Article

Click Surveillance of Your Partner! Digital Violence among University Students in England

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Abstract: Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have given rise to new forms of contact as well as new forms of violence. This research analyses whether ICTs are the cause of a new form of digital violence and studies the prevalence of this digital violence exercised through screens among university couples. A quantitative and qualitative methodology was applied in this study: a non-probabilistic purposive or discretionary sample of 303 (Age = 22.79; SD = 47.32; 58.7% male), with the use of an ad hoc questionnaire, and two focus groups of students studying in the same country. The results reveal a prevalence of 51.04% in the perception of digital violence through electronic devices in dating relationships among young people; 15.84% in the prevalence of digital violence in young couples' relationships; 9.36% in the prevalence of traditional violence; and 35.78% in the tolerance of digital violence among young people. The results highlight a slightly higher prevalence of women compared with men in digital violence. We conclude that there is a significant prevalence of digital violence among these young couples in the university context, which should be the subject of the creation of different awareness-raising, prevention and specific training programmes against it.

Keywords: digital violence; cyberstalking; university students; social networks; information and communication technology

1. Introduction

Following Paullet and Chawdhry (2020), the rapid uptake and growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has influenced the interpersonal relationships of their users (Alonso and Raigada 2014) and the young population, as their main consumers. The internet, social networks and digital media facilitate a new form of human contact while bringing with them new risks and harms (Cabello Cádiz 2013). This emerging social issue is evident in the growing number of studies around the world that have found digital violence in interpersonal relationships, with significant variability in the results among young people and university students aged 18–30. Starting the theoretical review with studies carried out at the beginning of the millennium, Spitzberg (2002) found that half of young victims admitted to having suffered abuse and harassment through electronic media, identifying their partner as the perpetrator. A decade later, Strawhun et al. (2013) reported that 20.5% of their surveyed subjects were victims of cyberstalking, while Dreßing et al. (2014) reported a prevalence of 6.5%. Berry and Bainbridge (2017), found that it was 20 and 34% of respondents who had confirmed such abuse. Similarly, Acquadro Maran and Begotti (2019) found that 46% of their respondents had been victims of cyberstalking. Likewise, DeKeseredy et al. (2019) found that 35% of respondents had been victims of technology-enabled bullying.

Derived from the new risks due to ICT immersion, the term "interpersonal electronic surveillance" was identified as referring to the frequent checking and reviewing of a

person's online presence, often performed by members of affective–sexual partners who spend a lot of time monitoring another person's online behaviour without their direct knowledge (Elphinston and Noller 2011; Tokunaga and Gustafson 2014). Most studies refer to this phenomenon as "cyberstalking" (Marcum and Higgins 2021; Strawhun et al. 2013) referring to different behaviours creating an overlap in their concept. Cyberstalking is widely accepted as the repeated use of unwanted electronic communication (Wilson et al. 2022). Thus, as mentioned in the first paragraph, there is a lack of consensus on the prevalence of this phenomenon due to the diversity of terminologies and elements (Kaur et al. 2021; Leukfeldt and Yar 2016; Wilson et al. 2022). According to Leukfeldt and Yar (2016), there is also an unclear theoretical framework in the study of digital violence as cybercrime in criminological research. Therefore, the concept that best fits this work is digital violence. A concept that involves not only cyberstalking but also coercion, intimidation, domination, threat, surveillance and control through the use of digital media (Montero-Fernández et al. 2022).

Regarding the different forms of manifestation of digital violence analysed in previous research, the monitoring and surveillance of a partner was detected in the studies by Lyndon et al. (2011) while the sending of threatening or rude emails and messages was found by Hinduja and Patchin (2011) who also found the posting of humiliating photographs (Hinduja and Patchin 2011; Lyndon et al. 2011). Some of the risk factors found in cyber-perpetration and cyber-victimisation of digital violence were as follows. Firstly, gender was analysed as an influence on the deployment of digital violence and a higher incidence of females compared with the number of males perpetrating digital violence was found (Kalaitzaki 2020; Rodríguez-Castro et al. 2021; Smoker and March 2017; Strawhun et al. 2013; van Baak and Hayes 2018). However, other studies claim that males are more likely to perpetrate cyberstalking (Worsley et al. 2017; Piquer Barrachina et al. 2017), as male students also showed higher levels of internet addiction, according to Yazgan (2022). On the other hand, in congruence with offline violence findings, females were more often observed to be the victims of cyberstalking behaviours in numerous studies (Bossler et al. 2012; Kalaitzaki 2020; Reyns et al. 2012; van Baak and Hayes 2018). Additionally, age, maturity, marital status or relationship status each had an impact on digital violence, with individuals who identified themselves as unmarried being 1.5 times more likely to be victims than those who were single (Labonté et al. 2021; Reyns et al. 2011; Rodríguez Salazar and Rodríguez Morales 2016; Sönmez and Solmazer 2022). Furthermore, distance between partners is detected as another factor to be analysed, given that in long-distance relationships a greater use of social networks with the intention of monitoring a partner has been detected (Billedo et al. 2015). Additionally, in several studies (Rey-Anacona et al. 2014; Borrajo et al. 2015; Deans and Bhogal 2019) romantic jealousy between people was found to be a significant predictor of controlling behaviours and abuse of digital violence. Similarly, another factor studied has been the disclosure of personal information on the internet. In this case, the amount of information shared on the internet has been associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing digital violence (Welsh and Lavoie 2012; Bossler et al. 2012). Finally, previous victimisation has also played an important role, as in the work of Woodlock (2017) and DeKeseredy et al. (2019), where it was concluded that those subjects who had experienced digital violence were also more likely to experience other forms of abuse.

