

# RISK FACTORS IN VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULTS WHO ACQUAINTED, AND MET WITH THEIR PERPETRATORS VIA SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** In this study, our aim was to analyze the cases who had been exposed to sexual abuse by the individuals whom the internet user was acquainted with via social networks, and met them outdoors with the intention to distract attention to the potential dangers of social networks, and also discuss possible measures to be taken to ensure safe use of internet.

**Material and Method:** For this purpose, 13 out of 162 cases who had been referred to the Department of Forensic Medicine, between the years 2011, and 2013 with a history of exposure to sexual abuse by the perpetrators whom they had gotten in personal contact after their acquaintance via internet were included in the study.

**Results:** All of victims were female and perpetrators

were male. Mean age of the cases was 17.00±2.3 years. Only one case was in the age group of ≥19 years. Sexual assault was claimed to be perpetrated via vaginal (n=4), anal (n=3), both vaginal, and anal (n=3) penetrations, while in three cases, any incident of penetration was not alleged. Physical examination revealed evidence of vaginal (n=3), anal (n=3) or both vaginal, and anal (n=1) penetrations.

**Conclusion:** It is not completely possible to prevent children from exposure to harmful environment, and behaviours encountered on-line, so we think that necessary accumulation of information about harmful internet content, and educational courses on effective protection from its adverse effects will be beneficial.

**Keywords:** Sexual assault, sexual abuse, social networking, facebook Nobel Med 2014; 10(3): 5-11

## SOSYAL AĞ ARACILIĞI İLE TANIŞARAK BULUŞAN VE CİNSEL SALDIRIYA UĞRAYAN OLGULARDA RİSK FAKTÖRLERİ

### ÖZET

**Amaç:** Çalışmada sosyal medya aracılığı ile tanıştığı kişilerle buluşarak cinsel saldırıya maruz kalan olguların analizi, bu suretle sosyal ağların oluşturabilecekleri tehlikelere dikkat çekilmesi ve güvenli internet kullanımının sağlanabilmesi için alınabilecek önlemlerin tartışılması amaçlandı.

**Materyal ve Metod:** Düzce Üniversitesi Tıp Fakültesi Adli Tıp Anabilim Dalı'na 2011-2013 yılları arasında cinsel istismara maruz kalma öyküsü ile gönderilen toplam 162 olgu içerisinde sosyal medya aracılığı ile tanıştığı kişilerle buluşarak cinsel saldırıya maruz kalan 13 olgu çalışma kapsamına alındı.

**Bulgular:** Çalışmadaki mağdurların tamamı kadın,

saldırganların tamamı erkekti. Olguların yaş ortalamasının 17,00±2,3 olduğu saptandı. Sadece bir olgu 19 ve üzeri yaş grubunda yer alıyordu. Olgularımızın 10'unda cinsel saldırının penetrasyon şeklinde gerçekleştiği, bunlardan dört olguda vajinal, üç olguda anal, üç olguda hem anal hem vajinal penetrasyona maruz kalma iddiasının bulunduğu, üç olguda penetrasyon iddiası olmadığı tespit edildi. Muayene sonucunda ise üç olguda vaginal yolla penetrasyon, üç olguda anal yolla penetrasyon, bir olguda ise hem anal, hem vaginal penetrasyona ait bulgular saptandı.

**Sonuç:** Çocukların internette olası zararlı ortam ve davranışlara maruz kalmasının tam anlamıyla önlenmesi mümkün değilse de zararlar hakkında gerekli bilgi birikiminin sağlanması ve davranış şekillerinin öğretilmesinin etkili bir korunma için faydalı olacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cinsel saldırı, cinsel istismar, sosyal ağ, facebook Nobel Med 2014; 10(3): 5-11

