



**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

# **“WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, IT’S NOT TOTALLY CLEAR WHAT’S OKAY AND WHAT’S NOT”:**

An interview study of how young people reason about smartphone surveillance in romantic relationships

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## **Abstract**

Snooping attacks, unauthorized access, and GPS-tracking: In the past years, a new kind of interpersonal surveillance has earned attention within the field of men's violence against women and cyberspace security - Smartphone surveillance. Investigating the digital dimension of intimate partner violence, Dragiewicz et al. (2018) introduce the term Technology Facilitated Coercive Control (TFCC). Scholars stress that digital functions do not only facilitate our everyday life but may cause significant harm. Nevertheless, is this the case in non-violent romantic relationships as well?

This thesis study the research question of how young people reason about Technology Facilitated Coercive Control in romantic relationships. Through qualitative in-depth interviews, the study aims to collect and analyze young people's sharing behaviors and if smartphone surveillance is perceived as something normalized.

Borrowing a theoretical framework that previously has been applied to explain the process of normalization within violent relationships, this study operationalizes the framework to analyze a new phenomenon and research problem. The outcome is four ideal types, describing the correlation between sharing behaviors and trust: The Trustful, the Confident, the Suspicious, and the Controlled.

The study's main findings are that people do share information with their partners based on trust. It is also among trustful partners that behaviors linked to TFCC tend to be normalized to a higher level. However, it is not until trust fades that these behaviors do cause harm and intrude on digital integrity. Withal, it is not easy to stay aware of when this may happen.

## **Acknowledgment**

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# 1. Introduction

Modern technology has made it possible to live our lives through social media and on digital platforms, as smartphones play a significant role in modern human life. The constant development of digital functions facilitates many aspects of quotidian life, exceedingly during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this also implies downsides that not many users are aware of. Presenting the term Technology Facilitated Coercive Control (TFCC), Dragiewicz et al. (2018) address the technological aspects of intimate partner violence and abuse. But is the phenomenon of TFCC also present in other romantic relationships?

Gendered violence started to gain international attention during the 1970s as the United Nations adopted the first treaty addressing women's rights, CEDAW<sup>1</sup> (Howard-Hassmann 2011). Today the question is acknowledged as a global matter of justice, where several dimensions of violence are being discussed. As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, new light has been shed upon the question of intimate partner violence, and in April 2021, the Istanbul convention<sup>2</sup> compiled general recommendations on the digital dimension of violence against women (Council of Europe 2021).

What the current debate does not take into account is the perspective of people's smartphone habits in everyday life. The Swedish Radio (2021) reported on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2021 that surveillance through social media is a growing problem among young people. Scholars also stress that the sharing of passwords and accounts within romantic relationships is becoming a behavioral norm in the U.S. (Park et al. 2018). Without knowledge of how people reason about behaviors linked to their phones and personal relations, Governments will have difficulties protecting civilians and their digital integrity.

Previous literature has emphasized the existence of TFCC and how digital functions open up new ways of surveillance, as well as of controlling and committing physical and psychological violence (Dragiewicz et al. 2018; Dragiewicz et al. 2019; Woodlock et al. 2020). Last decade though, researchers had highlighted the occurrence of intrapersonal surveillance and intimate

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<sup>1</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

threats as a growing problem within romantic relationships beyond the context of intimate partner violence (Marques et al. 2016; Marques 2019; Levy & Schneier 2020). Nonetheless, little attention has been drawn to how the people within these relationships think and reason about these behaviors.

This thesis aims to collect and analyze information about how young people reason and perceive the practice of digital functions to track and surveil ones partner. The research problem is not only of interest as it covers a gap in the literature of men's violence against women and cyberspace security but also as it relates to the discussion of a normalization process of controlling and destructive behaviors (Lundgren 1991). Focusing on young people in romantic relationships, their lifeworld, and smartphone habits, the material can help us to understand if partners in non-violent relationships perceive smartphone surveillance as something unproblematic or normal. This paper will investigate the following research question:

How do young people reason about Technology Facilitated Coercive Control in romantic relationships?

Existing literature on the topic is foremost based on quantitative data and survey research. In the field of men's violence against women, a mixed-method approach often is applied with in-depth interviews as a complement to quantitative data (Harris & Woodlock 2019; Woodlock et al. 2020), while scholars from the cybersecurity perspective collect data through surveys (Park et al. 2018; Levy & Schneier 2020; Marques et al. 2019). So far, there are no studies using a qualitative interview method with the aim of investigating how people in non-violent romantic relationships reason about sharing of information and controlling behaviors.

To investigate and answer the research question, this thesis applies a methodological approach of qualitative in-depth interviews with respondents. The sample consists of young people who are living in romantic relationships. Interviews with 17 respondents are conducted supported by a thematic interview guide. Applying the normalization process of violence model as a theoretical framework, the analysis results in four ideal types of reasoning. The ideal types are also positioned on a level of normalization.

The disposition of this thesis is the following. First, previous literature is outlined describing the main concepts and the remaining research gaps. Second, the theoretical framework is

explained and operationalized into several specific research questions. Third, methodological considerations and limitations are discussed and the design introduced. Fourth, results from the interview material are presented and analyzed thematically. Fifth, a concluding discussion critically highlights the main findings of the study. Lastly, directions for future research on the topic are pointed out.

## 2. Previous Literature

The fact that smartphone functions have impacted our modern interpersonal relationships and behaviors is elaborated in many fields of study. The following chapter will map out previous literature analyzing the phenomenon of digital surveillance within intimate relationships.

Studies that investigate the topic have mainly developed from two different fields of study; men's violence against women (Douglas, Harris & Dragiewicz, M. 2019; Woodlock 2017) and the cyberspace security community (Park et al. 2018; Marques et al. 2019; Levy & Schneier 2020). Initially, this chapter discusses research defining the concept of TFCC. Further literature from the two fields mentioned above is outlined. The chapter's purpose is to illuminate the state of art and to clarify the research gap. Scholars have tried to measure to what extent people use digital functions to snoop, spy, and track their partners (Park et al. 2018; Marques et al. 2019; Levy & Schneier 2020). Less present, however, is the discussion on how the people involved reason about these behaviors.

### 2.1 Technology Facilitated Coercive Control

Introduced in 1991, the World Wide Web became a turning point in the global network society (Henry et al. 2020: 1829). Today internet technologies and digital functions are intertwined in daily human lives one could only dream of 30 years ago. Since the launch of smartphones in the 2000s, digital development has rapidly resulted in countless functions ending up in our pockets. Phone cameras, audio recording, GPS-tracker, social media as Facebook and Instagram are examples of smartphone tools enabling a constant exchange of information and communication (Henry et al. 2020:1829). Personal information is easily collected and shared

on all societal levels, from governments to individuals. To stay aware of how, when, and where the sharing is taking place is close to impossible (ibid.)

In the article “Technology facilitated coercive control: domestic violence and the competing roles of digital media platforms,” the scholar Molly Dragiewicz et al. (2018) sheds light upon digital functions facilitating interpersonal violence and threats, exceedingly for women living in destructive romantic relationships. Dragiewicz et al. (ibid.) propose the term Technology Facilitated Coercive Control (TFCC) to encompass the technological and relational aspect of intimate partner violence and abusive patterns of behavior. The author's definition of TFCC is grounded in gendered violence and “the understanding of domestic violence as coercive, controlling, and profoundly contextualized in relationship dynamics, cultural norms, and structural inequality” (Dragiewicz et al. 2018: 609). The definition covers behaviors such as: harassment and threats on social media and SMS, audio and visual recording, stalking via GPS data, unauthorized access to accounts, impersonating a partner, publishing private information, and monitoring email (ibid.).

Along with other scholars (Woodlock 2017; Woodlock et al. 2020), Dragiewicz et al. (ibid.) profess that digital functions facilitate threat, stalking, and harassment by the perpetrator, hence worsening the situations for women living with domestic violence. By using SMS, social media, GPS data, visual and audio recording, the perpetrator can create a sense of omnipresence (ibid.). Victims have witnessed a feeling of not being able to escape the violence as it follows them through the smartphones wherever they are located (Woodlock 2017).

The latter part of the concept - coercive control, is borrowed from the work of Stark (2007). In his book, Stark uses the term coercive control to articulate patterns of the nonphysical and physical form of abuse. According to Stark, the coercive controlling of a current or former intimate partner is central in order to understand what is often known as domestic violence. Stark's concept of coercive control is developed on empirics of gendered violence in heterosexual relations. However, Dragiewicz et al. (2019: 20) suggest that, as “patriarchal gender norms inform all relationships, regardless of the couple involved”, it is possible to apply the concept of coercive control beyond heterosexual relationships, i.e. to LGBTQ relationships.

The most brutal example of TFCC is Stalker- and Spyware (BBC 2019). This indicates that the perpetrators install surveillance applications on the victim's smartphone without their



awareness. Spyware provides the perpetrator access to monitor everything, including GPS-location, communication, and sometimes even the phone camera, depending on the type of spyware application (Chatterjee et al. 2018). In 2018 Google play informed that they had removed all spyware applications, nevertheless, the market for stalker- and spyware increased during 2019 due to feasibility on third-party sites (Kaspersky 2020).

