

Online Dating and the Risk of Sexual Assault to College Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Advances in technology have created different platforms, such as online dating, where college students can meet other people. One serious risk factor of using online dating is the risk of sexual assault. Many sexual predators will use online dating as a method to connect with potential victims who are often vulnerable and trusting.

Aim: This paper discusses the risk of sexual assault among college students who use online dating sites. Faculty can be pivotal in educating students on the dangers of online dating and sexual assault. In addition, faculty members are in a position to recognize signs students may be exhibiting after a sexual assault, offer advice, and provide linkage to necessary services.

Results: Risk factors of sexual assault are explored in depth, including predatory tactics and the vulnerability specific to college students. Provided are key safety tips for online dating as well as recommendations regarding resources and reporting to law enforcement.

Conclusions: Online dating is popular among college students. Educating students in safety factors will enable them to consider the potential dangers and risk of sexual assault. In addition, higher education institutions must consider the needs of students and provide links to resources, support systems and reporting mechanisms.

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Sexual assault is a serious public health issue. It is defined as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient,” including acts such as forced sexual intercourse, forcible sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape (United States Department of Justice, 2016). In a national study, 19.3% of women and 1.7% of men have been raped during their lifetimes, and 43.9% of women and 23.4% of men have experienced other forms of sexual violence including unwanted sexual contact and sexual coercion in their lifetimes (Breiding et al., 2014). The latest National Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey reported 431,840 cases of sexual assault in 2015 (Truman & Morgan, 2016). Rates of sexual assault range from 6.0% to 44.2% of college students (Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2018). More vulnerable to sexual assaults are first-year and second-year students as well as female students who are disproportionately affected compared to their male college student counterparts (Fedina et al., 2018; Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

Over the years, the use of technology and social media has become a standard activity among young adults. Unfortunately, there has been a growing trend of sexual violence seen with the use of technology, often called technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) (Henry & Powell, 2018). TFSV includes both in-person and virtual



sexual acts including, stalking, sexual harassment, dating abuse, pornography, sexual exploitation, and sexual assault (Henry & Powell, 2018). The prevalence of TFVS is largely unknown, however, there has been an alarming increase in national surveillance data in England with a six fold increase over five years of sexual assaults related to online dating, with 25% of these victims between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age (National Crime Agency [NCA], 2016). Research has found female college students are at a risk for TFSV, with 34% of female college students experiencing cyberstalking, 28% receiving unwanted text and voice messages, and 21% receiving unwanted sexual images (DeKeseredy et al., 2019). In another study, females who experience forms of technology-facilitated stalking and received unwanted messages were more likely to report also a sexual assault (DeKeseredy et al., 2019).

ONLINE DATING

College students are vulnerable to sexual assault due to their unique circumstances and frequent use of online dating sites. It has been found that more than 50% of college students use online dating (Beauchamp et al., 2017; Newett, Churchill, & Robards, 2018). Reasons college students use dating sites and apps vary from entertainment purposes to seeking new friendships, casual dating or sex, to seeking long-term committed relationships (Beauchamp et al., 2017; Cobb & Kohno, 2017). Online dating allows for an increased possibility of finding someone with similar interests more readily than traditional dating or in situations when traditional dating is not an option (Vandeweerd, Myers, Coulter, Yalcin, & Corvin, 2016). The vast majority of college students will also try to make face-to-face connection, with 83.7% of students will meet someone face-to-face after connecting with them online (Beauchamp et al., 2017).

One vulnerability that places college students at risk for TFSV is the amount of personal information that they share on dating sites. When individuals join a dating site, they create a profile disclosing their personal information. Some dating sites ask users a series of questions to gather more personal information, which may not have been initially disclosed when creating the profile. Some questions are standard, such as favorite food or music, while others are more personal such as one's religious or political views, and yet others are very private questions, which can include one's sexual preferences or substance use histories (Cobb & Kohno, 2017). Some dating sites allow the users to enhance their profiles by linking different social and non-dating online networks, which may allow for additional personal information or photos to be shared between sites (Albury, Burgess, Light, Race, & Wilken, 2017). Connections may happen which allows access to their more personal information, especially if other social media platforms are linked, with additional personal details, and information about their friends and family made available (Murphy, 2018; Albury et al., 2017). Other online sites and apps have a geolocation, allowing users who are connected to each other to be notified if they are within a certain proximity of each other (Murphy, 2018).