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social networks on internet have become increasingly prevalent, and provide services at every level to the individuals, and various groups of people.<sup>1</sup> Researches have demonstrated enhanced popularity of online communication over internet in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Internet technologies have been indicated to decrease immense distances between individuals, and locations. In addition to increases in types of interpersonal relationships, and the number of individuals who engage in them, social networks enable individuals to communicate with people of the same or different nationalities.<sup>3</sup> By this means, individuals can get in direct contact with other people using audiovisual means, and catch a chance to pass their time all together. Within this context, various social networking services including Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter bestow their members a user name, and provide an opportunity to create a profile using their photos and other personal information, and share them with their fellow members. Recently, in our country these networks have been used increasingly. Based on 2009 data of Turkish Statistical Institute (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu - TÜİK) 57.8% of the internet users enter into chat rooms to send messages or e-mails.<sup>4</sup> Recent reports have indicated that especially social networking site called Facebook has reached widespread participation spectrum both in our country, and in the world. Social networking service Facebook has more than 500 million members, and Turkey with its 28 million users ranks fourth after USA, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Although information, and communication technologies have many positive aspects, they also cause many adverse outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Children and adolescents are the largest group which using internet for communication, and interpersonal interaction. These groups of people surf on internet mostly out of its intended use, lose their precious time, and isolate themselves from social environments. Besides they can become vulnerable to the abusive behaviours, and language of exploiters.<sup>7</sup> Examples of these unfavourable conditions may include cyber fraud, easy exposure of the children to sexual abuse, promoting more and more people to unhealthy way of living, violence or use of illicit drugs through information, and communication technologies, and cyber bullying.<sup>8</sup> Sexual crimes are threatening community, and thanks to increase in the level of consciousness, and importance given to that social problem it has become a debatable issue.<sup>9,10</sup> It has been reported that sexual crimes have demonstrated a rapid increase in recent years, which was also largely concealed from the public.<sup>11-16</sup>

In this study, our aim was to analyze the cases who had been exposed to sexual abuse by the individuals whom the internet user was acquainted with via social networks, and met them outdoors with the intention to distract attention to the potential dangers of social networks, and also discuss possible measures to be taken to ensure safe use of internet.

## MATERIAL and METHOD

For this aim, total 3752 cases' forensic reports who applied to Forensic Medicine Department of Düzce University Faculty of Medicine between 2011 and 2013 were examined. Thirteen out of 162 cases were admitted with a history of exposure to sexual abuse by the perpetrators whom they had gotten in personal contact after their acquaintance via internet were included in the study. The cases were evaluated as for their demographic characteristics, factors predisposing to sexual assault, and preexisting psychiatric diseases. SPSS software for Windows (versiyon 11.0) was used for evaluating data about minimum, maximum, mean, median and standart deviation for age groups and monthly mean income level of the families.

## RESULTS

All of victims were female and perpetrators were male. Mean age of 13 cases who were claimed to be the victims of sexual assaults perpetrated by the people whom they met after they had got acquainted with via social media was  $17.00 \pm 2.3$  (median: 17.00; min: 13.00, and max: 23.00) years. The cases were in the age groups of 13-15 (n=2), 16-18 (n=10) and  $\geq 19$  (n=1) years, respectively. All of the cases had been acquainted via Facebook. Seven cases (case #: 1,2,3,4,6,7, and 11) continued their education, while one case aged 18 years (case #: 12) attended open high school. They were university (case #: 13), lycée (case #: 10), primary school (case #: 5,8, and 9) graduates (Table). Monthly mean income level of the families was found to be  $1344.6 \pm 1008.2$  (median, 1000.00; min, 600.00, and max, 4000.00) Turkish Liras [ $672 \pm 500$  USD (median, 500; min, 300, and max, 2000 USD)]. Monthly income levels of nine cases were above the minimum wages earned in Turkey, while the families of the remaining cases were earning less than the subsistence wage. The victims were living in households with at least two, and at most six family members. A case who was a member of a nuclear family was also living with her grandmother, and grandfather. A 23 year-old case (case #: 13) was sharing the same home with her five friends. Parents of all cases were alive, and still married. Father of one case was an alcohol addict. →

**Table:** Properties of the cases (Hymen was examined at the gynecologic position whereas anus was examined at the knee-elbow position)