This digital violence affects the younger population to a greater extent, as they are unaware of the harmful effects it can cause due to the lack of identification of it as abusive and aggressive behaviour and the normalisation of its manifestation, in most cases, as simple tokens of love (Albero et al. 2013; Muñoz-Rivas et al. 2011). Consequently, this tolerance and legitimisation of digital violence leads to its practice and reproduction within affective–sexual relationships among young people (Borrajo Mena and Gámez Guadix 2015). One of the aspects that increases this invisibilisation of digital violence is related to gender violence and is due to the idealisation that young people make of violent behaviour, based on the romantic love that still prevails in today's society and all its myths (Bosch-Fiol

and Ferrer-Perez 2019). Studies by Bull et al. (2022) suggest that students' experiences of and attitudes towards sexual and gender-based violence and harassment are particularly likely to increase in number and frequency in the UK context. Therefore, according to González-Gijón and Soriano-Díaz (2021), today's society demands that young people be aware of this emerging social problem and be able to identify it.

The aim of this research is to study the violence that occurs through the use of ICTs and all the electronic devices commonly used in affective–sexual relationships among the university population. Thus, this work aims to study the prevalence of digital violence among university couples. In addition, following Leukfeldt and Yar's (2016) question, it seeks to study whether, or to what extent, theoretical concepts in relation to digital violence can legitimately be applied to the "terrestrial" world through a supposedly novel "virtual" environment. In the words of Muñiz and Fonseca-Pedrero (2017), this digital violence can be considered, in many cases, a precursor of physical violence and, in others, a reflection of a type of violence that transcends screens. In this sense, this paper proposes the hypothesis that violence exercised through digital media will result in a new form of violence that is not directly related to traditional violence outside screens, as digital violence may manifest itself as an isolated phenomenon in many cases and/or complement traditional violence.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology proposed for this work is framed within the framework of mixed methods research. Specifically, an explanatory sequential design is used, as the qualitative data are used in the subsequent interpretation and clarification of the results of the quantitative data analysis (Creswell et al. 2003). In accordance with the work of Montero and León (2007), this research proposes a quantitative methodology, with an instrumental research design. Therefore, following Morgan (1983), the strategy to achieve this quantitative and qualitative approach is complementation, as this is a double vision that allows different dimensions of the phenomenon to be studied and to be known, and where neither convergence nor integration of the results of both methods is sought. In the quantitative approach, using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, the construction of a research instrument will be carried out that will form an ad hoc questionnaire for the detection, measurement and analysis of the object of study. In the qualitative approach, the analysis of the content itself is implemented through focus groups that contribute to the deepening of the study of the phenomenon that concerns us.

2.1. Participants

This first study was conducted at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in the English city of Preston. For the quantitative approach we used the total university population of 38,000 subjects as the population data, with a confidence level of 95% and assuming a sampling error of 5.61%, to obtain a sample of 303 students. Of the 303 people in the sample, 41.3% were female (125) and 58.7% were male (178). The average age was 22.79 years. This English university student body belonged to twenty-two academic disciplines. In the qualitative approach, it was decided that two focus groups be conducted, the first consisting of five students of British origin (one girl and four boys aged between 19 and 24) and the second consisting of six international students who were studying at UCLan (two girls and four boys aged between 19 and 25).

2.2. Instrument

Due to the lack of a complete and adequate instrument for the analysis of violence through electronic media in affective–sexual relationships at the national and international levels, the construction of an ad hoc questionnaire was proposed. For the construction of this questionnaire and its items, the Dating Questionnaire (Connolly et al. 2000), the Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire (CAON) by Borrajo et al. (2015) and the Dating Violence Questionnaire (DVQ-R) by Martínez-Gómez et al. (2021) were reviewed.

