out this study: The *Risk of Addiction to Social Networks and Internet for Adolescents Scale* (ERA-RSI; Peris et

al., 2018) was used to assess addiction to social networks and the Internet. This scale consists of 29 items rated using a four-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = *Never or Nothing* to 4 = *Always or Much*) distributed in four factors: *Addiction Symptoms*, which assesses the presence of behaviours of addiction to these technologies; *Social Use* through which online socialization behaviours are studied; *Geek Traits*, that evaluates issues such as online sexual encounters or participation in virtual games; and *Nomophobia*, which assesses feelings of anxiety and control behaviours when using the mobile (Peris et al., 2018). Cronbach's α of the ERA-RSI was established at .90 in the study that developed the scale (Peris et al., 2018). Given the focus of our study on excessive ICT use, only the *Symptoms Addiction* factor was evaluated, for which an α of .79 was obtained in our 627 subject sample.

The *Cyber-Violence in Adolescent Couples Scale* (Cib-VPA; Cava & Buelga, 2018) was applied to evaluate situations of violence perpetrated and suffered through online social networks. This scale is made up of two subscales: *Perpetrated Cyber-bullying* and *Cyber-victimization*; each one consisting of 10 items which are rated using a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Never*; 4 = *Always*). Each subscale contains two factors: *Cyber-control*, which evaluates excessive control behaviours, and *Cyber-aggression*, which relates to online threats and insults (Cava & Buelga, 2018). The ω coefficient for the *Cyber-control* factor of the *Cyber-bullying* scale was set at .94 and that of the *Cyber-aggression* factor at .97. The ω values found for the *Cyber-victimization* scale were .92 and .97 for each factor, respectively (Cava & Buelga, 2018). In the present study, Cronbach's α for the *Cyber-control* factor of the *Cyber-bullying* scale was .86 and that of the *Cyber-aggression* factor was .79. This low reliability value for the *Cyber-aggression* factor of the *Cyber-bullying* scale is insufficient for the diagnosis of perpetration (Nunnally, 1978). On the other hand, in the *Cyber-victimization* scale, the *Cyber-control* factor's α was .82, and .83 for the *Cyber-aggression* factor.

The *Inventory of Interpersonal Relations and Sentimental Dependencies* (IRIDS-100; Sirvent & Moral, 2018) evaluates emotional dependence

and co-addictions and contains 100 items rated using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = *Totally Disagree* to 5 = *Totally Agree*). Of the seven subscales assessed by the inventory, only *Affective or Emotional Dependence* was used in the present study. Cronbach's α for this subscale was of .89 in the study by Sirvent and Moral (2018), and of .90 in the present study.

• DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

A quasi-experimental study followed a simple ex post facto prospective cross-sectional design was performed. The questionnaire to collect the information to be analysed was distributed online and participants were informed that their responses would be confidential, anonymous, and used for research purposes only. The study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki). Informed consent required a single response and had to be accepted before completing the questionnaire.

• DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21. The internal consistency of the items used was assessed through the Cronbach's α coefficient. Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses (Spearman's Rho) were performed to state the relationship between the study variables. The magnitude of the effect was measured with the coefficient of determination. Additionally, and to test hypothesis 3, we planned a comparison of means between men and women (grouping factor) with emotional dependence in ICT addiction (ANOVA). Likewise, and based on hypothesis 4, we made a comparison of means between men and women, and with age as a covariate, given the inconsistent preceding results on the effects on the measurement variables and the lack of criteria fixed grouping of this variable, in violence perpetrated and victimized by cyberbullying. This last data analysis design requires the execution of ANCOVAs. However, we observed a lack of homogeneity (significant Levene's test) in the distribution of the measurement variables (cyberbullying

perpetration and victimization) between the groups to be compared (men vs. women). The absence of homogeneity of variance when the groups are not of equal size (i.e., women / men = 428/199 = 2.15) can cause important deviations in the significance of the results (Stevens, 1986). Therefore, it was verified, when p was $<.05$ (significant), the fulfillment of 3 criteria that safeguard from these deviations (Mayorga et al., 2020): a) that the theoretical F ($F = 3.841$) was less than the value empirical of F ; b) that the ratio (β / α) between the false rejection of the null hypothesis and the false acceptance of the null hypothesis was ≥ 1 ; and c) that the magnitude of the effect size was in line with the acceptance of the null hypothesis (≥ 0.20). In all the results with significant F values, these 3 requirements were met. The effect size in the mean comparisons was obtained in d with Glass's formula (SD of the large group) and was corrected for attenuation (the reliability of some measures was low, $\alpha <.80$; Gancedo et al., 2021), estimating the magnitude in the percentage of increase (Fandiño et al., 2021).

