

## Cyber dating abuse: a study of social representations with Brazilian university students

### Abuso digital nas relações amorosas: um estudo das representações sociais com universitários brasileiros

### Abuso digital en las relaciones amorosas: un estudio de las representaciones sociales con estudiantes universitarios brasileños

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**Abstract:** The present study aimed at apprehending the social representations (SR) of Brazilian university students about digital Cyber Dating Abuse (CDA). A total of 447 participants participated in the study, responding to the Free Word Association Technique and the Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire (CDAQ). The data pointed to a high prevalence of involvement in CDA, both in victimization (87.6% control / monitoring, 34.7%, direct aggression); (92.6% control/monitoring, 25.1%, direct aggression). In addition, the results indicated that the structuring elements of SR were anchored in contemporary relational uncertainty and the conception of dominance within intimate relationships. Concerning the evocations of the peripheral nucleus, CDA was anchored in the violation of the rights to privacy and its causes and consequences, permeating psycho-affective and social aspects. Finally, the data revealed that "jealousy" presents itself as the central and organizing element of RS of this phenomenon, motivating abusive virtual actions.

**Keywords:** cyber abuse; intimate partners; love relationships; social representations

**Resumo:** O presente estudo objetivou apreender as representações sociais (RS) de universitários brasileiros acerca do abuso digital nos relacionamentos amorosos (ADRA). Participaram da pesquisa 447 participantes os quais responderam à Técnica de Associação Livre de Palavras e ao Questionário de Abuso Digital nos Relacionamentos Amorosos (QADRA). Os dados apontaram para uma alta prevalência de envolvimento no ADRA, tanto em vitimização (87,6% controle/monitoramento; 34,7%, agressão direta); quanto, em perpetração (92,6% controle/monitoramento; 25,1%, agressão direta). Além disso, os resultados indicaram que os elementos estruturantes das RS se ancoraram na incerteza relacional contemporânea e na concepção de dominância dentro dos relacionamentos íntimos. Quanto as evocações do núcleo periférico, o ADRA foi ancorado na violação dos direitos à privacidade e nas suas causas e consequências, perpassando aspectos psicoafetivos e sociais. Finalmente, os dados revelaram que o "*ciúme*" se apresenta como elemento central e organizador das RS desse fenômeno, motivando ações virtuais abusivas.

**Palavras-chave:** abuso digital; parceiros íntimos; relacionamentos amorosos; representações sociais



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**Resumen:** El objetivo del presente estudio fue aprehender las representaciones sociales (RS) de universitarios brasileños acerca del abuso online en el noviazgo (AON). Participaron de la encuesta 447 participantes los cuales respondieron a la Técnica de Asociación Libre de Palabras y al Cuestionario Abuso Online en el Noviazgo (CAON). Los datos apuntaron a una alta prevalencia de participación en el ADRA, tanto en victimización (87.6% control / monitoreo, 34.7%, agresión directa); como en la perpetración (92.6% control / monitoreo, 25.1%, agresión directa). Además, los resultados indicaron que los elementos estructurantes de las RS se anclaron en la incertidumbre relacional contemporánea y en la concepción de dominación dentro de las relaciones íntimas. En cuanto a las evocaciones del núcleo periférico, el CAON fue anclado en la violación de los derechos a la privacidad y en sus causas y consecuencias, atravesando aspectos psicoactivos y sociales. Finalmente, los datos revelaron que los "celos" se presentan como elemento central y organizador de las RS de ese fenómeno, motivando acciones virtuales abusivas.

**Palabras clave:** abuso online; parejas íntimas; relaciones amorosas; representaciones sociales

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Violence among people with close ties between themselves is not a recent phenomenon, but research on family abuse involving ill-treatment against children and women is found in the decades 60 and 70. Since then, there has been notoriety of the themes "conjugal violence", "domestic violence", and "marital violence". Nevertheless, currently, some authors have investigated these themes under the angle of intimate partners violence" (IPV), considering it a more broad term, since such abuse is not restricted only to domestic and conjugal spaces, nor does it occur only from the man for women (Conceição, Bolsoni, Lindner & Coelho, 2018; Neves, 2008).

