

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

# Cyber dating violence- a case report

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Cyber dating violence includes both the state of the victim to be harmed by threats, the dissemination of confidential information under the name of cyber violence, and the harassment of controlling the social relations of the victims, called cyber control, by constantly checking what they are doing on social media at any time. In the face of this type of violence that goes beyond spatial and geographical boundaries, the well-being of the victims is adversely affected because they consider the situation to be unresolved.

**Method:** In this case report, a 13-year-old girl who has been exposed to cyber dating violence will be mentioned.

**Findings:** After 3 months of virtual friendship with a 17-year-old man, whom this adolescent met on the computer games, she started to send him nude photos, they had virtual sex during the video call, the man guided her and offered to be a husband and wife with her during virtuel sex. It has been learned that she inserted a pen in front of the screen through his genitals and it hurt a lot. In the following days, they communicated to meet outside, the boy persuaded the teenage girl to take her home to introduce her to his family. The girl's family who followed them on their suspicions intervned in the situation, it became clear that they were faced with gang members. It has been revealed that throughout the time they communicated, the gang has collected a lot of data about the family's income level over the internet and social media and asked the girl's family for money through blackmail.

In conclusion; with the legal complaint of the family, the gang members received legal punishment and the adolescent girl was taken to psychiatric treatment with the diagnosis of "post-traumatic stress disorder".

**Keywords:** Cyber dating, violence, child abuse

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the widespread use of digital technologies has led to the emergence of online victims related to cyber dating. Cyber dating violence is also associated with other bullying behaviors, and its harmful effects are more pronounced in females (Miller, et al., 2018).

Many adolescents use the internet to socialize, initiate social relationships through virtual networks, initiate romantic relationships, and maintain communication with their peers and lovers. This trend has been increasing recently. The widespread internet use not only makes life easier but also increases harassment, controlling and abusive behaviors since it stretches interpersonal boundaries (Galende, et al., 2020), and dating violence plays a mediating role in committing crimes (Cava, et al., 2020a).

Cyber dating violence is defined as repetitive controlling, harassing or damaging behaviors toward a current or former lover, and it includes frequently visiting the person's profile on social networks, sending offending or threatening messages, spreading negative information about the person, stealing or abusing one's social media passwords (Galende, et al., 2020).

Cyber dating violence can also lead to a range of harmful consequences, ranging from demanding obscene photographs from the other party to acts of sexual oppression and coercion (Muñoz-Fernández, et al., 2023). In recent years, sextortion acts, which take place in online sessions in the form of threatening the other person to share sexual images and forcing the victim to share more sexual images for sexual or other purposes, pose a serious threat to youth.

It has been reported that sexual harassment victimizations lead to serious consequences, which is often associated with adolescent dating violence (Wolak et al. 2018). The study by Wolak et al. (2018), one of the studies on this subject, reported that 60% of underage youth knew the perpetrators at the time they were exposed to sexual harassment, and they often defined these people as their romantic relationship partners. Most of them (75%) stated that they sent their

pictures voluntarily, while 67% reported that they felt pressured to send these pictures. It was indicated that one-third of these individuals were physically threatened and stayed under threat for more than 6 months, half did not disclose the event, and very few reported the situation to the police. Furthermore, it was argued that underage victims were subjected to increased pressure by their aggressive flirts or sexual partners to initially send sexually explicit pictures, were repeatedly asked for pictures, were exposed to threats for more than six months, and were encouraged to harm themselves (Wolak, et al., 2018).

Cyber dating violence is becoming increasingly problematic. The increase in technological communication involved in adolescents' romantic relationships increases the possibility of mutual attachment due to easy accessibility (Cava, et al., 2020b). The fact that males and females become cyber control victims is rather related to their partners' high levels of anxious attachment. Females' committing cyber control crime is associated with high levels of anxious attachment, both for themselves and their partners. It was suggested that males' committing cyber control crimes was related to the increase in their anxious attachment level rather than their partners (Laforte, et al., 2023). According to another study on this subject, it was argued that anxious attachment was related to psychological cyber dating violence, stalking victimization and perpetration. It was reported that avoidant attachment was associated with both psychological cyber dating violence victimization and perpetration and sexual cyber dating violence victimization. The youth usually tend to view control, cyber stalking, and harassment behaviors as evidence of love rather than cyber dating violence (Fernet, et al., 2023).

In adolescents, the frequency of victimization due to cyber dating violence was stated as 12-56% (Stonard, et al., 2014). A study evaluating the rates of perpetration and victimization of cyber dating crime in adolescents separately reported the frequency of victimization as 12-56% and the rate of perpetration as 12-54% (Stonard, et al., 2017). This type of dating violence is defined as

being controlled, harassed, threatened, stalked, and harassed by current or former lovers through technology and social media (Cava, et al., 2020b).

