

# **“They’ll Always Find a Way to Get to You” Technology Use in Adolescent Romantic Relationships and Its Role in Dating Violence and Abuse**

**Stonard, K. , Bowen, E. , Walker, K. and Price, S.**

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# "They'll Always Find a Way to Get to You": Technology Use in Adolescent Romantic Relationships and Its Role in Dating Violence and Abuse

Karlie E. Stonard,<sup>1</sup> Erica Bowen,<sup>1</sup>  
Kate Walker,<sup>1</sup> and Shelley A. Price<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Electronic communication technology (ECT), such as mobile phones and online communication tools, is widely used by adolescents; however, the availability of such tools may have both positive and negative impacts within the context of romantic relationships. While an established literature has documented the nature, prevalence, and impact of traditional forms of adolescent dating violence and abuse (ADVA), limited empirical investigation has focused on the role of ECT in ADVA or what shall be termed *technology-assisted adolescent dating violence and abuse* (TAADVA) and how adolescents perceive the impact of TAADVA relative to ADVA. In this article, the authors explore the role ECT plays in adolescent romantic relationships and psychologically abusive and controlling ADVA behaviors and its perceived impact. An opportunity sample of 52 adolescents (22 males and 30 females) between the ages of 12 and 18 years participated in the study. One all-female and seven mixed-gendered semi-structured focus groups were conducted. Thematic analysis was used to identify three superordinate themes, including (a) perceived healthy versus unhealthy communication, (b) perceived monitoring and controlling communication, and (c) perceived impact of technology-assisted abuse compared with that in person. While ECTs had a positive impact on the development and maintenance of adolescent romantic relationships, such tools also provided a new avenue for unhealthy, harassment, monitoring, and controlling behaviors within these relationships. ECT

<sup>1</sup>Coventry University, UK

## Corresponding Author:

Karlie E. Stonard, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK.

Email: ab1764@coventry.ac.uk

was also perceived to provide unique impacts in terms of making TAADVA seem both less harmful and more harmful than ADVA experienced in person. [Adolescents' perceptions and experiences of ECT in romantic relationships and TAADVA may also vary by gender](#). Implications of the findings are discussed, and recommendations are made for future research.

**Keywords**

adolescent dating violence and abuse, technology, control, impact

**Introduction**

In the United Kingdom, between 83% and 88% of adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years report that they have had at least one romantic relationship experience with a boyfriend or girlfriend (Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009; Fox, Corr, Gadd, & Butler, 2014; Schütt, 2006). [AQ2](#) Similarly in the United States, almost three-quarters of adolescents aged 13 to 16 years report that they are dating or have experience with dating (Eaton et al., 2010). Research suggests that most adolescents begin initiating romantic relationships during early adolescence, which gradually progress from fewer, short, casual, and potentially frequent dating relationships, to more steady ones, or to a single steady relationship that becomes more dyadic as partners become more emotionally and sexually involved (Collins, 2003; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Davies & Windle, 2000; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Meier & Allen, 2009; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Adolescents have reported engaging in a range of non-sexual and/or sexual dating activities within their peer group and privately, from the early stages of adolescence (Carlson & Rose, 2012; Connolly et al., 2004; Fredland et al., 2005; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Waylen, Ness, McGovern, Wolke, & Low, 2010). Furthermore, romantic relationships are reported to provide teenagers with opportunities to form a sense of both their self-identity and sexuality (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Sorensen, 2007). A more detailed discussion of adolescent romantic relationships is beyond the scope of this article; however, there is a need for further research into the nature of adolescent romantic relationships in the United Kingdom. What is clear from the current literature is that while romantic relationships have the potential to affect adolescent development positively (e.g., Davies & Windle, 2000; Meier & Allen, 2009; Sorensen, 2007), they can also place young people at risk for problems such as increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Furman, 2002) and relationships that include dating violence and abuse (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004).

Adolescent dating violence and abuse (ADVA) has been recognized as a serious risk to adolescents' health and well-being (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Ismail, Berman, & Ward-Griffin, 2007; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). In the United Kingdom, studies have reported the prevalence of ADVA victimization between 10% and 30% for physical dating violence, 20% and 70% for psychological or emotional abuse, and 3% and 30% for sexual dating violence (Barter et al., 2009; Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Fox et al., 2014; Hird, 2000; Schütt, 2006). Recognition of the prevalence and impact of ADVA in the United Kingdom led to the proposal of the new cross-Government definition of domestic violence and abuse in September 2012 (implemented in March 2013), to include teenagers aged 16 to 17 years, in addition to adults aged 18 and above (Home Office, 2012). This definition, which now also includes coercive control as well as physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and financial violence and abuse, however, still excludes those below the age of 16 who are at risk of involvement in ADVA.

Electronic communication technology (ECT), such as mobile phones and methods of communication via the Internet (i.e., social networking sites [SNSs], instant messenger, and picture and video chat), has enabled fast-paced, inexpensive methods of communication that is changing and redefining young people's social networks (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006). It has been reported that ECT is used at least daily or weekly by most adolescents (e.g., CHILDWISE, 2013; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Ofcom, 2011). It has also been acknowledged that adolescents commonly use ECT to keep in contact with their romantic partners for day-to-day communication (Barter et al., 2009; Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Picard, 2007; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Toscano, 2007). Furthermore, Draucker and Martsolf (2010) have found that adolescents used ECT to establish, maintain, and end relationships, in addition to reconnecting after a breakup. Mishna, McLuckie, and Saini (2009) also identified that young people aged 11 to 24 years readily developed both friendships and romantic relationships online and that these relationships were highly valued and were considered as important as relationships in "real" life, with some of these relationships being established and maintained exclusively online. While advancements in ECT provide adolescents with opportunities in the development and maintenance of romantic relationships, further attention needs to be paid to the role of new and advanced forms of ECT in placing adolescents at risk for unhealthy or abusive dating behaviors.

A recent definition of ADVA, and the one that will be used for this article, offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2012) has identified relationship abuse to consist of physical, sexual, and psychological

or emotional violence as well as stalking, which can occur in person or via ECT. Psychological or emotional abuse includes, for example, threats, harming a partner's sense of self-worth, name calling, shaming, bullying, embarrassing a partner on purpose, or isolating a partner from friends and family (CDC, 2012). The types of behavior that can be included in technology-assisted adolescent dating violence and abuse (TAADVA) have also been presented by the Domestic Violence Prevention Centre (DVPC; n.d.) to consist of coercion, threats, harassment, intimidation, emotional and verbal abuse, stealing online identity, controlling behaviors, sexual abuse, and cyber stalking. Research interest, however, has only recently begun to investigate the prevalence of TAADVA (e.g., Associated Press & MTV, 2009, 2011; Barter et al., 2009; Cutbush, Ashley, Kan, Hampton, & Hall, 2010; Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2012; Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Fox et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Boyd, & Lenhart, 2013; Picard, 2007; Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013), and only two of these studies were conducted in the United Kingdom (e.g., Barter et al., 2009; Fox et al., 2014). Two of these studies have used the CDC's definition of ADVA, which includes ECT as an avenue for abusive behavior (e.g., Cutbush et al., 2012; Tompson et al., 2013), while the others have used their own definitions of TAADVA.