The first part of the instrument is composed of sociodemographic variables and relational variables in the dating relationship and is concerned with preserving the anonymity of the questionnaire's participants. Among these variables are the number of relationships and their duration, sexual orientation, and type of relationship. These sociodemographic and relational data in dating were collected through multiple-choice and closed-ended questions. In the construction of the second part, the first step was the drafting of a pool of items from which to build the four scales. The second step was the refinement of the items, based on the application of the Delphi method with a group of six experts in the field (Linstone and Turoff 1975). The second part consisted finally of four blocks with a total of 88 items. Each of these blocks measures the following dimensions: block one, composed of 12 items, assesses the perception of violence and strategies of control and abuse through electronic devices in dating relationships between young people; block two, composed of 27 items, measures the prevalence of new forms of digital violence in young people's dating relationships; block three, with 26 items, compares the prevalence of violence through screens and violence outside screens, such as gender-based violence; block four, composed of 13 items, assesses the tolerance of this violence through new technologies among young people; block four, composed of 13 items, assesses the prevalence of violence through new technologies among young people; and block four, composed of 13 items, assesses the prevalence of violence through new technologies among young people. In this second part, a Likert-type response format was chosen with a response option on the aggressions suffered and perpetrated, with a range of values of 1 "disagree", 2 "slightly disagree", 3 "slightly agree" and 4 "agree" for block one; and a range of values of "never", "seldom", "sometimes" and "often" for blocks two, three and four of the instrument. "Often" means that a relevant event has occurred six or more times in the relationship; "sometimes", about three or four times; and "seldom", once or twice in the relationship. The responses to each item received a higher or lower score depending on the degree of agreement with the phenomena in question or the frequency of the phenomena. The items were written in infinitive form to facilitate the double possibility of response (you to your partner or your partner to you, for blocks two and three), which allow the measurement of perpetration and victimization in the prevalence of violence, in addition to identifying whether the aggressions and abuses are bidirectional in nature.

On the other hand, in terms of focus group design, the funnel design was taken into account, according to which the discussion flows from general and broad topics, called transition questions, to more specific and focused issues in the form of key questions (Hennink 2007). In the end, the focus group presented a total of ten questions.

2.3. Procedure

In the procedure of the quantitative part of the study with the ad hoc questionnaire, a non-probabilistic purposive or discretionary sampling was carried out, selected on the basis of knowledge of a population and purpose of the study and on the basis of required criteria. In this way, a representative sample of the student population at UCLan in England was sought. Inclusion criteria included belonging to the university as a student body and having or having had a dating relationship. As for the focus group procedure, students were recruited on the basis of the previous non-probability, purposive or discretionary sampling, as well as snowball sampling.

2.4. Data Analysis

Regarding the data analysis, in the quantitative part, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the analysis of the reliability of the questionnaire, as well as the item–total correlation for the analysis of the items. Data analysis was carried out using statistical and data management software tools such as SPSS 15.0 in this case. As for the analysis of qualitative data, the analysis procedure was carried out by interpreting the different discourses exposed by the participants in order to obtain a new and coherent representation of the

phenomenon studied from a qualitative perspective. In this way, it was possible to carry out a comparative analysis of both results.

3. Results

3.1. Instrument 1: Questionnaire

Of the total sample (*n* = 303), 57.4% (78 women and 96 men) claimed to be in an affective–sexual relationship at the time of completing the research instrument. The duration of these relationships was mostly from 6 months to 1 year for 15.6%; from 1 year to 2 years for 34.4%; from 2 to 3 years for 15.6%; and from 3 to 5 years for 28.2%. As for the type of relationship the participants claimed to be in, we found that 13.6% were in a sporadic relationship; 33.2% were in a casual relationship, designated as a relationship with frequent contact without commitment; 46.8% were in a serious and/or stable relationship; and 6.4% said they were in a relationship with a commitment to marriage or living together. More than half of the girls admitted to being in a serious relationship. Of these relationships, 19.3% had direct, face-to-face contact with their partner more than once a day; 36.3% did so every day; 26.1% saw each other two or three times a week; 5.4% saw each other once a week; 4.7% were together once every two weeks; and 8.1% saw each other once a month or less.

Regarding sexual orientation, 6.6% said they were homosexual (12 females and 8 males); 4%, bisexual (8 females and 4 males) and 82.2%, heterosexual (93 females and 156 males), 7.2% did not answer this question. In relation to their marital status, 69.2% indicated that they were single (171), 4.9% were married (12), 1.6% were cohabiting (4), 3.2% were engaged (8), 17% were in a dating relationship (42), 3.6% were living with their partner (9) and only 0.5% were divorced (1). As for the type of family they had grown up in, 63.4% said they had grown up in a nuclear family (192), 0.7% in an adoptive family (2), 20.8% were in a single-parent family (63), 12.5% in a reconstituted family (38) and 1.3% in an extended family (4). Regarding the importance of religion in their lives, 25.1% considered it very important (76), 22.8% considered it quite important (69), 37% said it was not very important (112) and for 14.5% religion was not part of their lives (44).

The results reveal 51.04% in block one, which assesses the perception of digital violence through electronic devices in dating relationships among young people; 15.84% in block two, which analyses the prevalence of digital violence in young couples' relationships; 9.36% in block three, which studies the prevalence of traditional violence; and 35.78% in block four, which assesses the tolerance of digital violence among young people. The following are some of the most revealing results from each of the blocks.

