

SEXUALISED VIOLENCE AND DIGITAL MEDIA.

A collection of abstracts
with recommendations
for professionals

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Introduction

The following English-language abstracts aim to provide snapshots of the individual case studies portrayed in the empirically developed German-language recommendations for action when dealing with sexualised violence using digital media (SVUDM)¹ that originated from SRH University Heidelberg's project HUMAN. Development of recommendations for pedagogical practice in dealing with sexualised violence using digital media. As a project supported by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), in an effort to determine the features of a professional approach to SVUDM and to develop case-based recommendations for practitioners in Germany, the recommendations have thus far only been published in German. With the start of the EU-funded follow-up project, Beyond Digital Violence (ByeDV), which focuses on application, implementation, discussion and analysis of the recommendations for action, it is important to provide broader insight and access to an international, and especially a European, community of practitioners and researchers. In doing so, the teams from SRH University Heidelberg and DGfPI² are working together, not only with the five German counselling centres currently implementing the recommendations, but also with international colleagues, to reflect on the applicability of the recommendations and considerations or modifications that may be necessary to adapt them

for use by professionals across the EU. This is key in accomplishing ByeDV's stated goal of disseminating an EU Blueprint that adapts the project's quality criteria for broader use. Already, in describing the recommendations for action to international colleagues and peers, we have been able to engage in useful dialogues about national differences in the legal classification and consequences of various types of online behaviours, terminology, as well as the perceived need for distinguishing between online as opposed to offline sexualised violence when developing counselling approaches. The very nature of the virtual interactions inherent in SVUDM underscore the importance of approaching the subject from an international perspective. Perpetrators of Sexual Online Grooming (SOG) can be previously known or unknown to their victims, living down the street or in another country, and likewise, concerns about dissemination of exploitative abuse materials know no borders. It is our hope that this first step in making aspects of the recommendations for action available to a broader audience will not only initiate a conversation to consider the nuances that online digital media can play in sexualized violence against children and adolescents, but also harmonise European approaches to prevention and intervention.



¹ Sexualised violence using digital media (SVUDM) is a broad term that includes forms of sexualised violence that are initiated, committed, accompanied by or maintained through the use of online activity. The term is not intended to imply a distinction between on- or offline interactions. Rather, it expresses that digital media can play a role in sexualised violence and violation that take place on or offline, for example to groom or blackmail victims of abuse as well as to disseminate images of abuse.

² The German Association for Prevention of and Intervention in Child Abuse, Neglect and Sexual Violence (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Prävention und Intervention bei Kindesmisshandlung, -vernachlässigung und sexualisierter Gewalt e.V.) is an interest group with over 700 members and member organizations across Germany, representing the range of professionals working in the subjects of child abuse and neglect, either with children, adolescents or parents.

Abstracts



The following chapters from the Recommendations for Action are currently available in English abstract form.

Abstract 1

Parent-Child conflict resulting from presumed mediatised sexualised violence - This is the story of Eli, whose parents find what they consider "pornographic" chat content on his computer and, after confronting him about it, turn to his school social worker for support.

Abstract 2

Mediatised ritual violence - This is the story of Constantin, who was sexually abused by his mother's partner and shows signs of residual dependence and loyalty to his abuser. Constantin's possession of sexually explicit images and torture images on his own computer, as well as the ways in which he describes his relationship with his abuser could point to a pseudo ideology linked to a group of perpetrators involved in ritualised violence.

Abstract 3

Discussing (potential) dissemination of abuse images with victims and their families - In this case, Amira, whose sexual abuse by her nanny was filmed, and her family have been stabilised through the support of therapy. However, the therapists notice that the family is unaware of the possibility of online dissemination of the abuse images.

Abstract 4

Protecting victims when abuse images and videos recirculate - Magdalena is haunted by the naked images she and her cousin, Anna, were forced to send to their trainer, Anton. Despite switching schools and moving away, two years later the images resurface along with rumours that she is a paedophile.

Abstract 5

Dealing with anxieties and fears brought about by mediatised sexualised violence - Djamel was assaulted while fleeing Syria and is now plagued by fear and shame about the dissemination and potential recirculation of his abuse images, with concerns ranging from dishonouring his family to internalised homophobia, which are fueling feelings of panic and desperate searches to find his abuse images on the internet.

Abstract 6

Abuse Images and an Orientation on Child Wellbeing - Finn and Lina's father reports suspicion to the child welfare agency that Arthur M, the current partner of the children's mother, has made sexualised images of the children. The child welfare agency carries out an assessment to determine whether the children are endangered.

Abstract 7

Prevention - considers approaches to broaching the subject of mediatised sexualised violence with children and adolescents while also suggesting ways in which professionals can reconsider their attitudes and mindsets towards the online worlds experienced by young people today.



Note

The following abstracts do not include references because they are summaries from the German-language monograph with the title "Sexualisierte Gewalt und digitale Medien. Reflexive Handlungsempfehlungen für die Fachpraxis", published in January 2022 by the Springer publishing group.

Parent-child conflict resulting from presumed mediatised sexualised violence

The initial scenario:

Eli's parents contact his school social worker voicing concerns about interactions between Eli, a student at a special education school, and an individual known as "Lollypop", with whom Eli has been in contact via a dating app. The chats seem "pornographic" to the parents, who assume Lollypop is a pedophile. The chats indicated that phone numbers were exchanged between Eli and Lollypop and, therefore, other communication may have taken place off the app. Eli initially denies his parents' accusations and then freaks out after further confrontation. His parents are turning to his trusted school social worker for help.

Unpacking the Situation

The discovery of sexualised violence or suspected sexualised violence is understandably extremely disturbing and upsetting for parents. Sexual online content can lead to confusion, as consensual material and abusive material can be mistaken for each other. These ambiguities can make parents and guardians feel powerless. On top of this, parents tend to be more sceptical of digital media than their children, viewing any romantic and sexual interactions online as problematic. As a result of these fears, parents tend to approach scenarios like Eli's primed for conflict.

