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RECONFIGURING FORMS OF ABUSE: DIGITAL PERSONAL SPACE AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: The accelerated digitalisation of society has transformed the online environment into a central space for the formation and expression of interpersonal relationships among young people. However, alongside the opportunities for connection that this shift affords, new forms of abuse have emerged. Digital violence represents one of the most recent manifestations of intimate partner violence, characterised by control, harassment, and surveillance exercised through technological means. According to a 2024 study conducted by the Friends for Friends Foundation in collaboration with Reveal Marketing Research, nearly a third of respondents reported being victims of digital abuse, painting a worrying picture of the potential that the online environment holds.
The present study examines the extent to which social networks and digital communication applications reconfigure the dynamics of young people's romantic relationships, with particular emphasis on the transformations occurring at the level of communication, affective expression, and mutual care. The research was conducted by means of an online questionnaire administered to a sample of 100 young people aged between 18 and 35, currently or previously involved in a romantic relationship. The findings highlight similarities with regard to digital literacy and frequency of online engagement, whilst indicating significant differences in the ways in which digital intimacy is violated. These findings underscore the need to develop awareness-raising and prevention strategies addressing digital violence, with a view to fostering healthy and safe interactions in young people's romantic relationships.

Keywords: Personal digital space, young people, domestic violence, abuse, digital control.

Résumé : La numérisation accélérée de la société a transformé l'environnement en ligne en un espace central pour la formation et l'expression des relations interpersonnelles des jeunes. Cependant, parallèlement aux opportunités de connexion qu'offre cette évolution, de nouvelles formes d'abus ont émergé. La violence numérique constitue l'une des manifestations les plus récentes de la violence au sein des relations de couple, caractérisée par le contrôle, le harcèlement et la surveillance exercés par le biais des technologies. Selon une étude réalisée en 2024 par la Friends for Friends Foundation en collaboration avec Reveal Marketing Research, près d'un tiers des personnes interrogées se sont déclarées victimes d'abus numériques, dressant ainsi un tableau préoccupant du potentiel que recèle l'environnement en ligne.

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La présente étude examine dans quelle mesure les réseaux sociaux et les applications de communication numérique reconfigurent les dynamiques des relations amoureuses des jeunes, en mettant l'accent sur les transformations survenues au niveau de la communication, de l'expression affective et du soin mutuel. La recherche a été menée au moyen d'un questionnaire en ligne administré à un échantillon de 100 jeunes âgés de 18 à 35 ans, actuellement ou antérieurement engagés dans une relation de couple. Les résultats mettent en évidence des similitudes en ce qui concerne la littératie numérique et la fréquence d'utilisation de l'environnement en ligne, tout en indiquant des différences significatives dans les modalités de violation de l'intimité numérique. Ces constats soulignent la nécessité de développer des stratégies de sensibilisation et de prévention de la violence numérique, en vue de promouvoir des interactions saines et sécurisées dans les relations romantiques des jeunes.

Mots-clés : Espace numérique personnel, jeunes, violence domestique, maltraitance, contrôle numérique.

Rezumat: Digitalizarea accelerată a societății a transformat mediul online într-un spațiu central pentru formarea și exprimarea relațiilor interpersonale ale tinerilor. Însă pe lângă oportunitățile de conectare, au apărut noi forme de abuz. Violența digitală este una dintre cele mai recente manifestări ale violenței în relațiile de cuplu, caracterizată prin control, hărțuire și supraveghere prin folosirea tehnologiei. Conform unui studiu din 2024, realizat de Friends for Friends Foundation împreună cu Reveal Marketing Research, aproape o treime dintre respondenți s-au declarat victime ale abuzului digital, conturând un tablou îngrijorător al potențialului pe care îl are mediul online.
Lucrarea investighează modul în care rețelele sociale și aplicațiile de comunicare digitală reconfigurează dinamicile relațiilor de cuplu ale tinerilor, cu accent pe transformările survenite la nivelul comunicării, exprimării afective și îngrijirii reciproce. Cercetarea s-a realizat prin intermediul unui chestionar online aplicat unui eșantion de 100 de tineri cu vârste cuprinse între 18 și 35 de ani, aflați în prezent sau anterior într-o relație de cuplu. Rezultatele evidențiază similitudini în ceea ce privește alfabetizarea digitală și frecvența utilizării mediului online, însă indică diferențe semnificative în modalitățile de încălcare a intimității digitale. Aceste constatări subliniază necesitatea dezvoltării unor strategii de conștientizare și prevenție a violenței digitale, în vederea promovării unor interacțiuni sănătoase și sigure în relațiile romantice ale tinerilor.

Cuvinte-cheie: Spațiu digital personal, tineri, violență domestică, abuz, control digital.

