

CYBERVIOLENCE IN YOUNG COUPLES AND ITS PREDICTORS

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Abstract

The aims of this research were to analyze the presence of cyberviolence in young couples, to explore the associations between cyberviolence, emotional dependence, empathy, and filio-parental relationships, and to identify predictors of cyberviolence. For this purpose, a convenience sample consisting of 469 university students was selected. They completed the following measures: The Adolescent Social Network Partner Violence Scale, the Parental Bonding Instrument, the Dating Emotional Dependence in Youth and Adolescents, and the Basic Empathy Scale. 51.9% of the sample admitted to having suffered cyber-violence, and 56.6% admitted to having perpetrated it. Boys scored higher than girls on cyberviolence and cybervictimization. It was found that the higher the level of education, the lower level of cyberviolence and the higher the number of partners, the greater the possibility of suffering cyberviolence. The scarce empirical evidence about the factors related to cyberviolence points to the need of further research on individual and family variables.

KEY WORDS: *cyber-violence, partner, dependency, empathy, attachment.*

Resumen

Los objetivos de esta investigación fueron analizar la presencia de la ciberviolencia en parejas jóvenes, explorar las asociaciones entre la ciberviolencia, la dependencia emocional, la empatía y las relaciones filio parentales, e identificar factores predictores de la ciberviolencia. Para ello, se seleccionó una muestra de conveniencia compuesta por 469 estudiantes universitarios. Estos completaron la "Escala de violencia de pareja en las redes sociales en adolescentes" el "Instrumento de vínculo parental", el de "Dependencia emocional en el noviazgo de jóvenes y adolescentes" y la "Escala de empatía básica". El 51,9% de la muestra afirmaba haber sufrido ciberviolencia y el 56,6% admitía haberla ejercido. Los chicos puntuaron más alto que las chicas en ciberviolencia y cibervictimización. Se encontró que a mayor nivel de estudios menos ciberviolencia y, a mayor número de parejas, mayor posibilidad de sufrir ciberviolencia. La escasa evidencia empírica acerca de los factores relacionados con la ciberviolencia apunta a la importancia de seguir investigando más profundamente sobre variables individuales y familiares.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *ciberviolencia, pareja, dependencia, empatía, apego.*

Introduction

Currently, social media and mobile phone use is commonplace among young people (Fox et al., 2014). Although this has opened up a broad field of possibilities for communication, it has also created a new form of violence about which little has been known until recently: dating cyberviolence.

Dating cyberviolence is understood as any act that involves slandering, insulting, intimidating, pressuring or controlling one's romantic partner using electronic media (Donoso & Rebollo, 2018; Torres et al., 2013). Actions include monitoring, behavioral control and interactions carried out on the Internet, over the social media or on mobile devices, using the victim's personal user names and passwords, often without their consent (Backe et al., 2018; Baker & Carreño 2016; Flach & Deslandes, 2017). They also include threats, humiliation and degrading behaviors, carried out with the aim of causing suffering and isolation (Buesa & Calvete, 2011; Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010).

Cyberviolence in dating relationships is perpetrated by possessive and jealous people (Estébanez, 2018). Some authors have found a relationship between cyberviolence perpetration and victimization, with victims being more likely to repeat patterns of violence and participate in cyberaggression towards their romantic partner, and vice versa (Peskin, et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel, et al., 2017). Consequently, on many occasions, it is difficult to delimit the role of victim and perpetrator, since it may be that both members of the couple play both roles. Indeed, an increasing number of studies refer to the bi-directionality of violence within couples (Fernández et al., 2014; Moral et al., 2017; Romo et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2007), which has been found to be present in between 50% and 70% of cases of cyberviolence (Harned, 2002).

In terms of the prevalence of this type of violence, the data vary from 7% to 80% (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Korchmaros et al. 2013; Sánchez et al., 2017; Zweig et al., 2013), depending on the type of violence analyzed, the sample and the methodology and measurement instruments used.