In our review of these 12 TAADVA studies cited above (Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014), prevalence estimates range from 12% to 56% for victimization and 12% to 54% for instigation, depending on the various measures used. These estimates are fairly comparable to those reported for psychological/emotional ADVA victimization (35%-55%) and instigation (20%-70%) in this earlier review (Stonard et al., 2014). Measures of TAADVA in these 12 studies typically include checking a partner's messages without permission, checking the whereabouts of a partner, demanding passwords to online accounts, deleting or un-friending ex-partners, using information posted online against a partner, pressuring partners to engage in sexual acts, insults or put downs, spreading rumors about a partner on the Internet, threatening a partner via ECT, sharing private or embarrassing images or videos of a partner, making a partner feel afraid not to respond to contact, and restricting a partner's ECT use (Associated Press & MTV, 2009, 2011; Barter et al., 2009; Cutbush et al., 2010; Cutbush et al., 2012; Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Fox et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Korchmaros et al., 2013; Picard, 2007; Tompson et al., 2013; Zweig et al., 2013). Females have been reported to be more likely to report being a victim of both non-sexual and sexual TAADVA (e.g., Barter et al., 2009; Zweig et al., 2013). While females were also more likely to report instigating non-sexual

TAADVA, males were more likely to report instigating sexual TAADVA (Zweig et al., 2013). Interestingly, a substantial percentage (over 60%) of the 13- to 18-year-olds in Picard's (2007) investigation reported TAADVA to be a serious problem for teenagers their age who are in relationships. A recent large survey of 3,277 adolescents (age 14-17) who had been in a dating relationship in England and four other European countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Italy, and Norway) also found that 40% had experienced some form of online emotional violence (Barter et al., 2015). This study found that controlling behavior and surveillance were the most commonly experienced forms of online violence.

TAADVA appears to reflect many of the same behaviors that have been traditionally experienced or used in ADVA; however, ECT provides a new avenue in which adolescents can receive and use such abusive and controlling behavior through mobile and online technology. A small amount of literature has identified ADVA as a correlate of TAADVA, including in-person physical and/or psychological, and/or sexual ADVA (Cutbush et al., 2010; Cutbush et al., 2012; Dick et al., 2014; Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Korchmaros et al., 2013; Zweig et al., 2013; Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014). This may suggest that dating violence and abuse via ECT is not a distinct form of abuse to that conducted in person but may be experienced as a continuum of abusive behavior. In the United Kingdom, Barter et al. (2009) identified that technology provided an extra mechanism by which partners could exert control for young people who were already in a violent relationship, control which extended into every aspect of their social lives, in both the online and offline environment.

While inconsistencies in behaviors measured in studies reporting TAADVA hinder accurate comparisons, the prevalence of TAADVA in these studies is substantial. Studies, however, rarely distinguish the specific ECTs used in TAADVA, although mobile phones have been reported to be particularly relevant due to the constant access to this tool (e.g., Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Korchmaros et al., 2013). Draucker and Martsof (2010) provided some examples of behaviors described by 18- to 21-year-old respondents in their narratives of retrospective accounts of their experiences of ADVA aged 13 to 18 years. Most commonly, the participants described how their partner had checked up on them by calling their phone multiple times. Many participants admitted going through voice mail recordings or stored text messages in their partners' phones to determine whom they had been talking to, and participants gave examples of how romantic partners had left voice mail or text messages threatening to harm them if they did not return their partner's calls.

Abusive and controlling behaviors that occur within intimate relationships have been interpreted within the context of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1977, 1984). Hazan and Shaver (1987) identified three attachment styles (secure,



avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent), which each differed in the way they experience romantic love. Adolescents and young adults ( $M$  age = 20 years) with more insecure and anxious attachment styles have been found to have more difficulties regulating emotions when distressed with romantic partners, are more likely to report anger, sadness, and fear during their interactions with romantic partners than secure youth, and to report less confidence in emotional regulation during conflicts, and more difficulties managing conflict (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001). Research with adults has also found that combinations of anxiously attached females (i.e., who have a greater need for physical or emotional proximity) and avoidant-attached males (i.e., who maintain greater distance) were associated with more violence (Doumas, Pearson, Elgin, & McKinley, 2008; Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009). From an attachment perspective, ADVA and TAADVA may be used as a way of re-establishing proximity or as a result of emotional reactions to disruptions in proximity or relationship maintenance (Bowlby, 1984; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). However, research regarding adolescent attachment and romantic relationships is much less theoretically advanced, and further empirical investigation is required.

A relatively new phenomenon involving ECTs among adolescents is the practice of "sexting." Sexting has been defined as "the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images by teens" (Lenhart, 2009, p. 3). In a review of research on sexting, Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012) reported that 15% to 40% of young people are involved in sexting, depending on their age and the way sexting is measured. It has been suggested that adolescence is a time of sexual exploration not only in real-life situations but also in the virtual reality of online sex through media such as the Internet, chatrooms, and webcams (de Bruijn, Burrie, & van Wel, 2006). While such practices may be used on a voluntary or mutual basis, sexting may place adolescents at risk of behaviors that are coercive, linked to harassment, bullying, and violence (Ringrose et al., 2012). Sexting may therefore present a risk factor for abusive behaviors within the context of adolescent dating relationships.

A final observation of note is that adolescents have been reported to have subjective views of behaviors relating to TAADVA. In Barter et al. (2009) and Girlguiding's (2013) studies, the adolescent girls' views varied regarding what level of contact was acceptable and some perceived higher levels of contact as a sign of a caring partner as opposed to an intrusive one. For example, some girls justified their partners monitoring or controlling behaviors based on feeling loved rather than checked up on, whereas others recognized that such control may progress from being nice to being annoying and uncomfortable. Draucker and Martsolf (2010) similarly found that some

participants reported that controlling or monitoring behaviors were motivated by care or concern; however, most acknowledged that such behaviors were often due to concerns for infidelity or relationship insecurity.

The aim of this article is to expand the limited qualitative literature that has explored the role of ECT in adolescent romantic relationships and ADVA. While a small but growing amount of literature has demonstrated that ECT is used within the context of ADVA, we do not fully understand how it is used or what the perceived implications of using ECT in this context are. This article is one of the first British studies to the researchers' knowledge to qualitatively explore the role of ECT in ADVA and the perceived impact of TAADVA among 12- to 18-year-olds. In particular, the research questions this article aimed to explore were the following:

**Research Question 1:** What role does ECT play in adolescent romantic relationships?

**Research Question 2:** What role does ECT play in ADVA/controlling behaviors?

**Research Question 3:** How do adolescents perceive the impact of TAADVA relative to ADVA?

## Method

### *Design*

A qualitative approach was used to explore the role ECT plays in adolescent romantic relationships and ADVA from the young people's perspectives and to gain insight into their thoughts, opinions, and awareness of the subject matter. Focus groups were chosen as the method of data collection as they provide opportunity for in-depth responses to questions by encouraging participants to develop their thoughts through group discussion (Crow & Semmens, 2008; Noaks & Wincup, 2004). This method seemed to work well, and respondents were enthusiastic in their contribution to the discussions.