1. Introduction

Most of today's young people's relationships take place in a deeply digitalised environment, where technology can influence the way they communicate, the way they express their emotions or feelings, and sometimes even the way a couple manages conflicts. For young people, mobile phones and laptops are no longer just tools in a modern world, but have become means of connecting to a globally interconnected digital world. Thus, the online environment ends up „owning" an integral part of each individual's personal and relational identity. It may be argued that this virtual space does not function merely as an extension of face-to-face interactions, but rather as a framework in which expectations are

defined, specific forms of closeness are manifested, and personal boundaries are negotiated.

In this context, the digital space has been brought to the attention of social scientists due to its relevance in the dynamics and evolution of methods of aggression and abuse between partners. While physical and verbal violence have been extensively analysed in the literature, digital abuse is a relatively new form that is much more difficult to observe and manifests itself in various forms of control. This includes behaviors such as the constant monitoring of the victim through requests for access to personal accounts, manipulation through messages, and the restriction of online interactions, all of which are much more difficult for the victim to control and much more accessible to the aggressor, even when the partners are not in the same physical space.

2. Definitions, conceptual boundaries, and contexts of emergence of digital abuse

In Romania, Law No. 217 of 2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence provides a clear definition of abuse between partners in Article three, paragraph one:

"... domestic violence means any intentional inaction or action of physical, sexual, psychological, economic, social, spiritual, or cyber violence that occurs in the family or domestic environment or between spouses or former spouses, as well as between current or former partners, regardless of whether the aggressor lives or has lived with the victim."

Within the same legislative framework, cyber violence is defined as follows: „online harassment, online messages inciting gender-based hatred, online stalking, online threats, non-consensual publication of intimate information and graphic content, illegal access to intercept communications and private data, and any other form of misuse of information and communications technology through computers, smartphones, or other similar devices that use telecommunications or can connect to the internet and transmit and use social media or email platforms, with the purpose of shaming, humiliating, frightening, threatening, or silencing the victim."

Since the emergence of successful social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, several researchers have pointed out that although these online networks facilitate communication and connection between people, they can also be used as tools for control and psychological/emotional abuse. According to Tokunaga (2011), these platforms allow for the creation of a space for abuse that he calls „cyber dating abuse," and recent studies confirm these risks. Harris and Woodlock (2019) highlighted how the online environment can be used for coercive control, affecting the psychological health of victims.

In this context, Evan Stark's (2007) theories provide the necessary support to understand this dynamic. According to Stark, coercive control is a systematic pattern of dominant and oppressive behaviours through which an individual (the

aggressor) exercises power over another person (the victim) using various tactics repeatedly to intimidate, degrade, isolate, exploit, and shape the victim's daily behaviour to diminish their autonomy and independence.

However, online abuse cannot be considered a direct consequence of the emergence of technology itself, but rather the result of the evolution between technological transformations and the privacy of today's individuals. In other words, it did not suddenly appear in our lives, but gradually took root where privacy „moved" from the physical to the virtual space, through social media accounts, messenger apps, or any other types of online tools/applications.

Thus, what initially seemed to be an opportunity to stay in touch with friends, family, and loved ones also created the conditions necessary for the disclosure of a new form of exercising power in couple relationships by allowing access to all information about the partner and pressure for this „transparency in the couple relationship". The findings suggest that this change is not primarily technological or digital, but rather social, reflecting the current generation's reshaped expectations regarding intimacy with a partner, responsibility within a relationship, and trust in the other (Baym, 2015; Boyd, 2014).

3. Recognition of digital abuse in Romanian legislation

Although digital abuse in intimate relationships was formally recognized in Romania in 2020 through Law No. 106/2020, which amended and supplemented Law No. 217/2003 on the prevention and combating of domestic violence, its significance as a distinct and serious form of violence was acknowledged by specialists and the broader public only subsequently. This delayed recognition underscores the challenges inherent in identifying and addressing emerging forms of abuse that are mediated through digital technologies.

With the appearance of the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic and the exponential increase in the incidence of digital violence, the phenomenon began to attract the attention of the Council of the European Union (EU) once again. The EU has therefore decided that all Member States must identify and criminalise all forms of cyber violence in their legislation. These provisions include several acts such as the non-consensual distribution of intimate material (private selfies, deepfakes, intimate videos), cyberflashing (sending unwanted sexual images via digital platforms), cyberstalking (tracking other people's online activity) and online stalking of victims, harassment via messages or social platforms, as well as incitement to violence or hatred online against a partner or victim (Council of the European Union, 2024).

In 2024, the phenomenon of digital violence began to gain much greater visibility in Romania, attracting the attention of specialists concerned with the transformation of interpersonal relationships in the technological era. A study conducted during the same period by the Friends for Friends Foundation, in collaboration with Reveal Marketing Research, highlighted the fact that digital abuse is experienced by almost a third of the young people surveyed (28 percent of

respondents), thus painting a worrying picture of how the online environment can become a space for control, intrusion and emotional pressure, even when the aggressor does not live with the victim. The relevance of the research lies not only in the reported figures, but especially in the fact that it brings to light practices that, although present for years, have been ignored or minimised for too long. The study shows that digital violence is not just a one-off deviation, but an indicator of a profound change in the dynamics of intimacy and power among younger generations, thus marking the evolution of methods of abuse.