1. Parents may focus on eliminating or restricting the use of digital media or demand full access to their child's past and future online interactions.
2. By antagonising the use of digital media or identifying sexual violence where youth do not, parents may inadvertently play into the grooming tactics of predators, who appear, by contrast, understanding and supportive of a young person's sexual autonomy.

Recommendations for Action

Professional support can help take the following into account:

- a. whether sexualised violence is or is not taking place their child's mediatised sexuality.
- b. the role that parents' fears of sexual violence play in the situation.
- c. educating parents on perpetrator strategies serves the purpose of establishing a risk assessment and alleviating feelings of guilt.
- d. indications of generational perception issues regarding the role of the digital world and relationship building.
- e. the risk of parents taking excessive actions.

Analysing the Request

Eli's parents put the school social worker in a challenging position by asking for his help and involvement. A specialist may be able to help the social worker make a risk assessment. The social worker does not want to betray Eli's trust, nor does he want to ignore the parents' serious allegation of sexual violence against a minor. It is important to involve Eli as early as possible and to be transparent about his parents' concerns. It may be helpful to involve a second professional, so the social worker can continue to be an advocate for Eli while the other professional focuses on the concerns of his parents.

Counselling and Stabilisation for Parents

It is also important to address the needs of parents who have discovered or suspect that their child is the victim of mediated sexualised violence and take into account the following:

1. Parents also need to discuss their fears and worries, but in a solution-oriented way that also involves accepting their child's mediated sexuality.
2. Some parents may feel a sense of shared responsibility or guilt for the situation that has befallen their child.
3. Educating parents on perpetrator strategies serves the purpose of establishing a risk assessment and alleviating feelings of guilt.
4. Parents may use stricter rules around the use of media as an attempt to regain control, however, this can have the opposite effect.

Another prerequisite for help and support is a risk assessment that takes into account

Consider the concerns of the parents, potential evidence of power imbalance in an online relationship or grooming strategies and the reaction of the child to confrontation.

It is extremely important to consider the child's autonomy and identity. Eli, for example, has experienced violations of his personal sphere by his parents, which can result in feelings of rejection, stress and embarrassment.

The legitimate needs of the child form the baseline for the recommendations for action. The professional may see a link between the incident of mediated sexualised violence and the needs of the victim - in this case seeking acceptance of his own sexuality and feelings of marginalisation. Helping parents through the challenging process of understanding and accepting their child's sexuality is key to defusing the conflict. Thus, the risk assessment acts as the intersection between violence prevention and sex education.

The follow up:

Eli has a private meeting with his school counsellor. From his perspective, his parents are overreacting. Lollypop understands him and has helped him in his coming out process. He has been deeply embarrassed by his parents' invasion of his private conversations.

Unpacking the Situation

Hearing Eli's perspective further establishes the parent-child conflict. Eli describes having felt violated by his parents, whereas he confirms consensual mediated sexualised interactions with Lollypop, which he considers unproblematic. While we do not know the nature of Eli's educational needs, only that he attends a special education school, the taboo of disabled sexuality coupled with the higher risk of victimisation of persons with physical or intellectual disabilities could play into his parents' protectiveness. Additionally, digital media can play a particularly important role in sexual development and empowerment for individuals who have been doubly marginalised as both queer and disabled youth. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out that Eli may have an intellectual disability that could call into question his ability to give consent to Lollypop and to recognise exploitative behaviour.

Recommendation for Action

Intervention and Mediation

Initiating short and long-term mediation of the conflict between the parents and child is essential to helping this family through a crisis. They have already shifted away from speaking to interacting through negatively interpreted actions. However, with mediation, they can still resolve the conflict in a self-determined, mutually beneficial way.

Assuming the school counsellor does not detect a power asymmetry within the family, he can act as an impartial mediator to help all participants discuss their perceptions of the conflict, their feelings and desires and discuss ideas for resolution. It is important to lay out rules that can be negotiated (e.g. privacy, self-determination of sexuality, acceptable ways to use digital media for sexual autonomy, expression of parental concerns) and those that cannot (e.g. violence and awareness of grooming strategies from potential sexual predators). It is important to give equal consideration to protecting Eli against privacy violations by his parents and assuring his parents' ability to raise him as they see fit. Parents may have to adjust their rules as children enter adolescence, however, alongside this renegotiation, it is important to strengthen children's relationships with key adults in their lives (e.g. parents and school counsellors) and their awareness of social norms and expectations.

Sexual Empowerment

Digital media can play a formative role in the identity development and 'coming out' experience of queer youth. Unfortunately, its use does not automatically lead to empowerment; queer youth are still twice as likely as heterosexual youth to have sent nude photos to strangers online. It can help for adults to signal a willingness to talk with the adolescent about what he wants and needs for his own sexual empowerment and what he interprets as a positive sexual relationship. This may help him identify a predatory or grooming relationship more clearly.

Reflections on the Perpetrator

Thus far the recommendation has focussed on Eli and his parents, not Lollypop, as Eli would need to be questioned more closely to determine the true nature of their interactions. One generally has the right to control how images of oneself are used, even requesting their return or deletion if they are distributed without consent or meant for use within the bounds of a romantic relationship that has reached its end. What's more, parents generally have to consent to the release of an image of a minor child, not to mention that the possession and distribution of sexually explicit images of minors is a criminal offense. If it is determined that Lollypop behaved in an abusive way, a restraining order can be filed, however if Eli were to contact Lollypop anyway, the restraining order would be difficult to maintain.

Implications of Criminal Charges

The usefulness of criminally charging Lollypop depends on many factors, not least of all the feelings and potential impact on Eli. The legal ramifications of Lollypop's interaction with Eli depends on the state in which the offence was committed.