As expressed above, TFCC covers a wide range of controlling behavior. Dragiewicz et al. (2018) address the concept specifically to men's violence against women. Though, similar terms have been used to pronounce technology facilitated controlling behavior in other interpersonal contexts. For example, Tokunaga (2011: 706) uses the term Interpersonal Electronic Surveillance (IEP) to define strategies over communication technologies aiming to "gain awareness of another user's offline and/or online behaviors". He characterizes IEP as a goal-oriented behavior describing when a contact of any sort is placed under surveillance on an individual level.

## **2.2 Cybersecurity**

In the past decade, studies within the cybersecurity community have mainly concerned issues such as government surveillance, malware, and international security threats (Marques et al. 2016). Little focus has been drawn to the perspective of interpersonal security (Levy & Schneier 2020). Nevertheless, recently scholars from the field have taken an interest in behaviors such as account sharing, smartphone snooping, and unauthorized access (Park et al. 2018; Marques et al. 2019; Levy & Schneier 2020). In the article "Share and share alike? An exploration of secure behaviors in romantic relationships", Park et al. (2018) investigate security design, arguing that the social context of account users rarely is being taken into consideration. By applying a social-psychology approach, they study differences in account and password sharing among intimate social groups correlated to relationship status. Their survey research shows that account sharing "plays a critical role" (Park et al. 2018: 83) in contemporary romantic relationships and that the motives behind sharing behaviors are both due to fulfilling practical/functional goals and to "satisfy each other's emotional needs" (ibid.). The same study stresses that password sharing among romantic relationships is becoming a

behavioral norm (Park et al. 2018). This is based upon quantitative data on how people share accounts and passwords in the U.S.

Sharing is generally a sign of trust (Park et al. 2018), and trust indeed an essential part of romantic relationships. Yet how about when trust fails? According to previous research from the field of men's violence against women, digital sharing functions might create a sense of valuable affiliation, likewise respond to great physical and emotional harm if the relationship turns destructive. Research indicates that the technological aspect has radically transformed our sexual and romantic relationships to concern digital communication (Henry et al. 2020). New innovative tools compose a playground to "seek, maintain, or end intimate relationships" (Henry et al. 2020: 1833) but also of growing surveillance behavior (Marques et al. 2019).

Other scholars addressing the downside of digital functions and the lack of security are Levy and Schneier (2020). Focusing on privacy threats arising within the family, romantic relationships, or close friendships i.e. intimate threats, they stress that the perpetrator often is the one we trust most. Surveys find that among phone users in the US, 12% respond that another person has unauthorized access to their phone, which is perceived as "an invasion of privacy" (Marques et al. 2019:1). Another study estimates that 31% of the participants in an online survey have used someone else's phone without permission, so-called "snooping attacks", when the phone is left unattended (Marques et al. 2016).

### **2.3 Why people surveil their partners**

Previous studies describe several explanatory factors that may be behind why people in romantic relationships use digital functions to keep track of their partners. As mentioned above, trust plays a significant role in relationships. However, when mistrust grows in a relationship, this affects our behaviors. Scholars explain intrapersonal surveillance with relationship dissatisfaction, which often is associated with jealousy (Muisse et al. 2014).

Emotions of jealousy arise when romantic partners perceive some kind of external threat to the relationship, for example, when there are suspicions of infidelity. Therefore to extinguish the uncertainty and the external threat, partners may take action to secure information about the

situation (Tokunaga 2011). As digital functions can provide information rapidly and easily, i.e. potentially verify the suspicions, jealousy may compose a motivation for surveillance (Phillips 2009).

Studies have also highlighted that the use of social media platforms may provoke jealousy. This as partners in romantic relationships can receive updates about each other's online activities with or without the intention of doing so (Arikewuyo et al. 2020). Muise et al. (2009) analyze the relationship between time spent on Facebook and jealousy-related feelings and behaviors. Their results suggest that the social network site may expose individuals to potentially jealousy-provoking information, which may turn into surveillance behavior of the partners' Facebook page. Partners that become occupied with seeking out relationships-threatening information easily end up in a vicious circle as scholars distinguish the behavior to be addictive (Muise et al. 2009: 47). The amount of time spent checking one's partner's online activities and profiles also often indicates the level of surveillance (Tokunaga 2011).

Other aspects that may cause jealous behavior in romantic relationships are geographical distance and previous experiences of infidelity. Dainton & Aylor (2001), among others (Buss & Shackelford 1997), stress that long-distance partners tend to show suspiciousness and jealousy to a greater extent than partners in geographically close relationships. Based on this evidence, one can assume that partners in long-distance relationships consequently also practice smartphone surveillance to a greater extent. However, more recent research is at odds with this (Tokunaga 2011). Thus, it is unclear whether geographical distance matters or not.

Concerning individual character features, young people seem to be more likely to engage in unauthorized access and smartphone snooping (Marques et al. 2019). Scholars explain this relationship with the depth of adoption of smartphones. Young people represent the group spending the highest amount of time on their smartphones and social media (Marques et al. 2016). Yet, when it comes to password sharing, it has been denoted that relationship duration, cohabitation, and marriage, significantly affect whether partners decide to share private information (Park et al. 2018). This, as marriage and cohabitation per se, can be seen as a sign of faith (ibid.).

## 2.4 Summary

Previous literature examining the phenomenon of digital surveillance behavior has the methodological approach in common, primarily applying quantitative methods. Scholars from the cybersecurity perspective mainly use survey research (Park et al. 2018; Marques et al. 2019; Levy & Schneier 2020), while a mixed-method aspect often is prevalent in the field of men's violence against women. In-depth interviews with survivors of intimate partner violence complete the quantitative data (Harris & Woodlock 2019; Woodlock et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, previous literature also tends to concentrate on similar research aims: to distinguish the phenomenon and to some extent investigate its prevalence. There is no study that I know of today that provides empirics on the perspective and thoughts from people involved in interpersonal digital surveillance, living in "non-violent" romantic relationships. So far, scholars have investigated the phenomenon either as a part of violent relationships or as a growing problem in interpersonal relationships, but while doing so only with a quantitative approach. In short, the research gap considering how partners in non-violent relationships reflect upon digital surveillance is apparent.

To cover this gap, qualitative interviews will contribute to the discussion of what kind of surveillance functions are perceived okay to use and in which situation, when the respondents experience that it is an invasion of their privacy and where they do draw the line, etcetera. Questions like these cannot display the frequency of the phenomenon, but the respondents' ways of reasoning around it may indicate if smartphone surveillance is perceived as unproblematic or normal behavior in romantic relationships.

To investigate this, the so-called normalization process of violence model (Lundgren 1991) will be applied to the material. The normalization process, which is a model pronouncing how violence becomes internalized and adopted in romantic relationships, is further developed in the chapter below.

Studying a potential normalization process of TFCC among young romantic relationships is of interest due to many reasons. Firstly, a growing acceptance for surveillance is problematic as it can be considered as an invasion of privacy and a shift in the understanding of greater

violence. If behaviors such as GPS-tracking and smartphone snooping are stopped being challenged, the experience and danger for people living with intimate partner violence risk becoming delegitimized. Secondly, if such behaviors are perceived as normal, it also implies that private information and tools to commit harm are accessible if the relationship turns destructive. As mentioned earlier, smartphones have radically affected how we live our lives and our relationships. What if smartphone surveillance is more common than we think?

### 3. Theoretical Discussion

The following chapter describes the theoretical framework built upon the normalization process of violence model (Lundgren 1991). Firstly, the different parts of the process are outlined. Thereafter, previous studies using the model are mentioned. Lastly, how the theory will be used to investigate the research problem of the thesis is elaborated. With the normalization process as a theoretical framework, I hope to find out if behaviors that indicate some kind of control- and surveillance behaviors (TFCC) are present in “non-violent” relationships and how people think about this. This chapter aims to highlight what such a potential normalization process in romantic relationships could look like. At the end of the chapter, specified questions that operationalize the model will be provided.

As one of the first to study and interview women in intimate partner violence, sociology professor Eva Lundgren presented the normalization process of violence in 1991. The model seeks to explain the process of violence within intimate partner relationships and, foremost, how the violence becomes internalized and adopted i.e. normalized by the victims. Lundgren’s theory has been influential in research on intimate partner violence against women and in the women's shelter movement (e.g. Wemrell et al. 2019; Enander & Holmberg 2008; Örmön & Hörberg 2016). However, it has also received criticism for not being complex enough (Hydén 1992).

The normalization process is grounded in gender norms and the appreciation of power dynamics, conceptions of what it means to be a woman versus a man, and how these roles are performed within partner relationships (Lundgren 2004). The theory establishes different steps

in the process of violence and has contributed to a new understanding of why many women remain in violent relationships. Victimized women tend to adapt themselves to the demands of the abuser as a strategy to escape the violence. This adoption, together with constant getting their life space diminished, makes the women internalize the perpetrators' conception of how she should live and subsequently regard herself with the eyes of the perpetrator (ibid.).

Lundgren presents the normalization process from both the perspective of the man (the perpetrator) and the woman (the victim) as she clearly defines the process as gendered.

The normalization process for the man is centralized around the concept of *becoming* a man in relation to the woman. Lundgren describes this as an “incorporate process of gender’ in which ‘he creates masculinity” (2004:24, my translation). From the man’s perspective, the normalization process is about taking control over the woman, her femininity, and living space as it is associated with *becoming* a man (Lundgren 2004). The violence is a strategy to fulfill this goal, a strategy to subordinate the woman and maintain the gender-power order.