But what happens when this method of abuse is used between partners? The particularity of digital abuse lies in its continuous and invasive nature. Through the tools used by partners, technology allows access to each other's activities, blurs the boundaries between private personal space and the space we share with others, and creates the possibility of constant surveillance. Intrusive behaviours are usually difficult to identify or define as abusive, especially for young people, where digital control is sometimes perceived as an expression of one's feelings. We could say that it is actually a „grey area" in which controlling behaviours are minimised, normalised or confused with various natural manifestations of modern intimacy: „It is only natural for me to check your phone".

4. Empirical study on young people's experiences in romantic relationships

To provide an empirical foundation for the present analysis, an original quantitative study was carried out within the student population of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași. The research aimed to investigate how digital technologies and social media platforms reconfigure relational dynamics, particularly intimacy, trust, and autonomy, among young users, and to assess respondents' awareness of digital abuse.

4.1. Methodology

Research objective: *To investigate how the digital environment and social networks contribute to the reconfiguration of power and control dynamics in the relationships of young people (aged 18–35) by exploring typologies of behavior and digital control.*

The research question that guided the entire approach was formulated as follows: „*To what extent do the digital environment and the use of social networks influence the emergence and manifestation of forms of control in couple relationships among young people aged 18 to 35?"* The formulation of this question allowed the investigation to be structured around the relationship between technology, personal autonomy and emotional dynamics, placing emphasis on the subtle and specific forms of control generated in the online environment.

The main objectives of the research:

- Determining the frequency of use of digital space by young people;

- Examining the role of digital literacy in young people's experiences of online abuse and their capacity to identify controlling behaviours;
- Determining young people's attitudes towards intimacy, trust and privacy in the context of digitalisation;
- Identifying the main forms of digital control manifested in couple relationships;
- Identifying young people's perceptions of the degree of normalisation of digital control behaviours in couple relationships.

To achieve these objectives, a quantitative research method was chosen, using a questionnaire as a tool. The choice of questionnaire was motivated by the need to obtain comparable, standardised and sufficiently extensive data to allow the identification of certain patterns and correlations between variables. The structure of the questionnaire combined closed-ended questions, multiple-choice questions, scaled items and open-ended questions.

The tool was created in Google Forms and distributed online through the official Facebook group of the Secretariat of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, a virtual institutional space moderated by faculty staff and used constantly for administrative and academic communication. The choice of this distribution channel was methodologically justified by direct access to a sample relevant to the research topic, namely young people who are active in the online space and familiar with the digital environment.

To ensure that the research met the ethical standards required of sociological inquiry, a number of precautions were taken from the design stage onwards. Consent was obtained from every participant before the questionnaire was completed. The introductory section of the questionnaire presented respondents with the information required for informed consent as the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation ant the right to withdraw at any stage of completion without consequence. Access to the next phase of the form was conditional upon acceptance of these terms. Attention was also paid to item construction. The questions were formulated in neutral terms, avoiding any wording likely to induce socially desirable responses or to orient respondents towards a particular answer. The only personal data collected was the respondents' email address, requested strictly for the purpose of verifying the validity of the responses and preventing multiple submissions from the same person. Participants were assured that their contact details would remain confidential, would not be linked to their answers at any stage of the analysis, and would not be used for any other purpose.

The online link to the questionnaire was open to respondents for six days, from 10 to 15 November. The responses were monitored as they arrived, since a self-imposed target of 100 valid responses had been set from the outset as the condition for treating the sample as representative. This figure was reached on 15 November, and the link was closed on the same day. No responses submitted after that point were taken into account.

Through this methodological structure, the research aimed to provide as complete a picture as possible of the form that coercive control takes in the digital age, the mechanisms through which technology influences power dynamics in couples, and the degree of awareness that young people have of digital abuse. The questionnaire thus enabled the collection of relevant data, providing a solid basis for further analysis.

Data analysis was performed using an online statistics program called Statistical Product and Service Software Automatically or SPSSAU (SPSS Cloud), a statistics program similar to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), but which helps identify the most appropriate methods for analysing the data entered.

