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Feature article

Digital forms of dating violence – what school nurses need to know

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Abstract:

A substantial amount of U.S. teenagers experience physical or sexual abuse within their romantic relationship. With recent technological advances, teenage dating violence can also be perpetrated digitally by harassing or controlling a romantic partner through the Internet or mobile phone. **School nurses might have to act as first responders for victims of an abusive romantic relationship.** As online and offline forms of dating violence are often intertwined, it is imperative that school nurses are able to identify different types of digital dating violence, as this could signal the presence of offline forms of dating abuse. Therefore, being able to interpret potential warning signs could help school nurses to play an active role in prevention and intervention of different types of dating violence. **In this article, we provide** an overview of the recent research on the context and consequences of cyber dating abuse and outline several suggestions for prevention and intervention.

Keywords:

1. cyber dating abuse;
2. media;
3. interpersonal violence;
4. violence;
5. abuse

Digital forms of dating violence – what school nurses need to know

Teenage dating violence, which includes physical, emotional or sexual abuse within a dating or romantic relationship is identified as a public health concern by the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC, 2016), and is considered to be a form of school violence by the *National Association of School Nurses* (2014). Offline forms of dating violence have a relatively high prevalence rate in adolescents' romantic relationships across the U.S. **The results from the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated** that 10.3% of teenagers had “been hit, slammed into something, or injured with an object or weapon on purpose by someone they were dating or going out with one or more times” in the 12 months prior to the survey (i.e., physical dating violence) (Kann et al., 2014, pp. 10-11). Likewise, 10.4% of the respondents had been “kissed, touched, or physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to by someone they were dating or going out with one or more times” (i.e., sexual dating violence) (Kann et al., 2014, p. 11). These types of dating violence are not the only ways young people can be victimized by their romantic partner. Similar to other forms of violence and abuse, such as (cyber)bullying or grooming, digital media have opened up additional avenues for perpetrators to target and harm their victims.

What is cyber dating abuse?

Digital forms of dating violence, also known as cyber dating abuse, can be defined as the “control, harassment, stalking, and abuse of one’s dating partner via technology and social media” (Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014, p. 1306). Cyber dating abuse includes a wide range of abusive behaviors, including those which emotional or psychological in nature, such as insulting or threatening a romantic partner through digital media, or accessing the partner’s

personal messages on social media or e-mail accounts without permission (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; Zweig et al., 2014). Other types of cyber dating abuse can be sexually motivated, such as pressuring the partner to send a naked picture of himself/herself or pressuring a partner in other types of sexual acts via digital media, when he or she does not want to (Zweig et al., 2014). Examples of the different types of cyber dating abuse that have been used to measure the behavior in various empirical studies are included in Table 1. As with other types of abuse, some forms of cyber dating abuse differ from traditional dating violence in that perpetrators can potentially target their victims anytime and anywhere, which makes it more difficult for them to escape the abuse (Stonard, Bowen, Walker, & Price, 2015). Moreover, the perpetrators might not be confronted immediately with the (emotional) consequences of their actions. They cannot see the victim being sad or upset, making it more difficult for them to assess the damage that their behavior has caused and they might therefore feel less inhibited to act in an abusive way towards their romantic partner (Borrajo et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Vandebosch, 2014).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

How prevalent is cyber dating abuse?

Researchers have only recently started to investigate the prevalence and context in which cyber dating abuse occurs (Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014). Temple et al. (2016) found in their large-scale study in southeast Texas that 22.3% of surveyed high school students had at least one experience of cyber dating abuse in the year leading up to the study. Zweig, Dank, Yahner, and Lachman (2013) found in another study among 7th to

12th grade youth in the northeastern U.S. that 26.3% of the participants reported cyber dating abuse victimization and 11.8% reported cyber dating abuse perpetration in the year prior to the survey. Within the Zweig et al. sample, 22.2% of youth had experienced non-sexual forms of cyber dating abuse and 11.2% had experienced sexual forms of cyber dating abuse, with females being more likely than males to become victim of sexually motivated forms of digital dating violence. With regard to perpetration, 2.7% reported their involvement in sexual cyber abuse and 10.5% of the respondents had perpetrated non-sexual cyber dating abuse. Females were more likely than males to perpetrate non-sexual forms of cyber dating abuse whereas males were more likely to perpetrate sexual cyber dating abuse. Some of the abuse has also been found to be reciprocal, with adolescents being both victim and perpetrator. Within the total sample, 8.6% of the respondents reported that they were both victim and perpetrator of cyber dating abuse (Zweig et al., 2013).

