The Relationship Between Teen Dating Abuse and Self-Harm

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to determine whether individuals who experience teen dating violence are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation. Although there is plenty of literature out there on teen dating abuse and on self-harming, very few of them look at the relationship between the two. With the self-harm rates among adolescents increasing it is becoming more and more important to seek out the causes. To provide evidence that teen dating abuse can lead to self-harm this study uses SPSS to run tests on data retrieved from highs schools across the nation. Findings indicated that some suicide ideation is a result of teen dating abuse. Policy and research implications are discussed.

Introduction

Imagine that little Susie is dating John, one day at school John sees Susie talking to Joe buy the lockers. That night, after school, John takes Susie’s cell phone, then deletes Joe’s number and blocks Joe on all of Susie’s social media. He also threatens Susie if she ever talks to Joe again. This narrative is one example of dating violence. Teen dating violence or teen dating abuse is an umbrella term that covers many different harmful acts that one can commit to a relationship. This is a serious and possibly a fatal form of violence (Cutter-Wilson & Richmond, 2012). It is also a relatively new topic in relationship violence.

Today, teenage dating violence continues to exist (Bonomi, Anderson, Nemeth, Frederick, Rivara, & Buettner 2013). There are many different reasons for why that is. One of the major reasons is the increase in technology, creating more ways to control and abuse an individual's significant other (Draucker & Burke, 2010). According to Dosomething.org (2018), roughly 1.5 million United States high schoolers admitted being a victim of physical abuse by their significant other. Dating violence is also linked to social disorders such as anxiety and depression (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003). Because of this, there is a reason to believe that dating violence may lead to self-harm.

Self-harm cases are increasing in young adults (Griffin, McMahon, McNicholas, Corcoran, Perry, & Arensman, 2018). They are also becoming more graphically displayed in tv and movies such as in the tv show Shameless, where a season 2 episode depicts a character starts cutting after a breakup. Over the past couple of decades suicide among famous people has captured the attention of America. A few examples would be Robin Williams and Curt Kobain. Along with this increase comes another increase of severity of the methods, meaning that more lethal attempts are on the rise (Griffin et al, 2018). It is important to mention that self-harming is not suicide. According to Merriam-Webster (2018), self-harm is the act of purposely hurting oneself as an emotional coping mechanism where suicide is the voluntarily act of taking one’s own life. Self-harm can lead to suicide. An example of self-harm would be an individual is
cutting themselves, where a suicide attempt would be when that individual is cutting themselves with the sole intent of killing themselves.

This paper starts by looking at literature regarding both teenage dating abuse and self-harming. It then transitions to a methods section where there is information on where the data came from and why binary linguistic regression was used. After that is the results, where the finding of the study is posted. After that is the discussion where the results are explained, and where we can see if individuals who experience teen dating violence are more likely to self-harm. Lastly is the future research section. This is where different possible paths for the future are discussed. Each path dives deeper into the issue and looks at correlation topics

**Literature Review**

When someone mentions teenage dating abuse the typical response is to think of a physical altercation. Yes, this is dating abuse but sadly victims suffer from various types and degrees of dating violence. There are four major types of teenage dating abuse. The four types are psychological, moderate physical, severe physical, and sexual dating abuse (Foshee et al., 2009). Moderate physical dating violence consists of smaller less threatening acts of violence stretching from scratching, slapping, & biting to twisting fingers, throwing objects at their partner, & pushing against the wall (Foshee et al., 2009). Severe physical abuse was a lot more life threatening stretching from choking and burning to assault with a deadly weapon and hitting their partner with a hard object, such as a fist (Foshee et al., 2009). Few articles look at the correlation between teen dating violence and depression. It is important to note that if someone is a victim of psychological abuse it will be tricky to approach them because of the complexity and the difficulty of identifying it (Hinsliff-Smith & McGarry, 2017). Sexual abuse includes any type of sexual contact that an individual was unwillingly forced into (Foshee et al., 2009). Psychological abuse is when a non-physical, hurtful act is committed against an individual, such as making fun of them or destroying their property (Foshee et al., 2009). Another type of abuse that is newer to society is cyber abuse. Cyber abuse has many different shapes and sizes. It could be something small such as reading a partner’s text or something huge such as creating a hate website and slandering an individual with nasty insults (Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013).

