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“Is it really a crime to stalk? But I stalk”: The experience of online harassment¹

“É crime stalkear, né? Mas eu stalkeio”: A vivência do abuso digital

“Es un delito stalking, ¿verdad? Pero yo hago stalking”: La experiencia del abuso digital

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¹ The authors declare that this contribution is a segment (or excerpt, section) of the first author's own (dissertation) (<https://unifor.br/web/guest/bdtd?course=75®istration=1923857>). However, it is ensured that the work has not been published in another scientific journal.

Abstract

Introduction: Digital abuse involves the perpetration of aggressive and controlling behaviors against an intimate partner through technology. This phenomenon represents a contemporary form of violence in romantic relationships, marked by dynamics of power, control, and surveillance, with significant impacts on young people's mental health. **Objectives:** To understand the experiences of Brazilian youth regarding digital abuse in intimate relationships, analyzing the behaviors, beliefs, and impacts associated with this form of violence. **Method:** This qualitative, cross-sectional study is part of the broader project "Digital Abuse in Intimate Relationships: A Study with Brazilian Youth." Fourteen participants aged 23 to 29 years (71.4% women) took part in semi-structured online interviews. The material was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. **Results:** The findings revealed actions or sets of actions mediated by technology that generated discomfort for at least one partner, including control, monitoring, and direct aggression. Participants' justifications for digital abuse were linked to beliefs about romantic love and the normalization of jealousy. Common mental health impacts included symptoms of anxiety and depression, while coping strategies involved strengthening support networks and seeking professional help. **Conclusion:** Digital abuse constitutes a significant form of violence in intimate relationships, grounded in power and control dynamics. The study highlights the need to increase the visibility of this phenomenon and to develop preventive and interventional strategies aimed at young people in academic and community contexts.

Keywords: emotional abuse; young adult; digital technology; intimate partner violence.

Resumo

Introdução: O abuso digital envolve a perpetração de comportamentos agressivos e controladores contra um parceiro íntimo por meio da tecnologia. Esse fenômeno tem se configurado como uma forma contemporânea de violência nas relações afetivas, marcada por dinâmicas de poder, controle e vigilância, com impactos relevantes sobre a saúde mental de jovens. **Objetivos:** Compreender as experiências de jovens brasileiros acerca do abuso digital em relacionamentos íntimos, analisando os comportamentos, crenças e impactos associados a essa forma de violência. **Método:** Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, de corte transversal, vinculado ao projeto mais amplo "Abuso Digital entre Parceiros Íntimos: um estudo com jovens brasileiros". Participaram 14 jovens com idades entre 23 e 29 anos (71,4% mulheres), que responderam a entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas de forma online. As entrevistas foram transcritas e submetidas à análise temática. **Resultados:** Os achados evidenciaram ações ou conjuntos de ações mediadas pela tecnologia que geraram desconforto em pelo menos uma das partes da relação, incluindo controle, monitoramento e agressão direta. Foram identificados argumentos utilizados pelos participantes para justificar o abuso digital, relacionados a crenças sobre o amor romântico e à naturalização do ciúme. Também se observaram impactos frequentes sobre a saúde mental, como sintomas de ansiedade e depressão, bem como estratégias de enfrentamento centradas no fortalecimento da rede de apoio e na busca de ajuda profissional. **Conclusão:** O abuso digital constitui uma forma significativa de violência em relacionamentos íntimos, ancorada em dinâmicas de poder e controle. O estudo reforça a necessidade de ampliar a visibilidade desse fenômeno e de desenvolver estratégias preventivas e interventivas voltadas a jovens em contextos acadêmicos e comunitários.

Palavras-chave: abuso emocional; adulto jovem; tecnologia digital; violência por parceiro íntimo.

Resumen

Introducción: El abuso digital implica la perpetración de comportamientos agresivos y de control hacia una pareja íntima a través de la tecnología. Este fenómeno constituye una forma contemporánea de violencia en las relaciones afectivas, caracterizada por dinámicas de poder, control y vigilancia, con impactos relevantes en la salud mental de los jóvenes. **Objetivos:** Comprender las experiencias de jóvenes brasileños sobre el abuso digital en las relaciones íntimas, analizando los comportamientos, creencias e impactos asociados a esta forma de violencia. **Método:** Se trata de un estudio cualitativo, de corte transversal, vinculado al proyecto más amplio “Abuso Digital entre Parejas Íntimas: un estudio con jóvenes brasileños”. Participaron 14 jóvenes de entre 23 y 29 años (71,4% mujeres), quienes respondieron a entrevistas semiestructuradas en línea. Las entrevistas fueron transcritas y sometidas a análisis temático. **Resultados:** Los hallazgos evidenciaron acciones o conjuntos de acciones mediadas por la tecnología que generaron malestar en al menos una de las partes de la relación, incluyendo el control, la vigilancia y la agresión directa. Se identificaron argumentos utilizados por los participantes para justificar el abuso digital, relacionados con creencias sobre el amor romántico y la naturalización de los celos. Asimismo, se observaron impactos frecuentes en la salud mental, como síntomas de ansiedad y depresión, así como estrategias de afrontamiento centradas en el fortalecimiento de la red de apoyo y la búsqueda de ayuda profesional. **Conclusión:** El abuso digital constituye una forma significativa de violencia en las relaciones íntimas, anclada en dinámicas de poder y control. El estudio refuerza la necesidad de ampliar la visibilidad de este fenómeno y de desarrollar estrategias preventivas e interventivas dirigidas a jóvenes en contextos académicos y comunitarios.