Studies carried out in the United States report that around 50% of high school and university students have suffered or perpetuated cyberviolence in their dating relationships (Baker & Carreño, 2016; Baker & Helm, 2011; Temple et al., 2016), and similar results have been found in relation to young couples (Burke et al., 2011). According to these studies, the most common behaviors include constant telephone calls, checking one's partner's call records and looking through their Facebook interactions (Burke et al., 2011). Other studies report somewhat higher prevalence rates of up to 70% (Bennet et al., 2011; Kellerman et al., 2013) and even 90% in the case of perpetration (Leisring & Giumetti, 2014). Research carried out in Spain reports figures of around 45% for cyberviolence perpetration, with a somewhat higher percentage for victimization (De Los Reyes et al., 2019; Durán & Martínez, 2015). For example, 21% of the sample in the study by De Los Reyes et al. (2019) claimed not to let their partner chat with certain friends and said they became angry if they did so; and 30% claimed that their partner became angry if they saw they were online yet did not answer them immediately. For their part, Borrajo et al. (2015) found a prevalence rate of 75% in cyberviolence perpetration and 82% in

victimization. This disparity in the data, which may be due to the type of sample studied in each case, the instruments used or the different behaviors analyzed, makes it difficult to compare different studies and draw conclusions that provide a clear picture of the situation under study.

In terms of gender, the results reported by previous studies are far from conclusive. Some found higher rates of cybervictimization among girls (Burkle et al. 2011; Sourander et al., 2010; Zweig et al., 2013), whereas others claimed that boys suffer from cyberviolence more frequently than their female counterparts (Donoso et al., 2017; Piquer et al., 2017), and also perpetrate it more often (Buelga et al., 2010; Calvete et al., 2010; Durán & Martínez, 2015; Gabarda et al., 2021; Javier-Juárez et al., 2021). Other studies, however, failed to find any significant differences between boys and girls (Bennet, et al. 2011; Didden et al., 2009), reporting that both perpetrate and suffer from dating cyberviolence in equal measure.

In terms of age, the extant research offers no clear data. Some studies argue that age may be a moderating variable for violence perpetration and victimization. Violence seems to be most prevalent during medium-late adolescence, and then drops progressively from 25 years onwards (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Fritz & O'Leary, 2004). Some studies have found that dating violence is more frequent between the ages of 15 and 30 (Jennings et al., 2017; Redondo et al., 2017). Others, however, such as the one by Zamora et al. (2018), failed to find any significant relationship between age and violence in couples. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that differences between studies may be due to the age range selected in each, since if this range is broader and includes younger age groups, differences are more likely to be detected. In this sense, Foshee et al. (2009) found that the trajectory of violence in young couples over time is not linear, but rather curved, and tends to decrease from 16-17 years onwards.

In addition to prevalence data and associated sociodemographic factors, it is important to understand the other variables involved in this type of dating violence. Among the many associated factors that have been identified, the present study focuses on early parent-child relationships and behavioral patterns in social interactions (such as emotional dependency and empathy), due to the implications they may have in terms of intervention/prevention.

Some studies have linked online violence to child-parent relationships. Shaver and Hazan (1988) claim that the attachment formed by children with their caregivers determines the nature of their couple relationships during adolescence and adulthood, since these relationships are generally similar to the model developed with attachment figures during childhood. People with secure attachment develop social skills that enable them to establish dating relationships based on trust, with conflicts being resolved efficiently due to the adequate emotion regulation of both members of the couple (Muñoz et al., 2015). In contrast, Charalampus et al. (2018) found that insecure-anxious and avoidant attachment predicted harassment and victimization in both adolescent and young couples. Similarly, Reed et al. (2015) found that people with anxious attachment controlled their partners more frequently and invaded their privacy more often.

The results of previous research therefore seem to indicate that it is important to explore early parent-child relationships. It is also important to analyze

relationships with mothers and fathers separately, since some studies have shown that, in terms of future couple relations, children's relationships with their mother are more important than their relationship with their father (Delgado et al., 2011; Seiffge et al., 2010). It is worth highlighting that some authors argue that the mother-child relationship is more important among boys, whereas the father-child relationship is more important among girls (Bucx & Seiffge, 2010; Martínez et al., 2014; Scharf & Mayseless, 2008). Furthermore, according to some studies, excessive control and lack of affection by caregivers is a predictive factor for dating violence (Chase et al., 2002; Magdol et al., 1998; Miller, et al., 2009). In light of the above, we decided it would be interesting to analyze maternal and paternal control and affection separately, along with their possible association with cyberviolence perpetration and victimization.