Case number	Age	Education	Number of assault	Number of assailant	Claim of the incident	Pre-incident psychiatric diagnosis	Mental retardation	Suicide History / ideas	Post-incident ASD <sup>8</sup>	Hymen findings	Anus findings	Penetration findings	Promise of marriage
1	13	Prim. sch. stud. <sup>1</sup>	One	One	Other <sup>6</sup>	---	---	---	---	Intact	Normal	---	---
2	15	Prim. sch. stud.	Two or more	Two	Vaginal penetr. <sup>7</sup>	Personality disorder + conversion disorder	---	+	---	Hymen was broken at the level of 5 o'clock (old tear)	Normal	Vaginal penetr.	---
3	16	Prim. sch. stud.	One	One	Anal penetr.	---	---	---	---	Intact	Normal	---	---
4	16	Prim. sch. stud.	One	One	Other	Personality disorder	---	+	---	Rejection of the examination	Rejection of the examination	---	+
5	16	Prim. sch. grad. <sup>2</sup>	Two or more	Three	Anal penetr.	Conversion disorder	---	+	+	Intact	Intact Scar at the level of 6 and 12 o'clock	Anal penetr.	---
6	17	Prim. sch. stud.	Two or more	One	Vaginal penetr.	---	---	---	+	Fresh tear at the level of 5 o'clock	Normal	Vaginal penetr.	---
7	17	Prim. sch. stud.	Two or more	Three	Vaginal + Anal penetr.	---	---	---	+	Hymen was broken at the level of 6 o'clock (old tear)	Chronic fissur at the level of 6 and 12 o'clock + scar at the level of 3 o'clock	Vaginal+ Anal penetr.	+
8	17	Prim. sch. grad.	Two or more	Five	Vaginal penetr.	Personality disorder	+	---	---	Hymen was broken at the level of 2 and 7 o'clock (old tears)	Normal	Vaginal penetr.	+
9	17	Prim. sch. grad.	One	One	Other	Personality disorder	---	+	---	Intact	Normal	---	---
10	18	High sch. grad. <sup>3</sup>	Two or more	One	Anal penetr.	---	---	---	---	Elastic hymen (Four months pregnancy)	Normal	---	Married
11	18	Prim. sch. stud.	Two or more	One	Vaginal penetr.	---	+	---	---	Elastic hymen	Normal	---	+
12	18	Open high sch. stud. <sup>4</sup>	Two or more	One	Vaginal + Anal Penetr.	Personality disorder + attention deficit	+	---	---	Intact	Chronic fissur at the level of 6 o'clock and scar near it	Anal penetr.	+
13	23	Univ. grad. <sup>5</sup>	One	One	Vaginal + Anal Penetr.	---	---	---	---	Intact	Two condilomas at the level of 12 o'clock + chronic fissurs at the level of 12-1 o'clock	Anal penetr.	+

**1:** Primary School Student, **2:** Primary School Graduate, **3:** High School Graduate, **4:** Open High School Student, **5:** University Graduate, **6:** Other: Kissing, petting, sucking, handling, etc behaviours, **7:** Penetr: Penetration, **8:** ASD: Acute Stress Disorder

Sexual assault was claimed to be perpetrated via vaginal (n=4; case #: 2,6,8, and 11), anal (n=3; case #: 3,5, and 10), both vaginal, and anal (n=3; case #: 7,12,and 13) penetrations, while in three cases (case #: 1,4, and 9), any incident of penetration was not alleged. Three victims described vaginal (n=3; case #: 2,6, and 8) or both vaginal, and anal bleedings (n=1; case #: 7) after sexual assaults. Physical examination revealed evidence of vaginal (n=3; case #: 2,6, and 8), anal (n=3; case #: 5,12, and 13) or both vaginal, and anal (n=1; case #: 1) penetrations. In a case who claimed to be a victim of anal penetration (case #: 3), any evidence of penetration was not detected both in her physical examination, and laboratory tests. An 18-year-old woman who was married for 5 months was pregnant on the day of physical examination,

and asserted that she had been forced to anal coitus by her husband with whom she married after she had been acquainted with him via Facebook. Three cases (case #: 5,6, and 7) in the 16-17 age bracket who were exposed to sexual penetration had acute stress disorder, and one of them (case #: 5 who aged 16 years) had preexisting conversion disorder before the incident (Table).