Studies argue that cyber dating violence is associated with increased rates of depression and anxiety in victims, an increased tendency to describe relationships as an ambiguous process in general, an increase in antisocial behavior, and an increase in coercion (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Cyber dating violence leads to adverse consequences in terms of mental health, including suicidal tendencies (Miller, et al., 2018). Furthermore, it causes emotional and psychological distress and decreased self-esteem (Cava, et al., 2020a). Dating violence poses a risk in terms of disrupting the psychological well-being of adolescents and establishing good relationships in the future (Muñoz-Fernández et al. 2023). It was reported that exposure to cyber dating violence, both as a victim and a perpetrator, or in both cases, was associated with low self-perception and psychological problems in adolescents. Cyber aggression was also found to be associated with an increase in self-esteem (Smith, et al., 2018).

The victimization related to electronic (cyber) dating violence is not different from the victimization in other dating violence events that young people are exposed to. It was stated that cyber dating violence was related to face-to-face physical dating violence. Risk factors for physical dating violence, such as bullying, were also revealed to be associated with cyber dating violence (Thulin, et al., 2021). Electronic sexual coercion includes the methods of applying pressure on the person to have sexual intercourse online. Sharing sexually explicit messages or images or sharing these private interactions online without permission is included in this coercion. This type of pressure can become threatening to the person (Thulin, et al., 2021).

Adolescence is a period when people are prone to being easily influenced. Some adolescents hand over their phone and social media passwords to their romantic partners to prove their deep commitment and love. This situation can lead adolescents to a danger that they are not aware of by facilitating the behaviors of being controlled

and watched, which are very typical for cyber dating violence (Galende, et al., 2020).

Cyber dating violence includes the behavior aimed at harming the victim by direct attacks (threats, etc.), the dissemination of confidential information under the name of cyber violence and the harassment of controlling the social relations of victims, which is called cyber control behavior, by constantly checking what they are doing on social media at any time. Cyber control behaviors are observed more commonly than cyber violence behaviors. These victims are constantly under cyberattack compared to offline dating, and it is much more difficult to avoid. In the face of this type of violence that transcends spatial and geographical boundaries, the well-being of victims is adversely impacted because they consider the situation unsolvable (Cava, et al., 2020b). Due to the possibility of being exposed to cyber dating violence at any time and in any situation, cyber dating violence can qualitatively lead to more negative consequences than traditional, in other words, face-to-face dating violence (Cava, et al., 2020a).

It was argued that victims who were frequently exposed to cyber dating violence had lower family-oriented self-concepts, had more communication problems with their mothers, felt more depressed and lonely, and had lower life satisfaction levels compared to individuals occasionally exposed to cyber dating violence. A correlation was reported between feeling more lonely and being exposed to cyber dating violence. Social isolation is often desired by aggressors who want to control their victims more easily (Cava, et al., 2020a).

Being a victim of cyber violence by a romantic partner was reported to be associated with face-to-face psychological, physical, and sexual partner violence experiences (Marganski & Melander, 2018).

The present case report addresses a 13-year-old female who was exposed to cyber dating violence:

AB is a 13-year-old female. She is the eldest child of a conservative family. She has a seven-year-old brother. It was thought that she looked older

than her age in terms of her external appearance and her self-care was appropriate. She is a seventh-grade student. It was stated that she had on good terms with her friends at school. Her academic achievement was rated as below average. A domestic conflict was not described. Her mother was reported as a housewife, and her father as a tradesman with an income level above the average. It was indicated that AB was not allowed to meet with friends outside of school due to the conservative family structure. Her girlfriends came to their house sometimes, and her mother offered them treats. It was stated that AB frequently asked permission from her family to meet with her friends, they had conflicts with her mother because of this, and AB's angry attitude toward her mother about this issue had emerged recently.

It was expressed that AB started playing computer games for 3 months and started making friends online with some of the people there. One and a half months ago, AB met a person named SO in the game environment, then they continued a virtual friendship, SO introduced himself as a 17-year-old high school student, and after virtual conversations, their friendship level progressed and turned into flirting, they called each other over video calls and video chatted. AB said that she became very attached to SO over time, found him very reliable, and thought they started a long-term relationship. It was learned that SO introduced himself to AB as a very reliable and caring person. It was revealed that SO started to ask for money from AB to pay his phone credits or debts in the 3rd week of their acquaintance. AB could not resist him and sent the money that she had set aside from her own pocket money. It was found that AB gave all the social media passwords to SO to prove the degree of her commitment to their relationship. SO followed AB very closely on social media, was jealous about this issue, they had a quarrel about this issue, he pressured AB to restrict her communication with other people, AB attributed these behaviors to SO's great love for her and did not display a reaction. Over time, at the insistence of SO, AB started to send him nude photographs, they had virtual sex during the video call, she took off her clothes because SO wanted to see her naked in