In this direction, new contexts of IPV mentioned in the literature, such as dating violence (Beserra et al., 2015; Pimentel, Moura, & Cavalcanti, 2017), violence in homosexual relations (Elísio, Neves, & Paulos, 2018; Santos & Charity, 2017; Wu et al., 2015), and bisexuals (Turell, Brown, & Herrmann, 2018); IPV in interracial couples (Brownridge, Taillieu, Chan, & Piotrowski, 2018); IPV within the virtual environment or Digital Dating Abuse (CDA) (Burke, Wallen, Val-Smith, & Knox, 2011; Cutbush, Ashley, Kan Hampton, & Hall, 2010; Flach & Dischnacks, 2017; Tokunaga, 2011; Zweig, Dank, Yanher, & Lachman, 2013).

The present study will focus on CDA, a phenomenon characterized by threats, insults, humiliation, or control behavior, using electronic means, intended to provoke anguish in the partner (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015a; Flach & Discosnacks, 2017; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016). If, on the one hand, CDA emerges in the context of violence between intimate partners, on the other hand, it occurs through the growing use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by couples.

Thus, technology, as a means that allows a multitude of relationships, beyond geographical, temporal, cultural, cognitive boundaries, has become a tool for perpetrators to humiliate, deflate and assault their mate (Deans & Bhogal, 2019; Flach & Dischnacks, 2017; Peskin et al., 2017).

In this sense, abuse using technology can be facilitated by the sensation of anonymity and lack of physical signs; by the possibility of occurrence anywhere or at any time (even after the end of the relationship); the presence of the aggressor is not necessary (Melander, 2010; Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2015), which can reach a larger audience of people (Runions, Shapka, Dooley, & Modecki, 2013; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

There is greater disinhibition of behaviors, and greater control of the individual over the partners' interactions can make digital abuse as prevalent as violence offline. In international studies, rates of victimization vary from 1,1% to 91,9%; and rates of perpetration between 2,7% and 97,7% (Durán & Martínez-Pecino, 2015; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2017; Smith et al., 2018; Zweig et al., 2013).

Research also warns of severe implications for those involved in this phenomenon, namely: Sleep disorders, depressive and anxious symptoms, suicidal ideation, involvement in delinquent behavior, and negative implications for school performance (Flach & Deslanches, 2017).

Factors related to CDA involvement may be diverse, such as individual (sex and age); relationship-related (history of abuse in previous relationships); family members; psychological (anger, jealousy, hostility); perceptions; norms and beliefs (Deans & Bhogal, 2019; Hancock, Keast, & Ellis, 2017; Peskin et al., 2017; Ramos, Miller, Moss, & Margolin, 2017; Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, & Ortega-Ruíz, 2015; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

Therefore, this set of factors elucidated that CDA must not be considered in a decontextualized manner, but through a psychosocial perspective, considering the social relationships that constitute it and the meanings attributed by the social actors to the phenomenon. Thus, the present study consists of the Theory of Social Representations (TSR) as an analytical basis of social actors' knowledge.

The TSR, whose foremost exponent was Serge Moscovici, concerns a theoretical, methodological approach, inserted in Social Psychology. Part of the conception that social representations (SR) constitute a set of concepts, propositions, and explanations originated in daily life in the course of interpersonal communications (Moscovici, 2012). It can also be understood as a form of knowledge, socially, elaborated, and shared, seeking to build a reality familiar to a social group (Jodelet, 1989). In this sense, its concept can group several elements, such as information, ideology, norms, beliefs, values, perceptions, opinions, prejudices, attitudes (Jodelet, 2001).

For SR formation, two processes are necessary, the objective and the anchoring (Moscovici (1981/2012)). The first one concerns how the constituent elements of the representation must organize, as well as the path through which such elements acquire materiality; and the second corresponds to the assimilation of the new concept by objects already existing in the cognitive system, transforming the non-family into a family (Vala, 2013).

Within the TSR is highlighted the structural approach given by Abric (1998), which breaks down the SR into two elements: The central ones, which correspond to the stable and consensual part of the SR whose function is to generate the basic meaning of representation and determine the global organization of all elements. Furthermore, the peripherals, which have a more flexible character, allow adjustment to contextual changes and adaptation to concrete reality; and protect the central system.