Sexual assaults were allegedly executed by one (n=9), two (n=1) or five (n=1) perpetrators. Only one incident of sexual assaults were reported by 5 (case #: 1,3,4,9, and 13) cases, whilst more than one incidents were reported by 8 (case #: 2,5,6,7,8,10,11, and 12) cases. The victims were reportedly exposed to sexual assaults for more than once by the →

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same (n=4; case #: 6,10,11, and 12) or more than one perpetrator (n=3; case #: 2,7, and 8) or once by different offenders (n=1; case #: 5) (Table).

After the incident of sexual abuse, all the cases were firstly examined by a forensic specialist working in the Department of Forensic Medicine, Düzce University Faculty of Medicine. Except one case (case #: 4) that declined physical examination, all of them underwent both anogenital, and whole body examinations. It was revealed that only two cases referred for examinations under suitable conditions, and within a proper time frame so as to obtain specimens valuable for trace evidence. In none of the cases, any evidence of physical trauma was not detected. Virginity testing revealed that hymens of six women (case #: 1,3,5,9,12,13) were intact, and hymens of two victims (case #: 10, and 11) were elastic which permitted easy penetration of penis. However the married victim (case #: 10) was at her 4. month of her pregnancy, fresh (case #: 6), and old (n=3; case #: 2,7, and 8) hymenal tears which might be compatible with the incident of the sexual assault were detected. Anal examination disclosed featureless anus in eight cases, and two of them (case #: 3, and 10) claimed forced anal penetration without any relevant finding supporting their claims. In four cases (case #: 5,7,12, and 13) findings suggesting anal coitus were detected (Table).

Two cases (case #: 5,7) claimed that they had been given aphrodisiac substances without their consent. An another case (case #: 13) stated that she had willingly had anal intercourse with the offender before, than she had experienced a black-out after drinking a glass of coke. As a justification of her complain, she said that when she had awakened, she thought that the suspect had engaged in a vaginal intercourse with her. A woman (case #: 4) who declined ano-genital examination asserted that she had gotten contact with the offender on Facebook in the Summer of 2010, and visited the perpetrator at his home willingly. She kissed him, but when he groped her groins, and breasts over her clothes, she fled away. Later on, this suspect sent her abusive, and insulting messages via Facebook. Only one of the cases, indicated that she was assaulted by the offender with whom she had acquainted on Facebook, and she had been forced to engage in a sexual act by another friend of her without her consent. Other complainants stated that they had their first sexual experiences with the assailers who were the subject of their complaints.

## DISCUSSION

Within the scope of Research Project EU Kids On-Line, it has been indicated that study participants in the age group of 9-16 years begin to use social Networks from the age of 10, and surf on internet for 1-1.5 hours a day.<sup>17</sup> Also it has been stated that nearly 80 % of the young population in Turkey use the internet, and communicate via cell phones.<sup>18</sup> According to the data of Turkish Statistical Institute the age group between 16-24 years has the highest rates of computer, and internet usage in Turkey. Reports say that nearly half (49.1%) of the households in Turkey have an access to internet.<sup>19</sup> In the pediatric age group, risky internet use has a higher prevalence.<sup>20,21</sup> Risky internet use consists of sharing personal information, getting in contact with the person acquainted on social networks, and outside, entry into websites with pornographic, pejorative, suicide-promoting content, and audiovisual material encouraging use of narcotics, and illicit drugs. It also includes on-line abusive jokes or comments which intentionally bring disgrace on some other person.<sup>20,21</sup> Sexual temptation which is among the sexual behaviours encountered on internet is defined as “demands by an adult of personal information with or without intention of engaging in a sexual intercourse or abusive talks on sex”.<sup>22</sup> Most of the sexual crimes attributed to abusive content on internet are explicit acts of seduction which can start with sexual temptation.<sup>23</sup> It has been determined that internet users aged between 10-15 years are exposed to on-line sexual assaults, and threats (33% of the cases), and sexual harassment (15%) within a year.<sup>24,25</sup> All of our cases stated that they had chatted with their perpetrators about sexual matters on-line, before they had been exposed to sexual assaults.