Online dating violence has also been linked to emotional dependence. Emotional dependency in dating relationships alludes to an interpersonal relationship characterized by an extreme need for affection and approval, subordination, desire for exclusivity and fear of being alone (Castelló, 2005). This fear of breakup and being alone (Izquierdo & Gómez, 2013) prompts emotionally dependent people to put up with intolerable behaviors and attitudes (Castelló, 2005), and even sometimes to stay in violent relationships (Amor & Echeburúa, 2010).

Currently, social media and mobile devices have become one of the most commonly-used channels for interactions between dating couples, and some authors have associated their inadequate use with emotional dependency (Amor & Echeburúa, 2010), arguing that the social media foster this variable, since they enable round-the-clock contact and immediate communication between people (Melander, 2010). Young people and adolescents may feel obliged to be continuously connected, which makes it difficult to maintain limits and independence within a couple (Durán et al., 2011).

Among those studies that have found an association between emotional dependency and abuse of the Internet and mobile devices, those by Estévez et al. (2017) and Espinar et al. (2015), carried out in Spain, found that emotional dependency increased with a more intense use of technological media, and vice versa. Marshall et al. (2013) highlighted the existence of a relationship between emotional dependency and direct cyberaggression, and similarly, Morey et al. (2013) found that emotionally dependent people admitted to using the social media and their mobile devices to feel closer to and have more control over their romantic partners.

Finally, empathy is another important variable when analyzing online dating violence. Davis (1980) defined empathy as a construct involving a twofold capacity: the cognitive capacity that enables perspective taking and an understanding of other people's emotions, and the affective capacity that enables one to feel emotions triggered by an understanding of other people's feelings (Davis, 1980; Eisenberg & Stayer, 1987). Empathy is therefore understood as the human ability to understand other people's emotions and feelings, with those capable of empathizing and seeing the consequences of their actions being less likely to perpetrate violence and hurt their partner. Empathy helps inhibit negative impulses (McPhedran, 2009;

Richardson et al., 1994), and low empathy levels considerably increase the likelihood of behaving violently towards one's romantic partner (Blázquez et al., 2012).

A study by Sánchez et al. (2012) found that perpetrators had difficulty understanding their partners' feelings and emotions, and tended to disconnect morally more easily. Moreover, this study found that victims also scored low for empathy, meaning that, like perpetrators, they also had difficulty understanding other people's feelings and emotions, and were more prone to feeling guilt and shame.

Lack of empathy has been shown to be a predictor not only of violence in general, but of cyberviolence in particular, with those who score low for empathy being more likely to perpetrate (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Del Rey et al., 2016; Muñoz & Sánchez, 2020) and suffer from this form of aggression (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). Cognitive empathy plays a key role in avoiding cyberviolence in dating couples, since understanding the consequences of this type of behavior makes individuals less likely to engage in it. Affective empathy seems to be less associated with cyberviolence in dating relationships (Muñoz & Sánchez, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the online nature of this type of aggression fosters the inhibition of empathy, since aggressors cannot see the suffering they generate in their partners, a circumstance that encourages new acts of aggression. Authors such as Nolasco (2012) and Garaigordobil (2014) claim that being able to see the victim's suffering would activate the perpetrator's capacity for empathy.

In short, previous studies have reported varied results, particularly in terms of prevalence and gender differences, as well as in relation to the various factors linked to cyberviolence. Further research is therefore required into cyberviolence among young couples, with analyses striving to determine which variables (e.g., parent-child relationships, emotional dependency and empathy) may be related to this phenomenon.