The other perspective of the normalization process (the woman’s) is being described as a way of exterminating the woman by breaking her down step by step. This process can be divided into four different parts; 1) Displace and extinguish of boundaries, 2) Isolation, 3) Alternation between violence and warmth, and 4) Internalization (ibid.).

According to Lundgren’s research, victimized women tend to initially react to the violence and perceive it as something wrong, intolerable. However, along with the progress and recurrence of violence, it develops into an aspect of everyday life, something acceptable “they deserve”. By displacing and extinguishing boundaries, the woman’s life space successively diminishes as the man is in control. This changeover often proceeds unnoticed by the woman.

The next step of the normalization process is isolation. By isolating the woman physically from other relationships, she will also experience psychological isolation as the man becomes her only reference point (Lundgren 2004). The isolation hinders her from any other kind of influence, which makes it difficult for the woman to judge good or bad (ibid.).

The alternation between violence and warmth increases the man's control over the woman and composes the third step of the process. The duality leads to even more effaced boundaries and confusion as love and care suddenly might change into hate and violence.

The last step in the normalization process is internalization. At this point, the woman has lived through physical and psychological violence, manipulation, and her concept of reality has been exchanged to his concept of reality (ibid.).

Lundgren stresses the importance of understanding that violence, gender, sexuality, and power are closely intertwined. In all relationships, we live with "deep-rooted cultural truths correlated to gender and violence" (Lundgren et al. 2004: 16). That men battering their wives are unemployed alcoholics is one "cultural truth" demonstrated to be false (Lundgren et al. 2001).

The normalization process is a theoretical model which cannot explain all complex phenomena of intimate partner violence. However, by sustaining a structural perspective, relationships can be recognized as something other than static. Coexistence is a constant process, and there is no sharp line between violent or peaceful relationships (ibid.). Just like there is no sharp line between what kind of information sharing is okay and not.

This is of great matter as this thesis will not study violent relationships in the sense that the case selection has not been based upon previous experience of intimate partner violence. These relationships might show occurrences of tendencies declared within Lundgren's model. However, it is not my intention to reflect upon whether these relationships can be defined as controlling/violent but to discuss the potential normalization of such behavior. The respondents could potentially experience violence within their relationships, although one could argue that it is not very likely that these persons would participate in an interview study speaking about their relationship, if not as an indirect cry for help.

### **3.1 Previous studies using the theoretical framework**

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Lundgren's normalization process of violence model has foremost been applied in Nordic studies focusing on intimate partner violence against women (e.g. Wemrell et al. 2019; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Örmon & Hörberg 2016; Wiklund et al. 2010). The theory especially composes a vital contribution to the understanding of why women remain in relationships with violence (Wemrell et al. 2019). Enander and Holmberg (2008) examine the leaving process of battered women, using key concepts from the normalization process to their interview material. Reviewing other studies, this seems to be the most common way of applying the normalization process (Wiklund et al. 2010), or as a narrative to describe stories of victimization (Jarnkvist & Brännström 2016).

### **3.2 The application of the theoretical framework**

Above the normalization process is developed, yet the question remains how this model can be applied to the research problem. According to previous literature, I have only found studies using the normalization process to investigate life stories and relationships within a violent context. Hence, using it for my research aim is atypical and requires innovativeness.

The normalization process will in this thesis be operationalized and applied to investigate the phenomenon of TFCC. Focusing on the intrusion of digital integrity rather than physical violence, the theoretical framework will be used with a new approach. Interviewing young people in romantic relationships about their smartphone habits, I aim to observe their world of ideas and further analyze if their answers somehow can be linked to a normalization process. The theory will be explicitly applied by studying to what extent my respondents perceive it difficult to determine boundaries when it comes to acceptance of different smartphone behaviors and experiences of getting their social life space narrowed. The latter part indicates



some kind of social isolation, for example, not being able to keep in contact with people of your preference.

Hence, I will align the first two steps of the normalization process from the victims' perspective, i.e. Displace and extinguish of boundaries and Isolation. This as I am primarily expecting these two to be shown in the material. The latter two steps (Alternation between violence and warmth and Internalization) would imply a violent relationship. Respondents' thoughts and experiences of the access to private information available through smartphones and how they act upon this information may indicate an impression if they perceive smartphone surveillance as something unproblematic/normal in romantic relationships. Or at least illuminate the gray zone when it comes to defining how much access and information that should be shared.

With a clear focus on the “internalization of violence”, Enander and Holmberg (2008) describe why women do not leave violent relationships. Together with other studies in the field of intimate partner violence against women, the last two steps of the normalization process are most prominent. Nevertheless, as I do not actively concentrate on violent relationships in my study, I primarily expect tendencies of the first steps. The analysis will be carried out through operationalization of the steps into questions, aiming to capture these tendencies.

As elaborated above, the normalization process occurs from both the perspective of the man (the perpetrator) and the woman (the victim). This thesis will focus on the perspective of the victim. Firstly, as the opposite perspective of the perpetrator potentially could generate interviews of a problematic ethical character and secondly, due to the limits of a master thesis. The respondents consist of women and men, but in contrast to Lundgren's research, they both will belong to and will be interacted with as potential victims.

If the material shows that behaviors linked to displace and extinguish boundaries, and isolation, are present, it is important to be aware that this does not necessarily signal a continuation of the latter two steps- the alternation between violence and warmth and internalization. Below, questions that operationalize the first two steps are specified.

### 3.3 Specified Research Questions

Discussing the theoretical framework and how the normalization process will be applied to the material, these specified research questions will help out answering the main research question;

*How do young people reason about TFCC in romantic relationships?*

The specified research questions represent the first two steps of the normalization process i.e. displace and extinguish of boundaries and isolation.

1. How do young people reason about *displace and extinguish of boundaries*?
  - a. Do the respondents undoubtedly share private information with their partners, and have this changed during the relationship
  - b. Do the respondents display difficulties in distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and how is that, in that case, expressed?

Keywords: private space, physical and mental boundaries

2. In what ways do young people perceive limitations of their social life space (*isolation*)?
  - a. Do the respondents display any kind of limitations, physically or mentally, related to other persons in their surroundings?
  - b. Do the respondents display incertitude for posting pictures/information on social media knowing their partner can see it, and how is that, in that case, expressed?

Keywords: avoiding social interaction with others than the partner, mental and physical control, life space

## 4. Methodological Approach

To answer the research question of how young people reason about smartphone surveillance in romantic relationships and if such behaviors are about to become normalized, the chosen methodological design is qualitative in-depth interviews with respondents. The selected method is suitable as one of the purposes of interview studies is to achieve insights about people's lifeworld, which agree with my interest in capturing how people resonate, perceive, and think around the usage of digital surveillance functions (Bryman 2016).

Interpersonal relationships and behaviors are complex phenomena, which require complex methods to be approached. Interview methods differ from other kinds of methods, as the researcher interacts with the interviewees. This enables data collection, where other methods fail. Stressed in the chapter of previous literature, the methodological framework studying similar research questions is characterized by survey studies and quantitative designs. The phenomenon of TFCC in non-violent romantic relationships has, so far, to my knowledge, never been examined through interview design before.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part motivates the case selection and sample of respondents i.e. young people within a romantic relationship. The second part describes the procedure of collecting data and formulating the interview guide. The third part explains the analytical process, and the fourth part elaborates on ethical issues and the method limitations.

### 4.1 Case and sample selection

The selection of romantic relationships specifically instead of all kinds of intimate relationships (family, friends), is grounded upon studies claiming that digital communication plays a significant role in how romantic relationships proceed and that password- and account sharing behaviors are pervasive in the context of romantic relationships (Park et al. 2018). Scholars predict that data gathering in these relationships also is likely to increase and stresses how this might cause harm (Levy & Schneier 2020).

Romantic and sexual relationships are social constructions where the involved often become emotionally and physically engaged to a larger extent than in other intimate relations. This affects behaviors, expectations, how we desire to satisfy each other's needs but can equally develop into destructive behavior. It has been shown that when digital functions cause great harm, for example, coercive control, it is profoundly contextualized in romantic relationship dynamics (Drageiwiz et al. 2018:609).

This thesis focuses on young people (18-30 years), as high school students and people studying, in general, correspond to the group using smartphones and social media most frequently and to the largest extent (The Swedish Internet Foundation 2020). The amount of time spent on smartphones also seems to correlate with the depth of adoption and knowledge of engaging in behaviors such as smartphone snooping (Marques et al. 2019). Limiting the study to focus on this particular group is therefore interesting. Concerning my research aim, one could assume that if surveillance behavior through smartphones somehow is about to become normalized, it is among young people that this process could be spotted. This also motivates the selection of young people.

Composing interviews with respondents, the intention is to have a sample of people with as maximal variation as possible. Based on previous research, variables such as age (Marques et al. 2019), geographical distance (Dainton & Aylor 2001), and how long you have been in a relationship (Park et al. 2018) were taken into consideration while working out the sample. As I am living and studying in Sweden, it is convenient to conduct a Swedish case study.

Initially, I reached out to high schools in different parts of Gothenburg as a way of finding people of the right age that I do not have any connection with. Aiming for heterogeneity, this could also create a natural variation due to socioeconomic standards and cultural background. Unfortunately, the responses were close to non-existent.