RESULTS

The observed correlation between emotional dependence and cyber-control perpetrated was ρ of .407, $p <.001$, i.e., emotional dependence explains 16.6% of the variance of the partner control through ICT. Likewise, emotional

dependence predicts victimized cyber-control, $\rho = .402$, $p <.001$, accounting for 16.2% of the variance, and, to a lower extent, victimized cyber-aggression, $\rho = .310$, $p <.001$. These correlations reflect that emotionally dependent people are not only aggressors, but also victims of partner online abuse. On the other hand, we found perpetrated cyber-control to be related to victimized cyber-control, $\rho = .336$, $p <.001$, sharing the 11.3% of the variance. This correlation indicates that people who claimed to have exercised online control towards their partner also reported having been victims of assaults and controlling behaviours online. Finally, we found a significant, $p <.001$, correlation, $\rho = .400$, between victimized cyber-aggression and victimized cyber-control, suggesting that people who consider themselves victims of online assaults by their partner also report suffering abusive control through ICT (see Table 1).

Secondly, and in order to contrast our hypothesis regarding a high presence of online control mechanisms given the high normalization of this type of abuse, the frequencies of the different response options for the perpetrated and victimized cyber-control factors were summarized in Table 2. Most of the participants stated to have never committed (97.4%, $n = 611$) or never have been victims (93.9%, $n = 589$) of partner cyber-control. However, some participants reported having experiences with this type of abuse. 1.9%

Table 1
Correlations between emotional dependence, cyber-control and cyber-aggression

Factors	Emotional Dependence	Perpetrated cyber-control	Victimized cyber-control
Perpetrated cyber-control	.407***		
Victimized cyber-control	.402***	.336***	
Victimized cyber-aggression	.310***	.119	.400***

Note. *** $p <.001$.

Table 2
Perpetrated and Victimized Cyber-control

Answer	Perpetrated Cyber-control <i>n</i> (%)	Victimized Cyber-control <i>n</i> (%)
Never	611 (97.4%)	589 (93.9%)
Sometimes	12 (1.9%)	33 (5.3%)
Many Times	4 (0.6%)	4 (0.6%)
Always	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)

($n = 12$) claimed to have controlled their partner at some point while 5.3% ($n = 33$) declared to have been a victim of cyber-control on some occasion. These results show that, in spite of being present in this sample, control behaviours seem relatively infrequent.

According to the IRIDS-100 grading criteria, emotional dependence was present in 35.9% of the participants ($n = 225$), of which 139 were women (61.7%). As for emotional dependent subjects, sex differences were found regarding the excessive use of ICT, $F(1, 223) = 5.57, p < .05$. Succinctly, women ($M = 2.40$) with emotional dependence reported a greater addiction to ICT than men with emotional dependence ($M = 2.26$). The magnitude of the effect was between small and medium, $d = 0.38$, an increase (r) in addition to ITCs of 18.7% in women over men.

The results of an ANCOVA with sex (women vs. men) as factor and age as a covariate on the perpetration of cyber control revealed a non-significant effect of the covariable age, $F(1, 624) = 0.01, ns$, and significance of the sex factor, $F(1, 624) = 4.08, p < .05$, with a small effect size, $d = 0.20$. Succinctly, males ($M = 5.22$) perpetrate more cyber control than women ($M = 5.12$), quantifying said increase (r) in 10.0% more performance in men than in women.

Secondly, the results of an ANCOVA with sex (women vs. men) as factor and age as a covariate on cyber control victimization revealed a non-significant effect of the age covariate, $F(1, 624) = 0.12, ns$, and significance of the sex factor, $F(1, 624) = 13.12, p < .001$, with an effect size between small and medium, $d = 0.32$. In summary, males ($M = 5.53$) victimized more cyber control than women ($M = 5.24$), assuming an increase in victimization in men of 15.8% over women.

DISCUSSION

The integration of new technologies in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships has generated new forms of interactions that, while being very enriching on some occasions, may also become abusive and harmful (Álvarez & Moral, 2020; Jaen-Cortés et al., 2017). Numerous investigations explore the nature of online interpersonal conflicts as well as their possible triggers (Borrajó et al., 2015). However, most of them have been focused on the adolescent population and overshadowed the study of these variables in university students. In addition, research focused on the relationship between emotional dependence and partner abuse has mainly been conducted on offline environments (Bell et al., 2020; Momeñe et

al., 2017; Petruccelli et al., 2014), with limited studies in an online context.

