HELPP Zone: Towards Protecting College Students from Dating Violence

Amirreza Masoumzadeh[1], Lei Jin[1], James Joshi[1], Rose Constantino[2]
[1]School of Information Sciences, [2]School of Nursing, University of Pittsburgh
[amm215, lej17, jjoshi, rco100] @ pitt.edu

Abstract

Dating violence is a type of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) which is a serious, preventable public health and social justice issue. If dating violence is left unchecked, it can bring short term and long term negative effects to survivors, especially college students who are developing emotionally. We built a mobile application called HELPP Zone (Health, Education on safety, and Legal Participant Preferred) for college students to protect them against potential dating violence. In the HELPP Zone, a user can set a list of trusted contacts and her schedule, and reach them for help based on the context (user's location, schedule and status) when potential violence occurs. The HELLP Zone is our first step towards creating a platform to end dating violence.

Keywords: dating violence, protection, mobile application

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious, preventable public health problem. It is described as physical, sexual, or psychological harm inflicted by a current or former partner or spouse (CDC 2011). Dating violence is a type of IPV and has brought serious public health and social justice issues to people, especially the young who may not report it because they are afraid to tell friends and family (Black and others 2010; CDC 2012). If the dating violence is left unchecked, it will bring short term and/or long term negative effects to the survivors (Catallozzi and others 2011). Young people are developing physically, emotionally, and socially are heavily influenced by their relationship experiences. Unhealthy, abusive or violent relationships have negative proximate and long term consequences (Claiborne 2012; Garcia and others 2012). For example, survivors of dating violence are more likely to have poor grades, school attendance, and disruptive behaviors. They may binge drink, attempt suicide, and argue and fight with friends and family.

There have been few mobile apps developed recently with the goal of preventing violence. Circle of 6 (2011) allows a user to choose a group consisting of six trusted contacts, and provides quick communication with them if needed. OnWatch (2011) is a similar solution with few additional pay-only features. However, in both of these apps, the group of trusted friends is static and cannot adapt to the various needs of a user in different situations. For example, if a student is in the university area, she may include classmates, who may not be useful if she needs help in a different geographic area as on a spring break or vacationing at home with family. Furthermore, a user may not choose to include her parents as trusted contacts in every situation. She might prefer to ask for help from a close friend or sibling in difficult dating situations. We believe that such context-focused dynamic contact grouping is necessary in order to be in touch with the most appropriate contact or resource which the HELPP Zone app provides.

We built a mobile app, called HELPP Zone (Health, Education on safety, and Legal Participant Preferred) to prevent potential and escalating dating violence. In building the HELPP Zone App, we addressed the fundamental paradigm of Diffusion of Disruptive Innovations (DDI) (Fisher and Clayton 2012). A DDI is defined as a deliberately and intentionally developed product that functions as a disruptive innovative tool. The HELPP Zone app was designed as a simple product that enters the transformative service arena as a common activity. It offers an inexpensive and convenient service that has the potential to be diffused as a disruptive tool in preventing or stopping relationship violence among

college students. It provides several ways of disrupting an ongoing or escalating dating or intimate partner violence through just-in-time communication and intervention from and by appropriate and trusted contacts. In HELPP Zone, a user selects a dynamic list of trusted contacts, which are called helpers. Helpers can be reached by text messaging or phone calls based on the user's geographic location, time of day and need. In addition, the app is equipped with information (e.g. safety tips) that are ticker tape-like cues or messages to detect a controlling date/partner, to exit from a beginning violent episode or de-escalate a violent situation (Constantino and others 2007). The HELPP Zone app is free and currently available for Android as an inexpensive and widespread platform (HELPP 2012). We will make it available on other popular platforms such as iOS in the near future.

HELPP Zone Features

In the followings, we describe the settings and safety features available in the HELPP Zone app. These features are demonstrated in Figure 1.

User Settings

Status. In HELPP Zone, a user can set her status (or statuses), which represent her current situation, e.g., walking, biking, dating, in a restaurant, in a mall, etc. The user's status can be automatically updated based on her event/location.

Event. A user can define a series of events in the location tab, shown in in Figure 1.B and 1.C. Each event determines the user's status, the time when it will be active, the period that the event lasts, and as an option, the location where the event is taking place. An event can be either one time (e.g., a specific date) or periodic (walking or biking).

Helpers. A user can choose contacts that she can store in the mobile phone as helpers. These are user-trusted contacts that are known by her as individuals who will come to her rescue unconditionally without hesitation or being judgmental (Figure 1.D and 1.E). The helpers are either active or inactive based on the user's current status. During emergencies, a user can press the "Call 911" button at the "Action" screen, to quickly dial 911 and be transferred to the call screen of the phone.

Safety Feature: Calling Emergency Numbers

Call 911. During emergencies, a user can press the "Call 911" button at the "Action" screen, to quickly dial 911 and be transferred to the call screen of the phone.

Call Hotlines. By pressing the "Hotlines" button at the "Action" screen, a user is given the choice of calling one of the essential national hotlines.