It has been reported that one the most frequent risky behaviours demonstrated by Turkish university students is to talk face-to-face with their internet friends.<sup>26</sup> Questionnaire surveys have detected that 3-25% of the participants meet their internet acquaintances face- to- face.<sup>27-31</sup> The relevant rates were indicated in the Baltic States, Turkey; Italy, and Ireland were 23-25%, 3%, and 4%, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Twenty-one, and 22% of the participants who met with their internet friends stated that they went alone, by themselves, to the meeting place.<sup>29-31</sup> Reports have asserted that Turkey has the lowest rate of face-to-face meeting between internet friends among European countries, however the possibility of occurrence of tragic, harmful, and unwanted events during these rendezvous is at its peak in Turkey.<sup>28</sup> In our study, all cases indicated that they were alone when they had met with strangers they had acquainted online. All cases but one were less than 18 years of age. →

In studies performed, lower socioeconomic level is reported to be an important risk factor regarding victim of the sexual assault.<sup>12,32,33</sup> We have found that families of 69.2% of our cases have over minimum wages. Besides we could have gathered information about the educational levels of eight parents who had a primary school education. Besides 30.8% of our cases did not continue their education after primary school. Income level of all the cases was relatively better than average economical level of the population in general. These cases have an access to internet using mobile means of communication such as their private cell phones, laptop, and iPad which facilitate access to internet from anywhere. Out-of-home access to internet by children, and youngsters, invalidates the supervisory mechanism of the families over their children.

Most of the internet users who get in contact with strangers in the chat rooms consist of embarrassed individuals with inadequate social skills who feel themselves lonely which demonstrates that these people consider internet as a means to escape from their loneliness. In addition to internet users who communicate with strangers during instant messaging or in the chat rooms, those who met outdoors with their internet friends apparently comprise of kids who feel themselves lonely at school or persons who surf on internet in order to find friends with whom they could share their opinions.<sup>34</sup> Five participants of our study had personality disorders, four of them had suicidal thoughts, and tried to commit suicide before the incident. These findings support the opinion that asserts the role of mental, and social adaptation problems as potential contributing factors increasing the risk of communication with strangers on internet, and face-to-face meeting with them.

It has been indicated that mentally retarded children, and adolescents are highly vulnerable to sexual assaults when compared with the normal population.<sup>35-38</sup> Mental retardation is known to lead to insufficient social skills, and loneliness.<sup>39</sup> In our study, mild degrees of mental retardation were detected in three cases (case #: 8,11, and 12). Cases with mental retardation can be easily convincible for meeting out-of-home. Mild degrees of mental retardation which were only detected in three cases might be attributed to limited internet use by the patients with severe mental retardation. Since cases with mental retardation are at a higher risk of sexual abuse, their education aimed at protection of this group of patients from sexual exploitation should be specifically planned.

In our study, all of our cases indicated intrafamilial problems of various degrees of severity. Case #:

5 stated that her father was an alcohol addict, and gambled. Her father wanted her to marry with a stranger for money to pay his debts, and brought home unknown persons, while her mother was against her marriage. Meanwhile, she went out with her internet friend, and after a while he engaged in sexual intercourse with her. He threatened her to tell their sexual affair to her family, and his male friends forced her for sexual intercourse various times. The case was brought to court, and she claimed that her friend forced her to sexual intercourse against her will. This case supports the relationship between sexual abuse on one hand, and moral values of the parents, and environmental factors on the other hand.<sup>40,41</sup> This case substantiates the viewpoint which states that on-line sexual temptation, and resultant exposure to sexual exploitation are more frequently seen among youngsters experiencing intrafamilial disputes, physical and/or sexual abuse.<sup>42,43</sup>