First, we begin by presenting the results of block one, which measured the dimension that assesses the perception of violence and strategies of control and abuse through electronic devices in dating relationships between young people, with a score of 51.04%. Some of the most remarkable results were found in item 1, "Reading the partner's conversations with their online contacts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, etc.)". In this item, a striking majority of the sample agreed with the premise. Of the relevant sample, 42.7% of girls and 23.3% of boys "agreed", while 27.4% of girls and 32.4% of boys said they "strongly agreed". Also interesting are the findings of item 2, on "Knowing the partner's access codes or passwords to their virtual spaces", where 20.5% of girls and 21% of boys "agreed", and 41% of girls and 22.7% of boys said they "somewhat agreed". Almost 20% more girls than boys expressed agreement with knowing their partner's passwords. For item 4, "Logging into partners' profiles and Internet accounts and viewing their activity regularly", lower "agree" and "strongly agree" scores were observed compared with the previous items. Girls expressed "agree" in 18.8% and "strongly agree" in 25.6%, while boys indicated 14.2% "agree" and 26.1% "strongly agree". Regarding the type of affective–sexual relationship that the subject described being in, it is worth noting the highest percentage obtained for disagreement—58.8%—was obtained from the participants who acknowledged being in a committed relationship. Item 6, on "Looking at partner's daily Internet connections", showed a large negative majority for this question. Girls reported 12% "agreeing",

18.8% "somewhat agreeing", 26.5% "somewhat agreeing" and 42.7% "disagreeing". On the other hand, boys admitted 6.8% "agree", 10.2% "somewhat agree", 12.5% "somewhat agree" and an outstanding 70.5% "disagree" on the control of their partner's connections to virtual spaces. Considering the type of affective–sexual relationship at the time of the questionnaire for this item, there was a negative trend in the assumption of this premise as the subjects increased their commitment to their relationships.

Continuing with item 7, which analysed the action of "Being constantly in contact through electronic media (mobile phone, computer) with the partner to know where he/she is or with whom", it was calculated that 41.6% of the subjects thought they "agreed", with 40.8% of boys and 42.7% of girls. At the same time, 29.2% recorded that they "somewhat agree", with 30.5% of boys and 27.4% of girls. Therefore, it was deduced that a majority of this sample expressed their agreement with the action of being constantly in contact through electronic media. Looking further into the analysis, if we pay attention to the frequency of direct contact with the partner, the highest values of agreement with the premise were observed in the answer "every day" with 18.3% and "two or three times a week" with 13.1%. If we analyse the degree of commitment that existed between the relationships of the respondents, there was an upward trend towards agreement to be permanently in contact when the commitment increases, up to the proposal of marriage or cohabitation, as shown in Figure 1.
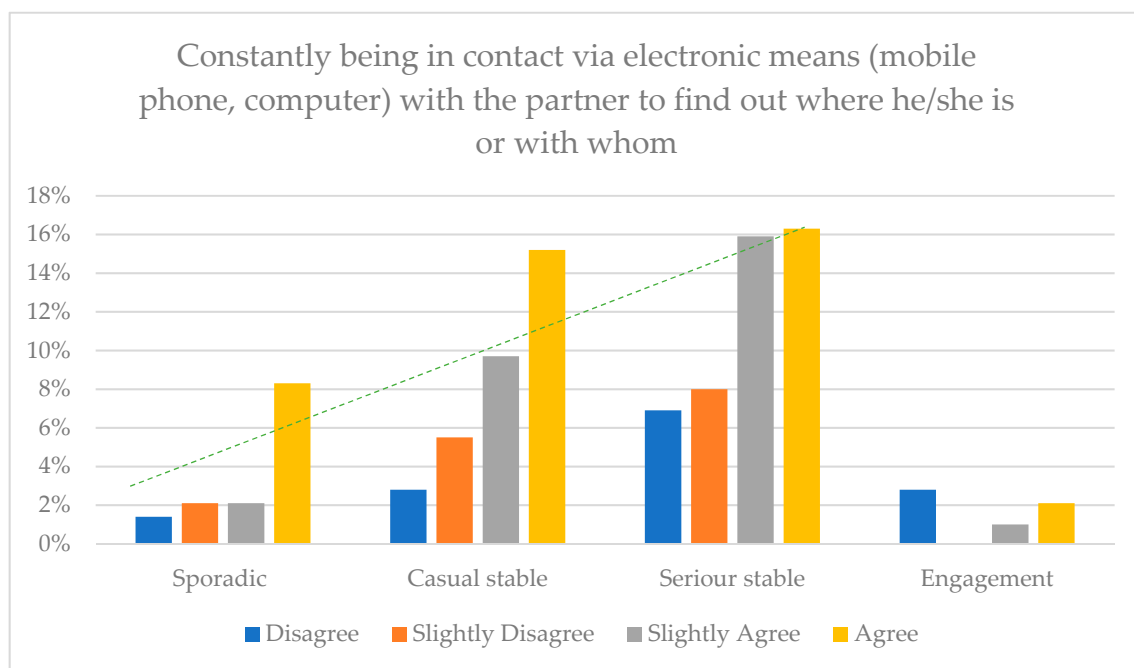

Figure 1. Results of item 7 correlated with the type of affective–sexual relationship.