Palabras-clave: abuso emocional; adulto joven; tecnología digital; violencia de pareja.

Introduction

Online harassment is a contemporary form of violence within intimate partnerships, occurring through the internet and digital technologies, thereby lacking geographical or temporal constraints. The term encompasses the unauthorized dissemination of intimate photos and videos with the purpose of controlling, monitoring, coercing, harassing, and/or stalking an intimate partner (Cavalcanti & Coutinho, 2019), as identified by Brown and Hegarty (2018). In general, estimates of cyber-dating victimization vary considerably due to disparities and inconsistencies in the conceptualization and measurement across studies, however, prevalence rates in earlier research ranged from 22% to 50% (Caridade et al., 2019).

The evidence is inconclusive regarding the gendered nature of online harassment perpetration. Some studies suggest potential divergences (Semenza, 2019), while others found no insights into the phenomenon (Reed et al., 2019). A growing body of research indicates a co-occurrence between online harassment and physical and/or psychological dating violence in the presential world (Paat et al., 2019).

1.1 Theoretical Framework

One classification of online harassment is non-consensual sexting, which includes revenge pornography—the unauthorized exposure of intimate material (Flach & Deslandes, 2017). Studies show that this type of violence can induce depressive feelings, anger, hostility, and excessive alcohol consumption, with it being associated with risky lifestyles such as vandalism or illegal possession of weapons (Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Lima & Morais, 2022).

Regarding studies on the topic, there is a prevalence of international research, predominantly from the United States, characterized by an empirical and quantitative nature. Among these studies, there are few representatives of qualitative research (Alsawalqa & Alrawashdeh, 2022; Lu et al., 2021; Rueda et al., 2020; Basting et al., 2023; Stonard, 2020; Reed et al., 2021).

Concerning national literature, up to the present study, only seven works on the subject of online harassment have been found, including three literature reviews, two theoretical studies, an analysis of applications, and an analysis of social representations of relationships in digital media (Flach & Deslandes, 2017; Cavalcanti & Coutinho, 2019; Andrade et al., 2020). Of these, the two theoretical works aimed to deepen understanding of internet-mediated relational dynamics, including online harassment (Flach & Deslandes, 2019). Lastly, regarding empirical research, one study analyzed mobile phone applications designed for partner control and monitoring (Flach & Deslandes, 2019), while another sought to understand the social representations of online harassment among young Brazilian university students (Cavalcanti et al., 2020).

This study is anchored in a constructivist epistemological perspective, which assumes that experiences and meanings are socially and culturally situated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Accordingly, the choice of a qualitative methodology and thematic analysis reflects the aim of capturing the subjectivity and complexity of online harassment in intimate relationships. Although the review considered a wide range of studies, this article privileges authors who emphasize the sociocultural and relational dimensions of violence (e.g., Flach & Deslandes, 2017; Cavalcanti & Coutinho, 2019), as well as those who address the digital transformations of intimacy (e.g., Keen, 2012; Lelaurain et al., 2021).

Therefore, considering that online harassment is a potentially harmful phenomenon in modern romantic and sexual relationships and that there is a considerable lack of qualitative studies addressing the topic in the national literature, this study aimed to comprehend the experiences of victims and perpetrators of online harassment. This research is part of broader

mixed-methods project entitled “Digital Abuse in Intimate Relationships: A Study with Brazilian Youth”, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The broader project aims to investigate the prevalence, meanings, and psychosocial implications of online harassment in romantic relationships among young people.

The present manuscript corresponds to the qualitative phase of this research, focusing specifically on in-depth interviews with participants previously identified in the quantitative stage as victims or perpetrators of online harassment. This phase sought to deepen the understanding of subjective experiences, beliefs, and coping strategies, complementing the quantitative findings and highlighting the sociocultural meanings attributed to digital violence within intimate relationships.