Taking all of the above into account, the first aim of the present study was to analyze the presence of cyberviolence among the young couples in our sample, exploring possible differences in terms of gender, age, education level, number of previous partners and duration of the relationships. Consistently with that reported by Durán and Martínez (2015), who used the same measurement instrument in a Spanish sample with an age range similar to that of our sample, we expected to find that at least 50% of respondents had suffered or perpetrated cyberviolence. We did not expect to find differences in accordance with gender (Bennet, et al. 2011; Didden et al., 2009).

The second aim was to explore associations between cyberviolence in young couples (both perpetration and victimization) and emotional dependency, empathy and parent-child relationships (affection and control) (Castello, 2005). In relation to this aim, we expected to find that cyberviolence was positively associated with emotional dependency and parental control, and negatively associated with empathy and parental affection.

Assuming that the variables explored (sociodemographic variables, emotional dependency, empathy and parent-child relationships) proved to be predictors, our

third aim was to develop two predictive models of cyberviolence: one for perpetration and one for victimization.

Method

Participants

The sample was recruited using a non-probabilistic convenience sampling method, resulting in a total of 469 participants, of which 20.5% ($n= 96$) said they did not currently have or never had had a romantic partner and were subsequently excluded from the analyses. Of those who claimed to currently have or had had a romantic partner at some point ($n= 366$), 65.6% ($n= 240$) were girls, 33.6% ($n= 123$) were boys and 0.8% ($n= 3$) identified themselves as "others". Participants' mean age was 20.45 years ($SD= 4.77$). In terms of education, 42.1% ($n= 154$) were university students, 19.4% ($n= 71$) were studying the Spanish Bachiller (equivalent to the last two years of high school in the US and to A levels in the UK), 23.2% ($n= 85$) were on advanced vocational training courses and 15.3% ($n= 56$) were on intermediate vocational training courses.

Instruments

- a) *Ad hoc questionnaire on sociodemographic data.* This questionnaire gathered data regarding gender, age, duration of the relationship, number of previous partners and education level.
- b) *Adolescent Social Media Partner Violence Scale (E-VPA)* (Cava & Buelga, 2018). This scale obtains measures of violence suffered and perpetrated in the couple through the social media and mobile devices. It assesses control behaviors targeted at the respondent's partner or ex-partner, as well as directly aggressive acts carried out with the intention of causing harm. The scale comprises 20 items, with 10 measuring experiences of victimization and the other 10 measuring violence perpetrated against one's partner. The scale contains two 10-item subscales: cyberviolence perpetration and cybervictimization. The cyberviolence perpetration subscale assesses acts of aggression and control targeted at one's romantic partner and carried out over the social media, and comprises items such as "I have insulted or threatened by boy/girlfriend in private" and "I have spread rumors or lies about my boy/girlfriend on the social media". The cybervictimization subscale assesses aggression and control suffered over the social media at the hands of one's partner, and comprises items such as "My boy/girlfriend has insulted or threatened me in private" and "My boy/girlfriend has spread rumors or lies about me on the social media". Items are rated on a Likert-type scale, from 1 (never) to 4 (always). Thus, the higher the score, the higher the cyberviolence or cybervictimization. The scale was found to have high levels of internal consistency: $\alpha= .81$ for the Cyberviolence perpetration subscale and $\alpha= .88$ for the Cybervictimization scale. For its correction, direct scores are used, since the items are formulated in positive.