Block two, which measures the prevalence of digital violence in the relationships of young couples of both partners, obtained a score of 15.84%. This block presents double responses for each item, because, firstly, the first response of each item indicates the action performed by the subject's partner according to him/herself and, secondly, the second response indicates the subject's own action in his/her relationship, from the perspective of the respondent. This allows for a comparison of results within each item. The results in the second block show a higher prevalence of behaviours framed as new (or not) digital violence by the respondents' partners, in all cases, according to the respondents' opinion. Furthermore, all responses to the items in this block indicate a very low prevalence of digital violence in the relationships of young couples of both partners. Item 13, by openly asking the partner about their movements, is represented in the following graph. As can be seen in Figure 2, which corresponds to item 13, the tendency to recognise a higher

prevalence of this type of action and behaviour in electronic media by the other partner is readily apparent.
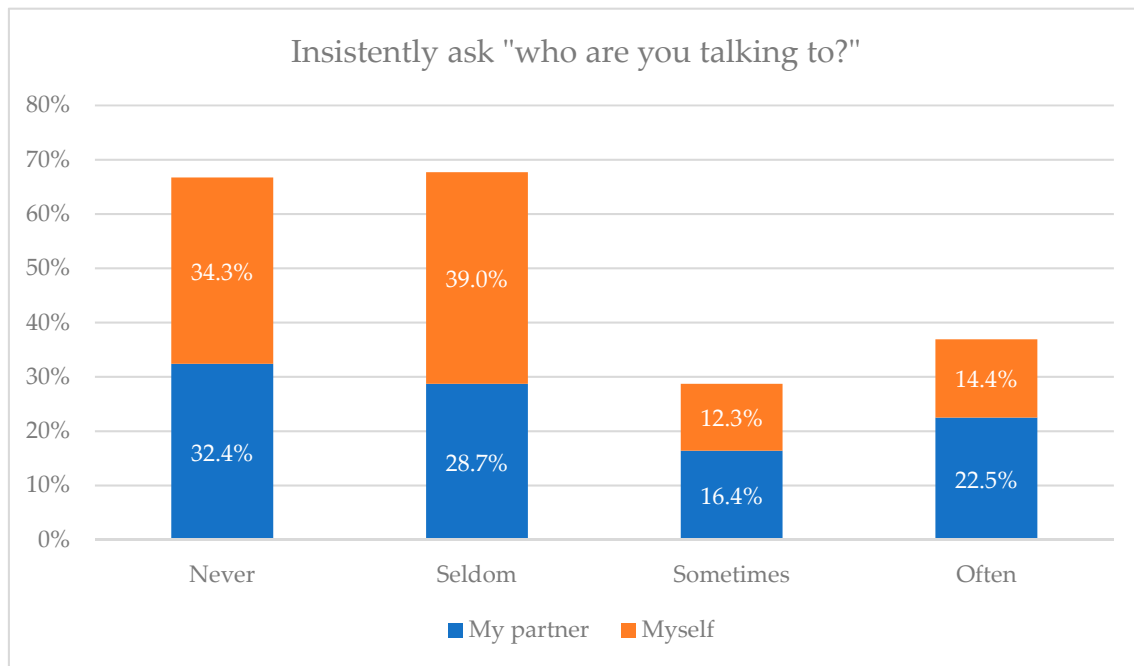

Figure 2. Results for item 13 on affective–sexual relationships according to the participant.

Item 15, on looking at the movements of the partner in their networks and virtual spaces, was striking. Firstly because of the higher prevalence reported, both by the partner (supposedly) and by the subject him/herself, compared with the results of item 13. It should be noted that the percentage of prevalence for this online control action was higher for the "sometimes" option, with 27%, than for the "seldom" option, with 22%, in the case of the participants' partners. It is also relevant to highlight item 18, where a 35% (of "sometimes" and "often" responses) prevalence of getting angry with the partner when the partner does not respond to online messages and phone calls immediately was found. Analysing this result in more depth, it was observed that boys acknowledged, in the first person, 9.6% for "sometimes" and 6% for "often", while girls admitted 12% for "sometimes" and 5.1% for "often". As for what respondents thought of their partners, 26.1% for "sometimes" and 14.8% for "often" were boys; while 9.9% for "sometimes" and 16.5% for "often" were girls. Referring to item 36, about posting erotic photos of their partners in virtual spaces after an argument, no boys admitted that their partners had done it "often", while 3.3% of girls stated that their partners had. Considering that most of the sample is heterosexual, it follows that no girl in a couple's position has posted erotic photos of her partner after an argument, while this action must have been carried out by some of the girls' partners. Accordingly, the first-person responses for this item corresponded with the previous ones, as no girl recorded an "often" response to this question, while 2.6% of boys did.

Continuing with block three, on the prevalence of off-screen and traditional violence. This followed the double analysis of the results of the partner and the subject, from the point of view of the subject. Looking at the results of the items in this block, the low prevalence reported in the use of traditional violence was highlighted, with a score of 9.36%. For example, item 40, which refers to the display of anger to a partner when something does not go well, obtained 21% in the "sometimes" option, both for the partner and the individual. Mentioning the percentages of item 41, on blaming the partner for problems in the relationship, it is noted that higher scores were found when the action was carried out by the respondent him/herself than by the partner, as indicated by the respondents. Of the

participants, 16% "sometimes" and 36% "seldom" undervalued their partners, while they themselves acknowledged that their partners did so by a respective 13% and 32%.

