

# Characteristics of Online Adolescent Dating Abuse Perpetrators

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# Background

- Adolescents (aged between 10-18 years) begin to establish romantic relationships within this developmental period.
- There are benefits to these early relationships (i.e., self-worth), however there is also the potential for negative outcomes (i.e., abusive behaviour in these early relationships).
- The widespread use of digital technologies has created a new range of behaviours that can be considered abusive towards partners (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018).

# What 'abusive' behaviours may adolescents engage in online?

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# Background

- Adolescent online dating abuse has been defined as ‘the control, harassment, stalking and abuse of one’s current or former dating partner via technology and social media’ (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016, p. 147).
- Behaviours can include:
  - Cyber-control or monitoring (e.g., knowing the whereabouts of a partner at all times).
  - Cyber-harassment (e.g., repeated text messages or phone calls).
  - Cyber-psychological and direct aggression (e.g., making direct threats).
  - Sexual (e.g., sending sexual pictures of a partner to others without permission).

# Aim and Methodology

- Over recent years information regarding the factors that increase or decrease adolescents' risk for perpetrating online dating abuse has begun to emerge in the literature.
- It was felt an understanding of risk factors specific to this area would be relevant to for several reasons (e.g., for the assessment and risk management of perpetrators, to inform policy and prevention).
- My review therefore focused on completing a rapid evidence assessment to identify common risk factors and characteristics of perpetrators.

# Findings

Table 3. Themes emerged from analysis

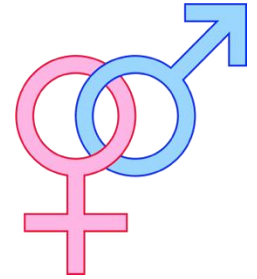
| Theme | Theme title                | Subtheme                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | Demographic                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender (<math>n = 16</math>)</li><li>• Age (<math>n = 6</math>)</li><li>• Race (<math>n = 4</math>)</li><li>• Adverse Childhood Experiences (<math>n = 4</math>)</li><li>• Health (<math>n = 3</math>)</li><li>• Academic Achievement (<math>n = 2</math>)</li></ul> |
| 2     | Internal processes         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attitudes (<math>n = 5</math>)</li><li>• Emotions (<math>n = 4</math>)</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 3     | Observable risk behaviours | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aggressive behaviours (<math>n = 5</math>)</li><li>• Behavioural indicators (<math>n = 3</math>)</li><li>• Technology Use (<math>n = 2</math>)</li></ul>                                                                                                             |
| 4     | Relationships with others  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family relationships (<math>n = 6</math>)</li><li>• Partner relationships (<math>n = 2</math>)</li><li>• Other relationships (<math>n = 2</math>)</li></ul>                                                                                                          |

*\* $n$  = number of studies the theme is identified in*

# Theme 1: Demographic

## 1a) Gender:

- Mixed results, differences in gender more likely when looking at specific behaviours.



## 1b) Age:

- Mixed results, majority found older adolescents were at greater risk.
- Two found the opposite, however limitations within these studies.



## 1c) Race:

- Mixed results.
- One study found 'black' ethnicity higher rate of overall dating abuse and one study found 'black' ethnicity higher risk for electronic harassment.



# Theme 1: Demographic

## 1d) Adverse Childhood Experiences:

- Higher levels of ACEs were at increased risk for all forms of dating abuse perpetration
- Poly-victimisation from peers/partners associated with higher incidence rates of dating abuse.



# Theme 1: Demographic

## 1e) Health:

- Physical health: Those who assessed their physical health to be poorer than their peers were more likely to engage in dating abuse.
- Mental health: Mixed results, some found depression and anxiety symptoms to be associated.



## 1f) Academic Achievement:

- No association for parental education and adolescents own academic performance and overall dating abuse.
- One significant association in terms of the perpetration of cyberstalking



# Theme 2: Internal Processes

## 2a) Attitudes:

- Norms for violence for boys against girls, myths of romantic love, sexist attitudes (hostile and benevolent sexism) and stereotypical gender and dating beliefs all found to be associated with perpetration.
- Many participants did not view monitoring behaviours as problematic
- Endorsement of sexting behaviour was associated with perpetration of all behaviours

## 2b) Emotions:

- Anger: no association
- Jealousy and insecurity: mixed results
- Emotional management: Destructive conflict resolution skills was found to be associated with higher odds of perpetration.