the video environment, and one day, during the virtual sex, when SO offered to be husband and wife and directed her, she inserted a pen into her genitals in front of the screen, blood came out during this, and she was very hurt and afraid. After this incident, SO told her that they were now husband and wife and he wanted to meet outside. Saying that she was attached to SO with love, AB said that she found a way to meet him on the weekend, left the house by making up an excuse for her mother, and went to meet with SO at the specified place and time. She stated that SO took her by the hand at the meeting place and said that he would take her to his house and that it was very natural since they were now husband and wife, and he wanted to introduce her to his family. They got on a minibus and headed for another district, got off at the last stop and went to an apartment. It was learned that, in the meantime, her mother, who was suspicious of her behaviors and movements in the last days, followed her with her father, and AB found her father behind her just as they were about to enter the apartment. A person whom SO described as "my uncle" and several men were waiting for them in the apartment, AB's father threatened to report everyone there to the police station, but one of the adults there, who was described as "uncle," threatened her father with the video recordings in their hands.

It was learned that this team was a gang, SO was used as a tool, they had collected a lot of data about AB's family and their income level over the internet and social media during their conversation, and they wanted money from them through blackmail.

Despite all the threats, the father of AB reported this gang to the police and ensured that they were taken into custody, and the legal dimension of the process was started.

It was determined that, in this process, the family took AB from school, enrolled her in distance school, took the tablet computer and mobile phone from her and applied for psychiatric treatment, and that AB was taken under psychiatric treatment with the diagnosis of "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." It was revealed that AB felt like a useless individual



because of all these events, felt guilty for causing these problems to her family, cut off communication with people and did not trust anyone. It was found that the diagnosis of "major depression" accompanied the clinical picture as a comorbidity in the 2-month course following the acute event.

## 2. DISCUSSION

In this case report, as stated by Galende, et al., (2020), it was determined that AB used the internet as a tool to initiate a romantic relationship, and the use of the internet led to the dating violence crime in this case (Cava, et al., 2020a). As Galende, et al., (2020) and Cava, et al., (2020b) indicated, with the increased attachment due to technological communication, AB became attached to SO enough to give her social media passwords over time and in the cyber dating violence she was subjected to, SO wanted to control the people with whom she came into contact in the virtual environment and to limit the people she communicated with over time. It was found that AB considered these controlling behaviors as evidence of love rather than dating violence, as specified by Fernet, et al., (2023). Furthermore, as indicated by Muñoz-Fernández, et al., (2023) and Wolak, et al., (2018), AB was subjected to cyber dating violence in the form of acts of sexual oppression and coercion to send obscene photographs to the other party. In line with the findings of Wolak, et al., (2018) stating that 75% of underage youth send their pictures voluntarily, AB sent her nude pictures to SO voluntarily and was subsequently exposed to cyber dating violence.

The fact that after their relationship progressed, AB was persuaded by SO with the claim of "I'm taking you to meet my family" and taken to the house where the fraudulent and abusive gang was located, and following the involvement of her family, she was exposed to the threat of sharing sexually explicit messages or images or these private interactions in the virtual environment without permission is in line with the results of the study in which Thulin, et al., (2021) reported that cyber dating violence was associated with bullying and face-to-face physical dating violence. Moreover, these findings are in line with

the results reported by Marganski and Melander (2018), indicating that being a victim of cyber violence by a romantic partner is associated with face-to-face psychological, physical, and sexual partner violence experiences.

The fact that the cyber dating violence that AB was exposed to emerged at a time when she was in conflict with her mother is in line with the results of the study by Cava, et al., (2020a), which reported that victims frequently exposed to cyber dating violence had more communication problems with their mothers.

As reported in the studies by Hinduja and Patchin (2011), Cava, et al., (2020a), and Smith, et al., (2018), AB was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression and suffered psychological distress following this cyber dating violence. Furthermore, in line with the study by Muñoz-Fernández, et al., (2023), it was determined that AB experienced psychological problems and this situation posed a risk for establishing good relationships in the future.

## 3. CONCLUSION

Since adolescence is a much more vulnerable period mentally and emotionally, adolescents affected by cyber dating violence are more likely to develop mental illnesses such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Psychological problems with adverse impacts on self-esteem and deterioration of interpersonal relationships also negatively affect the mental health of society.

Considering the important psychological and social problems caused by cyber dating violence, it is clear that it is essential to take measures to prevent this situation. In this respect, it is necessary to evaluate the mental and emotional needs of age groups who are particularly vulnerable regarding exposure to cyber dating violence. It should be taken into account that especially the youth who have experienced violence in the family and society are also likely to be exposed to violence from their early relationships. Moreover, it is of great importance to arrange education programs for the youth on how to maintain healthy relationships.

Since cyber dating violence is associated with psychological distress and decreased self-esteem, the concepts of cyber dating violence and psychological violence are not very separate from each other. Hence, it is extremely important that programs aimed at preventing dating violence in schools also include cyber dating violence.

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