In order to achieve this aim, the study pursued four specific objectives: (1) to identify the main digital abuse behaviors reported by young people in intimate relationships; (2) to analyze the beliefs and justifications attributed by participants to the practice of digital abuse, with particular attention to the normalization of jealousy and conceptions of romantic love; (3) to examine the impacts of digital abuse on participants’ mental health and well-being; and (4) to describe the coping strategies adopted by young people, including the strengthening of support networks and the search for professional help. Ultimately, it is anticipated that this research will enhance understanding of the subject and stimulate the development of further studies in the national context.

2. Method

2.1 Design used

The adoption of a qualitative methodology was based on the need to capture the complexity and subjectivity of online harassment, which involves relational, emotional, and sociocultural aspects that are not fully apprehended through quantitative approaches (Flick, 2022). The cross-sectional design was chosen to provide a snapshot of participants’ experiences in a specific time frame, acknowledging the exploratory nature of the study.

2.2. Data collection instruments

Sociodemographic Questionnaire – comprised of 11 questions, aimed at characterizing the participants in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, income, education, race, duration of the relationship, and internet access.

Semi-structured Interview – consisting of 15 questions, developed by the authors for specific use in the study. Some examples of questions include: “Have you ever heard of online harassment?”; “Have you ever experienced any issues related to this in any relationship?”; “What does/did he/she do?” and “What do you do when this happens?.” Semi-structured interviews were employed because they provide a flexible structure that allows participants to elaborate on their own experiences while ensuring that key topics relevant to the research objectives are addressed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This technique is particularly suitable for exploring sensitive issues such as violence in intimate relationships, as it balances guidance and openness.

2.3. Participants

In total, 14 young adults participated in the research. Among them, 10 (71.4%) were female, and 4 (28.6%) were male, with ages ranging from 23 to 29 years. Half of the participants were in romantic relationships (n = 7; 50%). Table 1 provides a detailed characterization of the participants.

Table 1
Characterization of the participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Occupation	Sexual orientation	Relationship duration
P1	23	M	Student	Homosexual	----
P2	25	F	Businesswoman	Bisexual	----
P3	27	F	Doula	Heterosexual	10 years
P4	24	F	Purchasing assistant	Heterosexual	1 year, 2 months
P5	27	F	Psychologist	Heterosexual	7 years
P6	29	F	Parliamentary advisor	Heterosexual	----
P7	29	M	Financial administrator	Heterosexual	----
P8	25	M	Public servant	Homosexual	4 yeras
P9	23	F	Psychologist	Heterosexual	1 month
P10	25	F	Child-care worker	Homosexual	----
P11	23	M	Student	Bisexual	----
P12	29	F	Saleswoman	Heterosexual	14 years
P13	25	F	Saleswoman	Heterosexual	----
P14	23	F	Psychologist	Heterosexual	6 years, 3months

2.4. Procedures used

This study corresponds to the qualitative phase of a broader research project on online harassment in intimate relationships. In the first phase, a quantitative survey was conducted using the Cyber Dating Violence Inventory (Morelli et al., 2017), which allowed the identification of young people classified as victims or perpetrators of online harassment. The present qualitative phase was designed to deepen the understanding of these experiences, complementing the quantitative data and enabling the exploration of subjective meanings and contextual nuances often overlooked by standardized instruments. Contact was established via email, clarifying the aims of this second phase of the research. A total of 123 individuals were contacted via email, resulting in 8 responses. For this reason, the “snowball” strategy was also employed, meaning that those who agreed to participate in the study were asked to recommend other potential participants.

Interviews were scheduled and conducted through the Google Meet platform from February to June 2021. The average duration of each interview was 40 minutes. In these communications, the research’s objective was presented, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of the participants’ identities and responses. At the conclusion of the process, based on the saturation criterion regarding profiles of perpetrators and victims, a total of 14 participants were selected.

2.4. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed in full and analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach comprises three stages: pre-analysis, involving a meticulous reading of the material to be analyzed; coding, characterized by grouping the thematic units; and, finally, categorization or data treatment, aiming to organize, classify, and interpret significant thematic units. The categories to which the results were allocated were defined a posteriori, meaning they were determined after the reading and analysis of the interviews to avoid a deterministic conception of classification with pre-defined categories.

Initially, the interviews were analyzed vertically – one by one – to observe each participant's experience with online harassment. Subsequently, after understanding each case, a horizontal analysis – overall – was conducted with all interviews analyzed to identify similarities and differences between the accounts (Meletti & Scorsolini-Comin, 2015). The literature on online harassment was utilized for the discussion of the data.