Cyber dating abuse is linked with other forms of abuse

Several **researchers** have found that youth who experience online forms of dating violence are also more likely to be victimized by offline forms of abuse (Dick et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2016; Zweig et al., 2013). **Results** among a clinical sample of adolescents seeking help in school-based health centers **show**, for instance, that youth who are exposed to cyber dating abuse have a higher chance of becoming a victim of sexual or physical forms of offline dating violence and non-partner sexual violence (i.e., sexual violence by someone that was not the respondent's romantic partner) than youth who did not experience digital forms of dating violence (Dick et al., 2014). **Temple et al. (2016) found in a longitudinal study that youth who experienced physical abuse at the first wave of the study were more likely to become**

victim of cyber dating abuse one year later. Similarly, youth who reported cyber dating abuse perpetration at the first time point were more likely to report victimization in the next wave of the survey. These **results** show that traditional dating violence often coexists with online forms of abuse, and that perpetrators run a higher risk to become victims themselves. Cyber dating abuse is also associated with offline bullying and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization (Borrajo et al., 2015; Yahner, Dank, Zweig, & Lachman, 2014).

Emotional, health and behavioral correlates of cyber dating abuse

Researchers have also focused on how cyber dating abuse among adolescents is related to emotional outcomes, health risk behaviors, and other forms of risk behavior. With respect to the potential emotional impact, cyber dating abuse perpetration has been longitudinally linked with anxious partner attachment (i.e., being afraid of losing the partner's love), and experiencing feelings of alienation toward the mother (Wright, 2015). However, the majority of these studies have been conducted by using cross-sectional designs, which renders it impossible to determine whether the reported correlates are a cause or a consequence of being a victim of cyber dating abuse. For instance, associations are found between being a victim of cyber dating abuse and experiencing depressive symptoms, and higher levels of anger and hostility (Zweig et al., 2014).

However, because of the nature of the data, it is impossible to disentangle whether these are predictors or consequences of cyber dating abuse victimization. Regardless of these limitations, it is important to recognize these associations, as they can provide more insight in the context in which cyber dating abuse takes place and the associated factors can act as potential warning signs of cyber dating abuse victimization.

From a health risk perspective, victims of cyber dating abuse have been found to be more likely to engage in heavy episodic drinking (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, Walrave, & Temple, 2016). With regard to sexual behaviors and sexual risk behaviors, victims are more likely to report sexually activity (Zweig et al., 2014), a higher amount of lifetime sexual partners (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016), and not using protection at the last sexual encounter (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Among a clinic-based sample of victims seeking help, Dick et al. (2014) found that victimization was linked with engagement in various sexual behaviors for both male and female patients, and contraceptive non-use and reproductive coercion among females.

Furthermore, **researchers** have found that cyber dating abuse victimization has been associated with a more risky lifestyle. Zweig et al. (2014) found that involvement in a variety of delinquent behaviors (e.g., bringing a weapon to school, vandalism, or attempted theft) was linked with cyber dating abuse victimization. The association between cyber dating abuse victimization and engagement in risk behaviors is not only limited to offline contexts. Adolescents who send sexually explicit pictures of themselves to their romantic partner or who engage in other online risk behaviors, such as talking to strangers online or sending online information to someone they never had met face-to-face, were more likely to become victim of cyber dating abuse than those who had not engaged in these online risk behaviors (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016). Participating in these offline and online risk behaviors could make adolescents more vulnerable to become victim of abuse, as they might find themselves more often in situations in which adults who can provide protection are absent, such as parents or teachers (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, et al., 2016).

Adolescents' own perceptions about cyber dating abuse

Qualitative researchers have identified attitudes and behaviors that might facilitate cyber dating abuse within adolescents' romantic relationships. One of these facilitators is the practice of sharing pin codes and passwords of cell phones and social networking accounts as a token of love and mutual trust at the beginning of a romantic relationship, or because their romantic partner demanded it (Baker & Carreño, 2015; Stonard et al., 2015; Joris Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2016). By doing so, adolescents might render themselves vulnerable to various types of controlling behaviors and monitoring. **This has been evidenced by data on cyberbullying, that demonstrated that adolescents who shared passwords, were more vulnerable to becoming a victim of cyberbullying (Walrave & Heirman, 2011).** Moreover, the monitoring and controlling behaviors are often caused by feelings of jealousy and the fear that the romantic partner could meet someone else or be unfaithful. The ease with which digital media facilitate these contacts with others might foster these feelings of uncertainty (Baker & Carreño, 2015). Additionally, because of their inexperience with romantic relationships, adolescents might not yet know how to appropriately cope with feelings of uncertainty about their romantic relationship and might therefore resort to monitoring as a coping mechanism (Stonard et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, et al., 2016). Another factor that might contribute to abuse is the fact that some adolescents do not always identify abusive behaviors as such. Monitoring behaviors, like repeated calling, can be mistaken by the victim and the perpetrator as signs of love, concern and care and might be experienced as annoying rather than abusive. Adolescents may not have the same perceptions of what constitutes an abusive behavior as adults do and are therefore more permissive of abuse. These differing opinions of what constitutes healthy relationships might put them at risk for cyber dating abuse victimization (Baker & Carreño, 2015; Stonard et al., 2015).

Conclusion: What roles can school nurses play?

About a quarter of adolescents in a romantic relationship experience digital forms of dating violence (Temple et al., 2016; Zweig et al., 2013). Cyber dating abuse does not necessarily occur independently from other types of dating violence and risk behaviors (Temple et al., 2016; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, et al., 2016). Given that youth spend approximately a third of life in the school setting, school nurses can play an integral role, together with other members of the school team, to prevent cyber dating abuse from happening in the first place and to intervene when an incident arises (Freeman, Rosenbluth, & Cotton, 2013).