Teenage dating abuse is prevalent and growing in the US. A study examining ten schools found that just under 30% of students who were in a relationship in the past year experienced physical dating abuse and just under 48% were the victims of psychological dating abuse (Zweig & Dank, 2013). Lastly, around 26% of students who have dated in the past year were victims of cyber dating abuse and around 13% of the high scholars were pressured into participating in sexual acts.

Another study found some alarming results. When it comes to sexual coercion, 1 out of 7 boys and 1 out of 4 girls reported being a victim (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). The most common form of abuse in teenage relationships is verbal emotional/psychological abuse, such as swearing. Like other literature, 64% of girls and 45% of boys reported abusing their significant other emotionally.

Males are more likely to be subject to sexual dating abuse than females, but females are also more likely to be victims of violent acts than males (Foshee, 1996). Females are also more
likely to be physical than men when they engage in self-defense. Even though the amount of teenage dating abuse is similar between males and females, females sustain more physical injuries and psychological abuse than males. Another study found similar results; 257 students were surveyed and 59% of them were victims of physical abuse and 96% of them experienced psychological mistreatment in one form or another (Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996). Females were more likely to remain in an abusive relationship. In contrast to the study above, more males than females reported physical abuse.

According to the University of Rochester Medical center (Rita & Amit, 2018), the rational part of the human brain is not fully developed until age 25 or so. Because of this fact, violence against minors and young adults are potentially more detrimental to their mental health compared to a full-grown adult. This is because stress on the maturing adolescent brain may contribute to the increase in depression or other stress-related psychological dysfunctions (Romeo, 2013).

More frequently, teenagers have little, if any, established identities and value systems to base their options leading to confusion, tension, and anxiety about dating and sexuality (Jezl et al, 1996). It is estimated that between 20% and 50% of active dating college students have experienced some sort of physical aggression during their relationships. It is also estimated that between 25% and 50% of female students will unwillingly submit to at least one sexual advance by their partner. Physical abuse is another major issue in teenage dating with studies reporting between 19% and 38% (at least one account) of physical harm (Jezl et al, 1996). Depressive disorders are highly associated with violent trauma (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, Costello, 2007). Depression disorders are also linked to future problems, such as morbidity and the individual is a higher suicide risk (Thapar, Collishaw, Pine & Thapar, 2012).

Self-harming is the second leading cause of death worldwide for young people (Hawton, Saunders, & O’Connor, 2012). Teenage self-harm rates are extremely high, and it is important to understand important contributors, such as psychological, family, and cultural factors. In the past, men were more likely than women to attempt suicide even though the rates of attempts for women were increasing (Charlton, Kelly, Dunnell, Evans, & Wallis, 1992). However, now self-harming is becoming more noticed in the youth. Deliberate self-harming is a common occurrence among teenagers, more so in females than males (Hawton, Rodham, Evans, & Weatherall, 2002).

Though there are several ways to self-harm and attempt suicide, some are more common than others. The most common types of deliberate self-harm are cutting and overdosing (Jacobson, Muehlenkamp, Miller, & Turner, 2008). Cutting is also the most popular way to attempt suicide among adolescents. Other notable suicide strategies include burning, stabbing, and asphyxiation.

**Current Study**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are over 10 million accounts of domestic abuse. Both men and women are included in this statistic. This study attempts to examine the relationship between teen dating violence and self-harm or suicidal ideation. The theory is that teen dating abuse has an impact on whether an individual will be prone to self-harm after they experienced abuse. The current study has one hypothesis to help explain this relationship.
Hypothesis: Individuals who experience teen dating violence are more likely to self-harm.