The use of online dating services is an easy method for sexual predators to find potential victims (Powell & Henry, 2018). There is no method of determining whether individuals are dangerous or have a criminal history based on their app profile (Abramson, 2014; NCA, 2016). It has been found that 47% of assailants who used online dating sites to connect with their victims, also had a previous criminal conviction (NCA, 2016). Sexual predators can create an anonymous profile and engage with potential victims under false pretenses (Goldsborough, 2017). Research has shown certain characteristics, such as looks, pictures, interests, and place of living can be perceived as being trustworthy (Jin & Martin, 2015). Some perpetrators will try to make their profiles more desirable and falsify their appearance, age, or employment in efforts to appear to be a better dating candidate to attract others (Abramson, 2014; Vandeweerd et al., 2016). Over time, online relationships develop with emotional attachment and trust, thereby

increasing vulnerability. This vulnerability and trust then is used against the individual who may be easily lured into a position where sexual assault or other TFSV can occur (NCA, 2016). Often, the perpetrator will persuade the victim to meet with in a few days of the initial contact in a secluded area, such as one of the individuals house, which has been found to be where 72% of online dating sexual assaults occur (NCA, 2016).

One of the most significant factors associated with sexual assault among college student is alcohol consumption (Lorenz & Ullman, 2016). The pharmacological effects of alcohol have been shown to reduce the perception and judgement of sexual aggression, can render someone incapacitated, impair one's ability to fend off a perpetrator, impact one's ability to make good judgements; the person is more likely to engage in risker behaviors as well (Fedina et al., 2018; Lorenz & Ullman, 2016). Getting together for drinks is a common scenario for meeting someone in person after an online connection is made. However, this can place a person in a difficult situation when meeting someone whose intentions are not for just drinks and will take advantage of the situation, especially if alcohol is involved, which can result in a sexual assault (Powell & Henry, 2018). Meeting in an environment where alcohol is readily available and a social norm can increase one's vulnerability for a sexual assault.

One area that has been identified in contributing to risk of sexual assault with online dating is the differences of the expectations between the two individuals (NCA, 2016). Women are more likely to join a dating site seeking friendships and relationships and men more like to join seeking sexual partners casual "hookups" (Newett et al., 2018). Hookups are causal encounters between two individuals that involve varying degrees of sexual activities, from kissing each other to having intercourse. Misinterpretation and different expectations also occur when a profile indicates that they are looking for a serious relationship but are really looking for casual sex, thereby misleading the other individual (Vandeweerd et al., 2016). With many dating apps, simple conversations can quickly escalate into a sexual nature. These conversations can create an unequal balance for the actual desire for sexual activity when meeting in person for the first time. Sexual messages via texting have been found to increase the risk for sexual assault (Dir, Riley, Cyders, & Smith, 2018). The NCA (2016), found 52% of victims reported sexual conversations with the assailant prior to their first meeting.

Another factor is the culture of hooking up. For some people, online dating is a method of meeting someone and facilitating a hookup. While the activities involved in a hookup can vary, it always entails some sort of sexual act. Even in cases where both parties were interested in hooking up, studies have found 75% of campus sexual assaults occurred in the context of a hookup (Flack et al., 2016). Because of this, some students using a dating site for hooking up may be increasing their risk of sexual assault.

DISCUSSION

College students have many unique circumstances which increase their vulnerability to sexual assault. The use of online dating apps is popular among many college students. The risk of using online dating and sexual assault is often not addressed in preventive efforts (Dills, Fowler & Payne, 2016). For some college students, navigating a new school system, city, and state is a daunting task. If there is a student who had difficulty making friends or joining organizations, online dating is an easy way to meet new people and try to mitigate the loneliness of not having friends or being in a new city. Predators will often look for lonely people and prey on their needs to make connections and exploit them. On the other hand, some students may have some experience with online dating in high school and can draw upon learned self-protective measures. However, some students may come from small communities or backgrounds in

which being a potential victim of violence is not a reality in their community, but is a risk in the college community, leaving some students more vulnerable to predators.