From the perspective of these theoretical contributions, this research includes digital abuse within loving relationships as a phenomenon inscribed in social-historical production, in which it is the individuals who (re)elaborate them, (re)signify them, and (re)interpret them according to social and cultural interests. In this way, CDA cannot be understood outside the social relations that constitute it, but in the very dynamics of the relationship and the society that founded it. In this

sense, for this investigation, it was attempted to apprehend Brazilian university students' social representations about digital abuse in loving relationships.

## Method

### *Type of investigation*

This research was quantitative, exploratory, and descriptive research, with cross-sectional views and a non-probabilistic sample for convenience.

### *Sample*

The sample of the study consisted of 447 participants between 18 and 56 years old ( $M=28.97$ ;  $SD=6.05$ ), most of them women (79.9%); heterosexual (85.4%), with post-graduate level of education (54.4%); and who were in a current relationship (70.5%). 55.5% lived in the Northeast region of Brazil, 22.8% in the Southeast region, 13.6% in the South region, 4% in the North region, and 3.4% in the Central West region. Finally, most of the sample assumed to spend more than 6 hours a day on the internet (35.6%) and the mobile phone (31.1%).

### *Instruments*

We used the Free Word Association Technique (FWAT), consisting of evoking five words related to the inductor (digital abuse in loving relationships).

To measure the rates of involvement, we used the Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire (Borrajó et al., 2015a) composed of two scales, one of victimization (10 items) and one of perpetration (10 items), both composed of two factors accounting for 20 items: Direct aggression (AD, 11 items); and Control/Monitoring (C, nine items). These components presented a satisfactory internal consistency, in their original version, through Cronbach's Alpha indexes: Direct aggression (victimization  $\alpha= .84$ ; perpetration  $\alpha= .73$ ); and Control/Monitoring (victimization  $\alpha= .87$ ; perpetration  $\alpha= .81$ ). In the Brazilian context, these indices were corroborated for both the victimization scale (AD  $\alpha=$  from .71 to .78; C  $\alpha=$  from .81 to .90) and the perpetration scale (AD  $\alpha= .67$  to .80; C  $\alpha=$  from .84 to .86) (Cavalcanti, Coutinho, Nascimento & Pinto, 2020). This measurement was answered based on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = "never" to 6 = "generally", with total scores ranging from 20 to 120. High values indicate a higher frequency of digital abuse behavior, whether as a victim, in the victimization scale, or as an aggressor, in the perpetration scale.

### *Ethical procedures*

This research submits to the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution (withdrawn for blind evaluation), in which all ethical terms cited by the National Health Council, Brazil, were followed, according to Resolutions 466/12 510/2016. After Approved (CAAE: 80433517.4.0000.5188), the Free and Clarified Consent Term (TCLE) showed to university students.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

Participants agreed in answering a questionnaire, via electronic form, through Google Docs resource. They performed by sharing it in academic communities. Nevertheless, before starting the research, the respondent was informed about the study's aim and told about the voluntary and confidential nature. If the person agreed to respond, the tool was made available to the participant. It should notice that initially, the FWAT appears to the respondent, then the Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire and the sociodemographic, to do not influence the FWAT. The average duration time for completion was 15 minutes.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

For CDAQ and sociodemographic analysis, descriptive analyses were made, as mean and standard deviation through IBM SPSS 21 software. As for the data from FWAT these analyses were performed with Iramuteq software, through prototypical analysis. The prototypical analysis aims to identify the representational structure based on the criteria of frequency and evocation order of the words coming from the free evocations test (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Measurement of Cyber Dating Abuse**

Considering the measurement used to measure involvement in CDA at some point in life, the data revealed rates of 87.6% (mean of 2.41) for Control/Monitoring victims, 92.6% (mean of 2.36), Control/Monitoring perpetrators; 34.7% (mean of 1.25), Direct Aggression victims, and 25.1% (mean of 1.14), Direct Aggression perpetrators. These findings indicate a high prevalence of involvement in CDA, which can be explained by the indiscriminate use of communication technologies socially and their insertion within intimate relationships.