### *Participants*

A total of 52 participants were recruited either from opportunity samples at a secondary school (40) or through purposive sampling of personal contacts of the researcher (12). All participants were aged between 12 and 18 years ( $M$  age = 13.7 years,  $SD = 1.56$ ), and 55.8% (30) of the sample were female. The majority of participants described their ethnicity as White (92.3%), and the

most commonly reported parental marital status was married (40.4%), followed by divorced (28.1%).

### ***Data Collection***

Ethical approval for this study was granted from a University's Research Ethics Committee. Of the eight focus groups conducted, five took place in the school setting. A teacher was present during these focus groups. The other three focus groups were conducted at the family home of one of the participants, and the researcher was the only adult present. Four of the five focus groups in school were conducted based on year group (two year 8 groups, one year 9 group, and one year 10 group) and one consisted of participants from years 8 to 10. All focus groups except one were mixed-gendered, and the other comprised of an all-female group of year 8 students. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for the focus groups (see Appendix). The focus groups ranged in size from 3 to 12 participants and varied in length from approximately 20 to 60 min. All focus groups were audio-recorded. The focus group discussions typically focused on heterosexual adolescent romantic relationships.

### ***Data Analysis***

The recorded data from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen to analyze the data, which is an accessible and theoretically flexible method that allows for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in qualitative data in rich detail. This process involved coding and organizing the data into themes while systematically classifying data with a retrieval system to manage the coded extracts (Babbie, 2010). An inductive approach was used when analyzing the data to identify themes at a semantic level. Consequently, themes were driven purely by the data provided by respondents and not by the researchers' theoretical interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process involved repeated reviewing of the coded extracts and the themes that these produced.

### ***Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research***

The guidelines outlined by Shenton (2004) to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of qualitative research were used to attempt to promote the trustworthiness of the findings. In order to enhance credibility, as an alternative to internal validity (Shenton, 2004),

participants were fully informed that the research was voluntary, confidential, and that honesty was of paramount importance if participating to ensure only those who were freely willing to participate did so. [A03] Member checks or respondent validation was also used to seek clarification from the participants on the data and the researcher's interpretations of the findings (Bryman, 2004). This involved summarizing the main points of the discussions at the end of the data collection session to check and verify their accuracy with participants. As an alternative to external validity or what is known as generalizability in quantitative research, Shenton states that researchers should provide sufficient detail of the context of the fieldwork to allow for transferability (i.e., the ability of other researchers to identify whether the context of the study is similar to another to which it might be applied). As an alternative to reliability, dependability refers to the reporting of research design, implementation, and operational detail of the data collection in enough detail so as to enable others to repeat the study in an attempt to gain the same results (Shenton, 2004). A detailed description of the methodological design and process has been outlined and additional materials are provided in the appendix as stated. Finally, steps were taken to enhance confirmability, as an alternative to objectivity (Shenton, 2004), by ensuring the findings represent the respondents' experiences and ideas rather than the preconceived ideas of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher's Director of Studies and supervisory team, in addition to an experienced independent member of the immediate team, examined and verified the raw data and analysis.

## Results

Three superordinate themes and a total of 10 subordinate themes were identified in the thematic analysis (Table 1). These themes and subthemes are described using extracts taken from the raw data that represent the general patterns in the adolescents' perceptions, awareness, and, in some cases, experiences of ECT use in romantic relationships, TAADVA, and its impact.

### *Healthy Versus Unhealthy Communication via Technology*

The first theme captured the adolescents' perceptions of what was considered as healthy or unhealthy, in terms of the levels and context of communication between dating partners. When talking about ECT-based contact with a partner, there was a particular emphasis on mobile phones as being a key method of communication. This theme also represents the adolescents' views of the nature of responding to communication and how this could impact on whether communication was considered as healthy or unhealthy within the relationship.

**Table 1.** Superordinate Themes and Associated Subordinate Themes From the Focus Group Analysis.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Perceived healthy vs. unhealthy communication	Frequency of communication: Enough, but not too much Responding to communication: Enthusiasm vs. anxiety
Perceived monitoring and controlling communication	Checking messages and online accounts Demanding passwords to phone or online accounts Controlling friends, deleting ex-partners from online accounts Obsessive checking through excessive contact Mixed perceptions of what is healthy
Perceived impact of technology-assisted abuse compared with that in person	Less impact than in person: More opportunity to stop and ignore More impact than in person: "They'll always find a way to get you" More impact than in person: "It gets in your head"

*Frequency of communication: Enough, but not too much.* Adolescents generally agreed that at least daily communication with a dating partner was a healthy and a desirable amount of communication, as long as this contact was not constant throughout the day, which was viewed as being too much.

But like I don't know like probably about everyday but not like all the time every day. (Female, age 12-13)

Calling every day, it depends what they are like, if they are like proper needy or whatever. (Male, age 13-14)

While daily communication was desired, it was recognized that if this was hourly or more frequent, then this would become obsessive and annoying.

But urm, like you wouldn't want them to be like obsessive and not like every hour of every day that's just like stupid questions like how are you like over the day. (Female, age 13)

You can be like over obsessive like every minute hello hello hello hello hello and it just keeps on going on. (Female, age 12-13)

Conversely, there were three male adolescents aged 14 to 18 (and another female aged 14-15) who expressed that daily communication with a dating partner via ECT would be too much and therefore considered this as rather unhealthy.

I'd say to a certain extent that's [daily communication] sort of unhealthy. (Male, age 16)

I don't know like every other day because you get, sometimes you just get really annoyed because they just like don't shut up. (Male, age 14-15)

However, some adolescents gave examples their awareness of relationships ending due to a lack of communication, in this case, that is, one partner not texting the other daily. For example,

But my sister, the boyfriend she has just broke up with, he wouldn't text her everyday like, they were at different Uni's [Universities] and she got really like worried and but they broke up because he didn't think about her enough so I think it needs to be like, you need to talk to them often enough but not all the time because you get obsessive. (Female, age 15)

There were therefore mixed views over what was an appropriate level of communication. Generally, adolescents felt that daily communication was healthy unless the communication became overly obsessive, while four of the older adolescents (aged 14-18) felt that daily communication was actually unhealthy. Importantly, it was recognized that the right balance of communication between partners was needed. There were, however, some contexts in which increased communication was seen as acceptable. The adolescents perceived more frequent communication to be associated with closer or more serious relationships, meaning that increased contact was therefore acceptable or more likely.