Changing strategy, the further proceeding of collecting respondents consisted of sharing information/ads about the interview through the following channels: Facebook, Linked-In, direct messages to friends and family asking them to forward, billboards at the University of Gothenburg, and by email to other students at the faculty<sup>3</sup>. In the ad, I asked for people in the

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<sup>3</sup> E-mail and information are attached in the appendix

age between 18 - 30 years that were currently in a romantic relationship and who were interested in participating in an interview. Information about the topic, length of the interview, voluntary participation, and confidentiality was also provided.

I conducted 17 interviews with 11 women and 6 men. The interests in participating were higher among women than men. One participant did not show up. Nevertheless, all of the respondents were people I do not have any personal connection with. Concerning the number of interviews, the goal was to find 4 respondents (2 women, 2 men) from 4 different subgroups. The subgroups represented people in romantic relationships with: 1) Long-distance relations, 2) Living apart, 3) Cohabitation, 4) Marriage. Nevertheless, soon I realized that my aim of maximal variation in relation to the subgroups would be too complicated due to the limitations of a master thesis. Finding respondents at the right age within a romantic relationship, that I did not know turned out to be challenging enough. The variation could not be fulfilled in an optimal way. However, a number of 16 - 18 respondents were my goal to ensure theoretical saturation. Most successful were the variation due to age with a good division between 18 -30 years. The duration of the relationships varied from 2 months to 12 years. Three respondents were living in same-sex relationships. Concerning the aspect of the respondents living area, I had some geographical variation between cities and countryside, but with a majority living in either Gothenburg or Stockholm.

Below, Figure 1 illustrates the variation due to the subgroups. A detailed list of the respondents is attached in the appendix.

*Figure 1. Subgroup variation*

RESPONDENTS	Long distance	Living apart	Cohabitation	Marriage
<b>Woman</b>	2	3	7	0
<b>Man</b>	0	1	5	1

*\* The total sum does not correspond to the number of respondents. This as some respondents fit into more than one category.*

## 4.2 Data Collection

The data collection was accomplished by semi-structured, thematic interviews with open-ended questions. The questions were designed around themes, which allows more flexibility while interviewing and is specifically suitable for the purpose of capturing respondents' opinions and perceptions (Bryman 2016: 469). Initially, open-ended questions were addressed to become more specified during the interviews. This enables rich, elaborated answers and facilitates follow-up questions, which may contribute relevant information beyond the posed question as the respondent will be given space to talk more freely (Bryman 2016, Halperin & Heath 2017).

The interviews were conducted, supported by a thematic interview guide with questions to the different themes. The four themes were based upon a mix of situations previous research indicates smartphone surveillance might occur, and the first two steps of the normalization process; A) Smartphone Habits, B) Sharing of Information, C) Adoption and Limitations (isolation), and, D) Boundaries and Integrity. Each interview started with some warm-up questions about the respondent and their relationships. This to address something, for them, familiar and easy to talk about, and for me, useful background information.

Under the first theme, “Smartphone Habits”, questions concerning how, to what extent, and in what ways the respondents used their smartphones were discussed. Next theme, “Sharing of Information”, extended the interview to include smartphone behaviors in relation to their partner. For example, how, and what information they share with each other, if this is something they are taking for granted, and if it has changed during the relationship. Following, “Adoption and Limitations” touched upon if they had avoided posting information online or physically specific places (limiting their life-space i.e. social isolation). Also if they were aware of, if their partner were using GPS-data to find out their location. Related to the last theme, “Boundaries and Integrity”, I asked the respondents to give example of behaviors they would perceive as an invasion of their privacy, and reason around situations when it is “okay” to use their partners' phone without permission<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See full interview guide in appendix

After conducting each interview, first impressions and characteristic reasonings were written down. This to ensure that perceived emotions and other unsaid information, would not be left out in the later analysis of the material. The transcribing of the interviews took place after all 17 of them were carried out. Each interview lasted between 31 - 65 minutes, with an average time of 46 minutes.

### **4.3 Analytical Process**

The analytical process started with reading through the interviews, one at a time. During the second reading, quotes and interesting passages linked to the themes displace and extinguish of boundaries and isolation were highlighted. Sorting out the material under the themes facilitated the later analysis and process of shaping the story.

After sorting out and observing the material, similar reasoning reappeared but with different motivations. The finding that the most reasonings were built upon trust correlated with sharing behaviors resulted in four ideal types: the Trustful, the Confidant, the Suspicious, and the Controlled. To illustrate this, a four-field model was created (Figure 2).

In the concluding analysis, I related back to the research aim and the question of normalization in relation to the ideal types. A new figure was developed presenting the “level of normalization” and where the ideal types here were positioned (Figure 3).

### **4.4 Ethical remarks and method limitations**

Before the interviews, the respondents were informed about the topic of the study but not the exact research aim. Knowledge of the study’s aim might color the answers and decrease the validity of the study. Further practical information was provided a week before the interview. The respondents were instructed about anonymous participation, that they could interrupt the interview whenever they wanted and/or choose not to answer questions. I also asked for permission to record the interviews, which everyone agreed to.

An extraordinary dimension of my data collection is the fact that we are still living in the Covid-19 pandemic. This required interviewing online through the video conferencing tool “Zoom Video Communications”. Interviewing online was practical and enabled interviews with respondents living beyond Gothenburg. Before the interviews, the respondents also were required to sit somewhere where they could speak freely and without being disturbed. However, a possible validity issue could have been the fact that most of the respondents were living with their partners and participated in the interviews from their homes. This was not an observed problem, but for some living in a one-room apartment, finding a place like this could have been a struggle due to Covid-19 and the “working from home- restrictions”.

As the topic of my study might be considered sensitive for some, an essential part of the preparations of the interviews was reckoning potential uncomfortable situations and how to deal with them. Elaborated above, the sample was simply based on “young” people having a romantic relationship. With this said, I did not have any pre-knowledge about the “level of controlling behaviors” or tendencies liked to my topic. However, calling them non-violent would imply zero findings in my material. Likewise, statistically, it would be likely that some of the respondents have had violent experiences related to romantic relationships (BRÅ, 2009). Though, one could argue that these persons would not be too interested in participating in a study concerning their romantic relationship if it would not be seen as a link to help.

Emphasizing research from Scerri et al. (2012), the interviews were always rounded off with some minutes reserved for feedback from the respondents. This to verify the comfort level during the interviews and register any kind of distress. A way to assure what the Scerri et al. call “ethics in practice” (2012: 116). Initially, this also came to be a good indicator that I had formulated my questions in a way that did not generate uneasiness. Another way of controlling this was to carry out a pilot interview. Beyond the information about anonymity, confidentiality, etcetera, the respondents were also informed about the handle of the material. I named the audio recordings with numbers and promised to delete all files after finishing my study.

One limitation of my sample is that the respondents are somewhat liked through friends in common. As mentioned above, all of the respondents were people I met for the first time. However, it is possible that this affected the heterogeneity of the group. For example, a large part of the group was high-educated with the same ethnicity. Previous research does not



necessarily address these as important aspects, though it could be discussed whether it affects the result.

What can the results from a sample of Swedish young people say about the phenomenon of TFCC in other countries? The question of what kind of case Sweden is has been taken into account from a generalization perspective. One aspect is the individualistic Swedish culture, and that people have high integrity. Yet, Sweden is a technological country where a majority of people are using smartphones in their everyday life. It is not given that the results can be generalized to other cases. However, one could at least speculate that the results may have similarities with other democratic societies compared with totalitarian societies.

Another generalization issue is that it is difficult to define whether my results are related to age or a life-cycle aspect. Will the sample perceive behaviors linked to TFCC in the same way as they turn older due depth of adoption. Or is it rather a matter of a specific time period in life? It should also be stressed that within the sample, different generations are represented. For example, the youngest respondent expresses that she got her first iPhone when she was 11 years old. Meanwhile, one of the oldest respondents argues that he believes his childhood and teenage years without a smartphone have had an impact on his smartphone adoption.

It should be stressed that the interviews were held in Swedish and that the exemplifying quotes later were translated into English. As English is not my native language, it is possible that some of the nuances in the answers have been difficult to display. Another possibility is that the quotes do not correspond totally with how the respondents would have expressed themselves in English.