Mediatised ritual violence

The scenario:

A social worker in a group home finds sexually explicit images of minors and images of torture saved on the phone of 15 year old Constantin and refers him to a specialist counselling centre. Constantin's file indicates that he was sexually assaulted by his mother's partner (P.) between the ages of eight and thirteen and that thousands of images, including images of Constantin, were found by police on P.'s computer. Criminal charges were filed against P. without the involvement of Constantin. He discusses his relationship with P. as having involved "real man things", such as technology and drones and appears fascinated and proud, but also concerned that P., whom he also calls Prometheus, is disappointed in him and will find out about the counselling session. The counsellor reflects that the memories of P. sometimes make Constantin anxious, to which Constantin shows him a cryptic blog post from a gaming forum.

Unpacking the Situation

The counselling session demonstrates that Constantin exhibits dependency on the perpetrator as well as a loyalty conflict. His statements and the blog allude to images and figures from antiquity (Prometheus, Icarus, Pandora's Box), which may indicate ritualised violence - perpetrators with (pseudo) ideological or cultic justifications for violence.

**Ritualised violence is organised by networks of perpetrators who use an embedded "pseudo" ideology to commercially produce and distribute abusive images and sell child sexual abuse as a "service". The ideology can be used to justify violence while creating psychological hurdles that prevent victims from leaving. This grants perpetrators additional power and control. Ritualised violence can provoke dissociative identity disorders in victims, which can then be exploited to push victims to commit crimes, remain loyal to perpetrators against their better interest, or even become perpetrators themselves.*

The reflections focus on:

- a. the abuse images in Constantin's possession
- b. Constantin's ongoing dependence on P.

We advise counsellors dealing with presumed ritualised violence to contact subject matter experts.

Possession of Abuse and Torture Images

Despite the context of Constantin's own abuse history, his possession of abuse images is concerning. His possession and potential uses of these images need to be considered. Some abuse victims search out their own images online as a coping mechanism. Some use self-triggering as a form of self-harm, while others use the control aspect of searching out images (sometimes of themselves) to manage PTSD symptoms. The presence of these images on Constantin's personal phone could indicate that he has been searching for abuse images or they could indicate ongoing contact and content exchange with P.

Relationships of Dependence

Young people may have feelings of dependence and fear after unresolved abusive relationships. In this case, representations of masculinity were associated with and enhanced by technology. Online activities (e.g. logging into networks, viewing violent or pornographic material) can tie into ritualism and be used as a tool by perpetrators to maintain secrecy and isolate those affected from their support networks. This isolation desensitises victims to potential further violence and suggests that they are being (or could be) monitored.

Recommendations for Action

Given that Constantin is experiencing ritualised violence, one must assume that if he is still endangered, he could also be endangering others. Constantin's possession of abuse videos could indicate an attempt at gaining control over and processing the situation, self-punishment, perpetrator behaviour, or ongoing control (or fear of control) by the perpetrator. He could be exhibiting signs of a dissociative identity disorder with ongoing loyalty to the perpetrator, possibly even reporting back about counselling sessions.

Relationship Building

It is best for counsellors to focus on the victim in these situations rather than becoming preoccupied with criminal prosecution of the perpetrator(s). Trauma Pedagogy can be useful to help see the multidimensional aspects of the trauma and help the victim create "non-violent spaces".

Victims of violence experience a loss of confidence and disillusionment in relationships and will need to build stable relationships with so-called helpers in order to overcome the experience. One must consider that Constantin experienced conflicts related to dependency and loyalty which were triggered by online experiences. Counsellors need to offer Constantin support without forcing him to choose between their help and his potentially ongoing interactions with the perpetrator(s). This can be challenging for a counsellor - to what extent do they uphold the norms of the perpetrator/organised violence when they offer to be confidants of the victims, who may in turn test the trustworthiness of the counsellor. The victim should be reassured that they will choose the content of conversations with the counsellor, and they do not need to talk about anything they do not want to talk about. The goal is to build trust.

Trauma-pedagogical Diagnostics

The goal is to assess the psychiatric well-being of the person based on environmental factors, stressors, personal strengths and resources to understand whether a dissociative personality disorder may be present.

Creating Non-Violent Living Spaces

The danger of online contact by perpetrators is very high in cases of ritualised violence. The victim's need for secure spaces is inversely proportional to their ongoing experience of threat. Thus, the victim can best advise as to where and how they feel safe. For Constantin, one must assess how safe he feels at the group home where he lives and whether this facility has a basic understanding of organised and ritual violence in order to support him. He may also perceive the relationships with counsellors as safe spaces. It is harder to predict to what extent he can use digital media as a safe space.

Considering Media Use

The two key things to consider in the case of Constantin's digital media use are

- a. his possession of abuse images and
- b. his reference to the blog entry.

The questions that a counsellor should consider are:

- Why does Constantin own/look for/use the abuse material?
- What does he experience before, during and after a search/use?
- What connections are there between P. and the possession/use of the abuse material?
- To what extent does interacting with the videos relieve and/or burden Constantin?
- In what other situations does Constantin experience a comparable burden and/or relief?

Counsellors should talk to Constantin about their concerns about the images and videos, his criminal liability in possessing them and the harm caused to the subjects of the images.

The meaning of the blog entry can be discussed with Constantin and put into perspective, keeping in mind that he may still be in contact with perpetrators and may identify with the images and allusions in the blog. Unlike some scenarios, the possibility of eliminating digital media use is not perceived as media scepticism in cases of ritual online violence, especially if it makes the victim feel safer. But, we support self-determination rather than external prohibitions when deciding how to proceed with online presence.

Partial Work

The goal of partial work in systemic trauma education is to create alliances between the counsellors and parts of the personalities of victims suffering from dissociative personality disorder. Note that this does mean accepting that some personalities may remain loyal to the perpetrator.

Mental Health for Helpers

Although studies show very few helpers have been directly threatened through their work supporting victims of ritualised violence, it can awaken anxieties and fears even in trained specialists. There is a high incidence of secondary trauma. It is important that helpers are educated in self-care.