Similar results are found in the literature, which indicates that CDA is a daily behavior among couples with expressive rates, highlighting control/monitoring as the most frequent type of digital abuse among intimate partners (Borrajó et al., 2015a; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, Walrave & Temple, 2017; Zweig et al., 2013).

### **Prototypical Analysis**

Based on free evocation with the inducer stimulus "cyber dating abuse", 2.231 evocations with 649 different words were obtained. The evocations average frequency was 33,22, and the Mean Order of Evocation (MOE) was 2,75. The minimum frequency for the inclusion of words in the quadrants was 15, a little more than 3% of the sample size. Based on these values, it generates a diagram with four quadrants, as seen in Table 1. The results show representational structures of the studied belonging group, university students, about digital abuse in loving relationships.

### **Social Representations Structure of Cyber Dating Abuse (Minimum Frequency of 15).**

		MOE <=> 2,75			MOE <=> 2,75		
Average		Central Nucleus			Primary Periphery		
Frequency	Evocations	<i>f</i>	MOE	Evocations	<i>F</i>	MOE	
>33,21	Jealousy	102	2.6	Lack of respect	64	2.8	
	Control	47	2.6	Exposure	54	2.8	
	Invasion	38	2.3	Fear	52	3.4	
	Nudes	35	1.9	Mistrust	51	3.2	
				Insecurity	46	3.0	
				Violence	40	2.9	
Average		Contrast Zone			Secondary Periphery		
Frequency	Evocations	<i>f</i>	MOE	Evocations	<i>F</i>	MOE	
<33,21	Facebook	32	2.1	Possession	33	3.1	
	Privacy	28	2.7	Betrayal	30	2.9	
	Password	25	2.0	<i>Machismo</i>	27	3.0	
	Photo	25	2.0	Anger	23	3.0	
	Persecution	24	2.4	Abuse	22	3.0	
	Stalking	16	2.2	Threat	18	3.1	
	Whatsapp	16	2.6	Sadness	17	3.6	
	Surveillance	15	2.3	Shame	17	3.3	
				Crime	17	3.2	
				Aggression	18	2.9	

As observed, on the left, in the upper quadrant, called the central nucleus, the high-frequency words (higher than the mean) and the low mean order of evocation presents, i.e., they were more promptly evoked. The representative elements of this quadrant are responsible, according to Abric (1998), for creating or transforming the peripheral quadrants' meanings. Also, they present a more stable, permanent, consensual nature, relating to the collective history of the belonging group.

In this axis, jealousy represents of CDA social representations core, which mobilizes abusive actions (control, invasion, and sending of nudes). This element carries a set of meanings developed by man throughout the history of the species, as Spink (1993) points out. In this context, it can seem that jealousy has played a preponderant role in romantic relations historically, presenting itself as a timeless concept. For example, in the Roman period, it worked as a protector of "man's morals"; in the Renaissance, as an attitude towards threats to marital fidelity; in modernity, as fear for losing the object of love. Finally, in contemporaneity, as a rescue of the feeling of security and trust (Almeida & Lourenço, 2011; Baroncelli, 2011).

By going through different periods of human history, some demonstration of jealousy considered familiar, perceived as the contrary of apathy; socially valued, or even treated as a synonym of love, nevertheless, may mask abusive actions (Almeida & Lourenço, 2011; Baroncelli, 2011; Wright, 2017). In this regard, empirically recurring evidence is that jealousy may present itself as an essential trigger for violent acts within loving relationships; or even its manifestation by threats, physical and verbal aggression (Daspe, Vaillancourt-Morel, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2018; Kaufman-Parks, Longmore, Giordano, & Manning, 2018; Wright, 2017).

Table 1

With the help of technological devices, jealousy can worsen, thus just as in real everyday life, intimate partners use ICTs to express jealousy through abusive actions such as: sharing intimate photos without consent, invasion of privacy, investigative behaviors (stalking), possession, and persecution.

These findings corroborate previous research (Borrajo et al., 2015a; Deans & Bhogal, 2019), as well as they, are consistent with what Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) highlight when mentioning that jealousy, although acting as a short-term relief from relational insecurity, may encourage the incidence of more episodes of jealousy in a medium and long term.