- c) *Parental Bonding Instrument, PBI* (Parker & Tupling, 1979; Spanish adaptation by Gómez et al., 2007). This instrument is a retrospective questionnaire that measures respondents' perceptions of their relationship with their parents up to the age of 16 years. The test comprises 25 items such as "He/she smiled at me frequently" and "He/she enjoyed talking to me" and is divided into two subscales: *Affection* (12 items) and *Control* (13 items). Responses will be measured on a scale from 0 (always happened) to 3 (never happened). The affect scale will have a maximum score of 36 points while the control scale will have 39 points. Thus, the instrument allows obtaining differentiated scores for the father and for the mother. The PBI has good internal consistency. In this study, the values obtained were $\alpha = .75$ for paternal affection, $\alpha = .73$ for maternal affection, $\alpha = .75$ for paternal control and, finally, $\alpha = .75$ for maternal control.
- d) *Dating Emotional Dependency in Youth and Adolescents questionnaire* (DEN; Urbiola et al., 2014). This questionnaire measures emotional dependency in the dating relationships of youths and adolescents. It comprises 12 items divided into four dimensions: *Avoiding being alone*, *Need to please*, *Need for exclusivity* and *Asymmetrical relationship*. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (always). Thus, the higher the score, the greater the emotional dependence. To complete the test, it is important for respondents to have had a significant romantic relationship. The DEN has good internal consistency. In the present study, the values obtained were $\alpha = .98$ for the general scale, $\alpha = .95$ for the Avoiding being alone scale, $\alpha = .94$ for the Need for exclusivity scale, $\alpha = .91$ for the Need to please scale, and $\alpha = .91$ for the Asymmetrical relationship scale.
- e) "Basic Empathy Scale" (Basic Empathy Scale, BES; Jolliffe, and Farrington, 2006), Spanish adaptation by Villadangos et al. (2016). The BES consists of 20 items distributed in two factors: *Emotional empathy* (11 items), referring to the degree of emotional congruence with the emotions of another person (e.g., "My friends' emotions do not affect me much", "I usually feel sad after being with a friend who is sad about something") and *Cognitive empathy* (9 items), which captures the ability to understand reality from other people's point of view (e.g., "I understand my friends' happiness when something is going well for them", "I find it difficult to know when my friends are scared"). The items are answered on a Likert scale where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree". Thus, the higher the score, the greater the empathy, and the scale shows good internal consistency. In the present study $\alpha = .69$ was obtained for the emotional Empathy subscale and $\alpha = .65$ for Cognitive empathy.

Procedure

First, we contacted faculty teaching on the Primary Education, Social Education and Law undergraduate degrees run by the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), and teaching staff from vocational training and *Bachiller* courses in Vizcaya (the Basque Country).

We explained the aim of the study, the procedure to be followed and the instruments we were going to use. After obtaining consent from the schools, centers and faculties, we commenced with the data collection. Once in the classroom, we gave respondents vocal instructions on how to complete the questionnaires, and ensured them that their participation was voluntary and anonymous and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants completed the questionnaires in class time in a session lasting approximately 20 minutes. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee at the UPV/EHU (M10_2018_188).

Data analysis

First, the presence of violence was calculated, identifying those participants who claimed to have suffered or perpetrated cyberviolence on at least one occasion (E-VPA). We performed a Student's *t* test to compare the online dating violence means for boys and girls. Next, ANOVAs were conducted with online dating violence as the dependent variable to explore possible differences in terms of age, education level and number of previous partners. The partial eta squared (partial η^2) statistic was used as a measure of effect size. A posteriori contrast analyses were carried out using the Tukey method. Finally, to determine the two predictor models of online dating violence perpetration and victimization, linear regression analyses were performed following the "Intro" method. Effect size was analyzed in accordance with adjusted R^2 coefficients.

Results

Cyberviolence and differences in accordance with sociodemographic variables

The results revealed that 51.9% of participants ($n= 189$) reported having been controlled by their partner on at least one occasion, whereas 56.6% ($n= 205$) admitted to having controlled their partner themselves. Moreover, 22% ($n= 80$) claimed to have suffered cyberviolence at the hands of their partner, whereas 12.4% ($n= 45$) admitted to have perpetrated this type of violence with the aim of hurting their partner.

In terms of gender differences, boys scored higher than girls for total cybervictimization (both cybervictimization and being controlled) and cyberviolence perpetration. No statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls in either controlling or total violence (Table 1).

