

Digital violence in teen dating: an ecological engagement methodology

Thaís Afonso Andrade ¹

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5784-1674>

Véronique Donard ³

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4812-6668>

Marisa Amorim Sampaio ²

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6600-8625>

Priscilla Machado Moraes ⁴

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6673-9623>

¹⁻³ Universidade Católica de Pernambuco (UNICAP). Rua do Príncipe, 526. Boa Vista. Recife, PE, Brazil. CEP: 50.050-900. E-mail: t.afonsoandrade@yahoo.com

⁴ Universidade Evangélica de Goiás (UniEVANGÉLICA). Anápolis, GO, Brazil.

Abstract

Objectives: to investigate digital dating violence among adolescents.

Methods: qualitative research, applying the ecological engagement methodology, carried out in a non-governmental organization. The final sample consisted of eight male and female adolescents, aged between 16 and 19 years old. Data were analysed according to Content Analysis technique, with triangulation of instruments and technique: biosociodemographic questionnaire; field notes; semi-structured interview; questionnaire "Knowing Dating Relationships".

Results: digital violence was frequent and naturalized in dating; despite mutual violence, bidirectionality in dating violence did not mean gender symmetry; the pandemic was linked to the daily increase in Internet use via mobile phones, but it did not increase dating violence. Impulsivity was used in attempts to resolve conflicts in dating, associated not only with adolescence, but also with the increasing digitization and acceleration of relationships within our society. Adolescents were direct and/or indirect victims of violence in their main development microsystems (family, school and neighborhood), simultaneously exposed to different types of violence, since childhood.

Conclusions: the digital microsystem can be seen as another context for the perpetration and victimization of violence. Preventive actions should consider the various expressions of violence (physical, psychological, sexual and digital) and their repercussions for physical and mental health.

Key words *Violence, Dating, Adolescence, Adolescent development, Adolescent health*



Introduction

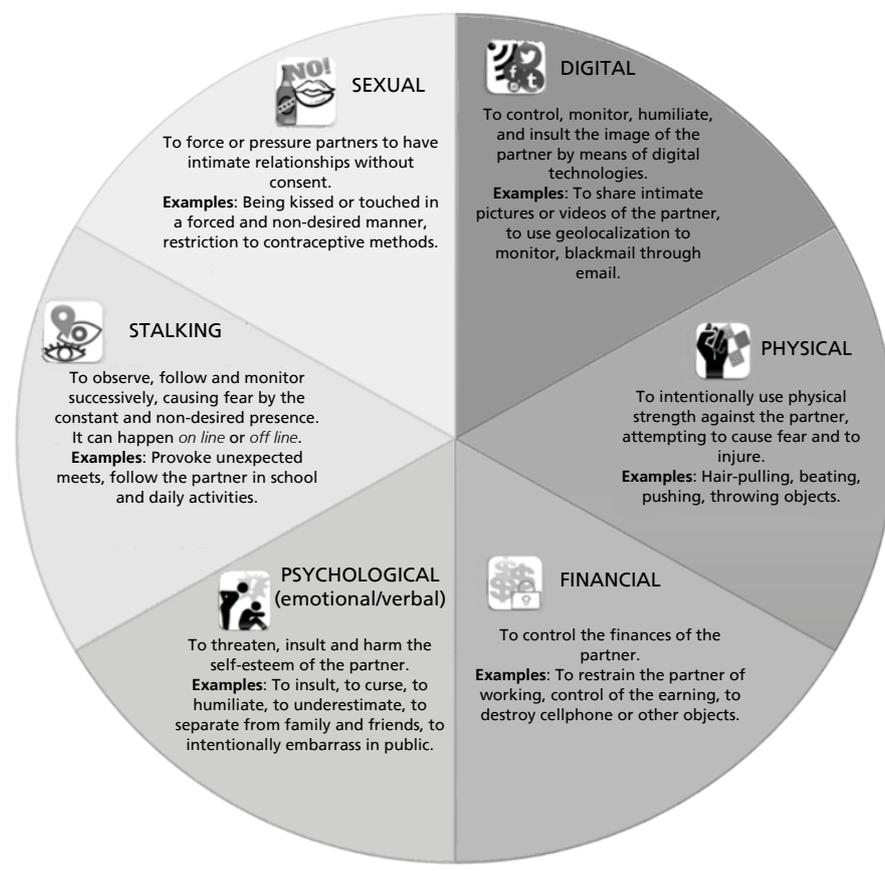
Dating violence (DV) is considered a public health problem which may affect the health of adolescents in both short and long term^{1,2} and the literature^{3,4} reveals alarming rates of the phenomenon within adolescents. The World Health Organization (WHO)¹ considers DV as an early variety of violence between intimate partners, the first experiences occurring between 11 and 17 years of age. DV within adolescents may occur in various ways, and the following typologies are common: psychological, digital, phisic, sexual, stalking and financial,^{2,4,5} demonstrated in Figure 1 based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).²