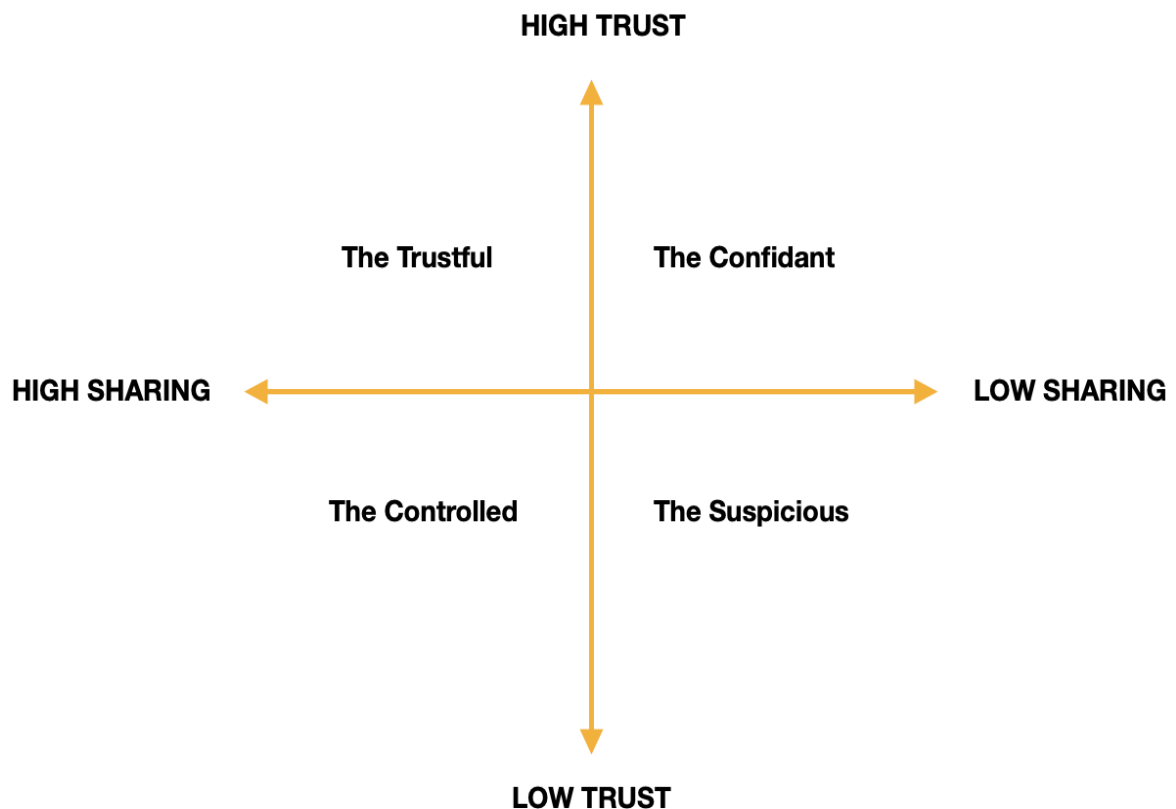
## 5. Analysis

The following chapter presents, and analyzes the interview material thematically from Displace and extinguish of boundaries, and Isolation. The four research questions operationalizing the themes guide the analysis. The first theme is analyzed through a four-field model, presenting ideal types of the respondents' ways of reasoning. The second theme is presented with text only as the findings related to the theme are not as extensive. At the end of the chapter, a more detailed discussion will follow, covering interesting aspects beyond the specific themes.

### 5.1 Distinguish of boundaries

Many of the respondents consider sharing information as a natural part of being in a romantic relationship with someone. However, to what extent the respondents share their private information varies, and is based upon different reasoning. Studying the interview material, similar reasonings reappear. Most apparent is the dimension of trust and how this plays a central role throughout all of the interviews. Below a figure illustrates four ideal types based on the correlation between trust and sharing; The Trustful, The Confidant, The Suspicious, and The Controlled. The different ideal types are described one at a time and presented under categories from the research questions; What is being shared, Changing over time, and Boundaries. Essential while taking part of the analysis is remembering that the four-field model presents *ideal types*. This by the meaning that in real life, one person can display characteristics from several ideal types. Therefore, some of the quotes are stated by the same respondent, but presented under different ideal types.

Figure 2. Ideal types



### 5.1.1 The Trustful

The main characteristic for the Trustful, is that they share information with their partner because they trust them. The sharing is perceived as a natural part of the relationship and is seldom something they question or think about closer. Because this ideal type is living in a relationship where they totally trust their partner, they do not mind sharing everything. Concerning private information, a high amount is being shared.

This ideal type also covers persons that are not engaged enough to make an active choice, not to share information. For example, the application Snapchat requires changing of the settings if the user does not want to show the GPS location. As the respondents trust their partners fully, they do not bother to change the settings. Another practical dimension of the reasoning is that sharing information simplifies everyday life in a relationship. Below, the characteristics will be developed further.

## What is being shared

As mentioned above, the Trustful shares a lot of information with their partners, without any greater consideration. Hence, the question of whether the respondents undoubtedly share private information with their partners, is in this case, answered; yes. Discussing private information, the respondents answers mainly referring to pin-codes, passwords, GPS-locations and “bank identification numbers”. The interview material indicates that the Trustful does not have secrets towards their partners, nor perceive their phones as a private matter in the same way as the Confidant does (developed further down). The quote below illustrates the respondent's reasoning around the privacy of her phone and the information she is sharing.

I do believe she even knows my bank identification number. /.../ There are no secrets. I would not share it with anyone, so I guess it is a private matter. But in my relationship, I know it sounds cheesy, but she is a part of me. So it's also her property. She's allowed to read my messages if necessary. (R12)

The respondent expresses that she perceives her phone as a private matter, though, as her partner is not anyone, but someone she really trusts, sharing her phone with the partner is unproblematic. Next quote highlights the process of learning each other's pin codes. The respondent explains that it is something that often takes place in a situation where one partner is using their partner's phone. Hence, to borrow the phone from each other is a habit that Truthful exemplifies in their answers.

It becomes something you just learn as you're about to check something on your partner's phone. For example, if your phone is dead, then they [the partners] say the [pin]code /.../ it is something that happens naturally, but personally, anyone can receive it [the pin code]. (R9)

In the quote above the respondent stresses that sharing and knowing each other's pin-codes is something natural. For this person it even seems like the pin code is not private at all, as it is expressed that she could share it with “anyone”.

The characteristic that the Trustful share based upon trust is something that shines through the arguments. Below, the first quote highlights the practical dimension, and the second quote lack of engagement.

We have each other's fingerprints registered on our phones and do know different passwords /.../ We share it undoubtedly, not because we need it, but because I think it is practical. I don't share it with everyone for example, but as he generally already knows everything, it doesn't matter if we share or not. (R6)

I do have my GPS location visible on Snapchat, but that's because I don't know how to turn it off /.../ I don't reflect at all over the fact that she can see where I am. (R3)

The first quote exemplifies that some of the respondents have their partners fingerprint registered on their phone. The fingerprint function is being used instead of a pin code, and facilitates opening the phone. In contrast to the respondent above, this person states that she would not share her private information with “everyone”, but that it is an act of trust. The latter quote points out that sharing also is a question of knowledge, as the respondent stresses that she does not know how to turn the GPS location off. However, it is unlikely that there is no way she can receive this information if she requires it. Therefore, it is more likely that it concerns a matter of engagement in this specific case, and not knowledge.

### **Changed over time**

The Trustful have in common that many of them (not exclusively) have been in their relationship for several years. This could partly also be an explanation to why the level of trust in this ideal type is high. The question *of* whether the respondents' sharing has changed during the relationship, is therefore related to time and trust. Generally two kinds of answers are present. Either the sharing has increased with time and more trust (R16 & R8) or, not changed particularly as it has been an obvious part from the beginning (R11). When the sharing has been present from the beginning, it is often an action to signal trust at an early state of the relationship.

It is nothing we have talked about, but it has developed during the relationship.  
I have never felt any desire to be private. (R16)

The longer we were together, and specifically when we moved together, “may I use your phone because it is closer”. (R8)

He went from being a person I didn’t know anything about, to a person I know everything about. We have always been very open, there are few questions about him I can't answer. There is nothing I don’t want to share with him. (R11)

Illustrated above, information- and phone sharing appear to be a part of the relationships that the respondents do not pay a lot of attention to. It is something that develops over time (R1, R8), or simply a way of getting to know each other (R11). The first quote also indicates that this is neither something the respondents talk about with their partners.

## **Boundaries**

The second question operationalizing displace and extinguishing of boundaries, is whether the respondents display difficulties in distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Demonstrated in the interview material, the “trust argument” is continuously essential. Respondents under the Trustful ideal type draw the line where behaviors that indicate failed trust, are being performed. Studying the interviews, the same reasoning reappears - it is not about what the partner has done per se, but that it implies a lack of trust.

Following quotes hands examples of situations where the Trustful perceive that their partner would cross the line.

It is an action that indicates lack of trust. If he wants to control stuff on my phone, it implies that he doesn’t trust me, and that is what I consider as the biggest insult. In a relationship, trust is what's the most important. And I don’t have any desire to go through his phone after pictures or messages, because I trust that I wouldn’t find anything sketchy. If it’s something he needs to know, then he's got to ask me about it, it’s about consent. You ask first, even though no one has anything to hide. (R11)

I would be irritated if she used my phone without asking for permission, not because I have something to hide on my phone. But because then she assumes that I have something to hide and that would make me annoyed. (R2)

The Trustful share private information with their partners, and some of them even share their phones. Nonetheless, stressed in the quotes above, the Trustful does have a pretty clear

perception of what behaviors they accept and do not accept. One interesting finding is that even though they trust their partner and share a lot, they do consider it essential to ask for permission before using each other's phones.

### *5.1.2 The Confidant*

The main characteristic for The Confidant, is that they do not share information with their partner because they trust them. In other words, because they trust their partner they do not have any desire to take part of their private information (as this is comprehended as something linked to jealousy). The Confidant perceives the phone as a private matter and does not see the point of sharing information as pin code, passwords, etcetera, as both themselves and their partner have their own phone. In contrast to the Trustful, this ideal type has reflected to some point, of what and how they share information.