4.2. The sample

The sample was representative of the total number of students at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences. A total of 102 questionnaires were recorded in this study. Of these, only 100 were ultimately validated, with two being excluded due to incomplete or invalid responses. The characteristics of the valid sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research sample

Characteristic	Category	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	73	73%
	Male	27	27%
Age	18–35 years (target range)	100	100%
Educational status	Students from the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași	100	100%
Recruitment environment	The Facebook group of the Secretariat at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences	100	100%
Tool used	Online questionnaire	100	100%

Data collected through the applied online instrument

5. Data interpretation

5.1. Frequency of digital media use by young people

When it comes to the frequency of digital space use (Table 2), most men spend between three and five hours online every day (38 percent), with social networking, communicating with friends and partners, and social media consumption becoming part of their routine. However, there are also men who spend less time online, usually between one and three hours a day (25.93 percent), and for them, the digital environment is perceived more as a useful tool than as a dominant space in their social life. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a not insignificant segment (29.63 percent) report spending five to seven hours or even more on social networks, suggesting an intense immersion in the online environment, where leisure, socialising, couple communication and entertainment take place mainly through technology.

Table 2. Frequency of online media use by Gender

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	*p* Value
		Male	Female			
How much time do you spend online each day on average (for recreational purposes: social media, messaging apps, browsing the internet, etc.)?	More than 7 hours per day	2 (7.41)	8 (10.96)	10 (10.00)	3.537	0.618
	Less than 1 hour per day	1 (3.70)	2 (2.74)	3 (3.00)		
	I don't know / I don't want to answer	1 (3.70)	0 (0.00)	1 (1.00)		
	Between 1 and 3 hours per day	7 (25.93)	22 (30.14)	29 (29.00)		
	Between 3 and 5 hours per day	10 (37.04)	29 (39.73)	39 (39.00)		
	Between 5 and 7 hours per day	6 (22.22)	12 (16.44)	18 (18.00)		
Total		27	73	100		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

In the case of women, the majority fall within the range of three to five hours spent online daily (39.73 percent), followed by the segment of those who spend between one and three hours per day (30.14 percent). Also, a significant percentage exceeds the three to five hours per day, with 16.44 percent reporting five to seven hours and 10.96 percent spending more than seven hours online. These data indicate a constant presence of the digital environment in the daily lives of young women, where communication via messages, calls, or social networks becomes an integral part of couple interactions. Frequent connection to the online

space suggests that technology functions not only as a communication tool, but as a permanent framework for the relationship, influencing the dynamics and rhythm of interactions between partners.

Although there are observable differences between men and women, *these are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.537$, $p = 0.618$).* Overall, the data show that young people's couple relationships take place in a context where online presence is almost permanent. Partners no longer interact only face to face, but extend their relationship into the digital space, even if they are only a few metres apart. This context is important for further understanding conflicts and digital control behaviours.

5.2. Digital skills, data protection, and feelings of vulnerability

Of all respondents, the results indicate that most young people, both men and women, rate their skills as „good" (63 percent) or „very good" (29 percent), stating that they know how to manage privacy settings, passwords, and platform use. We also have a percentage of eight percent of all respondents who rate their digital skills as average, but most of them did not report any form of abuse in their relationship. In general, at a declarative level, technical competence is high, and no significant differences were found between men and women (Table 3).

Table 3. Assessment of digital competence by gender

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	p Value
		Male	Female			
How would you rate your digital skills (use of platforms, security, privacy)?	Good	14 (51.85)	49 (67.12)	63 (63.00)	2.504	0.286
	Very good	11 (40.74)	18 (24.66)	29 (29.00)		
	Average	2 (7.41)	6 (8.22)	8 (8.00)		
Total		27	73	100		
Do you know how to protect your personal data and privacy online?	Yes	20 (74.07)	53 (72.60)	73 (73.00)	0.055	0.973
	I don't know, but I would like to know	2 (7.41)	5 (6.85)	7 (7.00)		
	I know roughly what I should do, but I don't know how	5 (18.52)	15 (20.55)	20 (20.00)		
Total		27	73	100		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

What we will notice in the following lines, however, is that women appear more frequently to be exposed to various forms of direct control, many of them self-assessing their digital competences as „very good". This discrepancy suggests that vulnerability depends not only on technical competence, but also on the power dynamics within the relationship. The concept of coercive control formulated by Stark (2007) explains that domination does not necessarily manifest itself through obvious acts of violence, but through constant and subtle practices that can be justified as legitimate care or jealousy. In this context, digital competence does not eliminate the risk of abuse, because the problem is not just access to technology, but its use for control purposes. In Giddens' (1992) terms, modern intimacy involves transparency and reflexive communication, but technology can transform this openness into a space of excessive surveillance.

Furthermore, even in the absence of constant monitoring, the mere possibility of being monitored can alter behaviour. Foucault (1977) describes this mechanism through the concept of panopticism, where individuals self-regulate their behaviour because of the potential to be observed. In the digital environment, this translates into self-censorship, adjusting posts, or avoiding certain interactions to prevent conflict.

The results show that digital literacy is necessary but insufficient to curb abuse. Vulnerability arises at the intersection of technical competence, platform architecture, power dynamics in couples, and transformations in contemporary intimacy (Zuboff, 2019). Digital abuse cannot be explained solely by a lack of knowledge, but must be understood as a complex social phenomenon, integrated into control structures and new forms of technologically mediated intimacy.