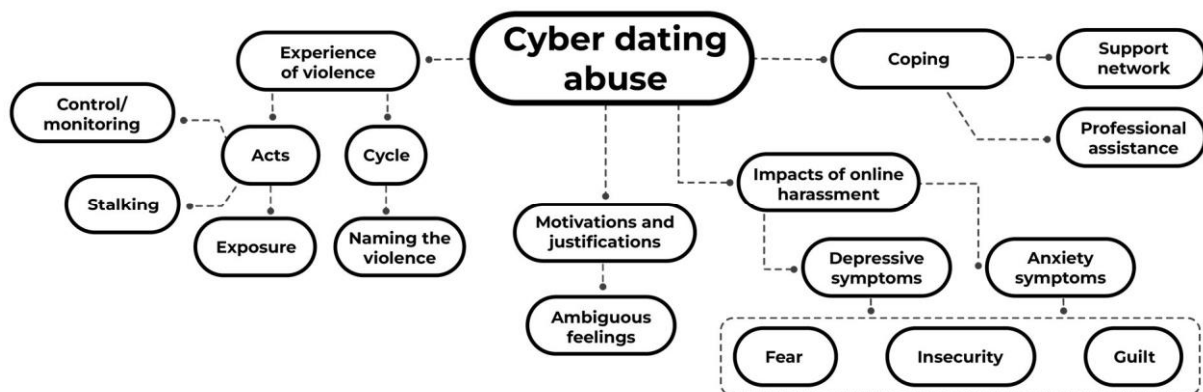
This study underwent an ethical review by the Ethics Committee of the authors' institution and was approved under authorization number: 4.231.135, following all guidelines from Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016 of the National Health Council. All participants signed the consent form, which was provided virtually, along with details regarding the research objectives and procedures, as well as the voluntary participation consent form for the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the interviews, thematic categorizations were created, emerging from the coding of strata and mind maps that were refined throughout the process. Figure 1 presents the mind map produced by the authors, following the thematic analysis proposal (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Figure 1.

Mind Map constructed by the author based on Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis



The data were organized and analyzed with the assistance of Thematic Analysis. Accordingly, the narratives of those who experienced online harassment were explored to understand the practices related to online harassment that they had encountered, as well as the motivations, justifications, and consequences of this experience for themselves and others. To present the information acquired, the following categories will be presented and discussed: a) experience of violence; b) motivations and justifications; c) impacts of online harassment; d) coping.

3.1 Experience of violence

The category “experience of violence” gathered accounts of the most common violent behaviors in the participants’ discourse and how they occurred or were perceived. Here, violence is understood as actions or a set of actions carried out in the digital environment or through technological resources that cause discomfort to at least one party in the relationship. Such acts may also be referred to as online harassment and occur in the forms of control and monitoring as well as direct aggression (Flach & Deslandes, 2021).

He would watch my online activity, constantly bothering me, wanting to know who I was talking to, what I was talking about (...) he kept demanding photos, wanted me to post pictures, and if he posted a photo and I didn't comment, he would get upset. (P12, female, 29 years)

The preceding excerpt exemplifies one of these partner control and monitoring practices. In this case, the partner used access to information about his girlfriend’s (P12) last access to the messaging app to monitor and control her virtual actions and interactions. Additionally, he wanted the partner to post photos and comment on photos he posted on social media as a way to display and affirm that they were together.

It is necessary to emphasize that the practice of control and monitoring has a high prevalence already identified in the literature (Cavalcanti et al., 2020). The authors lead us to understand that this may occur due to normalization and misunderstanding, equating abusive practices to a “proof of love” or care for the partner.

Similarly, Flach and Deslandes (2019), in analyzing tracking, control, and monitoring services provided by applications, found that surveillance often exists under the justification of concern for the other, as evident in statements present in the applications: “Concerned about the safety of your loved one?”, “No need to worry about your son, daughter, boyfriend, or girlfriend because (...) will track all of them!” or “Stop worrying about the child or a girlfriend who doesn’t answer the phone. Just press the button and find out where they are!” (p.10).

Within control and monitoring, cyberstalking stands out, understood as repetitive and unwanted communication or contact conducted electronically, such as through social media, email, or other technologies (Marcum et al., 2017). Some authors consider cyberstalking a subset or extension of stalking, given the consequences (Worsley et al., 2017). Traditional stalking involves persistent harassment behaviors linked to a relational violence pattern. It can manifest as seemingly everyday and harmless, such as offering gifts or sending messages and making frequent phone calls (Huuki et al., 2022). The clustering of these behaviors, depending on the context and duration, constitutes the harassment known as stalking (Stevens et al., 2021).