Looking at item 47, only half of the sample acknowledged that they had "never" undervalued their partner or vice versa. It is interesting to note that in this item more participants recognised that they had carried out the action referred to in the "sometimes" option, 14% compared with 12.5%, which would be the number of times that their partners had done so. Delving a little deeper into the times that their partners had undervalued the participants, it is worth noting that women admitted that their partners undervalued them "often" by 10.1% and "sometimes" by 5%. Males, for these responses, scored 5.9% and 17.8%, respectively. Therefore, recalling the heterosexual majority of the sample, 5% more female partners admitted to reproducing this abusive behaviour against their partners on a frequent basis. Item 50, on trying to decide what is best for the partner, deserves to be highlighted in the following, given that the percentage of "sometimes" responses was slightly higher, at 28% when carried out by the subject him/herself and 22% when carried out (allegedly) by the subject's partner. This denotes a more normalised and socially accepted view of this type of behaviour within affective–sexual relationships. This was similarly observed in item 53, which is based on not recognising or assuming responsibilities within the affective–sexual relationship. The same response of "sometimes" was marked 33% of the time when it was made in the first person by the individual and 29.5% when it was made by the partner. Items 55, about shouting at the partner, and 58, about isolating the partner after an argument, showed quite similar values. In item 55, 28% of "seldom" and 17% of "sometimes" were found in the (alleged) infliction of this by the partner, and 27% and 21% for the same responses, respectively, by the subject. In item 58, the same responses of "seldom" and "sometimes" are noted for the partner, with 30% and 14.7%, and 28.6% and 19.6% for the actions affirmed by the participant, respectively. Therefore, it follows that the premises questioned in items 55 and 58 could also be considered socially as actions that are not so negative and related to violence as such.

The last block, block four, which evaluates the tolerance of this violence through new technologies in young people, resulted in a score of 35.78%. Looking at the results, the percentages of item 66 were striking, given that it was accepted by a majority of the sample, with similar percentages among males and females. That is, 25% and 31% admitted that they "often" and "sometimes" told their partner what they were doing and where at all times, respectively. In item 68, which deals with understanding their partner's anger when not answering immediately, 14% said they understood "often" and 18% "sometimes", where 14.9% went for the girls' opinion and 20.5% for the boys' opinion for the latter response. The results for item 69 were in line with the previous results. Thus, a majority was also found to reject the statement, with responses of 11% for "often" and 20% for "sometimes", with a slight difference between the gender for the latter response. Again, more boys (21.8%) admitted to undertaking this action "sometimes" than girls (16.5%). Similarly, item 70 was also rejected by an even larger majority than in the previous cases, with 57% "never" and 18% "sometimes". However, a curious 13.8% admitted to letting their partner into their virtual spaces with their passwords "often". Item 71 deserves to be represented in Figure 3 below, according to the gender of the respondents, as their percentages were almost symmetrical.
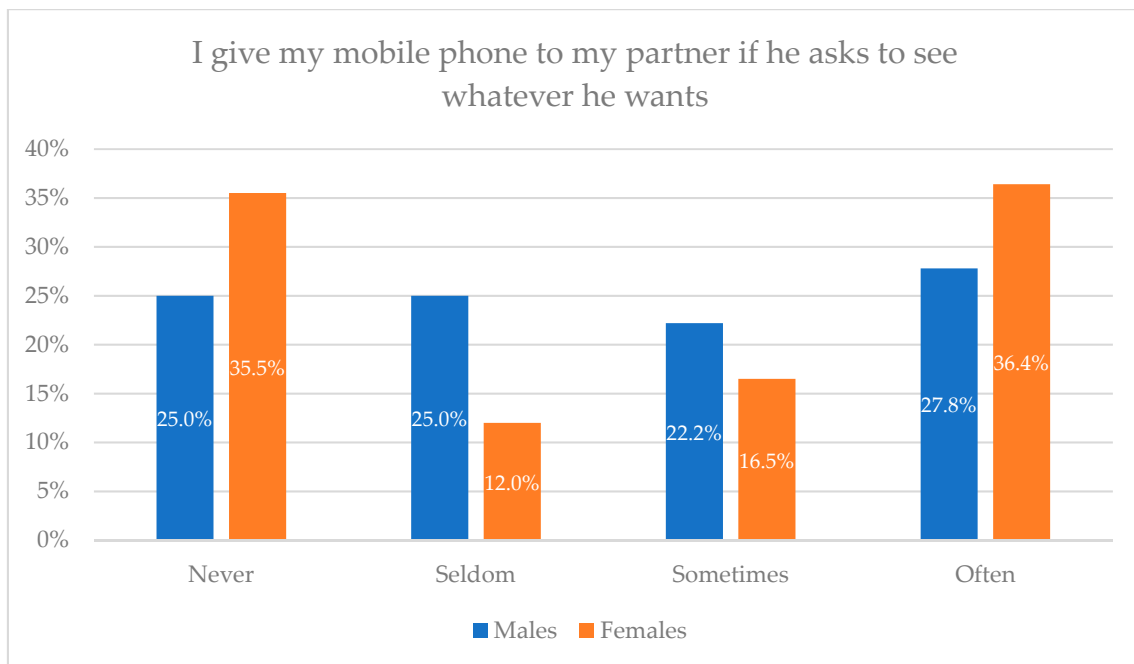
Figure 3. Results of item 71 on affective–sexual relationships according to the gender of the participants.