5.3. Conflicts generated by online activity in couple relationships

The participants' responses show that the online environment is not only a space for communication, but also a space for tension within couples. According to the data recorded, 70.37 percent of men say they have had at least one conflict in their relationship that they perceived as being caused by their partner's activity on social media, compared to 34.25 percent of female respondents. Data analysis shows that there is a statistically significant association between gender and the reporting of these conflicts, suggesting that the differences we observe are not random (Table 4).

We find a similar pattern in the case of conflicts generated by one's own online activity: 66.67 percent of men and 28.77 percent of women reported such situations. In this case, too, the association between gender and the experience of conflicts is statistically significant. This difference may reflect variations in the perception of online behaviors, relational norms, or sensitivity to digital interactions, but further analysis in future studies will be necessary to explain the mechanisms underlying this association.

It is important to emphasize that not all of these conflicts stem from serious events, but from personal interpretations. A „like" on Facebook can become evidence, a message can be perceived as hidden, and the fact that your partner

smiles on the phone can raise questions. Contemporary relationships are based on openness and constant communication, but it is precisely this openness that creates the expectation of almost total transparency. When something remains unclear, suspicion quickly arises (Giddens, 1992).

Table 4. Self-reported and partner-perceived online behaviors

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	*p* Value
		Male	Female			
Have you had conflicts in your relationship that you perceived to be caused by your partner's activity on social media?	Yes	19 (70.37)	25 (34.25)	44 (44.00)	11.799	0.008**
	No	6 (22.22)	39 (53.42)	45 (45.00)		
	I don't want to answer	1 (3.70)	1 (1.37)	2 (2.00)		
	I don't remember	1 (3.70)	8 (10.96)	9 (9.00)		
Total		27	73	100		
Have you had conflicts in your relationship that you perceived to be caused by your own activity on social media?	Yes	18 (66.67)	21 (28.77)	39 (39.00)	13.397	0.004**
	No	8 (29.63)	49 (67.12)	57 (57.00)		
	I don't want to answer	1 (3.70)	1 (1.37)	2 (2.00)		
	I don't remember	0 (0.00)	2 (2.74)	2 (2.00)		
Total		27	73	100		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

In addition, social networks function as spaces where everyone builds a public image. If we look at things from Goffman's perspective (1959), he talks about social life as a stage on which individuals play roles. In the digital environment, this stage is permanently visible. The partner becomes a spectator of interactions, and any online gesture can be interpreted as a sign of loyalty or lack thereof. This gives rise to conflicts that, offline, might not have existed or might not have been as intense.

Another relevant aspect is the normalization of jealousy. Some participants describe their reactions as natural or justified. Certain forms of control are often minimized and integrated into the idea of „normal" behaviour in a relationship. In the digital environment, where information is accessible and constantly updated, the temptation to check or interpret excessively becomes greater. Curiosity can easily turn into monitoring, and monitoring can become routine.

At the same time, a more subtle phenomenon can be observed. Even when there are no direct checks, some participants suggest that they adjust their online behaviour to avoid discussions. This is where Foucault's (1977) theory of panopticism becomes relevant. Constant surveillance is not necessary for it to have an effect. The mere fact that you know your partner can see, interpret, or react is enough to change your behaviour.

Overall, conflicts generated by online activity do not seem to be isolated incidents, but rather an expression of how technology is restructuring intimacy. As Baym (2015) shows, digital communication changes the way relationships are experienced and interpreted. The data suggests that the online space amplifies existing emotions and makes the relationship permanently exposed to evaluation.

5.4. Digital control behaviours in couple relationships

With regard to the monitoring behaviours exercised by respondents over their partners, the data in the table indicate statistically significant differences based on gender ($\chi^2 = 25.499$, $p = 0.001$). This result shows that digital control patterns are not evenly distributed between men and women, but follow distinct configurations (Table 5).

Table 5. Distribution of online abusive behaviors toward partners

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	p Value
		Male	Female			
Behavior	I asked for my partner's phone or social media account passwords	10 (15.15)	10 (8.26)	20 (10.70)	25.499	0.001**
	I asked to see my partner's messages or calls	16 (24.24)	9 (7.44)	25 (13.37)		
	I asked them to delete certain people or contacts	9 (13.64)	12 (9.92)	21 (11.23)		
	I searched online for ways to monitor my partner's activity	1 (1.52)	1 (0.83)	2 (1.07)		
	I installed a location tracking app for my partner without their consent	1 (1.52)	1 (0.83)	2 (1.07)		
	I checked my partner's social media activity (likes, comments, stories)	2 (3.03)	19 (15.70)	21 (11.23)		
	I looked at my partner's phone with their consent	16 (24.24)	22 (18.18)	38 (20.32)		
	I looked at my partner's phone without their consent	5 (7.58)	23 (19.01)	28 (14.97)		
	I did none of these things	6 (9.09)	24 (19.83)	30 (16.04)		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

Across the sample, the most prevalent reported behavior was checking a partner's phone with their consent (20.32 percent), suggesting that a significant portion of interactions related to access to digital devices take place in a consensual setting. However, a considerable percentage of respondents (14.97 percent) stated that they had checked their partner's phone without consent, indicating the existence of intrusive practices that cannot be ignored.