Despite the differentiation between the terms (cyberstalking and stalking), participants used the term stalking to describe their experiences related to abusive behaviors in the online environment, the focus of this research. For example, P10 reported the abuses she endured with her ex-girlfriend for four years. Currently, P10 described this relationship as “toxic,” as her partner had complete control over the participant’s virtual behaviors, as evident in the following passage:

I couldn't post anything, I couldn't follow anyone new, couldn't comment on anyone's photo, no one could comment on my photos because everything was like this: “Who is this person? Where do you know them from? Why is she commenting on that? Are you involved with her?” The person was really stalking me; it was sinister. (P10, female, 25 years)

Participant P14, on the other hand, boasted about knowing how to stalk her boyfriend, despite disliking the practice and stating that she probably has no reason to continue it since she

has been dating for over six years and considered her partner a “calm” person. However, the participant reported being unable to stop the habit:

I have the habit of stalking. I hate it, actually! But I have it, and I'm very good at stalking, through my Instagram, you know, it's light. Is stalking really a crime? But I stalk. So, I'm there looking at the photo he liked, who he's following, and I have the habit of searching, trying to find out, I search to know who it is, where they're from...
(P14, female, 23 years)

It should be emphasized that the legal definitions of stalking vary according to the legislation of each country. In Brazil, there is the Stalking Law (Law No. 14.132/2021), enacted in March 2021, which defines the phenomenon as the repeated pursuit by any means, including virtual, constituting a threat to the physical or psychological integrity of the victim, as well as their freedom or privacy. The law, therefore, criminalizes stalking, with the perpetrator subject to imprisonment, which can be aggravated if committed against women.

Despite the law, recognizing these behaviors as problematic poses a challenge for the victim, as it confronts beliefs and norms that have already been naturalized (Lizama-Lefno & Quiñones, 2019). The perception of what constitutes violence varies not only from person to person but also from relationship to relationship and from culture to culture (Lelaurain et al., 2021). One participant highlighted in their statement their perception of stalking as something common and without significant consequences, at least initially:

From the perspective of someone being stalked, I don't think it's problematic: I get stalked. So, if someone is stalking me, I don't mind. I think stalking becomes problematic when it really becomes persecution. For example, calling the person, sending messages to the person, liking everything they post all the time. Because then, in this way, you would be somehow harassing that person. But I don't think looking at photos and checking the person's profile, I don't think that's a criminal act. (P1, male, 23 years)

Dhir et al. (2021) observed the difference between stalking/cyberstalking – an abusive practice – and the search for general information – a common habit of social media users. The search for general information is a phenomenon driven by curiosity, whereas stalking/cyberstalking often occurs in specific relational contexts (Sani & Valqueresma, 2020). Furthermore, the search for general information does not encompass threats or the spread of fear (Dhir et al., 2021). Dhir et al. (2021) also highlighted the search for general information as a benign form of stalking/cyberstalking, limited to checking profiles available on social media.

Another form of violence perceived in the participants' accounts was the demand for and control over online exposure by one of the relationship's parties. This situation is often conflicting, generating disagreements between the couple about the subject. The overemphasis on public exposure is considered one of the supporting elements of digital culture, where the boundaries between what is considered public and private become blurred and dissolve (Keen, 2012). The private life is externalized in search of validation that approves and confirms its existence (Flach & Deslandes, 2019). Participant P6 reported her experience with online harassment, which occurred when she began dating a guy she had met at work, who would be the “dream of any girl.” However, after the officialization of the relationship, the partner started displaying behaviors that bothered her, as expressed in the following account: “*I don't like demands [to post photos], especially at the beginning of a relationship, and as I said, I couldn't even expose myself (...)*” (P6, female, 29 years).

A similar discomfort was expressed by participant P2, who stated that her girlfriend had a strong need to expose the relationship on social media to feel validated and recognized:

I'm not one of those people who like to show off a lot; I've always been very private. She, on the other hand, was totally the opposite, she showed too much, to everyone, wanted to show that and I didn't accept it. She wanted to expose me to everyone to know that she was with me, and I've never been this way in any of my other relationships. (P2, female, 25 years)

However, participant P7 considered that exposure had a positive side:

The positive side would be showing people that I like someone, that I'm being loved by someone. Exposing that would be good for me. So, I would find it nice, being in a relationship. I can tell people that I'm in a relationship and that person is the one I like. (P7, male, 29 years)

This result is consistent with the findings of a qualitative study conducted with 20 young university students (of both sexes) aged 18, from different courses at a private university. The research showed that although there was criticism of publicizing the private life, young people identify it as a demand already integrated into contemporary culture (Moreira et al., 2017).

Another point that drew attention in the participants' statements was the existence of a cycle of violence that repeats with some regularity. These cycles are characteristic of intimate partner violence, starting slowly and silently and progressing in intensity and consequences (Giudice et al., 2019). In online harassment, a progression in abusive behaviors can also be perceived: *"In my case, I saw a progression. What happened infrequently suddenly started happening much more frequently."* (P8, male, 25 years).