Discussing (potential) dissemination of abuse images with victims and their families

Scenario:

Amira is a 12 year old who was filmed being abused by her nanny. Following counselling, she and her family have been stabilised, and she feels safe and protected. However, the counsellors working with Amira and her parents, respectively, realise that the family is not aware of the possibility that the abuse videos could be published and disseminated online and are unsure of whether to broach the subject with the family.

Unpacking the situation

There is always the possibility that digital evidence of sexualised violence will be published and disseminated online, even in cases where there has been police involvement. Usually, even young children are aware of these potential risks and have had concerns about dissemination of images. However, sometimes repression can cloud this sense of awareness about the potential and resulting consequences of dissemination (e.g. coming across the images of oneself or one's child online, circulation and humiliation within the peer group). The therapist is caught between upholding the family's false sense of security and destabilising them yet again, which could trigger further stress and re-traumatisation.

The fear of image dissemination can haunt victims and their families for years. However, in the case of this unaware family, the realisation could dawn on them at any time that the videos/images either have been, could be, or could be threatened to be disseminated by the perpetrator, so it may be better to confront the possibility of dissemination head on while they have the stability and support of their current therapists. Not immediately addressing the risk could result in a future, potentially worse experience of trauma and a loss of trust in the therapy process or therapist that did not properly prepare them.

Recommendations for Action

Working with Victims of Violence

Children and adolescents who have been affected by mediated sexualised violence may be confronted with triggering situations for the rest of their lives. Klapptstein and Kortewille take the perspective that it is therefore good to address difficult topics head on and, in doing so, integrate stressful and painful realities into the victims' new living environment. Talking to Amira about risks can teach her to cope and therefore, this option outweighs the risk that it could destabilise her and thus adheres to the overarching goal of "participation" in social work, which empowers patients to participate in making decisions about their lives and helping them to regain control. Not informing Amira about the risk of dissemination denies her the ability to work through the associated burdens and is an exercise of destructive power on the part of the therapist.

When to Discuss Dissemination

The timing for this discussion depends on the individual case. In general, broaching the subject should not be delayed. Early confrontation with a stressful event is more effective than waiting to introduce a new stressor after the client has already been stabilised, which can promote avoidance responses in the client. However, it may be important to take small steps and move slowly. The higher the likelihood of dissemination, the sooner Amira needs to be sensitised to this issue. Conducting a risk assessment of the likelihood of dissemination and a stress assessment to evaluate the patient's current perception of stress can help determine when and how to approach the subject.

Techniques for Supportive Conversations with the Victim

We suggest following the principles of supportive psychotherapy geared towards acute crisis situations or cases of potential destabilisation to guide empathetic and problem-oriented conversation that clarify and confront stressors. The risks should be explained in an age-appropriate way, and helpers should check what Amira has understood. Discuss fears and concerns and how she is feeling with regard to the new information she is receiving. The goal is to facilitate a safe space. It may help to discuss actions Amira can take to empower her if dissemination does occur. It is advisable to ask early on in the therapy process if there were digital interactions with perpetrators or the possibility that interactions were filmed or photographed.

Working with Parents

It is important that Amira's parents be made aware of the risk of dissemination as well as technical and legal options that can help prevent dissemination. Amira does not necessarily need to be sensitised at the same time as her parents, but it is important that Amira does not learn about the risk of dissemination inadvertently.

Protecting victims when abuse images and videos recirculate

The scenario:

When she was 14, Magdalena sent her trainer, Anton, naked photos of herself under the guise of a secret relationship. She ended the relationship when he flirted with her nine year old cousin, Anna, and also requested naked photos of Anna. Anton threatened to circulate the naked photos of the two girls if she and her cousin refused to send him more naked photos of the girls together. Magdalena convinced her cousin to go along with it, against Anna's judgement, but Anton circulated the images anyway. Two years later, Magdalena now attends boarding school far away and thought the nightmare was over when the images begin to circulate in her new school. Her classmates spread rumours that she is a paedophile, and she feels a sense of hopelessness that the rumours and recirculation will continue to follow her through life, as well as guilt that people will find out her role in involving her cousin Anna in the situation with Anton. The boarding school is involved insofar as they are aware that Magdalena is being bullied and are taking steps to address this aspect of the issue.

Unpacking the situation

The use of digital media perpetuates violence and can continually trap victims in a cycle of recurring trauma, creating a feeling of powerlessness. We consider both the dissemination and recirculation of the nude photos as well as the sexually-motivated bullying by the boarding school classmates as examples of mediatised sexualised violence. Despite the sexual images of Magdalena surfacing twice, Magdalena has never made anyone aware of the fact that the images were created under threatening circumstances for both Magdalena and Anna. Magdalena feels a sense of responsibility for her cousin's involvement and doesn't think anyone would understand her motives.

Instrumentalisation of Digital Media by Perpetrators

Perpetrators can use digital media to misrepresent or obscure the context in which videos or images were recorded. In this case, Magdalena appears as the perpetrator of the violence committed against her and Anna. But, third parties, like the peer groups, who spread rumors and create a stressful environment for victims, are equally responsible for the negative effects on the victim through their role in continuing or restarting the humiliation.

The Burden of recirculated Evidence of Violence

Individuals in Magdalena's situation experience powerlessness and dependency as well as feelings of stigmatisation and shame. They may be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, PTSD and suicidal tendencies. Recirculation re-activates previous stresses and reinforces feelings of guilt. Losing control on multiple occasions can make people feel hopeless, like they are re-living the previous incident of assault.