School nurses can prepare for this task by being aware that online and offline behaviors are becoming increasingly blurred in teens' lives, and making other members of the school staff aware of this reality. They should understand that digital dating abuse may be a risk marker for traditional dating violence and that victims of both online and offline dating violence might also be perpetrators and vice versa, as a substantial amount of dating violence is reciprocal in nature. **In order to determine prevalence and the effectiveness of implementation strategies, school climate surveys – administered to students, staff, teachers, and administrators – should include questions about traditional *and* digital forms dating abuse.**

Most importantly, school nurses can engage in conversations about digital dating abuse and healthy relationships with students. They can have information in the form of pamphlets and posters in their office to show teens that this is a serious form of abuse. This will also let students know that they can come to them if they encounter online or offline dating violence.

In order to engage in productive conversations with teenagers, it is important that school nurses are able to speak adolescents' language. They should become familiar and stay connected

with advances in technology. Next to finding information about e-safety and digital technologies through informative websites such as “On Guard Online,” operated by the United States Department of Homeland Security (<http://www.onguardonline.gov/>), they can also download and experiment with current social media Apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, Yik Yak, and Ask.fm. Experience with these applications will enable them to provide credible advice. **If school policies discourage downloading these and similar social media Apps, nurses and other school-based professionals should lobby for gaining access or acquainting themselves with these Apps through relevant websites.**

When discussing cyber dating abuse, conversations could focus on what constitutes healthy communication within a romantic relationship and signals that could lead to abuse. **For example, school nurses can** explain boundaries in contacting each other during the day and other ways to cope with jealousy in the context of digital media. By discussing examples and drawing on the teenagers’ own experiences, adolescents could be educated to distinguish abusive controlling and monitoring behaviors from genuine signs of love and care (Baker & Carreño, 2015). **Moreover, potential red flags can be identified, such as excessive contacting or demanding a partner to send a picture of where they are or who they are with to “prove” that they are telling the truth.**

As cyber dating abuse has been repeatedly linked with engagement in online risk behaviors, such as sharing passwords online or other information (Baker & Carreño, 2015; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, et al., 2016), school nurses could provide victims with advice about safe Internet use and they could provide a checklist on how adolescents can protect themselves against further victimization. Students should be counseled to never share their passwords with anyone as this is a common risk factor in online victimization. School nurses could draw on the expertise of the

technology coordinator or the school librarian to inform students about safer Internet use (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). Moreover, when confronted with a victim of cyber dating abuse, school nurses should, similar as when handling a cyberbullying incident, instruct the victim to save evidence of the behavior (such as screenshots, text messages or e-mail messages), as these could potentially be later used by counselors to confront the perpetrator and to engage in a discussion about healthy relationships and boundaries.

Lastly, school nurses can work with school administrators, educators, and staff in becoming familiar with and strengthening your school's curriculum and policies related to cyber abuse. They can also advocate the implementation of school-based universal and comprehensive healthy relationship programs that target the shared risk and protective factors of multiple risky behaviors (such as Fourth R; see www.youthrelationships.org). By following these steps school nurses can play an active role in the prevention and intervention of these digital forms of dating violence.

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Figure and Table captions:

Table 1: Examples of cyber dating abuse adapted from different empirical studies on cyber dating abuse (Borrajó, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, & Ortega-Ruíz, 2015; Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014).

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| <p>Emotional and psychological forms of abuse</p> <p><i>Controlling behaviors (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, & Ortega-Ruíz, 2015; Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• demanding know the passwords and pin codes to the mobile phone, social media, or e-mail accounts• reading and checking the romantic partner’s mobile phone, social networking messages, text messages, e-mail messages without permission• controlling the whereabouts of the romantic partner by repeatedly asking what the partner is doing and with whom• controlling and asking questions about the status updates and friend’s list of a romantic partners online profile page, or asking to remove certain friends from social media accounts• excessive calls or messages to check on the romantic partner• getting angry or upset with the partner when he or she does not respond to phone calls, text messages or social media postings <p><i>Threatening or humiliating (Borrajo et al., 2015; Zweig et al., 2014)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• spreading rumors, insulting (swearing or calling names), or humiliating the romantic partner by posting status updates, wall posts, pictures, or by creating social media profile pages• sending threatening text messages or e-mail messages• taking pictures or videos of the partner and distributing it without permission |
| <p>Sexual forms of cyber dating abuse (Zweig et al., 2014)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• sending sexually explicit pictures when you know that the partner does not want it• pressuring the romantic partner into sending self-made sexually explicit pictures• forcing the partner to engage in sexual acts against their will via the internet or the mobile phone |

Table 1: Examples of cyber dating abuse adapted from different empirical studies on cyber dating abuse (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; Sánchez, Muñoz-Fernández, & Ortega-Ruíz, 2015; Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014).