Education is a necessary preventative component in addressing this problem. The majority of students will have a mandatory educational training on sexual assault (Amar, Strout, Simpson, Cardiello, & Beckford, 2014). It has been identified that the training should occur for all students on a yearly basis and to use social marketing campaigns to increase awareness (Amar et al., 2014). The CDC recommends campuses incorporate principles of prevention to provide educational trainings in various ways, such as in-person and with sexual violence information presented at different times so that messages about sexual violence and available resources will reach students multiple times (Dills et al., 2016). Information on online dating and TFSV should be included in educational trainings and include what is helpful for students, such as the scope of the problem, gender dynamics, ways to resist sexual violence, the need for reporting, and on and off campus resources (Amar et al., 2014). Other recommended training include teaching skills to prevent dating violence, promoting healthy sexuality, and empowering and engaging students to promote social norms that protect against violence (Dills et al., 2016).

With online dating, the perception of knowing someone is higher after sharing personal information and photos. Some people do not fully consider the dangers of online dating, which can lower the threshold of suspicious behavior and place them at risk for an assault (Beauchamp et al., 2017). In addition, even if there are safety concerns, college students will continue to meet up with individuals they have connected with from online dating, even if they perceive some safety concerns (Beauchamp et al., 2017). This creates a false sense of security and individuals may take risks they normally would not with typical strangers such as meeting them in a secluded area or in their homes (NCA, 2016). Forensic nurses are in a key position to educate patients and the public on the risks of online dating and sexual assault (see Table 1. Safety Tips to Consider with Online Dating).

Table 1

Safety Tips to Consider with Online Dating

- Be wary of dates that occur in isolated areas, such as an individual home.
- Avoid dates who do not use pictures in their profiles, or refuse to send pictures or details of themselves over the app and will only do so outside of the app.
- Avoid or limit personal details on dating sites, as the individual is then aware of your address, telephone number and other personal information.
- Do not be pressured into meeting an individual especially in a location which can isolate you.
- Avoid being pressured into changing the location of the date, especially if the date started in a public place and the individual is insisting you change to a secluded location.

- Meet a person from a dating app in a public place, where it is easy to leave such as a café or shopping center.
- Inform someone else, such a friend or relative, that you are meeting someone for the first time and share that person's profile so they are aware of who you are meeting.
- If the meeting is going poorly or making you feel uncomfortable, make a quick excuse to leave. Do not linger and allow for an opportunity for the date to continue.
- If an individual doesn't want to meet in person after a period of time of correspondence, stop the online relationship.
- When sharing personal information, limit the amount of information so that it cannot be searched on the internet; only give a first name or nick name when meeting a date for the first time.
- Avoid linking social meeting accounts where your personal information and close contact information can be shared or easily accessed.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or limit alcohol intake on your date.
- Avoid going to a place of residence on the first few dates.
- Turn off the geolocation service on your profile so that you cannot be tracked.

Sources:

National Crime Agency. (2016). Emerging new threat in online dating, initial trends in internet dating-initiated serious sexual assaults. Retrieved from <https://www.west-info.eu/files/file3.pdf>

Office of the Esafety Commissioner. (2016). Dating apps and websites. Retrieved from <https://www.esafety.gov.au/women/being-social/online-dating/dating-apps-and-websites>

The federal civil law, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, requires higher educational institutions to address sexual violence (DeMatteo, Galloway, Arnold, & Patel, 2015). The law requires employees within the higher educational institution to respond appropriately to reports of sexual violence and to train employees in how to respond appropriately to reports of sexual violence (DeMatteo, Galloway, Arnold, & Patel, 2015). The United States Task

Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault issued recommendations to address sexual violence on campus as a priority, includes services for victims (The White House, 2017). Despite the legal mandate, campus response and policies in addressing sexual assault varies across institutions. One study found only 70% of colleges had information on whom to contact after a sexual assault is reported (Sabina & Ho, 2014). In addition, even when there is a response, some students have a negative experience after reporting an assault which can cause a secondary victimization and negatively impact the recovery process (Orchowski, & Gidycz 2015). These system issues create a culture where students don't want to report a sexual assault. Khan, Hirsch, Wambold, and Mellins (2018) found only 8 out 89 incidents of sexual assault were officially reported. Training efforts for sexual assault prevention need to be targeted to faculty and include information on the need to use a trauma-informed approach when responding to students after an assault. A trauma-informed approach allows for an understanding of the impact of trauma has on the acute and recovery phase, allowing for a culture of safety empowerment and healing (Miller, 2018). Future research must explore reasons students do and do not report the sexual assault so that interventions and prevention efforts can be targeted to what is working as well as exploring areas to develop different ways in which students can report as sexual assault (Khan et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, many victims of sexual assault do not seek healthcare services such as a medical forensic exam after a sexual assault (Khan et al., 2018). Many individuals will not seek out or talk about their dating experiences even when services are available (Beauchamp et al., 2017). Beauchamp et al. (2017) found 87.27% of college students will not discuss their dating experiences. One reason for not wanting to discuss or report a sexual assault is a protective factor, which if the assaulted person does not label the act as a sexual assault, then they can believe that nothing harmful occurred (Khan et al., 2018). Some college students do not report the assault due to fear of the perpetrator and that they may be assaulted again or face retaliation (Schwarz, Gibson, & Lewis-Arévalo, 2017). The use of alcohol has also been associated with a lack of reporting from students who believe that they will be blamed for the assault due to consuming too much alcohol or may be blamed because they should not have been drinking alcohol to begin with (Schwarz, Gibson, & Lewis-Arévalo, 2017). Services should be advertised and promoted on their confidential and blame free nature, as these are often reasons students do not seek services.

Another reason for not reporting a sexual assault is related to the assaulted individuals' perceptions of risks and benefits; the risk to social life and academics often outweighed the benefits of reporting, and the added stress of reporting the assault was not desirable (Khan et al., 2018). Reporting an assault may result in the complaint going through the campus judicial process. The campus adjudication process is one method in which students can file a complaint; it is an official campus process where the complaint is heard and judgements and outcomes are made. There is no nationally standardized process in how a campus adjudication process occurs. Cases of sexual assault can take place on campus which is heard at the adjudication board. Members of the adjudication board can consist of faculty, students, administrators, and staff (Amar et al., 2014). The process is often difficult, and essential information needed such as how to file a complaint, what the process consists of, whom can be present as well as what the burden of proof is and possible outcomes of the complaint may not be available (Sabina & Ho, 2014). In addition, outcomes in cases where a perpetrator is found guilty of a sexual assault may only result community service or a fine (Amar et al., 2014). A need for institutions to have clear information on the judicial process is necessary so that an informed choice for the student can be made if they want to proceed. In addition, the culture of the college must consider the secondary victimization of students when reporting a sexual assault and use a trauma informed approach when creating policies that address sexual violence.

To date, little is known of the prevalence and associations with online dating and sexual assault in the United States. Countries such as the United Kingdom have been monitoring sexual assaults related to online dating and have seen a significant increase in the number of assaults (NCA, 2016). Collecting data on online dating related assaults allows researchers to define trends, identify who is most at risk, and share what safety measures can be taken (NCA, 2016). Many official forms and mandatory forms in documenting sexual assaults do not reflect the advances in technology and may need to be updated to obtain an accurate description of the prevalence of the problem (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2016). Knowing how prevalent the problem is essential in addressing priority areas. The issue may be a serious concern that needs to be addressed. In the United Kingdom, data have shown a sharp increase in online dating related sexual assaults which allows prevention efforts to address this as a growing concern (NCA, 2016). If local communities or health centers are not collecting this data, another avenue may be for colleges and university to include this area when there is a report of a sexual assault.

Another consideration in collecting data is categorizing the assailant. For some individuals, the assailant may not be viewed as a stranger as the online relationship may have occurred for a length of time (NCA, 2016). A new category of how the assailant is categorized should be considered, as the individual may believe they know the person as an acquaintance, perhaps as the result of trusting a false profile as the individual is a stranger and not someone really known to the individual. Even if national data is not collected in this manner, having local sites or state sites collecting this information can allow for an awareness of how prevalent the problem has become.

CONCLUSION

Online dating is a popular activity in which many young people engage. For some, meeting someone new is an exciting time, especially if you are looking for a relationship. However, online dating doesn't come without risk. Knowing possible risk factors and areas of vulnerability will allow young adults to make informed choices that improve their safety. As employees in higher educational institutions, we are obligated to address these concerns. Addressing these concerns requires an understanding of how prevalent the problem is, educating students on prevention methods that are consistent with the technology they are using, and implementing resources that are sensitive to the unique circumstances that college students face.

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