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Commentary

Commentary: Rethinking Digital Dating Abuse Through Gendered Perceptions and Lived Experience of Young Adults

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As digital communication becomes ever more embedded in the daily lives of young adults, the dynamics of intimate relationships are increasingly shaped—and strained—by technology. While digital platforms offer constant connection, they also create new contexts in which control, surveillance, coercion, and aggression can emerge [1]. The publication "College Students Perceptions of Digital Dating Abuse: Insights From Gender Schema Theory" advances the field by examining how college students judge the abusiveness of digital dating abuse (DDA) behaviors, how these judgments differ based on gender, and how personal histories of victimization and perpetration influence these views [2]. Although researchers have clearly defined several digital behaviors as abusive, through the increasing norms of online communication and engagement, it is unclear how college students view these behaviors. Situated within the framework of gender schema theory, this publication provides vital insight into how young adults make sense of digital dating behaviors in their relational lives, and why some forms of DDA remain under-recognized despite their documented harm.

Gender as a Lens for Interpreting DDA

A central contribution of the publication is its clear demonstration that gender strongly shapes how college students interpret DDA. Across all behaviors, male-to-female DDA was viewed as more abusive than female-to-male DDA, reflecting longstanding evidence that violence by men against women is perceived as more harmful and threatening [3,4]. Even in digital contexts without physical contact, cultural scripts linking men with physical power and women with vulnerability shape how students assess potential harm and escalation. Women also consistently rated digital sexual coercion and digital monitoring/control as more abusive than men, aligning with research showing that men are generally more tolerant of aggression and less likely to label behaviors as abusive [5,6]. Gender schema theory [7] offers a useful explanation: cultural expectations that associate masculinity with dominance and femininity with nurturance guide how individuals recognize and evaluate relational harm. Women's heightened perceptions may also stem from their disproportionate exposure to the emotional, psychological, and sexual consequences of DDA [8-10], including fear of escalation, reputational harm, and coercive control [11,12]. Men, by contrast, may normalize persistent messaging or monitoring due to socialization that minimizes relational intrusion and discourages acknowledging vulnerability.A particularly noteworthy nuance is that women also viewed female-to-male digital monitoring/control as more abusive than men did. Female-perpetrated aggression violates cultural stereotypes positioning women as passive or emotionally compliant [13], making such behavior appear more deviant—and therefore more abusive—to female respondents. Men's lower ratings in these scenarios may reflect norms that downplay male victimization, reinforce emotional invulnerability, and obscure harm when the perpetrator does not match stereotypical images of an aggressor [14]. As a result, male victims may be less visible to peers, less likely to receive support, and less likely to identify their experiences as abuse [15].

Hierarchies of Harm: Why Monitoring Is Under-Recognized

One of the publication's strongest contributions is its systematic comparison of how different types of DDA are ranked in severity. Students consistently viewed digital direct aggression as most abusive, followed by digital sexual coercion, and finally by digital monitoring/control. This hierarchy parallels findings from broader intimate partner violence research, where overt threats or sexual aggression are more easily recognized as abusive than psychological or controlling behaviors [16,17]. But digital monitoring/control might present unique risks precisely because it is so easily normalized among young adults.

Research shows that a majority of college students engage in at least one digital monitoring/control behavior—such as checking a partner's social media or sending excessive messages—without labeling these actions as abusive [18]. Adolescents and young adults often view digital access, shared passwords, or location tracking as signs of trust, intimacy, or commitment [19]. In this context, the publication's results reflect a broader cultural shift in which persistent digital connection is expected and surveillance becomes routine.

Yet digital monitoring/control is not benign. Studies demonstrate strong associations between monitoring behaviors and poor mental health outcomes, attachment anxiety, and eventual escalation to offline aggression [20,21]. The publication's findings that students consistently under-recognize this category of harm reinforce the need

for educational programs that clearly differentiate between healthy connectedness and intrusive control.

Experience Shapes Perception: Minimization Among Victims and Perpetrators

A significant theoretical insight from the publication is the identification of what might be termed a desensitization effect: individuals with prior experiences of DDA—either as victims or perpetrators—rate abusive behaviors as less harmful than those without such histories. This aligns with research on cognitive dissonance, self-justification, and normalization processes in intimate partner violence.

Victims who remain in or return to unhealthy relationships may reinterpret or downplay DDA behaviors to maintain relational coherence. Perpetrators, meanwhile, may minimize the negativity of their actions, especially when DDA behaviors feel mundane or common among their peers. However, the asymmetry noted by the authors, in which perpetrators minimized digital monitoring/control but not necessarily digital direct aggression or digital sexual coercion, might signal a deeper structural issue: digital monitoring/control is so culturally embedded that even those who commit it may not recognize its harm potential.

This has profound implications for prevention programming. Traditional interventions often assume that individuals can identify unhealthy behaviors but struggle with behavioral change. However, if young adults do not interpret their own actions—or their partner's actions—as abusive, generative dialogue about harm and relational boundaries becomes more challenging. Prevention efforts must therefore address both recognition and reinterpretation: helping students recalibrate their internal thresholds for what constitutes harmful digital conduct.

Conclusion

The publication "College Students Perceptions of Digital Dating Abuse: Insights From Gender Schema Theory" provides an important and much-needed contribution to the evolving discourse on DDA. By grounding its investigation in gender schema theory and foregrounding the diverse and often contradictory ways college students interpret digital behaviors, it illuminates the perceptual landscape that shapes young adults' responses to DDA. The findings reveal that DDA is not simply a technological phenomenon but a deeply social one—embedded in gendered expectations, cultural narratives, and personal histories. As institutions, educators, and scholars seek to reduce DDA and foster healthier digital relationships, this study offers a foundation for designing prevention efforts that are evidence-based, culturally attuned, and responsive to the realities of young adults. Its insights serve not only as an academic contribution but as a call for more intentional, nuanced, and inclusive strategies to confront the normalization of digital harm in intimate relationships.

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