Analysis by gender reveals clear differences. Men report a higher proportion of direct and explicit controlling behaviours: 24.24 percent asked to see their partner's messages or calls (compared to 7.44 percent of women), and 15.15 percent asked for their partner's phone or social media account passwords (compared to 8.26 percent of women). Also, 13.64 percent of men asked for certain people or contacts to be deleted, compared to 9.92 percent of women. This data suggests a more frequent tendency towards direct control and explicit requests for access.

In contrast, women tend to report indirect or digital monitoring behaviours more frequently. For example, 15.70 percent of women have checked their partner's activity on social media (likes, comments, stories), compared to only 3.03 percent of men. Women also report checking their partner's phone without consent at a higher rate (19.01 percent compared to 7.58 percent of men). At the same time, 18.18 percent of women have checked their partner's phone with their consent, a percentage close to that of men (24.24 percent).

Extreme behaviours, such as searching online for ways to monitor one's partner or installing a location tracking app without consent, are rare in both groups (1.07 percent overall), indicating that advanced technological forms of coercive surveillance occur only in isolated cases in this sample.

Another relevant aspect is the proportion of respondents who say they have not resorted to any of these actions: 16.04 percent overall, with a higher proportion among women (19.83 percent) than men (9.09 percent). This difference suggests that, although women are more likely to engage in certain forms of digital monitoring, they also report a greater absence of controlling behaviours.

The gender differences observed in the data should be discussed with caution. The study does not show that only men exercise control or that women are exclusively victims. Monitoring occurs in both directions. However, women report more frequent experiences of surveillance and invasion of privacy without alerting their partner, while men more often engage in direct control behaviours. Research by Dobash and Dobash (1992) supports the idea that power inequalities can be reproduced in the intimate sphere, and technology provides an additional tool for their manifestation.

An additional important element is the psychological effect of these behaviours. Even in the absence of constant monitoring, the mere possibility of being monitored can change behaviour. In Foucault's (1977) terms, the panoptic mechanism works by internalising surveillance. Thus, the partner may end up self-censoring, avoiding certain interactions, or constantly justifying their online activity.

The data show that digital monitoring is present in young people's relationships and that gender differences are visible, without being absolute. A significant proportion of men acknowledge checking or controlling behaviours, and women report experiences of surveillance more frequently. The phenomenon should be understood not only as the result of individual choices, but in the context of power dynamics and how technology facilitates constant access to each other's lives (Giddens, 1992; Stark, 2007).

5.5. Various perceptions of respondents

Young people perceive checking their partner's phone or asking for their passwords in different ways, depending on their personal experiences and how each defines intimacy. More than half of men consider these behaviours an invasion of privacy, and about a quarter perceive them as a form of control, although a smaller number interpret them as gestures of care or normal transparency in a couple. This variation suggests that monitoring may be justified in certain contexts, but remains problematic from the perspective of respecting autonomy (Table 6).

Table 6. Attitudes toward online privacy violations in romantic relationships

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	p Value
		Male	Female			
Do you consider checking your partner's phone or asking for passwords to be:	Unnecessary	1 (3.70)	0 (0.00)	1 (1.00)	6.136	0.293
	I don't know	0 (0.00)	1 (1.37)	1 (1.00)		
	A sign of care and transparency	4 (14.81)	7 (9.59)	11 (11.00)		
	A form of control	7 (25.93)	19 (26.03)	26 (26.00)		
	An invasion of privacy	14 (51.85)	34 (46.58)	48 (48.00)		
	A normal practice in today's couples	1 (3.70)	12 (16.44)	13 (13.00)		
Total		27	73	100		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

In the case of women, perceptions are more varied. Many women consider checking their phone or asking for passwords to be a violation of privacy or a form of control, while a small group interprets them as transparency or normality. 'Neutral' situations, such as when a partner forgets their password, show that perception depends not only on the action, but also on the specific context of the

relationship. The differences between genders are not statistically significant *(χ^2 = 6.136, p = 0.293)*, but observations suggest that the experience of digital vulnerability depends not only on technical skills, but also on one's position in relational dynamics and previous experiences of control (Giddens, 1992).

5.6. Digital abuse versus other forms of abuse

Another topic of interest to me was to see what young people in couples think about this new form of abuse and how they compare it to other forms of violence. To ensure that respondents had a familiar point of comparison, they were asked to relate to violence in the digital environment by comparing it to physical violence. The results show that almost half of the respondents (46 percent) consider digital abuse to be as serious as physical violence, which suggests a significant awareness of its emotional and psychological impact.