Methods

Data were collected through a survey instrument that was administered to American high school students. The students were between ages 12 and 17. Data collection was conducted between the months of August and October in 2016. The survey was created to get a better look at the average high school student regarding their perceptions and experiences with different types of teenage behavior. Before the survey was administered, parental consent was granted, and child assent was obtained when participants agreed to complete the survey. The total sample size was 2,670. The sample size varies among the tables due to a variety of analyses.

Suicidal ideation

Suicidal ideation is the dependent variable. This variable was constructed by taking four different variables and creating an index. (In the past year, did you feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some of your usual activities, did you seriously think about attempting suicide, did you make a specific plan about how you would attempt suicide, and how many times did you actually attempt suicide?) The index was then coded into a dummy variable with never thinking about self-harm as 0 and any thoughts whatever as 1. This variable was then used in the binary logistic regression analysis as the dependent variable.

Teen dating violence

Teen dating violence is the independent variable in this study. This variable was created by combining a total of 10 variables and creating an index. (Thinking about the boyfriends, girlfriends, or romantic partners that you have had this last year, has anyone done the following things to you...he or she called you names or criticized you, he or she tried to keep you from doing something you wanted to do, he or she threatened to hit or throw something at you, he or she slapped, hit, or punched you, he or she pushed, grabbed, or shoved you, he or she prevented you from using your cell phone, tablet, or other device, he or she threatened you in a cell phone text message, he or she posted online, or shared with others, a private picture of you without permission, he or she posted something publicly online to make fun of, threaten, or embarrass you, and he or she looked through the contents of your phone, tablet, or other devices without permission.) .914, meaning it is really likely they are all measuring the same construct. These 10 items had a Cronbach’s alpha of This index was then used in the binary logistic regression analysis as the independent variable.

Control variables

There were four total control variables. Age was broken into ten categories with the highest being 19 and up and the lowest 9 and under. The other three variables are all dichotomous measure, White (white = 1 and non-white = 0), Male (male = 1 and female = 0), Nonheterosexuality (heterosexuality =0 and nonheterosexuality=1). These were then used in the binary logistic regression analysis to see if they could help explain suicide ideation.
Analysis

All analyses that were run in this study were done using SPSS 25. SPSS is a computer software that allows users to run statistical analyses with data sets. This program was used because it is user-friendly and allows binary logistic regression, descriptive statistics, and bivariate correlation to easily run. The descriptive statistics were needed to check the response rate, means, and standard deviations of each variable used in the study. It is important to know the standard deviations of each variable because that shows how much diversity each variable has. Bivariate correlation is important because that shows if variables are positively or negatively related and the strength of that relationship. Logistic regression is used to predict a binary response by looking at the dependent variable. In the current study binary logistic regression was used to predict whether someone will have suicidal ideations based on the teen dating abuse experience. One of the reasons we used binary linguistic regression is that it is easier for practitioners to interpret the results. This test makes it possible to see how much of the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variables.

Results

Table 1. Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics (n = 2,670).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
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<tr>
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<td>0.286</td>
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<td>-0.051</td>
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<td>-0.049</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>-0.114</td>
<td>0.223</td>
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</table>

| Mean         | 0.150 | 0.06 | 0.46 | 0.37 | 0.38 | 0.44 | 0.22 | 0.18 | 0.21 | 0.23 | 0.20 | 0.19 | 0.20 | 0.39 | 14.43 | 0.68 | 0.50 | 0.05 |
| Minimum      | 0     | 0    | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 12   | 0   | 0   | 0   |
| Maximum      | 1     | 1    | 1   | 1   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3    | 17   | 1    | 1    | 1   |

Note: Standard deviation values are reported in the correlation matrix diagonal.