It would be more if you get on with them, so if you get on with them really well then quite more often. (Male, age 14-15)

More frequent communication was also seen as appropriate given certain circumstances. However, as identified by the female adolescent below, if contact from a partner became excessive, then what was at first considered sweet or caring may become obsessive and annoying:

I think it depends on what's happened because if there's like been an event and they've gone and they're trying to get in contact with you like ooh how's your evening?, but um, sometimes it can be sweet stuff then if it continues then it's obsessive, annoying. (Female, age 14-15)

When levels of communication increased gradually, this female participant in the extract above acknowledged that adolescents experiencing potentially obsessive or unhealthy levels of communication within a dating relationship may not recognize such behavior as worrying or unhealthy,

especially at first. This could be the case particularly at the start of a romantic relationship when such contact may be initially considered as flattering.

I think when it first starts happening like if it did and you get called like 24/7 you don't really realize it at first, you think it's a fluke like ahh they are just being sweet like and then I think it progresses to get annoying and then it just really bugs you, urm, and it also depends on the person because whoever is urm, doing the calls they may not even realize that they are being controlling, it may not be intentional and the actual victim of it like I said, they may not be aware until later on that what it was. (Female, age 14-15)

There were therefore certain contexts in which more frequent communication was considered as acceptable and therefore a healthy amount of communication; however, concerns are highlighted that young people may not realize or recognize when the frequency of contact becomes more intense, or progresses on the verge of unhealthy or even obsessive and controlling communication.

***Responding to communication: Enthusiasm versus anxiety.*** The second subtheme related to participants' perception of what was healthy or unhealthy in terms of responding to communication. When partners were enthusiastic to respond to calls or texts, the adolescents perceived this as healthy, indicating that this communication was mutually sent and received between partners.

They are enthusiastic to respond back to your messages and calls. (Male, age 15)

If it's like daily and they text back then it's fine. (Female, age 12-13)

However, female adolescents in particular talked about feelings of anxiety regarding a partner's level or frequency of responding to contact and described constantly wanting to check their phones when waiting for their partner's reply, leading to effects on their emotional well-being. For example,

Well then if you like text them all the time and then if they don't reply then you are constantly checking your phone then you can get like a bit urm upset, anxious and annoyed, and then you confront them and then like I was out and then they get upset and then it, you like are constantly wanting to talk to them and it just kind of makes them feel a bit weird. (Female, age 12-13)

Urm, well I have a story about my friend she, sometimes the person that she talks to just doesn't reply for like a week and then suddenly reply's a lot saying

I'm sorry I'm sorry I was out and then kind of doesn't and it makes her feel really upset. (Female, age 12-13)

One adolescent described some interesting behaviors as a result of this anxious, emotional response when communication was stopped or delayed between romantic partners. For example,

If they haven't text them back they decide to turn their phone off but then they turn it on again they say oh I'm going to leave it but then they don't so kind of they just keep on. (Female, age 12-13)

The anxiety described by these adolescent females in relation to the timing of a partner's response to communication seemed to be shaped and exacerbated by unique features of ECT-based contact. One of these features was the ability to see when a partner had read or received a text or online message.

Facebook is quite good for that because like when it's like a chat on there it has a little green dot and that means that they are online so like yeah so like. (Female, age 12-13)

You can see they've read it. (Female, age 12-13)

Yeah, so like if you text somebody and then they don't text back you can see. (Female, age 12-13)

This ability to know whether a partner was online or had read their messages seemed to lead these younger female adolescents (aged 12-13) to speculate about why their partner was not responding, often assuming that they were being ignored. Therefore, while ECT enabled opportunities for adolescents to communicate in their romantic relationships with girlfriends and boyfriends, this also brought about more opportunities for these young people to experience emotional insecurities such as anxiety, feeling upset, and feeling annoyed when partners did not respond to communication frequently or immediately.

### ***Monitoring and Controlling Communication***

The second superordinate theme captured the adolescents' awareness and experiences of the use of monitoring and/or controlling behaviors via ECT within teenage romantic relationships. A number of unhealthy dating behaviors were described and were linked to the notion of a lack of trust by at



least one partner within these controlling relationships. Four of these monitoring or controlling behaviors via ECT are represented in the first four subordinate themes of this theme in addition to a final one centered on the mixed perceptions of the unhealthy nature of such behaviors.

*Checking messages and online accounts.* The adolescents spoke of peer awareness or personal experiences of partners going through their text message histories on their mobile phone to determine whom they have been talking to. This was often expressed as an attempt to reassure a partner's concerns about infidelity and with whom their partner had been talking to, particularly those of the opposite sex.

Yes when they like take their phone and then go through and read all their messages to make sure they are not going out with somebody else. (Female, age 12-13)

They [girls] don't delete people but they [girls] like look on your phone. (Male, age 12-13)

Yeah because like um when they're out or something or you've left your phone or they've left their phone at your house or something you can just go on their phone because like, you know everything about them but you don't know everything about them. (Female, age 12-13)

This was not limited to mobile phones, and the participants also spoke about partners looking at their contact and message histories on online social media accounts such as Facebook.

Having their partners Facebook passwords and going on their Facebook and looking at their messages. (Male, age 16)

There was a general consensus among male and female adolescents that girls instigated checking and monitoring behaviors more often than the boys, although this was not exclusive.

I would have thought that it would be boys that look at girls but it seems more girls looking at boys. (Male, age 12-13)

Reasons given for this view were that females in their nature were more protective, obsessive, or that they simply cared more than the boys, who it appeared were less preoccupied with such issues within their relationships.

Yeah the girls usually are more protective. (Female, age 12-13)

Because they [girls] care more. (Male, age 12-13)

The boys are just laid back, the boys are like I've got thousands of girls on me which one to choose [laughs]. (Female, age 12-13)

Interestingly, one adolescent spoke of awareness of a friend's ex-partner checking his friend's messages on his social networking account after the relationship had ended.

They already had the password and then after the end of the relationship someone stupidly didn't change the password and then went on to the girl looking on to the guy's messages and finding something that she didn't like, after they were going out but she still had the password which is kind of creepy. (Male, age 15)

Unhealthy behaviors such as the obsession with checking a partners contact history during or after relationship had ended was not a rare occurrence as evidenced in these younger (i.e., age 12-13) and older (age 15-16) adolescents' discussions of their awareness of such behaviors in their peer groups. This was considered as particularly relevant to girls' behavior although not exclusively.

***Demanding passwords to phone or online accounts.*** The adolescents spoke of personal experiences and awareness of their friends' partners demanding passwords to their social networking accounts or mobile phones. This appeared to be motivated by concerns for infidelity and issues of trust within relationships and was particularly reported by the male adolescents aged 14 to 15 years.