Also, on the elements that emerge in the central nucleus, that is rooted in the current relational uncertainty as well as in the concept of dominance within intimate relationships, causing individuals, in order to maintain their relationships, to perform abusive and jealous virtual behaviors, such as: controlling, invading, disseminating intimate photos without consent (nudes).

In this respect, Bauman (2004) already mentioned that the culture of current intimate relationships, although based on pillars that promote autonomy, that distance themselves from the type of love intimacy socially plastered, antagonistically, due to the liquidity of the commitment, and with the consequent flexibility of relationships, reproduce more insecure bonds. Regarding this ambiguity, such a relationship will need vigilance and defense to sustain itself, being expressed by jealousy, intense vigilance, monitoring, and control.

On the other hand, CDA is characterized by the logic of domination and asymmetry of power between intimate partners. To exercise dominion over the other, the individual tries to control him or her, so that abuse would be the maximum expression of dominion. Nevertheless, by evoking Foucault's ideas about power relations that permeate all society, Fernandes (2010) highlights that in intimate relationships, power can exercise under the influence of culture, gender, or social roles imposed by the patriarchal system.

It also draws attention to the fact that the most prominent elements in the central nucleus: "jealousy" and "control," are dimensions studied in different researches about CDA (Borrajo et al. 2015a; Reed et al., 2017; Sánchez et al., 2015), being essential concepts for the definition of this

phenomenon. In this context, this finding points to a convergence of socially elaborated knowledge with the rectified universe.

In the final analysis, the element "nudes" stands out, which in a violence context is a term that alludes to the intimate content used by the aggressor to downgrade, defame, blackmail the victim, or even force him/her to have sexual relations with him/her (virtual rape). Such actions point to a contemporary social phenomenon called "*revenge porn*", which has been indicated in the literature as closely linked to gender violence since most victims are women (Bates, 2017; Citron & Franks, 2014; McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017).

As for the representations of peripheral systems (second, third and fourth quadrant), according to Abric (1998), they show a more flexible nature, being sensitive to the circumstances, integrating individual experiences.

The second quadrant, called a proximate peripheral system, was composed of words with high frequency (higher than mean) and high evocation order; in other words, those that do not so promptly evoke. This system maintains the central core and integrates new information, such as: "*lack of respect*", "*exposure*", "*violence*", "*distrust*", "*insecurity*", and "*fear*". Such elements are anchored in violation of privacy rights and the negative feelings caused by them, pointing CDA as a way of violating, disrespecting, and exposing the partner's intimate life, causing him/her insecurity and fear.

As can be seen in the face-to-face violence between intimate partners (Barros et al., 2016; Zerubavel, Messman-Moore, DiLillo, & Gratz, 2018), fear and insecurity are imposed on the victims of CDA. Such elements are alarming, since they may be responsible for the emergence of relational suffering, resulting in psychological damage and marital dissatisfaction. Furthermore, they alert to the feelings of threat and vulnerability in the face of technology's dangers. So that in the virtual space, this insecurity can be aggravated by the fact that the debate on policies to confront virtual intimidation is still initial.

In the lower-left quadrant, called the contrast zone, there are words with a lower frequency (below average) with a low evocation order, i.e., promptly evoked. This grouping CDA was associated with "*Facebook*" and "*Whatsapp*," referring to the spaces of digital abuses in loving relationships, indicated by social networks.

As environments propitious to the practice of CDA, the social networks are justified by their ease access and their multiple sources of information, such as monitoring of the latest postings, photos, or interactions with other people. Thus, the knowledge of these devices' password, whether by theft or consent, further increases the possibilities of surveillance.

In some cases, given the public nature of social networks, this abuse can go beyond the intimate sphere of the couple, taking on more expansive proportions through actions involving unlimited sharing of intimate photos or videos of the partner without consent, or even humiliating posts about him or her publicly. These data, confirmed by the studies of Van Ouytsel et al. (2016), which found that monitoring behavior refers to the number of social networks.