Participant P12 experienced abuse as both a victim and as an aggressor, providing insights into the progression of violence within her last relationship, which was a long-distance one — a factor that heightened her insecurity and, consequently, the abuse:

And I think it progressed, you know? From my experience, I started by checking the latest followers, then I already knew who the last ones were, and then I looked at each one, and then I would look at photos. I never got to see who liked each photo because it was too much for me, but I think if I had continued with that, maybe I would have, you know? (P12, female, 29 years)

In non-virtual violence, the cycle is commonly divided into three phases: tension, explosion, and calmness or "honeymoon." The first stage involves tension, typically characterized by psychological violence through disrespectful actions and embarrassment. The second stage, the explosion, marks the initiation of physical violence. Lastly, the third stage is the moment when the aggressor expresses remorse and recommences the relationship with new promises, until a new tension arises, renewing the cycle (Banca & Andrioni, 2023).

In the participants' experiences, even in the absence of physical violence, a similar cycle was observed. The aggressor started with seemingly harmless acts, such as sending numerous messages or asking them to post photos online under the pretext of nurturing the relationship. Subsequently, the aggressor induces depreciative feelings and submission in the victim, leading the victim to apologize for behaviors like delayed responses to messages and calls or not posting and commenting on photos of the couple. Consequently, the abusive behavior tends to recur and escalate, perpetuating the cycle:

She managed to get into my mind and kind of put the blame on me, and I had to apologize to her so that we could be okay, and I accepted that. (P2, female, 25 years); There's no reason for it, but I ended up apologizing because it was a lot of manipulation and punishment, you know, in terms of threats, "if you do this, I'll do that," and then I would give in; it was very complicated. (P10, female, 25 years).

Furthermore, the participants faced difficulty recognizing that episodes of online harassment also constituted acts of violence. Many victims of intimate partner violence do not perceive or understand it as such: *“While my family, my friends, everyone around me noticed, I couldn’t perceive that it was kind of abusive.”* (P2, female, 25 years). Participant P7 attributed acceptance of certain abusive behaviors to being gay, experiencing difficulty finding potential partners in their social circle, leading to compliance with their partner’s requests, coupled with their age and lack of maturity at the time: *“I saw this [sharing passwords] as a proof of love that he wanted, so I gave him it, but nowadays I see it as total abuse of power over me.”* (P7, male, 29 years).

Due to the challenge of understanding and naming the violence, it is imperative for professionals serving this demographic to identify and label it as such, legitimizing the suffering and fostering the victim’s capabilities to break the cycle and escape the aggressive context (Pedrosa & Zanello, 2016). However, as indicated by some authors (Nyame et al., 2013), this resistance is not solely from the victim; professionals dealing with violence cases often lack proper training and fail to recognize it as a legitimate issue, thereby normalizing the problem.

The Double Bind Theory, as addressed by Angelim and Diniz (2010), aids in comprehending the paradoxical relationship where love and care intertwine with violence and abuse. The authors highlight three conditions for a marital relationship to be considered doublebind violence, all of which were evident in the participants’ accounts. The first condition pertains to a strong emotional dependence allowing the establishment of an abusive dynamic, even in the face of a highly adverse relationship:

I was very young, you know, created a very strong emotional dependence because isolation does that, you cling to the person you have next to you; it was a very significant manipulation, and I couldn’t get out of it. So, I played into her hands. (P10, female, 25 years)

Another notable aspect in the participants’ narratives concerns cases of intimate partner violence in women diverging from heteronormative and cisgender norms. A considerable portion of the interviewed victims belonged to this group, in line with the report that the highest numbers of notifications regarding LGBT intimate partner violence in Brazil, between 2015 and 2017, were observed among lesbian and transgender women (Pinto et al., 2020). Furthermore, beyond violence, these individuals may experience additional stressors related to their sexual orientation, exacerbating interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict, discrimination, and social stigma, which can impact their intimate relationships (Balik & Bilgin, 2021).

The second condition involves the presence of paradoxical behavior, statements, or attitudes with feelings of ambiguity, as illustrated by these two participants: *“He was a very good guy, any girl’s dream, you know? Handsome, kind, friendly, and then we started exchanging messages; he gave me flowers, gave me presents.”* (P6, female, 29 years). *“Our relationship wasn’t 100% bad; we had good moments; I really liked her.”* (P10, female, 25 years).

Finally, the third condition characterizing double-bind violence pertains to the inability to reflect on the relationship, leading the victim to suppress the perception of violence: *“I lost many friends, not only because of this, but also as a consequence of this because I ended up not responding to many people because I couldn’t be bothered to explain to her why I was talking to this person.”* (P10, female, 25 years); *“I don’t even talk to my friends anymore, it’s a need of mine, but she doesn’t like it, so I don’t talk anymore to avoid it.”* (P11, male, 23 years).