Yeah I've seen it on a boy on the phone and they've just kept pestering him for the password on the phone to check he's urm, BBM. (Male, age 14-15)

Yeah, it's like, I've had the experience where they've had no trust and they got my Facebook password and stuff because I trusted them but they didn't trust me and they dumped me because I was putting X's [kisses] to a female. (Male, age 14)

This 14-year-old adolescent above who had personally experienced such behaviors expressed that they had been affected by this and felt upset that their partner felt that they could not trust them.

Yeah, but then they had no trust in me so they wouldn't listen to my side of the story and my side of the story was, I was putting kisses to them because they were my mum and it's just like, the no trust coming out of that it's just, you've got to have trust. (Male, age 14)

Females were once again reported to be the main instigators of these controlling behaviors by demanding passwords, although this was not exclusive. Demanding a partner's passwords to check their contact histories may be reassuring for potentially insecure adolescents who fear their dating partner is cheating; however, such behaviors were also perceived as unhealthy, intrusive, and controlling.

*Controlling friends, deleting ex-partners from online accounts.* In addition to having a partner demanding passwords to mobile phones and social networking accounts to monitor message and contact histories, one male adolescent also spoke of a friend's partner actively controlling their online contacts by deleting "friends" and particularly ex-partners or friends of the opposite sex on Facebook.

So she was like ooh can I have your Facebook I just want to make sure and so he had nothing to hide and so he was like yeah go on then . . . and she basically didn't like a few of the girls he had because some of them was his ex's so she deleted all the females that he had and all the people that she hated she deleted. (Male, age 14)

This need to control a partner's friendships with other girls was suggested to be a result of girlfriends having trust issues and being more obsessive in the relationship. While deleting and controlling the friends of a partner online were present in a minority of the adolescents' discussions of such behaviors, this shows concerning signs of unhealthy and controlling dating behaviors which young people appear to be readily accepting of from a young age.

*Obsessive checking through excessive contact.* ECT was reported to be used to constantly contact dating partners and check their whereabouts. This provides evidence of using excessive and controlling behaviors by means of ECT.

Like constantly wanting to find out what you are doing. (Male, age 13-14)

There was a general consensus among the participants that these obsessive behaviors were related to a lack of trust and concerns for infidelity, recognizing the hurtful nature of such communication.

Yeah it's like the obsession of making sure that they're fine, who you're with, making sure they're not getting in trouble and making sure they're not cheating on you. They're not going to take it serious and give you that freedom, instead of keeping you like on a leash to make sure you don't do anything bad, it's really upsetting because it's like, they have no trust in me. (Male, age 14)

One participant also spoke of examples of friends of partners getting involved in the harassment of a female by contacting her excessively when she was not with her boyfriend.

One of my cousin's best friends was in a relationship and she couldn't leave or he would get all of his friends who would pretty much just annoy her and pester her all the time. (Male, age 14-15)

This obsessive checking and excessive contact persisted beyond the termination of relationships, and the adolescents described continued harassment and controlling contact from ex-partners.

Yeah. And they keep messaging you like oh you going out with this? You getting on it are ya? You getting on this? And it's just like go away. (Male, age 14-15)

The adolescents recognized that it would feel intimidating if a partner was to continually harass them or attempt to monitor and control their whereabouts and felt that they would not know how to handle the situation. For example,

It feels scary because if somebody is really obsessive and you don't really know what to do you would find that you would kind of find them freaky and wouldn't really want to be around them much. (Male, age 15)

The experience or awareness of obsessive and controlling contact within dating relationships was not a rare occurrence among these adolescents, particularly male adolescents in the 13 to 15 years age group. These accounts showed signs of unhealthy, obsessive, and controlling patterns of communication that seemed to be associated with trust issues, insecurities, and concerns for cheating, which perhaps justified a need to monitor their partners' and even ex-partners' whereabouts.

***Mixed perceptions of what is healthy.*** While the adolescents identified that the obsessive and controlling dating behaviors discussed in this superordinate theme were unhealthy, at times there were some mixed perceptions regarding

the degree to which these behaviors were acceptable or appropriate, given specific contexts. This indicates it is likely to be a very subjective experience. One participant, for example, described that such checking behaviors were “sometimes healthy” (Female, age 12-13). Another female adolescent of this age group rationalized the use of checking or monitoring a partner’s messages or whereabouts via ECT due to a lack of contact outside of school. Such behaviors were reassuring for some adolescents who did not see their dating partner that often:

Like you get texts a lot because like you want to like trust them but then like you don’t know what they are up to because like you don’t really like see them that often when you’re not at school and you want to talk to them but they are always with their mates but then like you can also seem like you’re not like trusting them. (Female, age 13)

However, one participant did recognize that if contact was purely ECT based, then this type of communication may not actually be so reassuring.

But especially if you don’t actually see them like face-to-face you won’t actually know like if you are always just texting them and never like see them, face-to-face you won’t actually know like what they are doing. (Female, age 12-13)

Three participants expressed that “checking phone passwords is not bad” (Male, age 15), “not mean” (Male, age 12-13), or was acceptable “if it’s someone you like” (Female, age 12-13). However, it was acknowledged that checking a partner’s messages or checking up on a partner was unhealthy and an invasion of the person’s privacy.

But like the other person who knows that they are looking through their phone wouldn’t be very happy because it’s like their own thing so it’s personal. (Female, age 12-13)

But you could be a bit paranoid that you’re wanting to know what they are doing all the time and like personal space and you can just leave them alone. (Female, age 12-13)

Mixed perceptions over what is healthy and unhealthy and what is acceptable or not within a dating relationship may place adolescents at risk of not recognizing personal experiences of abuse or control via ECT, or abuse of privacy, within their romantic relationships. The view that some monitoring

and controlling behaviors were not unhealthy was particularly prevalent in the younger (age 12-13) female adolescents, although not exclusively.

### ***Perceived Impact of Technology-Assisted Abuse Compared With That in Person***

When asked how the participants felt the impact of TAADVA compared with that of traditional ADVA experienced in person, there were mixed views as to whether TAADVA had less, the same, or more of an impact than that experienced face-to-face. While there was a general view that dating violence and abuse was the same despite the method, there were some distinguishing features regarding ECT that came out of the discussions of this issue.

***Less impact than in person: More opportunity to stop and ignore.*** There was a pattern among the male adolescents in particular to view TAADVA as less harmful than abusive or controlling behavior experienced in person due to the increased opportunities and ease for such abuse to be stopped or prevented via ECT. For example, these adolescents felt that the abuse or contact could be stopped easily by simply blocking or deleting the person or turning your phone or computer off.