Recommendations for Action

Important facets of the scenario include:

- a. multiple instances of Magdalena's trauma
- b. the role of media
- c. the risk and fear of another recurrence
- d. the risk and fear of uncontrollable exposure
- e. feelings of guilt
- f. insufficient protection by the boarding school
- g. the risk of renewed victimisation in the future

Magdalena needs protection from all potential dangers. She needs to be regularly consulted and involved during her counselling so that the people helping her understand what she wants and needs from her current living environment as well as what she does not want or need. In doing so, her burdens and needs can be prioritised. It seems that she is currently most burdened by the rumours of pedophilia at her boarding school and concerns about her interactions with Anton and Anna being disclosed. Counsellors face the challenge of addressing Magdalena's voiced hierarchy of needs in parallel with other aspects of her experience that may need to be processed in order to protect her and help her cope. There may be multiple helpers involved in a case like this. The boarding school, for example, is responsible for dealing with the bullying at their institution and making sure that Magdalena feels safe at school and re-integrated into her social group. Doing so does not necessitate exposing her initial sexual abuse; rather it should focus on preventing the peer-led violence that is currently taking place. This means making the perpetrators of the peer-led violence at the boarding school take responsibility by raising awareness of bullying and explaining potential legal consequences that they could face.

Escaping Hopelessness and Creating Safe Spaces

It is challenging to protect victims of mediatised digital violence due to the constant risk of recirculation. Protection is best accomplished by helping the victim create a sense of control and self-determination alongside efforts to minimise the risks of re-traumatisation.

Emotion-oriented coping (cognitive strategies to reduce fears and stress) and instrumental coping (action-based strategies to minimise or eliminate a stressor or threat) can both be useful.

Emotion-oriented interventions can help Magdalena understand future risks and consequences and weave them into her life narrative while teaching her to feel empowered and in control again. Some question techniques that may be helpful to Magdalena are a) hypothetical questions (if-then scenarios) that help a person understand how they might react to a potential situation; b) circular questions, which present the external perspectives to situations that may occur, such as how Magdalena's parents might react to something; c) future projections, which can help Magdalena reflect on stressful situations by externalising them to another time.

Instrumental coping approaches include technical and legal options to delete images from the internet. For example, if key words linked to an image are known, it is possible to post many other images using the same keyword to minimise the chances that the problematic image will be found.

Forgiveness

Feelings of guilt are a major hurdle to Magdalena taking action against Anton and regaining control over her life. Magdalena needs to work through forgiving herself by de-framing and re-framing or re-contextualising her role in the violence with regard to Anna. Upon reframing, if Magdalena still feels guilt for her actions, it may be helpful to have clarifying conversations with Anna. In order to do so, it will be important to understand the current state of the relationship between Magdalena and Anna and Anna's current wishes with regard to the situation with Anton, in order to protect and respect Anna's right to self-determination while also helping Magdalena work through and process her own feelings.

Dealing with anxieties and fears brought about by mediated sexualised violence

The scenario:

Djamal was the victim of a group assault while fleeing Syria. He is plagued by fear that videos of him having oral sex with another boy and being raped will be disseminated and recirculated, although there has not been any evidence of dissemination in the past 13 months. He obsessively searches the internet for stories similar to his own, wakes at night in a panic, feels the need to assert his heterosexuality and tries to find all possible images of himself on the internet before other people see them and criticize him. In addition, he is worried that his family would be ashamed if they knew what happened to him. To make matters worse, his family are arch enemies of the family of one of the people who assaulted him (Ilai).

Unpacking the Situation

Djamal's desperation to search the internet "with one click" shows his feelings of powerlessness and his need for control and security. He is worried that a recirculation of the images will lead people to believe that his assault was consensual, and in turn, he excessively asserts his heterosexuality.

The stigma of being labeled homosexual or an uncontrolled and unwanted outing of one's homosexuality make digital evidence of violence particularly challenging for queer young people, who are robbed of the opportunity to "come out" on their own terms. In addition, same-sex assault can cause young people, regardless of their identity, to question their sexuality. Hegemonic and heteronormative masculine gender norms may contribute to Djamal's fear of being branded a victim. Some men may go as far as to portray themselves as perpetrators to free themselves of the victim label. By contrast, women may experience victim-shaming due to gender norms that portray femininity as provocative.

Djamal fears that a catastrophic recirculation of his assault evidence is around the corner. His concerns are not unfounded, as some who perpetrate mediated sexualised violence plan to shame, humiliate and misrepresent their victims to the victim's peer group and/or family, thus an experience of re-victimisation.

Djamal's fears around circulation also relate to how his family would react to his assault by a man. The extent to which a situation is perceived as subjectively threatening is dependent on factors such as the mindset of the victim as well as their socio-cultural context. In this case, homosexuality is prohibited in Syria, where queer people are excluded from social life and may be victimised or even threatened or killed by their families (even after leaving the country). Due to the negative relationship between the two families in this scenario, Djamal may fear consequences for or from his family. Severe social consequences can be a threat in many types of communities where group norms problematise sexuality due to homophobia, religious or cultural expectations, ableness, etc.

Fear as a Stressor

Fear can manifest as an emotional, physiological and/or cognitive stress reaction to a perceived threat and its associated uncertainties. It can be experienced for years after a violent incident and can lead to pathological anxiety disorders or psychosomatic disorders. Digital evidence of violence can open a Pandora's box of uncertainty related to the whereabouts and consequences of circulating assault evidence. Fear is also a subjective experience that is connected to a person's lived experiences and intersectional identities. Thus, adequate interventions to help someone work through fear must be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Challenges of Coping with Digital Evidence of Violence

The existence of digital evidence of his assault is a constant burden on Djamel. Like many who have experienced mediated sexualized violence, using digital media triggers memories of the assault and creates a general ambivalence around going online. Victims are caught between their fear of digital media and an awareness of its importance and pervasiveness for social participation. Abstaining from digital media can increase feelings of powerlessness. Some victims purposefully trigger themselves to regain control, for example searching for images of themselves online. This can be a sign of self-harm, or, as it appears in Djamel's case, a desperate attempt at reassuring himself that his videos have not been re-circulated.

Digital Media in the Context of Refugees

While digital media can support refugees in their flight, it can also trigger social crises, forcing them to relive experiences of violence in their country of origin or during their escape. It can be particularly challenging in cases of intersectional discrimination (i.e. people with multiple marginalised attributes), such as their nationality and their sexuality.