DV may occur *vis-a-vis* (offline) and/or mediated by the Internet (online). This latter is nominated digital violence, and is categorized as a contemporary typology of violence, understood as an intentional act of controlling, threatening, humiliating and insulting the image of the partner, inciting embarrassment and persecution by means of the use of digital technologies. It is observed in two varieties: behaviors of control and monitoring, besides

sexual digital violence.^{6,7} Differently of that observed in physical presence, such expression of violence does not demonstrate chronological and geographical barriers for it to occur.^{6,7} Therefore, ubiquity and promptness in sharing, and because of this, expanded audience, are specificities that characterize its complexity.⁷ Figure 2 demonstrates a possible understanding of digital violence as an intersection of psychological, sexual and stalking violence, which occur offline.

The study is based on the Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD), developed by Bronfenbrenner.⁸ Surveys in the public health area based on this approach are indicated by WHO for the comprehension of the multifaceted nature of violence.⁹ The model includes four components – Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) – which conceives human development in an interdependent manner among the different systems in which the individual is inserted.^{8,10} The first component of the model is denominated Proximal Processes, considered the most powerful mechanisms for human development and they refer to singular ways of interaction between person, objects and symbols.^{8,10}

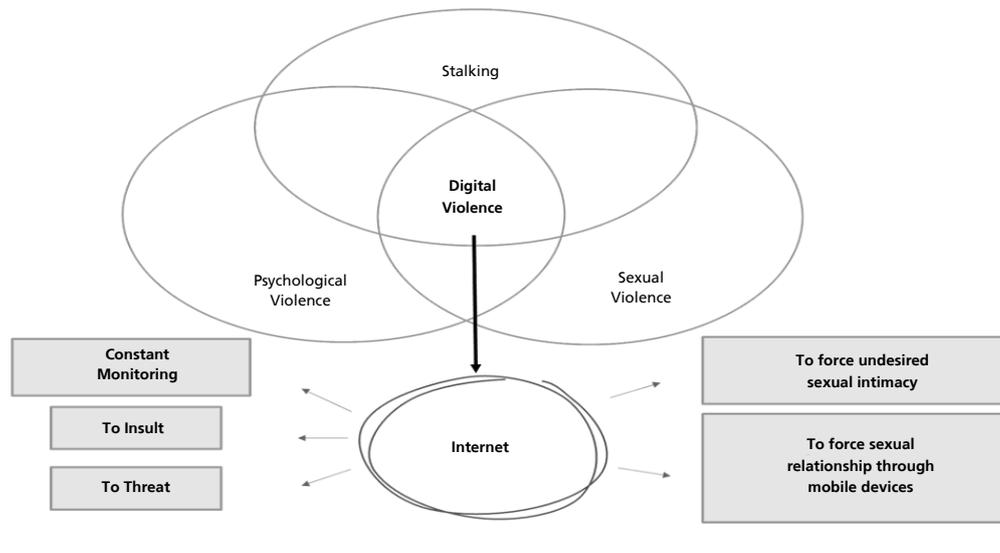
Figure 1
Types of dating violence.



