Adolescents’ perceptions of digital media’s potential to elicit jealousy, conflict and monitoring behaviors within romantic relationships

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12 focus groups among 55 individuals (51% girls) between 15 and 18 years old in two secondary schools in the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium

# Abstract

Understanding the role of digital media in adolescents’ romantic relationships is essential to the prevention of digital dating violence. This study focuses on adolescents’ perceptions of the impact of digital media on jealousy, conflict, and control within their romantic relationships. Twelve focus group interviews were conducted, among 55 secondary school students (ngirls = 28; 51% girls) between the ages of 15 and 18 years (Mage = 16.60 years; SD age = 1.21), in the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium. The respondents identified several sources of jealousy within their romantic relationships, such as online pictures of the romantic partner with others and online messaging with others. Adolescents identified several ways in which romantic partners would react when experiencing feelings of jealousy, such as contacting the person they saw as a threat or looking up the other person’s social media profiles. Along with feelings of jealousy, respondents described several monitoring behaviors, such as reading each other’s e-mails or accessing each other’s social media accounts. Adolescents also articulated several ways that they curated their social media to avoid conflict and jealousy within their romantic relationships. For instance, they adapted their social media behavior by avoiding the posting of certain pictures, or by ceasing to comment on certain content of others. The discussion section includes suggestions for future research and implications for practice, such as the need to incorporate information about e-safety into sexual and relational education and the need to have discussions with adolescents, about healthy boundaries for communication within their friendships and romantic relationships.

# Outcome

"The ability of social networking sites to render visible certain photographs like pictures of parties and activities to which the romantic partner was not invited may create jealousy and uncertainty about the romantic relationship. Snapchat often causes jealousy, because the messages are deleted upon being opened. Messages that score high on exclusivity have the potential to cause higher feelings of jealousy. Some cope with by having conversations with their romantic partners, others by intentionally replying through short messages or feeling angry without openly discussing it. None of the participants mentioned an inclination to seek support or advice from others.
The potential for misinterpretation by the recipient of written messages is a source of conflict since it lacks context and cues to facilitate interpretation of the emotional tone. Brief messages, or messages from which emoticons were absent, could lead them to believe that the sender was mad at them and may cause uncertainty over the status of the romantic relationship. Disparities in the speed of replies are also a source of conflict. Some described it as a matter of “politeness” to reply in a timely fashion, and others reported experiencing feelings of guilt if they failed to send a prompt reply, some use of a third person to test the partner’s feelings or fidelity by seeing if a partner responds faster to a friend’s message than the one send bythe girlsfriend/boyfriend.
The respondents voiced negative attitudes toward monitoring and controlling a romantic partner by means of digital technology. However, they engage in them. Nevertheless, they claim it is out of “curiosity” and “interest in their romantic partner” which causes them to remain within abusive and unhealthy romantic relationships rather than leaving them. Sharing passwords is also not uncommon. Ways to try to avoid a romantic partner’s romantic jealousy is by self-censoring ( girls stating to not post pictures that could look 'sexy' or omitting to like and comment on pictures or posts with others)" (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019)