Table 1 shows the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics. The correlation matrix suggests that the average age of the respondent is just under 14 and a half years old. It also suggests that the average respondent was white and heterosexual. It is also shown that more females answered but the split was nearly 50/50. The correlation matrix shows that there weren’t any concerns with variables being highly correlated with each other.
Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression Coefficients for Suicidal Ideation (N=1,172)

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<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>(S.E.)</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>(0.049)</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.682</td>
<td>(0.762)</td>
<td>1.860</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Nagelkerke R2 0.212

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Table 2 shows the results of the binary logistic regression analysis. There were only two statistically significant variables—dating violence and non-heterosexual. The respondents who reported dating violence were more likely to have suicidal ideation than those who did not report dating violence. Table 2 also shows that respondents who identified as non-heterosexual were more likely to have suicidal ideation. The model was able to explain 21% of the variance in suicidal ideation.

Discussion

Self-harming has become a hot topic over the past couple of years. This may be in part due to the mainstream images such as those that are portrayed in Netflix's 2017 series 13 Reasons why. It also may be in part due to the long list of celebrities who openly confessed to self-harm, such as Demi Lovato who openly talked about her history of self-harming in her 2012 MTV Special, “Stay Strong.” Whatever the reason was that sparked these conversations, do not mean they are behind individuals self-harming.

The findings show that dating violence combined with identifying as non-heterosexual explain almost a quarter (21.2%) of suicidal ideation. This information supports the hypothesis that individuals who experience teen dating violence are more likely to self-harm. It is important to note that different ages in the teen years, gender, and skin color do not have any effect on suicidal ideations.

This study has some limitations. It is worth noting the low response rate (15%) so the results must be interpreted with caution. The survey was also cross-sectional, and thus, respondents were only surveyed at one point in time. Lastly, the data came from a survey distributed to a nationally representative sample of adolescents; however, generalizability may still be a concern.

Future Research

There was no data that could classify the mental state of the respondents before the abuse. This data could play a key role in future research to help get an understanding of how individuals with a pre-classified poor mental state respond to the strain of relationship abuse compared to others who are in a good state of mental health. It would also be useful to have a question in the survey such as, "Did you ever self-harm before becoming a victim of relationship abuse?"
To get the best results in future research it will be necessary to create some more in-depth questions that a stronger index could be constructed from. By doing this it will be possible to cover more types of dating violence that goes under the radar or is not as serious as some other cases of dating abuse. An example of an ideal question would be, “Does your significant other take money without asking?”. With a more detailed question set, it would also be possible to look at all the different types of dating abuse.

Follow-up surveys would be critical in gaining a better understanding of the long-term effects of partner abuse. This information would be extremely helpful in creating recovery and treatment programs. Information like this could help set an average amount of time that is needed for recovery. In the follow-up surveys, a question that should be asked is "how long after the abuse did you start to have depressed thoughts?" If the average length of time that it took for depressed thoughts to form manifest, it would theoretical possible for treatment programs to start healing and even prevent depressed thoughts.

Cyber abuse is probably the last thing anyone thinks about when dating abuse is mentioned but the door to cyber abuse is becoming wider with the un-slowing growth in technology. It would benefit the victims if more research was done on the different types of cyber abuse and the effects of it. It may even be possible to educate the youth of potentially harmful situations and teach them how to react and respond to an abuser.

Another direction that needs to be explored is what recovery programs are the most helpful. This could be done by creating a list of recovery programs and comparing their success rates, success is the lack of depression in participants. After doing that each program would need to be broken down to see what aspects of the programs the most successful share, and the least successful share. From this information, the best possible recovery program could be created.

What about preventing the abuse in the first place? According to newhopeforwomen.org, there is an extensive list of predictors for relationship abuse. The full list can be found on their Abuser Tricks page; the lists include jealousy, controlling behavior, isolation, past battering, and dual personalities. It would be possible to offer seminars and classes on recognizing this type of behavior.

It would also be possible to create a program designed to attack these behaviors. To test the success rate of the program the participants would be compared to a control group who of people who wielded the same behaviors. The percentage of each group that went on to become an abuser could be compared to determine the efficiency of the program.
The Relationship Between Teen Dating Abuse and Self Harm

Works Cited