Recommendations for Action

Essential aspects of Djamel's situation focus on his fears of the following:

- a. publication and dissemination of the assault video
- b. misrepresentation
- c. being discredited by his social environment
- d. social sanction from family
- e. triggering through digital media

We present several question formats that allow Djamel to test his fears and understand their origins and interconnections. Successful intervention is dependent on Djamel's risk assessment using hypothetical and circular questions. His answers can be used to orient and sort the steps for intervention.

Hypothetical Questions - fictional situations using if-then scenarios to reflect on possible reactions by oneself and others (e.g. If your parents find out about the assault, then...; If your friends or family think you are gay, then...).

Circular Questions - asking the person to suppose how he thinks other people might think or behave. This allows him to better understand the anticipated external reactions that then allow him to think through how he comes to his assessment and how he might be able to affect things. (e.g. What do you think your parents would think if they found out about your assault? What do you think your parents would think if they were sent the video of your assault? How did you arrive at that conclusion?).

Reducing Fears through Reassessment

Fears can be reduced by reinterpreting the likelihood of a threatening occurrence, its significance and its ultimate harmfulness. Coping strategies can be impacted by cultural context. For example, Djamel may have an internalised, learned homophobia that makes it hard to imagine acceptance of his sexuality by his family. Here, systemic question techniques can also help assess the scope of possible reinterpretations. When possible, the helper can ask questions that help the individual recognize and question contradictions between their thinking and reality to arrive at a set of "truths", which can be embedded into their everyday experience.

Reducing Fears through Behaviour

This is a form of instrumental coping, which looks for concrete actions that can reduce risks and fears, such as technical and legal action. These approaches can be paired with cognitive approaches to play out scenarios in advance. Some actions prevent a fear from becoming real, while others seek to minimise consequences.

Physical Techniques for Coping with Fear

Even with other coping mechanisms, individuals may find themselves overwhelmed at times by fear. Anxiety regulation techniques, such as mindfulness exercises, relaxation activities, meditation, etc., can help prevent fear from spiralling out of control and can help people feel more secure.

Abuse images and an orientation on child wellbeing

The scenario:

Mr. G., father of Finn (10 years old) and Lina (3 years old) calls social services to report that Finn saw naked, posed pictures of his sister in the possession of their mother, from whom Mr. G. is separated. Finn tells his father about the pictures and reminds him that two years ago the mother's partner, Arthur M. took naked photos of Finn, which caused Finn a lot of shame. Finn and his father are angry about the photos, and Finn is particularly agitated at the idea of people seeing his sister naked. He does not want to see his mother or Arthur anymore, but he does want to see his sister.

Unpacking the Situation

According to notes from the phone call with Finn and Lina's father, Finn's alleged assault by his mother's partner, Arthur, violated him in two ways: through the invasion of an intimate situation and through the photographing of that situation. Finn's reaction that he did not want his sister to be seen naked could indicate a risk of dissemination, his awareness of the potential risk of dissemination or his own previous experience with the dissemination of abuse images. Regardless of whether the photographer of Lina's images requested the "poses", the choice to photograph her is problematic and indicates a sexualisation of the child. Based on Finn's personal experiences, it is clear that Arthur crossed a line in photographing the children.

It is unclear what role the children's mother played in the violation. Based on Finn's desire not to see Arthur or his mother, it appears that the boy no longer feels safe in that setting. Focus groups from the HUMAN project³ hypothesised several ways to interpret the parents' relationship with one another. In the case of conflict between the parents, the father would likely be quick to accuse the mother and assert that the children are not safe in her presence. However, this would also be an understandable response from an emotional parent presented with a possible abuse scenario. A conflict-ridden parenting situation must be considered, such as a custody battle. Regardless, the call to social services represents second-hand information from Finn through his father. Finn's ability to assess the violation and express his feelings could indicate that the welfare office or a counsellor could work with him directly.

Part of the role of a child welfare agency⁴ is to assess the increased risk of endangerment to the well-being of the child, in part by considering whether abuse images were created and whether



³In ByeDV's predecessor project, HUMAN, prototypical case scenarios with a focus on mediatised sexualised violence were developed, such as this one based on Finn and Lina. Experts from research and practice specialising in child protection, counselling in the context of sexualised violence and crisis intervention were recruited to participate in focus groups to discuss perspectives on and approaches to the case scenarios. The recommendations for action were developed based on the discussions within these focus groups.

⁴German social law (section 27) provides child and youth welfare services in situations in which the parent(s) cannot ensure their child's best interest as well as intervention in cases of child endangerment, when the parent(s) are unable or unwilling to avert danger to the child. The threshold for which these services are provided is judged by the local child and youth welfare authority and where there is a

they were or could be distributed. Inducing a child to pose sexually would in and of itself constitute abuse. Distribution of images is considered a more serious crime than possession of those images without intent to distribute.

Recommendations for Action

Risk Assessment

Following the father's call, the case becomes the responsibility of the child welfare agency. The risk-assessment carried out by the child welfare agency is oriented around the child's well-being. The child's welfare could be deemed endangered if the mother a) is unaware of the possibility of mediatised sexualised assault; b) is not able to prevent attacks on Finn and Lina; or c) is involved in the assaults. The more children involved in a situation and the younger the children, the greater the risk of vulnerability is assessed to be.

It is important for the child(ren) and their guardian(s) to be involved in the risk assessment, as long as that does not compromise the protection of the child(ren). In this case, experts disagree on the extent to which the mother should be involved in the risk assessment. On the one hand, it could be helpful to see her response to the accusations against her partner; it could confirm suspicions she has had and motivate her to leave him. On the other hand, it could be wise to initially exclude the mother out of concern that she may feel solidarity with her partner.