Source: elaborated by the researchers, content based on typologies of dating violence described by CDC.²

Figure 2

Digital violence and the interface with face-to-face violence (offline).



They can produce two types of effects: competence and dysfunction.^{8,10} In the violence between intimate partners, proximal processes are observed as dysfunctional, since the synergic interaction may be repeated for years.¹¹

The second component, “Person”, embraces biopsychosocial characteristics of the individual.⁸ Three attributes are described: a) forces/dispositions considered generative or disruptive; b) resources – biopsychological characteristics of the person that may facilitate the adjustment to a determinate context; c) demand – involves biological characteristics such as age, gender and race, aspects that are subject to macrosystemic beliefs.¹¹

The context, third component of the model, comprises the interaction of four environmental levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, evidencing bidirectional influences within and among them, situating the person in a system of relationships affected by various levels of the nearest environment and the furthest one. Microsystem is the immediate environment in which the proximal process of the developing person occur.^{8,10} Mesosystem considers the relationships between microsystems. The exosystem is defined as an environment in which the person is not directly inserted, although facts that influence his/her development occur.^{8,10} The macrosystem is referred to subculture or culture, social organization and systems of belief of a given society.^{8,12} Lastly, the Time or Cronosystem is related to the influence of the historic moment, besides including changes of the person in his/her life history. It is analyzed from three levels: microtime, mesotime and macrotime.^{8,10}

BTHD was built throughout the 20th century. Thus, modifications are necessary in order to comprehend the digital context in which adolescents develop. The

implications of these changes reverberate over the model PPCT.¹² In the contemporaneity, digital microsystems are central for the engagement of proximal processes of adolescents. In this perspective, the demand of both the physical and digital microsystems is evidenced.¹² Johnson and Pupilampu,¹³ proposed the sophistication of Bronfenbrenner’s theory regarding environmental influences on development, which includes the interaction of the individual with living elements (for example, peers) and non-living elements (for example, hardware) with the new technologies of information and communication (TICs), which occur in immediate or direct environments, more commonly home and school, in adolescence.¹⁴

With regard to digital microsystem, characteristics related to the different BTHD components can be pointed out. In the mesosystem, the role of social networks. In the exosystem, the monitoring of localization. Digital colonialism¹⁵ demonstrates the digital macrosystem: system resulting from the digitalization of our society. Rosa,¹⁶ demonstrates that TICs lead temporality to a technological and social acceleration, as well as in the rhythm of lives, allowing to think of the characteristics of a cronosystem.

Observing the complexity involved in DV and the gap of investigations on the theme, the aim of this study was to analyze digital violence in dating among adolescents.

Methods

Qualitative research, developed by the Ecological Insertion method (EI),¹⁷ performed in one of the microsystems of adolescents (natural environment): a non-governmental organization (NGO), located in Recife/PE, chosen by

convenience sample (ease of access). It is an institution of social assistance that attends children and adolescents from 0 to 18 years, which offers socio-professional qualification by means of free and technical courses, focused on professional initiation of adolescents from 16 years old. The NGO did not deal in its activities the DV theme.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the activities with the adolescents were suspended in the NGO. Only management activities, distribution of food and hygiene products were maintained. The NGO allowed that the EI was developed during October 2020, with daily visits of the researcher, by means of rigorous sanitary protocols.

The adolescents were selected with the help of social educators, via *Whatsapp* application, following the criteria: age between 15 and 19 years old; girls and boys; to be dating/having dated previously. Those who resided or had resided with the partner were excluded. The conclusion of the capitulation of new subjects attended the saturation criterion (recidivism and complementarity of interviews).¹⁸

The contacts with adolescents occurred individually, at the NGO garden, ensuring physical distancing and secrecy. Three adolescents were interviewed each day, in sessions of approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, one or two rounds, according to the way that each one answered the activities of the research.