# Theme 3: Observable Risk Factors

## 3a) Aggressive Behaviours:

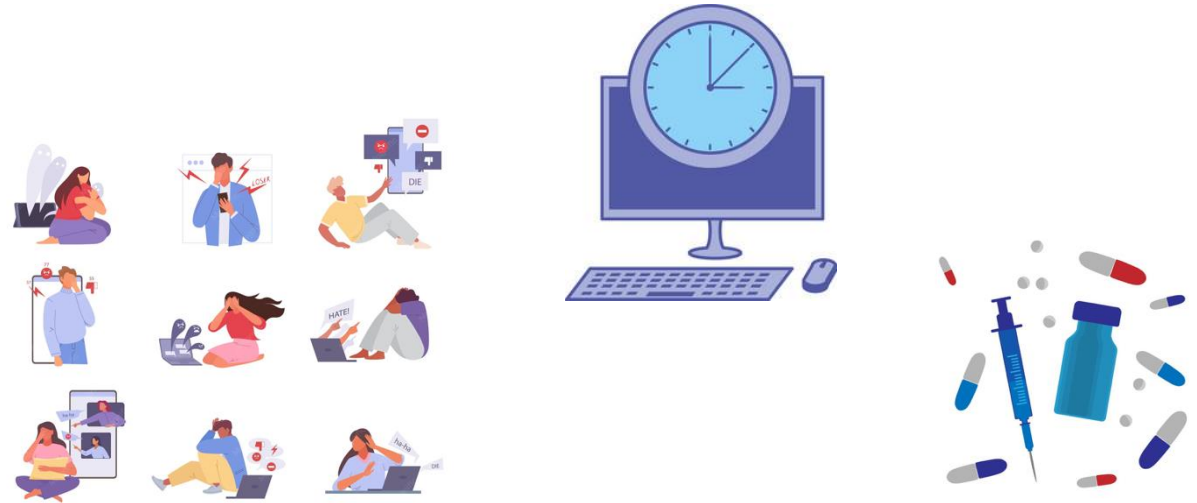
- Those who bullied their peers, those who perpetrated offline and online dating abuse higher risk of perpetration.

## 3b) Behavioural Indicators:

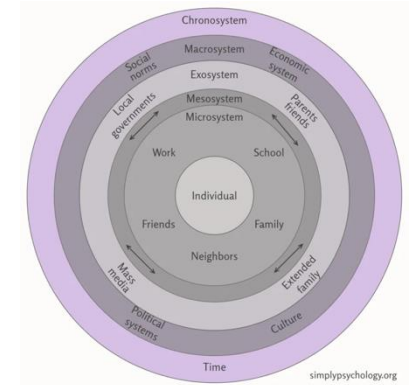
- Substance use: alcohol, smoking and misuse of medication associated with perpetration.
- History of sexual intercourse: Limited evidence but association found with perpetration.

## 3c) Technology Use:

- Greater texting frequency and social networking site use associated with perpetration



# Theme 4: Relationships with Others



## 4a) Family Relationships:

- Those who lived in a different family setting than a two-parent household were at higher odds of perpetration
- The quality of the family climate perceived related to the degree of abuse used
- Mother alienation was found to have an indirect effect on perpetration
- Mother's current parenting style had significant effects, particularly authoritarian

## 3b) Partner Relationships:

- Anxious partner attachment was found to be associated with perpetration
- Negative couple quality associated

## 3c) Other Relationships:

- Peer relationships: Having peers who engage in dating abuse and substance misuse associated with perpetration
- School climate: Those who scored lower on school climate more likely to report perpetration

Based on these findings, what should we do differently?

For example:

**Assessment:** What would you want to ask young people about?

**Intervention:** What should services focus on?

**Prevention:** What should schools/community organisations be doing?

**Policy:** What is currently missing?

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# Implications

- Given the link between ACE's and the higher risk of perpetration, intervention and prevention efforts should be trauma-informed and attend to interpersonal relationships and attachment.
- Perpetrators are more likely to hold attitudes that normalise and accept online dating abuse, sexism and violence generally. The efficacy of interventions to reduce these has not yet been proven, but initial studies have shown promising results for interventions such as DARSI (Carrascosa et al., 2019) and Date-e Adolescence (Sánchez-Jiménez, 2019). Treatment efforts should continue to be implemented with the goal of increasing understanding of this behaviour and attitudinal change
- Prevention efforts could be targeted in schools etc to teach adolescents about healthy and unhealthy relationships, with the aim of instilling norms against online dating abuse.

# Implications

- Interventions could include teaching younger adolescents about consent, internet safety, sexting and sexual behaviour.
- Professionals developing risk formulations should attend to factors such as peer involvement, information on any history of substance use and the amount of time using technology. This could be used to monitor for warning signs.
- Interventions should also include approaches to reduce the risk of substance misuse and time spent using technology.