It is agreed upon that the first priority is to involve Finn to understand his account of the situation and determine his needs. Speaking with Finn could also help clarify the respective parenting competencies, especially his mother's role and/or awareness of the potential violation. It is important to keep in mind, when moving forward with discussions with Finn, that he feels shame about the situation. Also, Lina must be taken into consideration. As a three year old, a conversation-based assessment may be complicated, and it may be helpful to speak with her childcare provider.

Because there are so many unknowns, it may be helpful to work with *if-then statements*.

Example 1: The child welfare agency may not be able to confirm a risk to the children, because Finn and possibly also Lina relativise the father's accusations and further evidence of abuse or neglect cannot be found. The mother may confirm that naked photos of the children were taken



disagreement, an administrative court makes the decision. If a case worker suspects any form of child endangerment, an assessment must be made, and in the event that the assessment determines that there is child endangerment, a plan has to be made to avert danger to the child (Spratt, Trevor & Nett, 2013). Child Protection Systems: An international comparison of good practice examples of five countries (Australia, Germany, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom) with recommendations for Switzerland. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284717579_Child_Protection_Systems_An_international_comparison_of_good_practice_examples_of_five_countries_Australia_Germany_Finland_Sweden_United_Kingdom_with_recommendations_for_Switzerland#pf102

and understand how this could be interpreted as a violation, but she may insist that the context was not sexualised. This is a difficult situation for the child welfare agency, as it does not rule out a risk to the children. Perhaps the children were sworn to silence and the mother is trivialising the situation.

If this is the situation, then possible next steps include:

- More meetings with helpers, such as involving the children's schools and daycares.
- Outpatient child-rearing support for the parents with a focus on Finn and Lina
- Warning that taking Photographs against the children's will is considered a crime and that a report will be made should any additional photos be taken or distributed
- An Assessment of the parents' awareness of the problem and willingness/ability to cooperate
- Empowerment of Finn and Lina regarding their rights and who to contact in case of subsequent violations.

Example 2: If the child welfare agency can confirm a risk to the children, and the parents, particularly the mother, is cooperative, then it is possible to support the parents in protecting Finn and Lina. The agency may choose to delegate the case to a centre that specialises in sexualised violence. The agency has the responsibility to develop a help plan together with the parents, which include securing the social space of the children, both on and offline. The mother can also request a restraining order against Arthur M. on behalf of the children.

Example 3: If the child welfare agency can confirm a risk to the children, but the mother either does not acknowledge the risk, does not take it seriously or is suspected of contributing to this risk, then the next step is to involve family court to help determine what is in the best interest of the children. Intervention options may be available to help sensitise the mother for the situation her children are in, and it is questionable to what extent her contact to the children will be limited.

The follow up:

According to a psychological evaluation of Arthur M., who has a previous criminal record of child abuse, his locus of control, impulsivity and victim empathy indicate a low risk of recurrence. The images of Lina that are found online are conspicuous but not considered pornographic in nature. Images of Finn cannot be found online.

Unpacking the situation

Experts have been interested in recent years in studying the relationship between sexualised online violence and other forms of sexualised violence against children and adolescents. There has been a particular focus on people who view abuse images online. Some studies indicate that individuals who view abuse images could also engage in hands-on violence. Researchers are concerned with the question of whether and under what circumstances possession and viewing of abuse images heightens the risk of committing hands-on violence or recidivism to past hands-on violence.

Recommendations for Action

Regardless of the criminal liability of Arthur M., the assessment report trivialises the implications of a known child sex offender possessing conspicuous images of a three year old child with whom he lives. Nor can dissemination of photos or the risk thereof be ruled out. In general, while the assessment may be useful for legal and criminal purposes, it does not help in assessing the broader risk to the Finn and Lina and would require additional consideration from experts on sexualised violence against children and adolescents.

Family court often hears from the children themselves in cases of endangerment of well-being. This requires age appropriate conversations with a qualified person, the use of recordings to avoid the burden of discussing difficult topics multiple times with a child, and the appointment of legal guardians who will look out for the well-being of the child. This means that Finn and even Lina can take part in the proceedings, and it increases the likelihood that Finn's wishes, such as those initially indicated by his father, will be taken into serious consideration.

The role of the mother remains unclear in this case, although experts in our focus groups indicated that the use of family court and the resulting psychological evaluation of Arthur M. indicate that she was not cooperative. Many of the resulting custody outcomes differ based on national laws.

Case documentations indicates that, despite their roles in early intervention, specialised counselling centres and child welfare agencies often feel powerless in the decision-making process when multiple organisations and legal agencies are involved in child welfare cases. Cases of mediatised sexualised violence further aggravate the situation, as there are often methodological challenges, confusion and uncertainty that can lead to dubious decision-making. These challenges point to the urgent need for professional standards and more qualifications and expertise in the area of mediatised sexualised violence in family court and related agencies.

In this final abstract, we discuss approaches for preventing mediated sexualised violence while taking into consideration respect for autonomy and self-determination with regard to a child or adolescent's use of digital media. Existing prevention strategies in Germany tend to focus on the risks of sexting, uploading and sharing sexualised images, cyberbullying and grooming and take the perspective of warning young people about the associated risks. The problems with risk-based discourse are that it: a) is rarely oriented to the ways in which young people actually use digital media; b) it puts the responsibility for protection in the hands of young people; c) it can increase feelings of shame and guilt by insinuating that victims of mediated sexualised violence did not properly protect themselves or had an unhealthy relationship with the online world; d) in creating this sense of shame, it may complicate the process of victims coming forward; and e) it decreases the role of empathy for victims by ascribing some level of shared responsibility for what happens to them.

We are in favour of a critical emancipatory attitude from adults with regard to young people's online activity, which is media positive and oriented toward the needs of young people while creating a reflective and empowering framework for considering insecurities, worries and risks.

Empowering a Self-Directed Relationship to Digital Media

Children often benefit from a framework in order to develop a self-directed and safe relationship to digital media. For example: What does it mean to be self-directed? How can I use media in a self-directed way? How can I maintain boundaries online?