No but you can block people, they always go on about how you can block people, you can like delete people, you can create another account where you don't add those people, it seems there is so many ways for it to not happen yet it still does happen. (Male, age 15)

It's just as simple as turning it off, like you don't have to look at the messages, it's not like face-to-face bullying where they are saying it and you can't get away from it or if they are physically hitting you and you can't get away from it. (Male, age 15)

Male participants in particular expressed that if they were abused or harassed via ECT by a dating partner that they "wouldn't take it as seriously if it wasn't face-to-face" (Male, age 12). Furthermore, abuse or control that was experienced in person was considered as being more harmful.

Any experiences in person are worse than electronically. (Male, age 15)

The person who is being hurtful, bullying or controlling is not around you or near you so it is not as bad. Also it is easier to ignore them electronically. (Male, age 14)

The male adolescents (age 12-15) in this theme therefore viewed TAADVA as being a lot easier to stop and ignore than in-person abuse or

bullying. TAADVA was also perceived as being not as serious as abuse in person, meaning the impact of abuse when experienced via ECT was lessened.

*More impact than in person: "They'll always find a way to get to you."* There were equally strong arguments by the female adolescents aged 12 to 15 in particular that ECT rather creates more opportunities for abuse, meaning such types of victimization was harder to prevent or distance oneself from and was therefore potentially worse than experiencing abusive or controlling behavior in person.

It's [technology] given more people the chance to do it. (Female, age 14-15)

Yeah they can, they'll always find a way to get to you. (Female, age 12-13)

This increased opportunity for communication via ECT was perceived to have unique impacts as such contact could be constant and inescapable, unlike removing oneself from an altercation in person.

But like text you would have it all the time whereas if it was face-to-face you wouldn't have like someone near you all the time like when you went home that would just be it but if you were like online you would get it like all the time and every time you went online you would get it. (Female, age 12-13)

I think you can do it more on technology and that can sometimes be worse because like you can sort of go and like hide from them and whatever but on technology they can pretty much get hold of you whatever way they want really. (Female, age 14-15)

The availability of ECT was also recognized to enable continued contact and harassment even following a relationship break up.

So say like if you were to break up and they still had your number they could still continue to ring you. (Female, age 14-15)

They could stalk your Facebook. (Male, age 14-15)

These increased opportunities for communication presented by ECT were believed to therefore lead to enhanced impacts due to the constant, inescapable nature of such contact even once a relationship has ended, particularly by females.

*More impact than in person: "It gets into your head."* Three female adolescents also spoke of how the nature of contact and control via ECT meant that not only did this provide a constant opportunity for communication, but a permanent record of the messages were available for repeated reading which meant an incident of abusive or unhealthy communication could constantly play on the receivers mind.

Like you have like your phone in your pocket in the day and it stays with you there because like unless you delete all the messages or something or anything which can sometimes be quite a big hassle, like it just stays with you and like whenever you want to go back and talk to that person you see all those messages again and that just reminds you. (Female, age 13-14)

It gets into your head and you can't get away from it because you want to keep reading over the conversation. (Female, age 14)

As described by these females in the extracts above, adolescents may become preoccupied with abusive or unhealthy communication via ECT, discussing how the permanence of electronic communication would lead to temptation to re-read the abusive or controlling conversation. Another young female also expressed that they would not want to block or delete a partner if they were mean because they would want to know what they have to say and would not want to leave the conversation.

No, because you are not always going to block that person or like do something. (Female, age 12-13)

The physical evidence of abusive or mean messages also appeared to make such behaviors more harmful than in person due to the concrete nature of the material and the potential for it to be made public.

When it happens in person you don't have the evidence that it happened so when you look back it definitely happened and more people can see it. (Female, age 15)

In summary, these extracts from the female adolescents (aged 12-15) in this subtheme identify how the nature of ECT meant that incidents "stays with you" and "gets into your head," highlighting how ECTs may nurture any obsessive or anxious feelings that may have been previously held by the adolescents. Stuck between not wanting to read abusive messages and wanting to know and seek explanation from their partner left them unable to block or delete these unwanted messages, which were left for repeated reading and continuing going over in their minds.



## **Discussion**

This article reported the findings of one of the first British studies to qualitatively explore how adolescents in the United Kingdom experience ECT in romantic relationships and ADVA, with a particular focus on controlling and monitoring behaviors. This study utilized semi-structured focus group interviews with adolescents aged 12 to 18 years and identified three superordinate themes relating to ECT: perceived healthy versus unhealthy communication, perceived monitoring and controlling communication, and perceived impact of technology-assisted abuse compared with that in person.

The adolescents identified ECT to have a positive impact on romantic relationship development and maintenance; however, they also acknowledged that such tools could provide a new avenue for unhealthy, controlling, or harassing behaviors. While there were mixed views regarding what was a healthy frequency of communication between dating partners, generally the adolescents felt that contact daily or every other day was at least desirable to successfully maintain a relationship as long as this was not obsessive. Mobile phones, in particular text messages, and SNSs such as Facebook were the most commonly reported technologies used in dating relationships, consistent with previous research (e.g., Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Korchmaros et al., 2013).

With regard to healthy versus unhealthy communication, the young (age 12-13 years) adolescent females in particular identified more anxious and emotional responses with regard to communication with a dating partner, particularly when partners did not respond instantly or at all. A lack of, or delayed, response to contact at times seemed to amplify feelings of frustration, sadness, or anxiety over why partners were not responding. Unique features of ECT also seemed to amplify such frustrations and anxieties by enabling adolescents to see when a partner was online or had read a text message, leading to worry and speculation as to why their partner had not replied. These young female adolescents also spoke more of obsessive checking of their own mobile phones for their partners' replies and being upset, annoyed, or anxious when they were not in constant contact with their boyfriends.

ECTs appear to provide a new avenue for abusive or controlling behaviors in adolescent romantic relationships. Several monitoring and controlling behaviors were identified by the adolescents, including checking messages, demanding passwords to mobile phones and online accounts, deleting friends or ex-partners from online accounts, and obsessively checking up on a partner through excessive contact, which were often linked with notions of no trust or concerns for cheating by one partner of another. Females were

reported to be the ones most likely to monitor or control their partner due to “being more obsessive” and “caring more” than the males, although this was not exclusively experienced by males and used by females. This was evidenced in the accounts from male adolescents of a range of ages describing instances or awareness of adolescents having their whereabouts, phones and messages checked, passwords demanded, and female friends being deleted from their accounts by romantic partners.

These findings highlight possible gender differences in the perceived importance of communication between male and female adolescents, whereby younger adolescent girls may be vulnerable to experiencing emotions such as anxiety and obsession as a result of a preoccupation with, or concerns for, a partner’s response to communication. However, adolescents have subjective views over what is and is not healthy or considered acceptable within a relationship; therefore, each individual experience will be unique. Notably, some adolescents may view and justify controlling behaviors as being not particularly bad, or as necessary for reassuring their own concerns or anxieties, highlighting the subjective nature of adolescents’ experiences of ECT-based monitoring and controlling behaviors. This was a view held by younger (age 12-13) male and female adolescents in particular.