As for evocations: *photos, privacy, passwords, surveillance, and stalking*, they point to the ways CDA occurs in digital sociability, where acts such as inspecting, continually monitoring, persecution, invasion of privacy, and publishing intimate photos without consent are possible by internet access. Such actions are in line with CDA's behaviors listed in previous studies (Borrajó et al., 2015a; Flach & Deslanches, 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

Finally, the fourth and last quadrant (lower right) indicates lower frequency elements (below average) and higher evocation order, namely: *possession, betrayal, machismo, anger, abuse, threat, sadness, shame, crime, aggression*. In this axis, individual variations were allowed, in which conceptual aspects of CDA were predominant and its causes and consequences, which cross psycho-affective and social elements.

As far as the conceptual aspects are concerned, it can show that CDA is defined more broadly as a type of aggression and abuse and in a specific way through threat, as a strategy to

blackmail the other. CDA was also described as a synonym for crime, indicating a problem that violates rights, freedoms, and guarantees. This element alludes to the knowledge of legal initiatives to combat virtual crime as Law 13.718/2018 on sexual crimes.

The fourth quadrant also draws attention to the fact that even the present study uses an "*inducer stimulus*" that carries with it the term "abuse" such element and correlates evoked less frequently. It may indicate a lack of perception about the real meaning of CDA and its motivations, either because of a distorted view of the phenomenon, in which abusive actions perceived as love or joke (Borrajo, Gámez Guadix, & Calvete, 2015b; Muñoz-Rivas, Gámez-Guadix, Graña, & Fernández, 2010). As far as the causal elements are concerned, the element "*machismo*" refers to the conception of masculine supremacy, in which it is imposed on men to dominate, attack, and invade, making such behaviors acceptable and naturalized in a virtual context. Moreover, CDA can be caused by the threat, even if remote, of the partner's betrayal, or the loss of the possession figure, since the technology enables a variety of new social interactions. Finally, it points to anger as an imperative for CDA, an aspect highlighted by research in the field to mobilize aggressive behaviors in person or virtually (Cavalcanti & Pimentel, 2016; Deans & Bhogal, 2019; Watkins, Maldonado, & DiLillo, 2016).

As the aspects that refer to the consequences of CDA, shame, and sadness described, elements that, when modified, can lead to worrying moods, such as depression, anxiety, and can lead to suicide, such implications of CDA described in Flach and Deslandes (2017) review study as well as: sleep disorders, involvement in delinquent behavior, and negative implications for school performance.

### Final considerations

From the data collected, it was possible to verify a high prevalence of CDA involvement, above 20% for Direct Aggression, and 80% for control and monitoring, which highlights the need for new investigations in Brazil. Besides, it draws attention to the need for interventions to minimize this phenomenon since serious consequences are identified for those involved.

As far as Social Representations are concerned, the core of CDA has anchored in current relational uncertainty and the concept of dominance within intimate relationships. As for the peripheral nucleus evocations, CDA was associated with the violation of privacy rights, referring to the social networks as the main spaces of surveillance, persecution, invasion, and publication of intimate photos without consent. Furthermore, it is represented as a type of aggression that pervades psychoactive and social causes and implications.

The results also showed that "*jealousy*" plays a predominant role in CDA, since it appears as a central and organizing element of this phenomenon, mobilizing abusive virtual actions such as: sharing intimate photos without consent, invasion of privacy, investigative behavior (stalking), and possession, and persecution.

Such findings suggest that studying CDA under the SR approach is pertinent, bearing in mind that this phenomenon presents complex characteristics, covering individual, social, cultural, and historical orders. For this reason, interventions aimed to fight this phenomenon should rely on a polyocular vision.

Although its relevant results, this survey has limitations, such as using a non-probabilistic sample, which cannot be assumed to generalize the data. Furthermore, there is an imbalance between the sexes in the sample so that women expressively represent most of the research, which may have been biased, for example, in the occurrence of the word "*machismo*".

This way, it shows that new studies would be equally relevant, such as the development of longitudinal research that analyzes how representations about the CDA phenomenon change over the ages and cross-cultural research that aim to know SR in other cultures. Studies suggest exploring the relationship between social representation and behavior, demonstrating whether representations,



beliefs, and attitudes can predispose online abuse behaviors between partners or even face-to-face violence.

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