Table 1
Gender differences in online dating violence

Tipo de violencia	Girls (N= 239)		Boys (N= 122)		t	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Cybervictimization	4.33	1.03	4.72	1.64	-2.37	.019
Being controlled	7.51	2.83	8.19	3.03	-2.09	.038
Cyberviolence perpetration	4.14	0.57	4.41	1.38	-2.15	.033
Controlling	7.10	1.39	7.34	2.05	-1.29	.197
Total cybervictimization	11.85	3.65	12.90	4.39	-2.29	.023
Total cyberviolence perpetration	11.24	1.71	11.77	3.24	-1.66	.099

No statistically significant differences were found in accordance with participants' age (over or under 18 years), although differences were observed in accordance with education level for both cybervictimization ($F[3, 360]= 5.002, p=.002; \eta^2=.040$) and cyberviolence perpetration ($F[3, 358]= 4.126, p=.007; \eta^2=.033$). Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that university students reported lower levels of cybervictimization than their counterparts on intermediate and advanced vocational training courses. In relation to cyberviolence perpetration, university students had lower levels than students on advanced vocational training courses.

Significant differences were observed also in accordance with number of previous partners, with more partners being associated with a greater likelihood of having suffered cyberviolence ($F[2, 36]= 4.322, p=.014; \eta^2=.023$) or cybercontrol ($F[2, 361]= 5.730, p=.004; \eta^2=.031$). In contrast, no significant differences were found in accordance with duration of the relationship (less than a year, between one and three years, or more than three years).

Association between cyberviolence and emotional dependency, empathy and relationship with parents

The following are the results of the Pearson correlations between the study variables (Table 2). The strongest correlations were found between cyberviolence perpetration and victimization ($r=.54$). Cybervictimization also correlated with emotional dependency, particularly with the variables avoiding being alone ($r=.46$) and asymmetrical relationship ($r=.34$).

The associations between cybervictimization and empathy, both cognitive ($r=-.26$) and affective ($r=-.21$), and relationship with parents were weaker, with cybervictimization correlating positively with control (paternal: $r=.19$; maternal: $r=.12$) and negatively with affection (paternal: $r=-.21$; maternal: $r=-.17$). In terms of cyberviolence perpetration, the results were very similar to those found for cybervictimization, with the highest correlations being observed with the dimensions of emotional dependency (e.g., need for exclusivity: $r=.36$ and avoiding being alone: $r=.32$).

Table 2
Correlations between cyberviolence victimization, perpetration, empathy, emotional dependency and relationship with parents

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Total cybervictimization	-										
2. Total cyberviolence perpetration	.537**	-									
3. Affective empathy	-.206**	-.126*	-								
4. Cognitive empathy	-.256**	-.263**	.461**	-							
5. Avoiding being alone	.456**	.322**	-.055	-.121*	-						
6. Need for exclusivity	.205**	.361**	-.052	-.117*	.464**	-					
7. Need to please	.228**	.228**	-.055	-.057	.542**	.601**	-				
8. Asymmetrical relationship	.338**	.308**	.032	-.027	.551**	.473**	.497**	-			
9. Maternal affection	-.169**	-.168**	.078	.149**	-.187**	-.093	-.063	-.126*	-		
10. Maternal control	.124*	.177**	-.128*	-.200**	.209**	.177**	.136*	.143**	-.428**	-	
11. Paternal affection	-.213**	-.147**	.060	.070	-.140	-.042	-.045	-.138*	.504**	-.261**	-
12. Paternal control	.193**	.130*	-.119**	-.181**	.113*	.140*	.035	.066	-.266**	.484**	-.349**

Note: **ps .01 (bilateral), *ps .05 (bilateral).

Predictor models of cyberviolence victimization and perpetration

Two multiple regression models were developed to determine the extent to which personal and social variables (emotional dependency, empathy and relationship with parents) predicted each of the variables associated with online dating violence (victimization and perpetration). In the first regression model, the variables cyberviolence perpetration ($\beta=.37, p< .001$), need for exclusivity ($\beta= -.19, p< .001$), avoiding being alone ($\beta=.39, p< .001$), affective empathy ($\beta= -.14, p=.003$) and paternal affection ($\beta= -.12, p= .01$) were significantly associated with cybervictimization, and explained 37% of the variance observed [$F(5, 299)= 36.84, p< .001$] (Table 3).