#### **What is being shared**

The Confidant does not share private information to the same extent as the Trustful. Some of the Confidants share pin codes, but not with the intention of having limited access to their partners' phones. They do not have the habit of using each other's phones. If they borrow their partners phones, it is during extraordinary circumstances. The quotes below characterize the Confidant's way of reasoning around sharing.

The phone is a private matter, you always keep your phone easy to reach [so why would I use my partner's phone?]. (R1:1)

I have never thought [of] that I would like to use her phone. It's not because we are too private, that we can't share them, but because I have never had the desire for it. (R3)

If someone wonders where I am, they can simply ask me about it. And the person that needs to know [the partner], will probably already know it because we hang out all the time. If we don't [hang out], I let him know. (R1:2)

We are not jealous people, so it is not a thing. If I had been jealous, maybe I would have wanted more control, but now we have such high confidence in each other. That's why I don't have any desire to know what he's doing online and vice versa. This, combined with the fact that he has high integrity, means that no problems arise. (R10)

As discussed earlier, the Confidant does not see the point of sharing too much with their partner for several reasons. Firstly, they do have their own phone to use. Secondly, they trust their partner. The Confidant relates a high level of insight and sharing to jealousy, as illustrated in the last quote. Why would they want to have access to their partner's phone and accounts, when they trust them? Another part of the argument is the ability to talk, and ask about information in real life. One of the respondents highlights this fact, in relation to sharing GPS-location (R1:2). She stresses that her partner does often know where she is because they are having a conversation about it. To share GPS-location is therefore unnecessary.

### **Changed over time**

Has the sharing behaviors of the Confidant changed during their relationships? The interview material indicates that the respondents do not perceive any particular differences according to the little information that is actually being shared. Two of the respondents answer the question if the sharing has changed during the relationship in the following way:

No, it has probably been the same. (R3)

Not that noticeable, I'd say. (R7)

Since the sharing behavior within this ideal type either is very low or non-existent, the material demonstrates that it is not much that changes during the relationship.

### **Boundaries**

As elaborated earlier, the Trustful distinguishes boundaries on trust and when it is disproved. Also, for the Confidant, trust is an essential part of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. What separates them is that the Confidant perceives situations where their partner crosses the line, not only as a betrayal of the trust but as an intrusion of privacy. Because the Confidant does not usually share private information, it becomes a question of integrity as well. The first two quotes illustrate the aspect of integrity (R10 & R14), the first and third quotes link the arguments to jealousy (R10 & R1).



As we have an open dialogue in our relationship, I would say that it is enough if he requires to know with whom and what I'm writing, with the intention that he doesn't trust me or is jealous. That would be a betrayal against our relationship and my integrity. (R10)

[I'm] thinking that this is where it becomes an intrusion of privacy. If someone calls repeatedly and she is not home [or] can't answer, maybe [it is okay to answer and] say she is not there. But not without asking [for permission], then it becomes something else. Without permission, it is easy to cross the line. (R14)

If he would read my conversations. It feels like something that belongs to jealousy, and I have never had relationships with jealous persons. They have not had any interest in that [reading her conversations]. (R1)

The argument of permission reappears in the quotes, likewise the intention behind the behaviors. Again, it is not the action per se that represents the intrusion, but if it is an action based upon jealousy. The fundamental deal in the relationship of the Confidant is that you should not have to share information because you trust each other. If the partner then requires to receive information about conversations, or worse, act in secret, the partner breaks the deal.

### *5.1.3 The Suspicious*

The main characteristic for the Suspicious is that they do not share information, primarily because they do not trust "the system", sometimes neither their partner. The Suspicious are skeptical towards the companies behind the smartphone applications and servers storing personal data. Because of this, they are both very careful and thoughtful, considering what kind of information they share and with whom. This ideal type has better knowledge about the potential risks of sharing private information and how it can be misused compared to the other ideal types. Referring to the interview material, respondents that belong to the Suspicious often have someone in their presence working within the field of software engineering or cybersecurity that has informed them about the potential risks. Others are just suspicious in general.

## What is being shared

The findings in my interview material stress that the respondents mainly trust their partner, but not the system, and that is why they do not share information. It is not per se their partner the Suspicious doubt, but how companies are storing their private information. The following quote is an example.

There is nothing I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing with him, but you're well aware of the application and the camera in general. And in a long-distance relationship, it becomes something you relate to, I would say. (R5)

This respondent stresses that she fully trusts her partner, but as she is living in a long-distance relationship, the question of integrity and security online has become an important factor. Further, the respondent explains that all of the communication in the relationship takes place online as they live apart. Therefore they have had discussions about what information they share with each other and through which channels related to a security perspective.

The Suspicious also represent persons with a high level of skepticism, that do not use their phones to the same extent as other ideal types. The interviews indicate that these respondents do not have the same interest in being active on social media, for example.

I'm generally very skeptical about location functions /.../ then I don't know if people do know where I am. I don't like Siri, it feels like someone is eavesdropping. Same with Facebook, it feels like they are listening as well. I always have my location services turned off unless I'm using Maps. I don't use the map on Snapchat either. No, I don't like it, I guess it's my integrity that is very high. That's probably also why I don't post things on social media, [I] feel no joy in it, and then people have access to what I posted. (R15)

I get so annoyed when Google says "you've been here, what do you think of this place" /.../ I find it creepy that Google knows where I am, so I turn off the location services if I don't use it. I find it a bit uncomfortable that a lot of information [about me] is stored. (R8)

I'm more worried about if it's being leaked to the public than that he would misuse the information I give him. (R10)

The quotes express discomfort of sharing information, as the respondents fear that it will end up in the wrong place, or simply get stored somewhere they cannot control. One respondent expressed that she does not want people to have access to the pictures she uploads on social media. Another reason not to share information is because they feel observed or listened to.

Even though the Suspicious show lack of trust towards the system, some quotes indicate an uncertainty from the respondent concerning what to share with the partner and anxiety related to mistrust.

It kind of feels like no, I don't want to share that too often [passwords]. It has nothing to do with our relationship but more a general thing, it's my passwords and my accounts /.../ The benefit for her to know my passwords is very little, I would say, compared to how it may make me worry or trouble me. (R14)

This quote illustrates that the respondent does not feel comfortable with sharing passwords with his partner. He is arguing that it has nothing to do with the relationship, but is rather a question of integrity and privacy. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that sharing information with his partner potentially can make him worry about what could happen if their relationship ended (elaborated further down). The latter part may be interpreted that it exist a hint of mistrust. Another possible explanation could be that he is very rational and reflects on potential risks.

Another part of the sharing versus trust correlation is the dimension of suspiciousness. The following quote demonstrates that the respondent perceives it more necessary to share his GPS location with the partner to avoid suspiciousness.

One could argue that if there's trust in a relationship, there's no need to share GPS- location. But it's more likely that it appears suspicious not to share the GPS location. It feels better to share it. (R2)

According to the Suspicious, not sharing the GPS location in a relationship could indicate that the person does have something to hide. As exemplified above, the respondent rather avoids potential suspiciousness by sharing where he is than keep it for himself.

### **Changed over time**

The Suspicious, together with the Confidant, represent the two ideal types that share little private information with their partners. According to this, the changes over time also follow the same pattern, i.e. not changing particularly at all. However, the following quote constitutes reasoning for a situation when the sharing did change.

At the beginning [of the relationship], we had a thought that we wouldn't share passwords /.../ as we are using the same [ones to many different accounts]. Well, we like each other, and probably nothing will happen, but if we break up and it [turns] into chaos. One could log in to different sites and do a lot of shit. It would be nice to avoid that risk, even though it is minimal. It will not happen, but I mean, it can happen in theory. (R14)

As the quote denotes, this couple had an intention not to share passwords with each other. The respondent describes that eventually, that happened anyway and expresses the potential risks of sharing information with someone he might not be having a relationship with forever.

## **Boundaries**

Emphasizing the question if the Suspicious displays any difficulties distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, the material signal differences depending on if the respondent bases their mistrust upon the system or their partner. The Suspicious that mistrust the system appear to have similar opinions concerning the topic as their partner, thus, have had a discussion about it. Agreeing on what to share because of suspiciousness towards the system annul misunderstandings of acceptable sharing. For the Suspicious that mistrust their partner, the boundaries might not be as clear and can differ between the partners. The quotes below concern sharing of passwords (R14:1) and GPS-locations (R14:2).

For example, I think she does not know the password I use the most, so it feels like I don't have to reveal it unnecessarily; it's more like why? But then I understand that it might feel annoying that I know her [password]. Maybe she can change it /.../ When you think about it, it's not clear what to do. (R14:1)

I guess it works for people, but I would probably feel that it was a bit controlling and monitoring. To check on the map where she is /.../ but if you don't ask [about where she is] then maybe you can check on the map, but it isn't something we use anyway. In my opinion, it's both easier and more pleasant to have a discussion about it. (R14:2)

The quotes illustrate the respondents' reasoning around boundaries and sharing. As the respondent displays, it can be difficult to distinguish which behaviors that are okay and not. The quote discussing the usage of location services presents a good example of a re-emerging pattern in the arguments, viz that the respondents tend to not be consistent in their reasoning. Above, the respondent does state that he probably would feel controlling using GPS-location

to find out where his partner is. At the same time, he denotes that it is a possibility if they have not had a discussion about where they are, but still, he prefers not to use it.