3.2 Motivations and justifications

The “motivations and justifications” category emerged from statements depicting arguments for the practice of online harassment and the ambiguous feelings perceived by these participants. Based on the analysis of interviews, it was evident that some abusive behaviors are normalized, often understood as positive for the relationship: *“I saw it as a proof of love [sharing passwords]”* (P7, male, 29 years); *“She is very jealous, and she wants me to be too”* (P11, male, 23 years); *“He is not jealous, sometimes I even wished he had some jealousy, but he has zero jealousy”* (P14, female, 23 years).

In some relationships, the feeling of jealousy, linked to care and affection for one’s partner, is frequently desired. However, it is met with disapproval when manifested excessively through controlling or aggressive behaviors. (Oliveira et al., 2017). According to Sears et al. (2006), victims often confuse these controlling and jealous acts with a supposed demonstration of dedication, proof of love, or attention from the abuser.

For this reason, the feeling of jealousy is also an important factor in the occurrence of intimate partner violence. When provoked by situations of infidelity, whether real or supposed, it triggers conflicts that can result in abusive behaviors within the relationship (Kyegombe et al., 2022): *“I consider myself a jealous person, I have the desire, even if I’m not dating the person, if I go with someone, I have the desire to go and see everything she is doing”* (P13, female, 25 years).

In addition to the cycles mentioned in the Experience of violence category, differentiated cycles in online harassment leading to bi-directionality of the phenomenon were also observed, which is commonly cited in the literature (Andrade et al., 2020). Once a person engages in abuse, they allow the partner to do the same:

At the moment that person abuses you, you will also accept it. First, because you have already abused that person, and second because you don’t want to lose that person. So, I think this ends up becoming a cycle of people abusing each other. (P2, female, 25 years)

It should be emphasized that all interviewees who engaged or had engaged in online harassment perceive it as problematic and understand that, if they were in opposite roles, they would not accept what they do or did to their partners: *“I felt as if I were betraying him; it may seem hypocritical because I think asking for a password is too invasive, although what I did [monitoring social networks] was also an invasion”* (P12, female, 29 years); *“I hate it because I feel kind of hypocritical, you know? Because I would never allow this to happen to me”* (P14, female, 23 years).

The recognition that their previous actions were problematic does not usually occur in traditional intimate partner violence, where most perpetrators deny violent practices and tend to blame the victim for the committed aggression (Scott & Oliveira, 2018), as well as having greater difficulty in recognizing non-physical violence (Carneiro et al., 2019). This difference must be considered clearly, as no more data were found regarding the perception of monitoring as problematic from the perspective of perpetrators of online harassment. Therefore, it is not possible to affirm that the recognition of these behaviors is caused by the type of (online) harassment. Possibly, the recognition occurred due to the participants’ understanding of what constitutes an abusive relationship and abusive behaviors.

3.3 Impacts of online harassment

The interviewees highlighted some impacts commonly associated with intimate partner violence, also evidenced in the literature regarding online harassment more specifically. These impacts included anxiety and depressive symptoms (Flach & Deslandes, 2017).

Anxiety is a common symptom in victims of intimate partner violence (Lourenço & Costa, 2020). Regarding online harassment, Van Ouytsel et al. (2021) indicate that anxiety is the most common symptom in perpetrators, motivated by the constant fear of losing their partner. In this research, it was also observed that anxious symptoms appeared in both parties involved in the abuse. Whether in perpetrators, as illustrated by participants P12 and P13: *“I felt anxious when searching for something; I always searched for something”* (P12, female, 29 years); *“It gives me anxiety attacks when the curiosity hits me, it gives me fever, even stomachache, it seems like it only goes away if I go and check.”* (P13, female, 25 years), or in victims, as reported by participant P6: *“When I receive the notification of attempted access, it gives that anxiety, makes me worried”* (P6, female, 29 years). P6 is no longer dating the abuser, but she believes he still attempts access, even after almost two years of the breakup. While P11, who was in a relationship, stated:

Just her asking [to see the phone] already triggers me, an anxiety attack, I’ve even talked about post-traumatic stress disorder because that time was such a confusion that, I don’t know, it stuck with me. (P11, male, 23 years)

Anxiety was also revealed in the discourses of those who experienced online harassment in both situations – victim and perpetrator: *“I’ve been in both situations, and it’s bad on both sides, being demanded, it’s bad, and having the need to be searching, feeling anxiety when you don’t search is also terrible.”* (P13, female, 25 years)

Regarding depressive symptoms, Wolford-Clevenger et al. (2015) noticed a weak to moderate relationship between these symptoms and online harassment, with a stronger relationship between these symptoms and psychological violence. Only one interviewee spoke about depression itself: *“I had depression, thought about dying, I know it wasn’t just because of her, but she didn’t help either”* (P11, male, 23 years)

However, in other reports, symptoms related to both anxiety and depression, as well as feelings such as fear, insecurity, and guilt, were observed: *“So, I already have insecurity. I have insecurity about my appearance, you know, my body, so I was afraid he would find prettier girls with a better body like people on social media”* (P5, female, 27 years); *“I started to be afraid to answer the phone to avoid another argument”* (P6, female, 29 years); *“I lived in constant fear of finding something”* (P12, female, 29 years); and *“I felt very guilty”* (P12, female, 29 years).