Item 75 showed some difference between boys and girls in the "often" response, with 17% of boys admitting that they do not mind sending nude photos to their partners if they insist, compared with 9.9% of girls who do so frequently. Similarly, in item 76, on feeling obliged to send intimate photos to a partner if he/she insists, the percentage shot up for the "never" option with 80%, 9% for "seldom", 3% for "sometimes" and 7.4% for "often". The same was true for item 77, on public humiliation on social media, although slightly less drastically. In this item the percentage was 70% for the "never" option, 12% for "seldom", 7.5% for "sometimes" and 10% for "often". Item 78, on allowing or condoning partner's insults or threats through messages when arguing, was also interesting. Although most of the responses were on the negative side, it was interesting to note that 18.2% of girls and 9.9% of boys said "often" and 12% said "sometimes".

3.2. Instrument 2: Focus Group Discussion

Firstly, we will present the results of the group of students of British origin, which consisted of five students: one girl and four boys. In naming some of the main characteristics of the participants and respecting their anonymity, we can reveal the following: the girl was 24 years old, claimed to be single and her longest relationship was six months; boy 1 was 19 years old, single and without long relationships; boy 2 was 20 years old, single and without relationships; boy 3, 20 years old, was in a one-month relationship and his longest relationship was five months; and boy 4, 18 years old, was single and his longest relationship was four months.

The first questions asked about the type of electronic devices and social networks they had experienced and their experiences of using them on a daily basis. Question four questioned the pros and cons of the inclusion of social networks in affective–sexual relationships. Question five questioned the opinion of being constantly in contact with a relationship partner and one of the comments was: «Talking to your partner or friends every day is bad because your conversations become meaningless. Meaningless conversations can kill a relationship». Question 6 was about knowing your partner's passwords to social networks in order to monitor their online activities on a regular basis. It is interesting to note the following comments: «If you know each other's passwords, there is no privacy, you just have to trust each other»; «But if we say that everything should be shared, why

not share a password, for example in case your partner needs to access your profile for anything?»; « Because I have to prove that I am not cheating...».

Question seven was about the opinion on impersonating and making changes to the partner's online profile. For this question, participants commented: «That is too much»; «If you're joking, it's OK, but if you're serious, it's wrong»; «I'm open to jokes, but if it's not funny...». Question number eight asked about banning contact between the partner and some people on social networks and other virtual communication spaces and the group commented: «It's different because in real life, you just have to go back to being single». Question nine asked whether insulting and threatening was easier through phone calls or messages because they were not face-to-face. «Cyberstalking. It's serious, but you can prevent it. You can block the person»; «If you don't talk face to face, it's easier to say anything, it's easier to continue the stalking and intimidation»; «In real life... you can take it to the police, for example». Question ten was based on the subjects' opinions on the use of social media as a means of humiliating their partner and some of the comments were: «I don't think it solves any problems. It can ruin your relationship»; «Never have an online discussion, it's better to have a face-to-face discussion, it's between the two of you». Finally, some final comments in the group of British students on the consequences of using social networking sites in a relationship were: «It is another means of communication to improve or destroy relationships»; «If you are sensible, you can use the platform to improve the relationship».

Secondly, the results of the group of international students who were studying at UCLan University in England will be presented. This group consisted of six students: two girls and four boys. In pointing out some of the main characteristics of the participants and respecting their anonymity, we can reveal the following: girl 1 was 21 years old, from France and single; girl 2, 22 years old, from India with a partner; boy 1, 25 years old, from Uganda and single, his longest relationship was four months; boy 2, 19 years old, from Burma and in a relationship of more than three years; boy 3, 19 years old, from Ukraine and single, his longest relationship was one year; and boy 4, 21 years old, from China and engaged in a relationship of one year. The most significant comments from each of the questions discussed will be highlighted below.

As with the first focus group, the first questions were generic. Question five asked about the subjects' opinions of being in constant contact with a relationship partner, and some of the comments were as follows: «I don't think people should have that access to you, you should have some space, if a person always knows you're online and you're waiting to respond every time...»; «Honestly, I have a girlfriend and she never lets me use Facebook, but I use it secretly». Question six sought opinions on knowing your partner's social media passwords in order to observe their online activities on a regular basis. It is interesting to note the following comments: «After some time of relationship we share the same account. We act as a whole. We share the same affection, we like the same things. We are like one entity, like one person. We share everything. There are no secrets. For some social networks we use the same account. It's not me or her, it's us».

Question seven was in regard to subjects' opinions on impersonating and making changes to their partner's online profile and they responded by alluding to the illegality of the action. Question eight asked about banning contact between the partner and some people on social networks and other virtual communication spaces and the group commented: «In my country, boys are too possessive of girls. [...] It gives complications to the relationship»; «Yes, I have a friend. He started a relationship with a girl and he was controlling her the whole time». Question ten inquired about subjects' opinions on the use of social media as a means of humiliating a partner and some of the comments were: «If you break up with someone... Do you need revenge? I think that's stupid. You have to be really angry with a person to do that». Some final comments in the group of British students on the consequences of using social media in a relationship that the group added were: «Increased paranoid behaviour»; «Comparing positive and negative things... it is

more negative»; «When you want to start a relationship, it's good, but when you want to maintain a relationship, it's bad. It depends on how you treat your partner».