#### *5.1.4 The Controlled*

The main characteristic for the Controlled is that they share information even though they do not trust their partner. This ideal type represents people living in dysfunctional relationships, although not necessarily violent. They share private information either because they feel forced or because they do not know about any other option. Like the trustful, the amount of sharing reaches high levels and is here on demand by the partner.

Recalling Lundgren's' normalization process, it is among the Controlled, findings of the first step could be expected. However, the interview material does not show any tendencies of displace and extinguish of boundaries in the respondents' answers.

One respondent shared that she had experiences of a friend being in a relationship with a controlling partner that used different digital functions to keep track of her.

I have had a friend who was in a manipulative relationship, step by step, it was creepy. [I said that] "this much control is not okay, you have to be able to have a coffee, or drink a beer, or just be out and about without him knowing where you are". It's probably the most harmful type, the worst-case scenario. Then there are other types who have trust issues and keep track through the map on Snapchat, or "Find my iPhone" because of the simple reason that they do not trust their partner 100%. They check for fun, but when it turns into a habit, the behavior becomes a routine and a part of your everyday life. (R9)

The end of the quote displays how the respondent perceives that keeping track of location services may turn into a bad habit in relationships. She explains that she has seen it happen and do believe that it is a problem in some romantic relationships. According to her, the behavior is based upon jealousy.



Observing the figure, one can conclude that the ideal types that share information to a larger extent, the Trustful and the Controlled, also have a higher tendency to normalizing behaviors linked to TFCC. This result is of interest as previous research highlights the correlation between smartphone adoption and smartphone snooping (Marques et al. 2019). Nonetheless, the result that the Trustful tends to normalize these behaviors contrast previous studies that intrapersonal surveillance is built upon mistrust (Muisse et al. 2014). Hence, the essential factor that separates the Trustful from the Controlled is the presence of trust.

Behaviors linked to TFCC are possibly normalized among the Trustful but do not cause any harm until the relationship turns mistrustful. Problematic in the context is that interpersonal trust is something that quickly can change, whereas changing sharing behaviors might be challenging. In this sense, the Trustful may end up in a “slippery slope” situation. Information has initially been shared because of trust in each other, but when the trust fails, it is hard to withdraw the shared information.

Important to emphasize is that Figure 3 only displays the first part of the level of normalization. Theoretically, the level of normalization continues to the right, in that sense, the Controlled are not the ideal type where TFCC is mostly normalized. The Controlled do still express some kind of opposition to the surveillance, they are aware of it and perceive it as an intrusion of their digital integrity. Further to the right ideal types that have internalized the violence may be found.

### **5.3 Isolation**

Compared to the first part of the analysis, the following part, discussing Isolation, is not as extensive due to more minor findings in the interview material. The results will be presented in quotes, highlighting reasonings linked to categories from the research questions; Limitations and Incertitude online.

### *5.3.1 Limitations*

The respondents' reasoning does not display that anyone felt physically or mentally limited in their social living space. A potential situation could have been if the respondents felt that they could not spend time with people of their preference as their partner dislikes it. Hence, this was not found. However, some of the respondents did display uncertainty posting information online.

### *5.3.2 Uncertainty Online*

Due to the question of whether the respondents display the uncertainty of posting pictures or information on social media knowing their partner can see it, some findings have been made. The reasoning often considers respect towards their partner. For example, several examples were given about situations where one of the partners attended a party while the other stayed at home, as illustrated below.

To be honest, I can say that I've avoided sharing a party video or photo if he's been home that night and I have been out with my friends. /.../ Now it's different, I don't think I would do it today. In the beginning, it was important how you'd present yourself online. (R10)

There are things I could choose not to share because I know he doesn't want it. Maybe [I] don't need to put in his face that we're having so much fun [without him]. More about consideration and respect for him. I don't hide that we're hanging out, more [selecting] what to share. (R13)

Location services can be an issue if you feel that now I want to do something that is more private. But that was more at the beginning of the relationship when I didn't know him that well. But it's not a problem now that we know each other/.../ I avoided the app [so did not update my location] because I thought it would be too obvious if I actively turned off location services. (R6)

As expressed in the quotes, this kind of reflection before sharing or posting information online appears to be motivated by consideration of the partner (R10, R13), rather than controlling behavior from the other side. The few findings in the interviews linked to isolation, also highlight that uncertainty over what to post on social media is a present part of the beginning of the relationships as the partners are getting to know each other. Self-consciousness is interpreted as a natural part of dating rather than a hint of isolation.



Though, significant in the last quote (R6), is the respondents' acknowledgment that she avoided the application because she did not want her location to be updated i.e. her boyfriend to have the possibility of checking where she was. The respondent stresses that this was in the beginning when she did not know her boyfriend, and was afraid of what he would think when it turned out with whom she spent time. Even though this example was unproblematic, the behavior of avoiding applications implies that similar kinds of behaviors could be present in more controlling relationships.

## **5.4 Findings beyond the themes**

This last part of the analysis will highlight interesting findings and reasonings from the interview material beyond the themes elaborated above. The aspects widen the respondents' reasoning around surveillance behavior and contribute with a deeper understanding to the concluding discussion.

### *5.4.1 Nothing to discuss*

Conducting the interviews, a significant finding was that sharing behaviors is not something the respondents talk about in their relationships. Very few expressed doubts about their partners' loyalty. However, only one out of seventeen have had a discussion with their partner on the topic of information sharing. The reasons behind this were either because they shared so little and did not see the need for it (the Confidant), or they shared a lot and still did not see the need for it (the Trustful).

No, I wouldn't say that, not at all. The closest thing we've discussed is if we should have a shared economy. Otherwise, in terms of information, access to passwords, and private data, we haven't talked about. (R13)

On the question of whether they knew if their partner actively used location services to track them, the large majority acknowledged that they did not. The respondents stressed that they did not think they would but could not be sure as it was not something they have never had a discussion about.

No, I don't think so. Or that would be if he's worried I'm late for school and want to check where I am. /.../ But otherwise, I don't think so. (R6)

As mentioned while discussing behaviors indicating isolation, the quote above rather displays the partners' care and consideration of his girlfriend than tendencies of control. Nevertheless, as it is something that also appears to be unsaid in young romantic relationships, the possibility that the functions are being misused without the partners' awareness, is still prevalent. This could be interpreted that some kind of ignorance is present among the respondents.

#### *5.4.2 The Last Active Function*

One smartphone function that almost all of the respondents express they use is the information about when their partner last were active on social media, for example, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or WhatsApp. The information is provided by different social media applications and is usually displayed beside the alias of the user or/and in the chat. Hence, it is difficult not to take notice of the information while contacting someone. The following quotes exemplifies situations where the respondents use the last active function.

Yes, maybe I use it sometimes if I don't get an answer in a long time, you were online 15 minutes ago and did not answer [me] in three hours. /.../ haha it is a fully developed monitoring system (R9)

Maybe you don't actively do it, but I would say that I look there pretty instant if I don't get an answer in a long time. Check Messenger and then, okay , he hasn't been active, maybe he's attending a meeting or doing something else, or this phone ran out of battery. (R13)

Using the information of when their partner last was active on social media, is by the respondents presented as an indicator to know what their partner is doing, or as an explanation why they have not answered their messages. As stressed in the first quote (R9), it seems like the respondents are aware that different smartphone functions can be used for interpersonal surveillance. However, when this is reasoned about, it is often with an ironic undertone, as it is something that never would concern them.

### *5.4.3 The sharing behaviors of others*

During the interviews, I also asked the respondents how they thought that other people in romantic relationships behave. A common apprehension, no matter their own age, was that surveillance behavior is more present among people younger than themselves. One of the youngest respondents stressed that people at her own age grew up with smartphones and how that has affected them, it has become a norm. Nonetheless, she also denotes that it depends on personality which applications people use and that the extent can vary a lot.

Generation Z is huge, the technology has changed a lot during that time. So the debate about social media and how it is used in school, for example, has changed. It is not possible to do a group task in school without social media. It's a big deal whether you want it or not, you got to have it. /.../ Also, we are so used to it since we had it from the age of 13, it has become the norm. (R6)

The respondent does not mention any specific situation that could be interpreted or linked to any kind of surveillance. Though, she does explain that sharing of location services is common, both among friends and partners, and that it is a big part of social life.

### *5.4.4 Covid-19 Pandemic*

The last aspect beyond the themes concerns the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. As a majority of the respondents living together with their partners, it became apparent during the interviews that questions regarding location services, or for example, how they kept themselves updated about each other during the day, were not relevant. This because many of the respondents were working from home with their partner and saw each other all the time. One respondent expressed it the following way.

At the moment, it's like, if someone walks out of the door, you know exactly where they're going, [because] you're not supposed to go anywhere (R11)

Another perspective of this “involuntary surveillance” taking place while working from home is that it potentially could trigger a continuous controlling behavior online.

## 6. Concluding Discussion

This master thesis is based on the research question of how young people reason about TFCC in romantic relationships. The research aim has been to collect, analyze and discover whether this group of people perceive the usage of TFCC as something unproblematic or even normalized. Addressing the current international debate of the digital dimension of interpersonal violence, the research problem is highly relevant from a policy perspective. To answer the aim of the research, the normalization process has been applied and developed into the two specific research questions; *1) How young people reason about displace and extinguish of boundaries, and 2) in what ways young people perceive limitations of their social life space?*

The concluding discussion is divided into the following three parts. First, the main findings are presented and critically discussed. Second, the research questions are answered, and lastly, policy implications and future research is taken into account.