However, a considerable percentage (35 percent) believe that digital abuse is not as serious, and only a few respondents perceive it as more serious or not serious at all. Analysis by gender shows that the differences between men and women are minimal, indicating that young people's perceptions are similar regardless of gender *(χ^2 = 2.261, p = 0.688)*. These data suggest that, although young people recognise the seriousness of digital abuse, there is still a tendency to underestimate it compared to traditional forms of abuse, highlighting the need to promote awareness and education on this emerging issue (Table 7).

Table 7. Perceptions of digital abuse compared to physical abuse

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2
		Male	Female		
How do you think digital abuse is perceived within a couple's relationship in relation to physical violence?	Just as serious	10 (37.04)	36 (49.32)	46 (46.00)	2.261
	More serious	1 (3.70)	3 (4.11)	4 (4.00)	
	Not serious at all	4 (14.81)	7 (9.59)	11 (11.00)	
	Not as serious	10 (37.04)	25 (34.25)	35 (35.00)	
	I don't know	2 (7.41)	2 (2.74)	4 (4.00)	
Total		27	73	100	

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

5.7. Reporting cases of digital abuse

When it comes to informing respondents about where or to whom they should report a case of abuse, the results indicate a partial and superficial level of information regarding protection against digital abuse. Almost half of the respondents said they had heard of a law that punishes online aggression, while only nine percent said they were specifically aware of its provisions and 30 percent said that no such legislative framework existed (Table 8).

Table 8. Awareness of laws addressing digital abuse

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	p Value
		Male	Female			
Have you heard of any law or other form of legislative framework that explicitly punishes online aggressors?	I have heard of such a law, but I don't know the details	11 (40.74)	36 (49.32)	47 (47.00)	1.041	0.791
	Yes, I am familiar with such a law and know what it stipulates	2 (7.41)	7 (9.59)	9 (9.00)		
	I have not heard of any such law	10 (37.04)	20 (27.40)	30 (30.00)		
	I am not sure	4 (14.81)	10 (13.70)	14 (14.00)		
Total		27	73	100		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

Although 55 percent of respondents believe they would know where to turn if they became victims of digital abuse, there is still a large proportion who would not know how to react, with the percentage reaching 45 percent. This reiterates the fact that, although there may be a general awareness of the problem, there is no effective knowledge of protection and intervention mechanisms (Table 9).

Table 9. Awareness of support options for digital abuse victims

Cross Tabulation Number (Percentage) Number Percentage

Item	Option	1. Gender: (%)		Total	χ^2	p Value
		Male	Female			
If you were a victim of digital abuse, would you know who to turn to for help?	Yes	13 (48.15)	42 (57.53)	55 (55.00)	0.702	0.402
	No	14 (51.85)	31 (42.47)	45 (45.00)		
Total		27	73	100		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Authors' calculations using SPSSAU

5.8. Defining digital privacy

In the closing section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to define, in their own words, what digital privacy means to them. The answers were diverse and highlight a high level of awareness of the importance of privacy in the online environment, at least in theory. Many emphasised that digital privacy involves protecting personal data and maintaining a private space free from intrusion. Some mentioned the relational dimension, considering that mutual respect and clear boundaries between partners are essential to prevent digital control from turning into abuse.

Female respondents placed greater emphasis on this aspect of protection against partner control. For them, digital intimacy means being able to communicate freely, without fear of being monitored or judged. They highlighted the importance of emotional and affective confidentiality, emphasising that the digital space is not just technical, but an extension of personal life. This perspective also reflects their more frequent experiences with digital surveillance, which makes intimacy associated with personal safety and freedom.

Looking at these definitions provided by respondents through the lens of the theories analysed above, it is noteworthy that the digital space constitutes a terrain where individual autonomy, identity performance, and relational dynamics intersect. The participants' responses show that digital privacy is a multidimensional concept that combines data protection, freedom of communication, mutual respect, and the continuous negotiation of personal boundaries. Understanding this form of violence is crucial in order to analyse the phenomenon of digital abuse and develop prevention strategies that are relevant both to young people and to the social environment in which they live.

6. Limitations of the study

Although the findings of this study offer relevant insights into the dynamics of digital control in young people's romantic relationships and provide meaningful support for the directions of future research, several methodological limitations of the present work must be acknowledged.

First, the sample is restricted to a subset of students enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, which limits the generalisability of the results to the broader population of young people aged 18 to 35. The homogeneity of the sample with respect to educational background and institutional affiliation means that the findings cannot be extended to young people with different socioeconomic profiles, levels of education, or geographic contexts.