An insecure attitude toward one’s dating relationship and resulting unhealthy and controlling behaviors may be explained within the context of anxious/insecure attachment styles (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994). Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1994) drew on Bowlby’s (1977) attachment theory to explore romantic relationships in terms of an attachment process. Hazan and Shaver (1987) explained that anxious/ambivalently attached individuals may be more likely to experience love as involving obsession, and extreme sexual attraction and jealousy. According to Hazan and Shaver (1994), in studies of adult attachment, anxious/ambivalent attachment is associated with obsessive preoccupation with a romantic partner’s responsiveness and the need to achieve a state of felt security. Furthermore, this is attempted and at times accomplished by devoting immense mental energy and behavioral effort to keeping others close by and engaged (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Hazan and Shaver (1994) argued that this might be the root of many dysfunctional behaviors contributing to relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution. This may explain some of the obsessive and controlling behaviors described by the adolescents in their own and their peers’ romantic relationships, although this is yet to be empirically tested.

Alternatively, it is also possible that the pattern of younger females displaying such insecure and anxious relationship behaviors is a result of their relative immaturity and a lack of relationship experience. For example, younger adolescents may feel a greater need for a relationship (i.e., they may

not know they are likely to have many more), and perhaps such adolescents will grow out of these traits with age, maturity, and more experience. There is some literature that has identified that in comparison with adults, adolescents may lack the social skills development to negotiate romantic relationships (Mulford & Giordano, 2008). However, further research is needed to explore these questions and possibilities.

Notably, ECT was used as a form of communication in the context of dating relationships, having both positive and negative impacts. ECTs were reported to exacerbate opportunities for controlling behaviors to be instigated due to the unique features of such technology (e.g., instant and constant access via a variety of ECTs), leading to potentially unique impacts of TAADVA (e.g., no escape from abuse, the abuse stays with you, it gets in your head), as identified by the female adolescents in the 12 to 15 years age group in particular. However, males were more likely to view that TAADVA was easier to stop (e.g., easier to turn off, delete, block, or ignore). Females were more likely to view such behaviors as having a greater emotional impact, indicating there is a gendered nature to the perceived impact of TAADVA. Other research to have explored the impact of TAADVA is virtually non-existent. However, a recent study (Barter et al., 2015) with 3,277 adolescents aged 14 to 17 years in England and four other European countries similarly found that the majority of female adolescents reported a negative impact of their experiences of ADVA (including online emotional and in-person emotional, physical, and sexual abuse) while the majority of young men reported an affirmative impact or no effect, although impacts varied across the different types of violence. Negative responses were described as being upset, scared, embarrassed, unhappy, humiliated, feeling bad about yourself, angry, annoyed, and shocked. Affirmative or no effect responses were defined as feeling loved, good about yourself, wanted, protected, thought it was funny, and no effect. Such findings are fairly consistent with research to have explored the impact of ADVA, such as the effects on young people's psychological and emotional well-being, which may include feelings of anger, fear, hurt, confusion, sadness, guilt, shame, and embarrassment, particularly for females (e.g., Barter et al., 2009; Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Ismail et al., 2007; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). More research is needed to explore the impact of TAADVA.

A notable finding of this study was the associated anxiety and distress identified by the younger female adolescents in particular, which was exacerbated by the unique features of ECT with regard to communication with a dating partner. Such unique features of ECT (e.g., the instant ability to communicate with another and monitor when communication has been read and received) seemed to affect how the adolescents perceived acceptable levels of communication and responding from a partner, leading to dissatisfaction and

sometimes emotional distress when expectations were not met. When partners did not respond or were not in contact frequently, the younger adolescents described obsessively checking their phones for replies, worrying why their partner was “online” but not responding to them. Obsessive checking behaviors (e.g., checking a partner’s messages) were also described by the older adolescents, both during and after relationships had ended. This is consistent with Girlguiding’s (2013) findings that ECT allowed partners to see that someone is online or responding to other messages and not theirs, which can easily exacerbate potentially controlling behavior and make it much harder to handle. In our study, females aged 12 to 13 appeared to be those most vulnerable to expressing feelings of anxiety and insecurity within their relationships. In Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden, and Lucero’s (2014) qualitative study with 15- to 16-year-olds in the United States, respondents were found to spy, monitor, and access their partner’s accounts, sometimes sharing passwords that often led to both distrust and jealousy. In particular, the young women in their study discussed the constant monitoring of a partner as a necessary component of relationships and as an acceptable means to safeguard that relationship (Lucero et al., 2014). More research is needed to explore the use of ECT for monitoring and controlling behaviors among adolescents.

The findings from this study vary in their consistency with the findings of previous studies. For example, Barter et al.’s (2009) study found that girls commonly reported that control was often associated with a partner’s wish to restrict their communication with peers they met online, especially males. This was consistent with findings in our research; however, this was not limited to females being controlled and was more frequently identified as behavior that the girls in fact instigated. Our differences in findings may be due to differences in sample size or particular characteristics of our samples. What is clear is that TAADVA is experienced and instigated by both male and female adolescents. Lucero et al. (2014) also found that the males in their study unanimously agreed that their girlfriends constantly check up on them via text message and SNSs, while females openly discussed monitoring and controlling their boyfriends. As seen in our study, other researchers have also found that controlling behaviors were sometimes condoned or justified, viewed as caring, or simply seen as not being bad or mean by the adolescents (Barter et al., 2009; Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Girlguiding, 2013). No other qualitative studies were found to explore this topic with adolescents specifically to compare our findings.

These findings are original in that they provide insight into the nature and impact of TAADVA and how this compares to ADVA in person, in terms of the unique features of ECT. A range of monitoring and controlling behaviors

were identified, including checking messages, demanding passwords, removing contacts, and obsessive checking behaviors through excessive contact. TAADVA was perceived by some as having less of an impact due to the ability to turn off, stop, or ignore unwanted contact via ECT. However, for others, it was perceived as having more of an impact in that partners or ex-partners had more opportunities via ECT to contact, harass, or control the other, leading to feelings that there was no escape from the person or unwanted contact. Furthermore, the permanent evidence of abusive or controlling messages meant incidents played on the adolescents' minds and stayed with them throughout the day.

### *Limitations*

This study has offered a unique contribution to understanding the relatively unexplored issue of TAADVA and its perceived impact in the United Kingdom. The findings of this study, however, should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. Qualitative data are subject to response bias, and due to the nature of the topic and the research methods (e.g., a teacher sat in on the focus group sessions, a condition of participation by the school in this study), such factors may influence the truthfulness of the respondents' answers. While assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized to participants, the school setting in which the data were collected may have had an impact on how comfortable respondents were with discussing dating behaviors. While this point is justifiably acknowledged, the adolescents, as mentioned, were very enthusiastic in their contribution to the study and the discussions, often talking about personal experiences as well as perceptions and awareness of TAADVA in their friendship groups. It is also worth noting that while the majority of the focus groups were mixed-gendered, there was one all-female year 8 group. This was due to an increased interest in participation in the focus groups by females in this year 8 class in the participating school. Two sessions for this class were therefore conducted, one which happened to be all-female group. It is not known what impact conducting the focus groups in this way may have had. The participants in the focus groups based on year group were in the same class at school, and those conducted outside of school were in the same friendship group and so were familiar with one another. The sample, being drawn from one secondary school in addition to a small number of other adolescents from one geographical area, may mean the findings are limited in transferability to a wider population. The majority of the sample was of White British ethnicity, meaning the perceptions and experiences of those from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds were not accounted for.