Table 3
Multiple regression analysis for predicting total cybervictimization

Variable	B	DE	β	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)	8.691	1.710		5.083	.000
Total cyberviolence perpetration	.692	.092	.371	7.528	.000
Need for exclusivity	-.236	.064	-.194	-3.702	.000
Avoiding being alone	.569	.076	.395	7.486	.000
Affective empathy	-.082	.027	-.139	-3.036	.003
Paternal affection	-.059	.023	-.121	-2.603	.010

In the second regression model, cybervictimization ($\beta= .46, p< .001$), need for exclusivity ($\beta= .25, p<.001$) and cognitive empathy ($\beta= -.12, p= .008$) were significantly associated with cyberviolence perpetration, explaining 36% the variance observed in relation to that variable [$F(3, 345)= 65.93, p< .001$] (Table 4).

Table 4
Multiple regression analysis for predicting total cyberviolence perpetration

Variable	B	DE	β	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)	9.244	.838		11.027	.000
Total cybervictimization	.277	.027	.463	10.291	.000
Need for exclusivity	.187	.033	.247	5.652	.000
Cognitive empathy	-.049	.019	-.119	-2.662	.008

Discussion

Cyberviolence is a new form of violence that encompasses both perpetration and victimization and is a frequent occurrence among young couples (Burke et al., 2011; Muñoz & Sánchez, 2020). It is subtle type of violence, often hard to detect, which is why more research is required to determine its dimensions and the principal factors related to it. The present study aimed to improve existing knowledge in relation to several aspects of this problem.

The first aim was to analyze the presence of cyberviolence in terms of both perpetration and victimization. The results were similar to those reported by other

authors, including Burke et al. (2011), and Durán and Martínez (2015), who found cyberviolence prevalence rates of around 50% in their samples. The present study indicates, once again, that cyberviolence is a fairly frequent phenomenon among young and adolescent dating couples.

In terms of gender, in contrast to our initial hypothesis, boys scored higher than girls for cybervictimization, being controlled and cyberviolence perpetration, although no statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls in relation to controlling. These results are consistent with those obtained by previous studies (Buelga et al., 2010; Calvete et al., 2010; Donoso et al., 2017; Durán & Martínez, 2015; Piquer et al., 2017), according to which, boys suffer cyberviolence more often than girls, but also perpetrate it more. This may be indicative of the bidirectional nature of violence observed among young couples (Fernández et al., 2014; Moral et al., 2017; Romo et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2007), which makes it increasingly hard to delimit the role of victim and aggressor, since both members of the couple often play both roles.

No significant differences were found in accordance with participants' age, perhaps because the age range of the sample was not broad enough for any differences to become apparent. In contrast, significant differences were found in accordance with education level, with university students reporting lower levels of cybervictimization than their counterparts on intermediate or advanced vocational training courses, and lower levels also of perpetration than students on advanced vocational training courses. This may be due to the fact that participants with a higher education level have a greater knowledge of this phenomenon and are more aware of the risks involved, which may help them identify situations of cyberviolence more easily in order to avoid them or simply not become involved in relationships of this nature.

Significant differences were also observed in accordance with number of previous partners, with the likelihood of suffering cyberviolence increasing the more previous partners participants had had. This is consistent with the results reported in relation to physical dating violence by Howard and Wang (2003), who found that girls who had had two or more sexual partners in past three months were more at risk of suffering physical violence. It seems that having multiple partners (which itself is often linked to sexual risk behaviors) increases the likelihood of suffering dating violence, probably because those involved in risk behaviors of one kind are more likely to take other types of risks also.

The second aim was to study the relationship between cyberviolence (victimization and perpetration) and emotional dependency, empathy and parent-child relations. Cybervictimization was found to correlate positively with emotional dependency, particularly avoiding being alone and asymmetrical relationship. These results are consistent with those reported by Castelló (2005), who found that emotionally dependent people were more likely to become involved in relationships characterized by fear of being alone. Emotionally dependent people may put up more with online violence perpetrated by their partner in order to avoid being alone, thereby generating asymmetrical relationships in which one member of the couple has control over the other. Similar results were observed for cyberviolence perpetration, which was found to correlate positively with need for exclusivity and

avoiding being alone. It may be that people who demand exclusivity from their partner exercise more control over them, using this control also to prevent the relationship from breaking up.