Studies show young people are often more aware of how to keep their online lives secret from adults than they are at how to protect themselves online, and likewise, adults tend to default to control and prohibitions in efforts to protect children online. By creating a controlled environment, children do not learn to regulate their own online behaviour and may see their experiences with violence as consequences of "breaking the rules" and therefore not approach trusted adults for help. In addition, experimentation and risk are important elements of growing up. As the online world becomes increasingly a part of young people's everyday experiences, it is important that they can navigate their place in that world and understand the nature of relationships that exist online to develop a sense of where their boundaries lie and who they can trust.

For professionals broaching the subject of prevention with children and adolescents, it may be helpful to pose questions, such as:

- What are the consequences if a friend posts sexualised photos and videos online and I don't? Will I be socially excluded?
- Is there something wrong with me if I don't feel comfortable sending pictures?
- How can or should I show affection online?
- How can I determine someone's intentions?
- I was posting photos and videos online, but I don't want to anymore. Can I remove them?
- How can I say no without ending contact with someone or being socially excluded?

One important element of determining one's boundaries is to understand offender strategies and what is an inappropriate way for someone to interact with you online. For example, it is wrong when someone threatens not to like you anymore, to break off contact with you or to publish or disseminate images of you without your approval. It is wrong when someone is upset with you because you refuse to post or share images of yourself. You have the right to end a conversation at any time and do not owe anyone anything. No one has the right to publish or disseminate images of you without your permission.

Reflecting on Media Use and Boundaries

Typical victim-blaming myths:

- Victims bring violence on themselves
- You are to blame if you trust the wrong people.
- Sending naked photos is slutty, and you shouldn't be surprised when the photos are disseminated.
- Boys will be boys. Not surprising that they would share photos sent to them.

It can be useful to reflect on the truthfulness of these myths.

- In what situations are such things said?
- Which assumptions are behind these statements? How can these assumptions be formulated differently?
- Who do these statements talk about and who is left out of the narrative?
- Who benefits from these statements and who doesn't?
- What messages do those being discussed need instead?

Careful media use by victims

Young people who have experienced mediatised sexualised violence encounter a dilemma when considering future online behaviour. The internet can provide socialisation, a sense of belonging, entertainment, distraction and an opportunity to take back control, however it can also burden them with concerns of re-encountering perpetrators of violence, triggering situations, re-victimisation and re-traumatisation. It is important that people who have experienced violence online do not feel forced to withdraw from the online world. Rather, they should have a role in determining whether and in which ways they want to use digital media. One of the roles of secondary and tertiary prevention is to help empower young people who have been victims to discuss the following:

- What do you use digital media for?
- When is it fun to use digital media?
- What is your favourite thing to do online?
- How do you feel when you are online?
- Is there something that you really do not like or do not like doing when online?
 - Can you describe these uncomfortable situations? How did it make you feel?
 - What did you do in this situation?
 - How often do such situations arise?
- What do you think would change for you if you didn't use the internet for a while?
- What would happen if you only used the apps and social media platforms that you like the most? And what if you took a break from using the other apps and platforms?

In this type of trauma work, discussing the use of digital media is closely connected to psychoeducation and learning to recognise one's own stress reactions and how to control them.

A Media-Positive Attitude and Model Media Use

Adults play an important role in modelling positive interactions with the online world. It begs the question whether young people can be expected to recognise risky or boundary-crossing behaviour online if photos and videos of them are being shared by their parents without their permission. Similar hypocrisy between parental behaviour-modelling and the expected behaviour of children has been documented, for example, in the way that parents want their children to engage with smartphones compared to the way parents engage with their own smartphones. Despite the stereotypes, there does not appear to be a difference between the ways that adults who are active online use the internet compared to youth. Online behaviour is more related to socialisation than age or generation.

Aspects of a Media-Positive Attitude

- Acceptance and tolerance of the fact that using digital media is important for the development and inclusion of children and adolescents
- Focus on the opportunities and potential inherent in digital media without ignoring the problems
- Motivation and empowerment of young people to have self-directed use of digital media
- Demonstrated interest in how young people use digital media
- Openness to media-critical discussion without prejudice for how young people choose to use digital media
- Conveyance that young people and the ways they use digital media are fundamentally valued
- Seeking to understand why young people choose to use digital media in the ways that they do

Dialogue with Young People that Can Help Communicate Genuine Interest in their Online Experiences

- What do you find interesting about posting photos and videos?
- What response do you want from people who see your photos and videos?
- What worries do you sometimes have?
- What uncomfortable experiences have you had online?
- Who is your favourite influencer? Why? What do you find real or fake?
- What aspects of digital media are you critical of?
- What do you find particularly exciting about meeting new people online?
- What do you like about flirting or arranging a date via social media?

Aspects of Model Media Use by Adults

- Using digital media the way one expects young people to use it
- Awareness of the boundaries, private sphere and rights of children and adolescents
- Asking young people permission before posting or sharing images and videos of them online
- Respecting that young people can revoke this permission at any time

In general, if there are rules for how young people should appropriately use digital media, there should also be rules and transparency for how adults, especially parents, use digital media.

Closing Thoughts

Prevention is only as effective as the structure and setting in which it takes place. We assume that specialists with the tools for intervention as well as prevention strategies will be most successful and have the most sustainable impact on the young people they work with. In addition, specialists and facilities where young people encounter open-minded attitudes will gain their trust and be able to strengthen and empower them. Regular prevention offerings for young people should include information about personal rights, including one's rights to one's own image online, awareness of boundaries, online etiquette and behaviour, etc. Prevention settings extend beyond educational and counselling settings to the digital world itself. While efforts have been made to better protect data and its use online, there is still a lot of untapped potential in working with online providers and platforms to better address the needs of young people online, learn about the strategies of offenders and financially and technologically support online and offline support for prevention and intervention measures.

take action | **beyond**
against cyber | **digital**
sexual | **violence**



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