The present study found significant positive relationships between emotional dependence, perpetrated and victimized cyber-control, and victimized cyber-aggressions. These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies that relate emotional dependence to dating violence (Estévez et al., 2017; Martín & Moral, 2019) and that show the tendency of conflicts that occur in the offline environment to move into the online context and vice versa (Blanco, 2014; Espinar et al., 2015).

The perpetration and victimization rates of partner cyber-control observed in this study were extremely low, since more than 90% of the participants reported having no experience either as an abuser or as a victim. These results differ from those found in previous research. In Reed et al. (2017), for instance, approximately 50% of the participants stated having had some type of partner control experience, although the majority were isolated incidents. At the same time, in Sánchez et al. (2017), 90% of participants reported having controlled their partner at some point and 70% acknowledged having been a victim of this type of abuse. However, it should be noted that those two studies were carried out in adolescent populations. Although the abuses that occur in romantic relationships during that period are usually a good predictor of future episodes of violence in adult relationships (Vizcarra & Póo, 2011), there are other variables that may influence the way in which couple relationships are managed (Marcos & Isidro, 2019; Sánchez et al., 2017).

Another objective of this study was to analyze the excessive use of ICT by people with emotional dependence and, more specifically, to test for potential differences by sex. Women who suffer from emotional dependence showed a greater addiction to ICT than men who suffer from the same dependence. This is in line with the findings by Estévez et al. (2017), where a significant positive relationship between emotional dependence and abusive use of the Internet and mobile phones was found, as well as

a higher level of abuse by young women. Due to differential gender socialization, young women tend to develop higher social requirements and, since new technologies facilitate closeness and communication (Álvarez & Moral, 2020), this could lead to an overuse of such technologies to keep in contact when their friends or partner are not present. On the other hand, Marcos et al. (2020) found that boys revealed greater emotional dependence, and greater belief in romantic love than girls.

Finally, the study aimed at determining the effect of sex and age on perpetration and victimization of online control. Differences were found between the sexes in terms of the perpetrated cyber-control, with young men being the ones who exercise greater cyber-control towards their partners. However, no differences were found between sexes in victimized cyber-control. These results coincide with those obtained by Linares et al. (2021), men perceive that they were more controlled by their partners, but they used more direct aggressions towards women, such as insults and humiliations. Instead, Lucero et al. (2014) found that young women presented a greater normalization of control behaviors towards their partner, with young men reporting more experiences in which their partners had checked their messages or had constantly ask what they were doing, where and with whom. In addition, Stonard et al. (2017) also found that young women exercised and normalized cybernetic control and monitoring behaviors more than young men did. Finally, we found no differences in the perpetration and victimization of partner cyber-control with regards to age. In this sense, Vázquez and Pastor (2019) found a progressive decrease in the use of social networks to communicate with their partner between the age of 18 and 25. Future research including a larger sample of young people between 24 and 30 years would aid in evaluating potential age differences regarding online cyber-control experiences.

This study was not without limitations, the main one being the impossibility of extrapolating the results to the general population due to the use of a non-probabilistic type of sampling. Another

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limitation is the length of the questionnaire applied that could have affected participant's responses due to fatigue and lack of attention. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study precluded the assessment of certain causal relationships that would have been of interest. Finally, as a consequence of the theme of this study, we cannot rule out biases in the results due to social desirability.

This study may constitute a basis for future lines of research, such as the analysis of the possible relationships between emotional dependence and forms of online abuse other than control, including threats and sexual extortion. This would allow to relate such manifestations to sexist attitudes and archetypal perceptions of romantic love (Carbonell & Mestre, 2019; Moral et al., 2018; Nava-Reyes et al., 2018). It would also be of interest to carry out a longitudinal study of the variations in the online communication repertoires of young couples, that considered variables such as the effect of previous experiences of partner online abuse as well as the education on the demystification of control and of jealousy based on romantic myths. The latter is highly relevant since romantic myths constitute a very important risk factor for violence in intimate relationships (Bosch et al., 2019; García et al., 2019; Resurrección & Córdoba, 2020). In this sense, monitored interventions based on the use of Apps with the aim of demystifying the myths of romantic love, as well as controlling behaviors, have proven effective (Navarro et al., 2018, 2020). Likewise, the importance of increasing awareness of the victimization experience from formal sources should be emphasized (Buker et al., 2021). Given the link between emotional dependence and the processes of control and interpersonal violence in romantic relationships, it is also necessary to re-educate emotions based on comprehensive prevention proposals (Moral et al., 2017) and to de-normalize controlling and abusive behaviors that take place in social networks in order to promote healthy relationships, especially when affective-dependent relationships mediate (Carrascosa et al., 2019).

- **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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