Participant P5 presented interesting data about concern for their own body. Zanello (2018) highlighted the social teaching that staying within a media-idealized and popularized standard is a feminine obligation, which impacts the self-esteem and self-confidence of women. In this case, there is a fear that the boyfriend would be more interested in another woman within this standard.

3.4 Coping

This category encompasses responses that address various approaches regarding which practices were suitable and significant for those experiencing online harassment. The participants mainly referred to a support network: *“I continue working; my friends helped me a lot. Exchanging ideas, talking, they help me not to be with all this fear.”* (P6, female, 29 years)

They also mentioned the professional assistance of a psychologist: *“When you start therapy, you can see things you didn’t see before. For example, today, I can identify and list various reasons why I wouldn’t go back to that relationship.”* (P1, male, 23 years); *“I started therapy and matured. I still consider myself a jealous person, with the desire [to stalk], so I go to therapy to improve this aspect.”* (P13, female, 25 years). Sapkota et al. (2019) assert that this type of intervention can assist in symptom control and the restoration of quality of life, as evidenced by participants’ statements.

No literature was found on coping strategies for victims of online harassment. However, when paralleled with intimate partner violence in general, it is observed that the assaults hinder social, work, and academic relationships, potentially impacting the formation or preservation of a social support network (Rocha-Silva et al., 2019), as demonstrated in the following accounts:

It also interfered with work, you know? Because sometimes I couldn't turn off the phone, and there he was calling, and I couldn't answer either. So, if I were in a stressful moment at work, I would go crazy, needing to concentrate and not in the mood to answer, but already thinking that later there would be a fight because I didn't answer, sometimes I saw no way out. (P8, male, 25 years).

One day I was studying, preparing for a presentation I was going to do on Friday morning. So, I was preparing on Thursday, and then I went in just to check. I saw something I didn't like, I got angry and jealous, and it ruined my night. I didn't study or resolve anything with him. (P12, female, 29 years).

Intimate partner violence is perceived as a social and cultural problem, and victims' decisions to break free from this pattern involve a coping process beyond individual resources. Victims' and professionals' perceptions of violence influence the reduction of negative consequences. Lack of knowledge about online harassment and its impacts causes insecurity and fear in victims seeking help, hindering actions aimed at addressing the violence.

4. Conclusions

The article aimed to understand the experiences of victims and perpetrators of online harassment. In general, the data obtained provides essential information on the subject. Studying the experience of online harassment is relevant, considering it is a common phenomenon with serious consequences, especially among adolescents and young adults. Similarities with traditional violence are emphasized, highlighting the need for further studies on online harassment.

Participants initially lacked awareness of online harassment, often associating it solely with revenge pornography. However, throughout the interviews, a deeper understanding of online harassment emerged. The interviewees identified abusive behaviors and paradoxical feelings about these practices, acknowledging their inappropriateness, however, either maintaining them or coexisting with partners who engage in them. Additionally, it was noted that the boundaries between perpetration and victimization were not always clear, with mutual interaction allowing bi-directionality, where some young adults started practicing this type of abuse after being victims, and vice versa.

This work has limitations, such as not investigating other digital phenomena, both at the individual level (e.g., Always On syndrome – the need to be constantly connected – and Fear of Missing Out [FOMO] – the feeling that others are having a good experience while you are absent, associated with the desire to stay digitally connected) and in the intimate relationships (e.g., phubbing – ignoring someone in a social setting to focus on the phone). Despite these limitations, it is hoped that the content addressed here can be useful for further in-depth research and interventions.

For future studies, it is suggested empirical research in Brazil should be conducted aiming to replicate studies on online harassment, considering its association with bullying, cyberbullying, self-esteem, feelings of jealousy, or psychopathologies. Additionally, more longitudinal studies using quantitative designs, such as intervention research, are recommended.

It can be concluded that, similar to other forms of violence, online harassment is a relevant phenomenon in the emotional and sexual relationships of young people. Therefore, there is an urgent need for interventions in schools and universities to prevent this violence

and/or reduce its consequences. Furthermore, creating a suitable support space for those who have experienced this violence is crucial to prevent revictimization.

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