Finally, item analysis and scale reliability was estimated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, the value of which was 0.955. Questionnaires with alpha values greater than or equal to 0.70 are suitable for the research. The standard deviation of the subjects was 47.32. The ad hoc questionnaire has a high internal consistency.

4. Discussion

Reviewing the above results and the main objective of this research study on the prevalence of digital violence among university students and their sexual–affective relationships, a low but significant prevalence in this population is observed. The prevalence of digital violence in this study is in line with the results of Strawhun et al. (2013) and outperforms those of Dreßing et al. (2014). In this way, it is observed that the tendency towards the negative response of disagreement, in the face of these premises related to behaviours of online control and abuse that young people show towards their partners in affective–sexual relationships, could be explained by a phenomenon of social desirability; the need to aim towards what is considered socially correct. However, it is crucial to take into account the different percentages of agreements and affirmations regarding the alleged abusive and controlling behaviours extracted from this sample. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the low percentages in this research could be explained by the non-identification and normalisation of digital violence also detected in previous studies (Albero et al. 2013; Muñoz-Rivas et al. 2011; Borrajo Mena and Gámez Guadix 2015). The vague perception of this type of abusive behaviour in virtual spaces, and hence the tolerance towards it, was in turn contrasted with the results found in the focus groups.

Analysing the low percentages found for these variables, it can be deduced that the behaviours and attitudes of abuse, harassment and control through electronic media give rise to a new digital violence. According to the hypothesis put forward in this study, and comparing the results of blocks two and three, it is demonstrated that this digital violence can be exercised without the presence of physical violence. Therefore, we can confirm that violence exercised through digital media will result in a new form of violence that is not directly related to traditional violence outside screens, as digital violence may manifest itself as an isolated phenomenon in many cases and/or complement traditional violence. However, the cases in this sample, in which physically and sexually violent behaviour is detected, are also likely to show abuse, harassment and control through telematic media.

Regarding the risk factors analysed in cyber-perpetration and cyber-victimisation of digital violence in this study, and in general terms, bidirectional digital violence has been detected (Piquer Barrachina et al. 2017). However, it should be highlighted the slightly higher prevalence of females compared with the number of males in digital violence, coinciding with the studies of Kalaitzaki (2020); Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2021); Smoker and March (2017); Strawhun et al. (2013); and van Baak and Hayes (2018). Thus, it is concluded that women in this study exercise more digital violence than their male counterparts, given that they responded more affirmatively in almost all the items studied. In other words, women in this sample identify cyberstalking in their own attitudes and actions more than they do in those of men. At the same time men also detect this type of digital violence in a slightly higher percentage in their partners, who in this sample were mostly heterosexual. However, some exceptions are worth mentioning, as in the case of the question based on the publication of erotic photos of the partner after an argument, as the results show that some males did this action, but that no female did.

Furthermore, we can confirm that as the degree of commitment and stability in the affective–sexual relationship increases, the behaviours and actions of digital violence decrease in the subjects surveyed (Labonté et al. 2021; Reyns et al. 2011; Rodríguez Salazar and Rodríguez Morales 2016; Sönmez and Solmazer 2022). Additionally, from the focus group results, we can also verify that romantic jealousy among students turned out to be a significant predictor of controlling and abusive digital violence behaviours (Rey-Anacona

et al. 2014; Borrajo et al. 2015; Deans and Bhogal 2019). Moreover, the allusion that emerged from the group discussions about privacy within affective–sexual relationships in digital spaces should be noted. In this case, online privacy concerns are correlated with excessive social interaction practices on the internet (Yazgan 2022) As for the remaining risk factors and variables previously analysed in studies of cyberstalking and also taken into account in this research, such as academic disciplines, the type of family subjects come from, the type of relationship, the duration of the relationship, meetings with the partner, religion, etc., there are no relevant results to highlight in the findings of this research. Thus, the presence of a new form of digital violence, not identified in many cases of the sample surveyed as such, is confirmed.

5. Conclusions

It is concluded that, in this study's attempt to analyse ICT and its impact on affective–sexual relationships among university students in England, a low but significant presence of digital violence is shown. Furthermore, the results emanating from the comparative analysis of the qualitative part verify the evidence found in the quantitative part. Therefore, taking into account the impact that electronic media has on younger populations in their social interactions and interpersonal relationships, the educational and university context should be the object of the creation of different programs of awareness, prevention and specific training. Thus, after the analysis of the sample, it is possible to proceed to the creation of specific training programmes on digital violence through the design of activities of discussion, reflection and analysis according to the characteristics of the context in which they are applied. Finally, as proposals for future research, further exploration of risk factors associated with the cyber-perpetration and the cyber-victimisation of digital violence is encouraged in order to act more effectively in its prevention and detection.

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