Second, the quantitative nature of the research, whilst appropriate for identifying patterns and statistical associations, does not allow for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and meanings that respondents attribute to digital control behaviours. A mixed-methods approach incorporating qualitative interviews might, in future studies, offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Third, as data were collected through self-administered online questionnaires, the results are subject to social desirability bias. Respondents may have underreported controlling or abusive behaviours due to an awareness of their negative social connotations, or conversely, may have normalised certain behaviours to a degree that prevented their accurate identification.

Finally, the cross-sectional design of the study captures a single point in time and does not permit the analysis of how digital control behaviours evolve over the course of a relationship. For this reason, I consider that longitudinal research would be necessary in order to trace these dynamics with greater accuracy.

7. Conclusions

Asking people about control, jealousy and surveillance in their own relationships means asking them to look at the things they may not have named before. The study was designed with this in mind. Participation was voluntary at every stage, informed consent was obtained before completion, and the confidentiality of the responses was strictly maintained. Under these conditions, the findings may be read as a faithful account of what respondents were willing to disclose.

The central research question guiding this study was: *To what extent do the digital environment and the use of social networks influence the emergence and manifestation of forms of control in couple relationships among young people aged 18 to 35?* Based on the empirical evidence gathered, the digital environment does not create new power dynamics, but it significantly amplifies, facilitates, and reconfigures those already present in couple relationships.

The data confirm that online presence is quasi-permanent in the daily lives of young people, with the majority of respondents spending between three and five hours online daily, and a considerable proportion exceeding this threshold. This constant connectivity transforms the digital space into an extension of the couple relationship itself, one in which intimacy, trust, and conflict are continuously negotiated.

The findings further demonstrate that digital control behaviours are widespread and take distinct gendered forms. Men more frequently engage in direct and explicit controlling behaviours, such as confronting their partner, requesting access to messages, demanding passwords, or asking for contacts to be deleted, whereas women tend to employ indirect monitoring practices, avoiding direct confrontation, for example by checking social media activity or accessing a partner's phone without consent. It is important to note that the study reveals that a high level of digital literacy does not function as a protective factor against abuse. Women who rated their digital skills as very good were nonetheless disproportionately exposed to controlling behaviours, suggesting that vulnerability stems not from technical competence, but from the relational dynamics of power, as theorised by Stark (2007) and Giddens (1992).

A particularly significant finding concerns the normalisation of digital control. A considerable proportion of respondents perceived monitoring behaviours as expressions of care, transparency, or relational normality, rather than as violations of privacy or autonomy. This normalisation, in line with Foucault's (1977) concept of panopticism, suggests that the disciplinary effects of digital surveillance operate even in the absence of explicit coercion. Partners thus self-censor, adjust their online behaviour, and internalise the gaze of the other.

The study also highlights a notable gap between awareness and knowledge. Whilst the majority of respondents demonstrated a general awareness of digital abuse as a phenomenon with potentially serious consequences, with 46 percent considering it to be as serious as physical violence, a significant proportion remained unfamiliar with the existing legislative framework for combating domestic violence, and 45 percent stated that they would not know where to seek help if they were victimised. This gap between recognition and institutional knowledge represents a critical area for intervention.

Taken together, these findings support the argument that the online space functions as an amplifier of pre-existing relational inequalities. As the data illustrate, the reconfiguration of control in the digital age does not represent a fundamental departure from offline power structures, but rather their adaptation to a new environment, one characterised by permanent visibility, immediate access, and the blurring of boundaries between private and shared space. Addressing digital abuse among young people therefore requires not only legal and technical responses, but sustained educational efforts aimed at fostering critical awareness of how intimacy, autonomy, and power are negotiated in digitally mediated relationships.

8. Future research directions

Building on the limitations of the present study, future research should aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital control in young people's romantic relationships. To enhance generalisability, studies should include more diverse samples encompassing couples of varying ages (between the ages of 18 and 35), educational backgrounds, socioeconomic profiles, and geographic contexts. Additionally, incorporating mixed-methods designs, such as combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, would allow for a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences, motivations, and meanings that partners attribute to digital control behaviours.

Specifically, it would be advisable to conduct a longitudinal study over a period of three to six months, involving multiple young couples, with monthly interviews to monitor the evolution of digital control dynamics over time. Such an approach would enable researchers to capture temporal changes in behaviours, the negotiation of intimacy and trust, and the potential escalation or mitigation of controlling practices within relationships, while also allowing for the verification of responses from the partner in the same couple, which could help assess the honesty of self-reported data. By addressing these dimensions, future research could provide richer, more nuanced insights into how relational power and digital mediation interact in contemporary romantic partnerships.

Author's note

This article was originally written in Romanian. Since neither English nor French is the author's first language, the initial translations were produced with the aid of the DeepL translation platform. The texts were then revised throughout, with particular attention paid to those passages where the automated rendering departed from the intended meaning or read awkwardly in the target language. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and clarity of the final versions, any remaining errors or infelicities are the author's own.

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