How do young people reason about TFCC in romantic relationships then? One of this study's main findings is that people build their reasoning upon trust and sharing behaviors. As demonstrated in the analysis, the reasoning around behaviors linked to TFCC varies, which is illustrated with the four ideal types; The Trustful, the Confident, the Suspicious, and the Controlled. Another main finding is the level of normalization (Figure 3) and where the ideal types here are positioned.

Figure 3 presents that the Trustful and the Controlled are ideal types with a high tendency of normalizing behaviors linked to TFCC. This result confirms existing literature arguing that persons with high smartphone adoption are likely to engage in unauthorized access and smartphone snooping (Marques et al. 2019). Though, as mentioned earlier, previous research also stresses the significance of trust and that it is foremost when the trust is questioned, behaviors change (Muisse et al. 2014). Acknowledging previous research, my main contribution is that the shift from living in a trustful relation to a controlled one is not necessarily apparent and may occur with consciousness from only one side.

My main findings confirm the claim by Park et al. (2018), sharing is generally a sign of trust and trust is indeed an essential part of romantic relationships. However, as the majority of my

respondents were living with their partners, this might have affected the expressed feeling of trust among the respondents.

According to the results, geographical distance i.e. long-distance relationships, did not show any effect on the respondents' reasoning around TFCC, thus, emphasizing the findings by Tokunaga (2011). However, the validity of this result can be questioned as the sample only covers two respondents in long-distance relationships.

Answering the specific research questions, the material expresses that young people do have a pretty clear perception of their boundaries and what behaviors they perceive as an intrusion of privacy. The respondents do not show any examples of displace and extinguish of boundaries, nor own experience of having their social life space limited because of a controlling partner.

As explained in the analysis, Figure 3 only displays the initial part of the level of normalization. The interview material display different thoughts and reasonings around TFCC, yet, none of them continues beyond the first step of normalization. Situations that indicate tendencies of isolation are found, but not in the sense that they imply the following step towards normalization of controlling behaviors. It can be questioned whether the second step of the normalization process, isolation, is taken into account. Reflecting over this, I consider it essential to address the initial ambition and expectation that this would have been found.

Providing a qualitative method with an innovative design, this thesis present how young people in romantic relationships think about a relatively new phenomenon (TFCC). Addressing the question of digital integrity and trust, the research contributes with a first insight about how people perceive smartphone habits that could cause interpersonal harm. Regarding future research, there are multiple questions that still require to be investigated. As mentioned above, this study only emphasizes the first part of the level of normalization. A suggestion of further research is to investigate the continuing levels.

Focusing specifically on young people in romantic relationships, the generality of my findings needs to be discussed. The results of the study can only speak for this group of people. It is possible that behaviors that may intrude on digital integrity are more present among other groups of people or perceived differently on the level of normalization. Regarding the generality of smartphone behaviors, how people reason, and when preventive measures are

needed, more studies need to be performed. Favorably, scholars pay further attention to teenagers under 18 years. This is of interest because of several aspects. Firstly, due to the depth of smartphone adoption. Secondly, based on the existing presumption that behaviors linked to TFCC here are present. Lastly, because of the importance of protecting under-aged persons.

Concluding this study, I argue that most people do live in trustful relationships where they share information with each other based on consent. Nevertheless, when a lot of information and accounts are being shared, it is difficult to stay aware of if someone uses them in a surveilling manner. As expressed in the interviews, sharing- and smartphone behaviors are not something that partners discuss in general. Neither are they aware if their partner actively uses location services to keep track of them. Smartphone surveillance might not be normalized, but the material do reflect attitudes of naivety among the respondents. This signals a requirement of policies implying the risks and considerations how people may protect themselves.

Recalling the research aim, this thesis suggests that TFCC is not normalized among young people in romantic relationships. However, as the topic seldom is pronounced, neither between partners nor in the public debate, it is possible that the phenomenon will increase. Policy implications could prevent such a development. Governmental responsibility needs to be addressed just as information about digital integrity and the potential risks of generous sharing behaviors. Because as one of my respondents articulates: "When you think about it, it's not totally clear what's okay and what's not."

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Interview Information

# INTERVJUSTUDIE

## Hej!

Jag heter Ellinor och skriver den här terminen min masteruppsats i International Administration and Global Governance på Statsvetenskapliga institutionen vid Göteborgs Universitet. Nu letar jag efter personer som kan tänka sig att ingå i en kvalitativ intervjustudie på temat **Ungas mobilvanor i parrelationer**.

Jag söker dig som är mellan 18- 30 år och befinner dig i en parrelation. Intervjuerna hålls på svenska över zoom under mars månad och beräknas att pågå ca en timma. Du som deltar är givetvis *anonym*.

---

Är du målgrupp för studien och tycker att detta låter intressant?  
Hör av dig till mejladressen nedan.

**Det skulle betyda så mycket för mig om du vill delta!**

Bästa hälsningar,  
Ellinor Snickars  
[gussniel@student.gu.se](mailto:gussniel@student.gu.se)

## **\*Translation**

### **INTERVIEW STUDY**

Hello!

My name is Ellinor, and I am writing my master's thesis in International Administration and Global Governance at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg this semester. Now I am searching for people willing to participate in a qualitative interview study on the topic; Young people's smartphone habits in romantic relationships.

I am looking for you who are between 18-30 years old and are in a relationship. The interviews are held in Swedish over Zoom during March and are estimated to last about an hour. You who participate are, of course, anonymous.

Are you a target group for the study, and think this sounds interesting?

Please send an email to the address below.

Best regards,

Ellinor Snickars

## 8.2 Interview Guide

### **Theme A: Smartphone Habits**

1. What type of mobile phone do you have?
2. How do you use your smartphone, and how much?
3. Can you tell me about how you use smartphones in your relationship?
  - Do you keep each other updated during the day?
4. Are there situations where you use your partner's mobile phone?
  - Can you give an example of a situation of when that could happen?

### **Theme B: Sharing of Information**

5. What information do you and your partner share with each other?
  - Can you give examples of what information your partner has access to?
6. Do you share this information undoubtedly?
  - Is there something you do not share?
  - Do you use the "last active function"?
6. Have you ever regretted not sharing any specific information?
  - Or, on the contrary, that you have regretted what you have shared?
7. Has the sharing been the same throughout your relationship?
  - Has it changed?
  - Is sharing behaviors something you had talked about before you started sharing?
  - Have there been situations where you have been insecure about how much you should share with your partner?
9. What is your impression of sharing behaviors in the relationships of others, such as your friends?

### **Theme C: Adaptation and Limitations**

10. Are there situations where you choose not to share or write certain things because you know your partner can see your activity online? (Whom your conversation with, where are you, etc.?)

- Do you remember / can you describe such a situation?
- Are there certain things or places you give up because your partner knows about it or can see that you are there? (insolation)

11. If you think about previous relationships, what did it look like then?

12. Do you know if your partner actively uses location services to find out where you are?

- In what kind of situation can it be?

### **Theme D: Boundaries and Integrity**

13. Can you come up with behaviors that you would perceive as an intrusion of your privacy?

- (Previous relationships) What is different in this relationship?
- Do you remember any situation when you felt that you or your partner crossed the line?

14. Is this something you discuss in your relationship?

- Do you agree on how you use mobile phones in your relationship or what information you share?

15. Are there situations when it is okay to use your partner's mobile phone without their consent?

### **Concluding Questions**

16. Those were my questions, is there anything you have been thinking about or want to add?

17. Reflections over the interview. Was it like you had imagined?

18. If you have any questions or concerns - contact me!

## 8.3 Table of Respondents

### RESPONDENT 1

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 22 years old

**Occupation:** Studying

**Living situation:** By herself in a city

### RESPONDENT 2

**Gender:** Man

**Age:** 29 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With parents in a city

### RESPONDENT 3

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 24 years old

**Occupation:** Studying/ working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

### RESPONDENT 4

**Gender:** Man

**Age:** 28 years old

**Occupation:** Studying/ working

**Living situation:** With family in a smaller city (married)

### RESPONDENT 5

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 27 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** By herself in a city (long-distance relationship)

### RESPONDENT 6

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 19 years old

**Occupation:** Studying

**Living situation:** With parents in a city

### RESPONDENT 7

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 18 years old

**Occupation:** Studying

**Living situation:** With parents in the countryside

### RESPONDENT 8

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 27 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city (engaged)

### RESPONDENT 9

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 28 years old

**Occupation:** Studying /working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

### RESPONDENT 10

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 25 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

### RESPONDENT 11

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 22 years old

**Occupation:** Studying

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

### RESPONDENT 12

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 30 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

### RESPONDENT 13

**Gender:** Man

**Age:** 24 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city (have had a long-distance relationship)

### RESPONDENT 14

**Gender:** Man

**Age:** 22 years old

**Occupation:** Studying

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

### RESPONDENT 15

**Gender:** Woman

**Age:** 23 years old

**Occupation:** Studying

**Living situation:** With partner in the countryside (engaged)

### RESPONDENT 16

**Gender:** Man

**Age:** 27 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city (engaged)

### RESPONDENT 17

**Gender:** Man

**Age:** 21 years old

**Occupation:** Working

**Living situation:** With partner in a city