The association between cyberviolence perpetration, empathy and parent-child relations was weak, although it is worth noting the importance of both paternal and maternal control and affection, as indeed argued by Chase et al. (2002), Magdol et al. (1998) and Miller et al. (2009), who found that excessive control and lack of affection by mothers and fathers fostered dating violence. The data obtained in this study seem to indicate that control and affection play different roles in terms of the association between cyberviolence and parent-child relations, as do paternal and maternal control and affection.

The study's final aim was to develop predictor models for cyberviolence (both perpetration and victimization). To this end, two multiple regression models were generated to determine to what extent the variables studied influenced these two behaviors. First, we studied the predictor variables of cybervictimization, finding that cyberviolence perpetration, need for exclusivity, avoiding being alone, affective empathy and paternal affection were significantly associated with being a victim of cyberviolence, explaining 37% of the variance observed. This may be due to the fact that emotionally dependent people need to be the center of their partner's attention, rendering them more likely to engage in relationships characterized by the need for exclusivity within the couple. This need for exclusivity may in turn make them more willing to put up with any situation or circumstance in order to avoid breaking up the relationship, in an attempt to avoid being alone at all costs (Castelló, 2005). The results obtained in relation to empathy are consistent with those reported by other authors, such as Sánchez et al. (2012), who found that victims scored low for empathy, although in this case they were referring only to affective empathy. It may be that victims have difficulty emotionally "resonating" with other people's feelings, even when they understand them. Moreover, once again, paternal affection seems to play a key role in cybervictimization. As mentioned above, lack of paternal affection may render individuals more likely to suffer from cyberviolence, as some authors have indeed argued (Chase et al., 2002; Magdol et al., 1998; Miller, et al., 2009). This may be due to these individuals seeking, in their romantic relationships, the affection they did not receive from their father.

In relation to cyberviolence perpetration, the statistically significant predictor variables were cybervictimization, need for exclusivity and cognitive empathy, which together explained 36% of the variance observed. This is consistent with that reported by other authors, such as Méndez et al. (2012), who argue that emotionally dependent people seek sexual and affective security and exclusivity, which is reflected in excessive control over their partners. In terms of empathy, the results obtained in the present study are consistent with those reported by other authors (Brewer & Kerlake, 2015; Del Rey et al., 2016; Muñoz & Sánchez, 2020), who found that lack of empathy predicted cyberviolence perpetration. Cognitive empathy has been shown to play a key role in avoiding cyberviolence in dating couples, since understanding the consequences of this type of behavior makes individuals less likely to engage in it.

It is worth noting that cybervictimization was found to be a predictor variable for cyberviolence perpetration, and vice versa. This may be due to the bidirectional trend that has increasingly been observed in recent studies (Fernández et al., 2014; Harned, 2002; Moral et al., 2017; Romo et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2007), with bidirectionality being present in between 50% and 70% of cases of cyberviolence.

In light of the results obtained in the present study, we can conclude that parent-child relations, emotional dependency and empathy play a very important role in cyberviolence (both perpetration and victimization). Studies focusing on these variables are still scarce and further research is required with larger samples and more psychosocial variables in order to shed more light on the motives that prompt people to perpetrate and become victims of cyberviolence. Understanding this will help experts design social interventions aimed at preventing this phenomenon.

The present study has certain limitations. First, since it is cross-sectional in nature, caution should be exercised when establishing causal relationships between the study variables. Second, the fact that the data were gathered exclusively through self-report questionnaires increases the risk of social desirability bias, since participants may have responded in accordance with what they believed was socially expected of them. Future studies should therefore strive to gather information from multiple sources. Finally, the age range was also a limitation and should be broadened in future studies.

Despite these limitations, however, the present study provides new and relevant data regarding the association between cyberviolence and number of previous partners and education level. Moreover, maternal and paternal affection and control were studied separately, which is a novel approach in relation to previous studies, as was the combination of variables analyzed. In sum, the study contributes relevant information that enables a clearer understanding of cyberviolence in young couples, and may serve as a starting point for future research and the design of prevention programs.

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