### *Implications of the Findings*

These findings highlight concerns for the identified mixed perceptions of what is healthy or unhealthy in terms of acceptable levels of contact and control within adolescent dating relationships. Furthermore, the subjective findings, for example, regarding what is healthy and unhealthy in terms of communication with a dating partner and the impact of TAADVA may have implications when measuring TAADVA as adolescents' subjective views on such behaviors may then influence how they perceive research questions and their subsequent responses. Some adolescents accepted or justified controlling and checking behaviors as normal or necessary for the reassurance of anxieties about their partner's communication with others. Such concerns may lead to implications for adolescents recognizing abusive behavior and ultimately seeking help or ending a controlling relationship. A good starting point for intervention is through healthy relationships education and ECT safety and risk awareness. The establishment of policies in schools and organizations working with young people that identify and respond to such issues would ensure that these behaviors are acknowledged as relevant risks to adolescents and are managed and dealt with effectively. This would send the message that TAADVA will not be tolerated. In terms of safeguarding opportunities, schools provide an ideal setting in which to educate adolescents about healthy relationships, ADVA/TAADVA, and general e-safety. Education can empower young people by equipping them with the knowledge to recognize an unhealthy or controlling relationship, hopefully preventing initial or further victimization and instigation of ADVA and TAADVA. Internationally, the Council of Europe's (2011) Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence has recognized the need to prevent and protect victims of violence more effectively through policy and intervention. The Home Office (2014) has also produced an action plan to combat violence against women and girls that promotes prevention within schools. However, such a policy needs to specifically include TAADVA to recognize, understand, and manage ADVA that occurs within the context of ECT from early adolescence.

The findings from this study highlight implications for future research. There is a clear need to investigate using qualitative and quantitative research methods, the nature, prevalence, and impact of TAADVA, as well as ADVA, particularly in the United Kingdom. In addition, consideration of age and gender differences in experiences of victimization and instigation of TAADVA behaviors would provide insightful understandings on whether the prevalence and impact of TAADVA is related to factors such as age or gender. A deeper understanding of the impact of TAADVA, particularly in relation to ADVA, on both the victim and the instigator in terms of feelings,

behaviors, or responses to, and the outcome of TAADVA also needs to be explored. Future research that is longitudinal in design would provide more accurate results regarding the short- and long-term effects of TAADVA. Furthermore, an exploration of the relationship between attachment styles (e.g., secure/insecure attachment styles) and TAADVA, and the relationship between psychological and controlling ADVA and TAADVA would provide insight into the nature of ADVA/TAADVA and when and how to target interventions and identify those at risk. Further research is also needed to establish whether TAADVA is a unique form of abuse creating new victims and/or instigators, or whether ECT rather provides a new avenue for control and abuse in relationships that are already unhealthy. Further research should also consider the prevalence and impact of TAADVA in adolescents from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and in various school and youth establishments. Finally, consideration for TAADVA in ~~both~~ homosexual adolescent romantic relationships remains unexplored.

## **Conclusion**

This article reports the findings from one of the first qualitative studies in the United Kingdom to explore the role of ECT in adolescent romantic relationships, ADVA, and its impact. ECT was relevant to adolescent relationships with their girlfriends and boyfriends for both positive (e.g., relationship development and maintenance) and negative (e.g., abusive or controlling/obsessive behaviors) reasons. Furthermore, the use of ECT-based abusive or controlling behaviors was reported to have unique impacts, in terms of being both less and more harmful, than in-person ADVA. Findings highlight the need for more research into the nature, prevalence, and impact of TAADVA to understand how ECT is used and experienced in the context of abusive and controlling behaviors within adolescent dating relationships. Findings indicate that the experiences and impact of TAADVA may be subjective, with some adolescents rationalizing or justifying potentially obsessive and controlling behaviors viewing them as acceptable. Interventions are needed to raise awareness, educate, and prevent ADVA and TAADVA, in addition to promoting awareness of available services for adolescent victims and instigators.

## **Appendix**

### *Focus Group Interview Schedule*

1. How would you describe signs of a healthy relationship?
2. How would you describe signs of an unhealthy relationship? (Discuss what adolescent dating abuse is.)

3. What electronic communication technologies do you/teenagers use? (e.g., mobile phones, social networking sites, etc.)
4. Do you/where do you have access to the Internet? (e.g., on a mobile phone, laptop, etc.)
5. What do you/teenagers use electronic communication technologies for?
6. How do you/teenagers communicate with boyfriends or girlfriends/and friends?
7. Do you/teenagers use electronic communication technology to establish romantic relationships?
8. What would you describe as healthy (safe) and unhealthy (unsafe) in terms of electronic communication with a dating partner?
9. Are you aware of any unhealthy, abusive, or controlling behavior between dating partners by electronic communication technology in your peer group?
10. How do you think unhealthy or abusive dating behaviors by electronic communication technology would impact on the victim or receiver?
11. Would this be the same impact as in person or less or more?
12. Do you/teenagers know how to block or report unwanted contact?
13. How could technology-assisted abuse be stopped or prevented?
14. Would you want to learn more about healthy and unhealthy relationships?
15. Would you like support for any issues raised or discussed today?

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**Comment [KS3]:**

Below is a link to the website main reports however, it appears the link I used no longer exists. This citation in the main text can be removed though if needed without altering the sentence (p. 3).

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#### Author Biographies

**Karlie E. Stonard** is a final year psychology PhD student at Coventry University, England. Her recent publications include "The Relevance of Technology to the Nature, Prevalence and Impact of Adolescent Dating Violence and Abuse: A Research synthesis" (Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014) in the *Journal of Aggression and Violent Behavior*. Her research interests include the nature, prevalence, and impact of adolescent dating violence and abuse, and technology-assisted adolescent dating violence and abuse.

**Erica Bowen** is a professor in the Psychology of Violence and Interpersonal Aggression. One of her many research interests include understanding and preventing violence in intimate relationships across the lifespan.

**Kate Walker** is a research associate in The Faculty Research Centre in Psychology, Behaviour, and Achievement at Coventry University. Her research interests include intimate partner violence, behavior change, sexual offending and empathy.

**Shelley A. Price** is a senior lecturer in Forensic Psychology at Coventry University. Her research interests include the assessment and treatment of sexual offenders.