Two cases (case #: 5, and 7) claimed that they were given aphrodisiac substances against their will. An another case (case #: 13) stated that she had had an anal intercourse with the offender with whom she planned to marry. She also added that she had fallen asleep after she had drunk coke. When she was awake, she thought that the same person might possibly engage in vaginal intercourse to justify her complaints about him. Case 8, indicated that she was using alcohol, cannabis, and extacy (only once), and so she did not know what had happened to her. She also indicated that when she had regained her consciousness, she had disclosed that she had had a sexual intercourse against her will. Toxicologic examination of the cases was unremarkable. However during the time interval between the incident, and the examination, toxic substance might be metabolized, and eliminated from the body. Our cases also seem to support the viewpoint which asserts that internet user victims of sexual assaults demonstrate off-line maladaptive behaviours (problematic school performance, aggressive behaviours, substance abuse) when compared with those not exposed to cyber bullying.<sup>44</sup>

Investigations have demonstrated that families have inadequate information about their children's internet use, and meeting with the people they acquainted with on-line.<sup>30</sup> In Turkey within the first three months of the year 2013, internet users utilized their cell phones or smart phones (41.1%), portable computers (laptop, netbook, and tablets) (17.1%) for wireless connections (wi-fi) to social networking services outside their homes, and offices.<sup>19</sup> In our age, unfortunately due facilitation of access to internet thanks to advanced technology, it is absolutely →

not possible for the families to exert control on access of their children to websites. Herein, the importance of raising consciousness about potential threats, and dangers encountered by the children while surfing on internet is revealed more prominent. It has been indicated that educational courses provided by the teachers to their school girls about safe internet use withhold female students from meeting people with whom they had acquainted on social networks, on the contrary, talking of schoolgirls with their siblings about safe internet use increase the occurrence of this unwanted possibility.<sup>27</sup> Under the conditions of current daily life, protection of the children from access to harmful contents on-line seems to be almost impossible. The most effective way is to educate people about preventive measures so as to avoid from entering harmful contents on-line. To this end, generalization of education via mass media, and calling attention to potential hazards using public spots are thought to be beneficial. Curriculum of "Media Literacy" and "Computer" courses instructed in basic learned institutions should be reviewed so as to develop digital literacy. According to the EU Kids Online Report dated October 2011 "Turkish children, and their families require priorily skills to avoid unsafe internet use, and educational priorities aiming at increasing their ability to gain digital literacy. These educational priorities should be provided not only by the governments, but also by non-governmental organizations, media, and other educational institutes including universities. Trials performed in various studies, have disclosed ineffectiveness of imposing bans on access to pornographic websites in order to promote safe internet use."<sup>45</sup>

Social networking service called Facebook has declared a short time ago, that it has become completely open to internet users less than 18 years of age. According to recent regulation which removed the borders of sharing information, internet users less than 18 years of age can share, and exchange their messages with others not included in their friends'

list. Executive board of this social networking service announced the rationale of this application as "young people are the most active group in the social media, and they want their messages to be heard by multitudes." However it has been stated that the main purpose of this implementation is to prevent young people from entering into other websites.<sup>46</sup> All of our cases except one were under 18 years of age. Although many youngsters in this age group are seen to enter into similar websites, age limit to be stipulated might be a discouraging factor. Therefore as authors of this manuscript, we conceive that unrestricted access to social networking sites by children, and adolescents younger than 18 years of age will create problems hampering protection of these age groups both from entry into material with sexual content, and also their off-line rendezvous with unknown people outside the knowledge of their families. We also think that commercial firms should pay meticulous attention to social responsibilities during their commercial decision-making processes.

## CONCLUSION

Internet, and especially social networking sites bring with them many harmful effects concerning child abuse in addition to its numerous benefits. Even though children in Turkey are less prone to meet the people with whom they acquainted on internet, when compared with other European countries, the reports indicate that they are more frequently exposed to unwanted behaviours, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by their on-line friends. In line with developing technology, it is not completely possible to prevent children from exposure to harmful environment, and behaviours encountered on-line, so we think that necessary accumulation of information about harmful internet content, and educational courses on effective protection from its adverse effects will be beneficial.

\* The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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