Call Campus Emergency. College students would be more efficiently served if they call campus police for unwanted or reportable events in the campus area, or other safety-related offices in a specific university as shown in Figure 1.F and 1.G. A user may call emergency numbers that are available in the application database, such as campus police, sexual assault services based on her choice of a university in the settings page.

Safety Feature: Situation-Aware Helpers

Different set of helpers may be trusted and contacted for different situations. Helpers become active depending on the user's current situation which consists of user's current status(es), location and timestamp. When the user selects a helper, she could indicate in what status the helper should be reached (Figure 1.E). When it is in the time span of an event and a user is in the corresponding location (if specified), the user's status is updated to the specified status based on the pre-defined user's schedule. Such dynamic update to the user's status(es) provides situation-awareness to the application which is needed for selecting appropriate helpers.

Safety Feature: Asking for Help

When there is at least one active helper based on a user's current situation, the user can reach active helpers through the following ways:

Call Me. Suppose the user is in a situation where she needs to stop an unwanted or unconsented activity in a non-noticeable way an incoming call to her phone can give her a chance to disrupt the activity and let her helpers know of any potential threat to her. By pressing the "Call Me" button, a prepared message, as shown in Figure 1.H, will be drafted to be sent to the helpers that reads: "HELPP: Please give me a call. I need to pretend I am talking to you".

Need Help Here. When a user needs to let her helpers know about her location, she can use this function: Need Help Here as shown in Figure 1.I. A prepared message, which contains the location coordinates of the user and current street address, will be drafted to be sent to the helper(s).

Ask Something. When a user needs to consult her helpers, a prepared message will be drafted to be sent to the helpers by pressing the button: Ask Something

Figure 1. HELPP Zone's features

Safety Feature: Educational Resources

Multiple educational resources are available to the users by tapping the Resources icon on the "Action" screen.

On-Screen Ticker Tape Tips. As shown in Figure 1.A, HELPP Zone includes a push-like feature that shows quick safety messages on a message bar at the bottom of the "Action" screen. These messages are educational and informational but short and non-intrusive. A different message is displayed each time the user opens the application or goes to the home tab. The user has the option of circling through the messages by tapping on the message bar.

Safety Instructions. We provide concise safety instructions for intimate partner violence survivors, including protective tips when the user is at/away from home, including tips on rights, reporting, legal and law enforcement processes. As shown in Figure 1.J, a user can press the "Resources" button to check out these instructions.

Conclusions

In this paper, we introduced a mobile application, called HELPP Zone, for college students to prevent or disrupt potential dating violence. Technology is here to stay. It can be used as a sword or as a shield (IOM 2012). Our next step is to examine the acceptability and feasibility of the HELPP Zone app among college students through evidence-based research and respond to these questions: Would someone use this app? In what way will users of HELPP Zone become engaged and feel rewarded? What are the risks in disrupting ongoing dating violence by text messaging and/or calling helpers/emergency numbers? Will the educational materials (tips and instructions) and resources help in identifying beginning signs of abusive and coercive dating behaviors? Will the ease and period-of-time of app use inform the user to visit only safe and popular dating venues that are data-based on the crime rates in the location of and the ratings of the venues?

References

Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., Chen, J., & Stevens M. R. (2010). The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey (NISVS): 2010 summary report, Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf

Catallozzi, M., Simon, P. J., Davidson, L. L., Breitbart, V., & Rickert, V. I. (2011). Understanding control in adolescent and young adult relationships. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.*, 165(4), 313-319.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). National Youth Risk Behavior Survey Overview. , Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/vrbs/pdf/us_overview_yrbs.pdf, Accessed on February 19, 2012.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012). Dating matters: strategies to promote healthy teen relationships. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/DatingMatters_flyer.pdf, Accessed on February 2, 2012.

Claiborne, Liz Inc. (2012). Love is not abuse. Retrieved from http://loveisnotabuse.com/web/guest/college_introduction

CircleOf6. Retrieved from www.circleof6app.com, Accessed on September 16, 2012.

Constantino, R. E., Crane P. A., Noll B. S., Doswell W. M., & Braxter B. (2007). Exploring the feasibility of email-mediated interaction in survivors of abuse. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*,14, 291-301.

Fisher, J., & Clayton, M. (2012). Who gives a tweet: Assessing patients' interest in the use of social media for healthcare. *Worldviews on Evidence-based Nursing*, 2nd quarter, 100-108.

Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000). The sexual victimization of college women. *National Institute of Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics*, NCJ 182369.

Garcia, C. M., Lechner, K. E., Frerich, E. A., Lust, K. A., & Eisenberg, M. E. (2012). Preventing sexual violence instead of just responding to it: Students' perceptions of sexual violence resources on campus. Journal of Forensic Nursing, 61-71.

HELPP Zone, Retrieved from www.sis.pitt.edu/~leijin/HELPP.html

Institute of Medicine (2012). Communication and technology for violence prevention. Washington DC: National Academies Press.

OnWatch, Retrieved from www.onwatchoncampus.com