Three tools and one research technique were used for data collection. Tools: 1) biosociodemographic questionnaire (age, gender, schooling, religion, familiar configuration, time of dating and job); 2) Field journal: registry of proximal processes between participants and researcher, besides reports of informal conversations with employees of the institution; 3: Questionnaire "Knowing Dating Relationships": answers of Yes or No type, totaling 24 behaviors. The participant was invited to express the answer with more details, exemplifying situations associated with DV. Technique: 1) Individual semi-structured interview: deepened the DV theme between the adolescents, with the following variants: how do they date; conception of violence and DV; possible experiences of current or previous DV; adopted strategies facing DV; context influences (micro, meso, exo and macro) in relationships (district, school, NGO, familiar and intimate).

The constitution of the corpus considered familiarity with the phenomena and the deepening of the theme accounting for the material of 8 adolescents. From the analytical categories, the empirical categories were identified, interpreted according to the BTHD.⁸ In this process, the interviews, also composed by the "Knowing Dating Relationships" questionnaire, were triangulated

with the biosociodemographical questionnaire and the field journal, analyzed under different perspectives (field researcher and three supervisor researchers). The triangulation aimed to analyze data obtained by means of these different sources, with conclusions based on the whole, deepening and bringing more auditability and credibility about the central phenomena analyzed in the research, in order to validate or expand the interpretation. Lastly, the Thematic Content Analysis was used, which privileged the interrelation between the nucleuses Processes-Person-Context-Time,⁸ by means of the pre-analysis, material organization, data analysis and interpretation.¹⁸

The EI searched for the accomplishment of five aspects: i) engagement of participants and the researcher in an activity; ii) regularity of the significant presence for an expanded period of time; iii) more complex activities executed successively; iv) reciprocity in relationships; v) the interest and stimulus of the research theme should be interesting and stimulate in researchers and participants, the attention, exploration and imagination.¹⁷

The project was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of the University (suppressed information), under the CAAE number (24624619.7.0000.5206). Fictional names were applied in order to ensure anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Eight adolescents participated in the research: four girls and four boys, from 16 to 19 years old. There were no losses, exclusions or refusals. One adolescent was raised by an adoptive father, one by the parents, five by the mother, and one by the maternal grandmother. The families shared situations of unemployment, poverty, precarious housing conditions, early death of close people and relatives with alcohol dependence and abuse of drugs such as cocaine, however none of them had reported alcohol abuse or other drugs or pregnancy in adolescence, suggesting a protective relationship (mesosystem)⁸ between family and ONG. This aspect seemed to be related to the engagement of the majority of participants with the institution, being the smaller period of 6 years and the higher, 14 years (Table 1).

The adolescents possessed a cellphone, the only electronic dispositive on their reach with access to the Internet via Wi-Fi, shared with neighbors. They reported the usage of *Whatsapp* application for communication with the partners, as something common in dating relationships.

Based on the content analysis, three categories emerged: a) digital violence in dating; b) violence in the family, school and district microsystems; c) gender crossings.

Table 1

The use of Internet and electronic devices among adolescents.			
Name/Age	Schooling	Access to Internet	Electronic device
Adélia Prado / 18 years	3 rd high school	Wi-Fi signal shared with neighbors	cellphone
Carolina de Jesus / 17 years	1 st high school (EREM*)	Wi-Fi signal shared with neighbors	cellphone
Conceição Evaristo / 18 years	2 ^o high school	Wi-Fi signal shared with neighbors	cellphone
Fernando Sabino / 17 years	2 nd high school (EREM*)	Wi-Fi	cellphone
Guimarães Rosa / 19 years	Complete High school (EJA**)	Wi-Fi signal shared with neighbors	cellphone
João Cabral / 18 years	2 nd high school (EREM*)	Wi-Fi signal shared with neighbors	cellphone
Lenine / 16 years	2 nd high school (EREM*)	Wi-Fi	cellphone
Lia de Itamaracá / 18 years	Complete High school (EREM*)	Wi-Fi signal shared with neighbors	cellphone

* Escola de Referência do Ensino Médio com turno integral (Reference full time High School); ** Educação de Jovens e Adultos (Young and Adult Education).

Digital violence in dating

The researched evidenced that DV among adolescents, specially psychological, digital and physical varieties, stand out as naturalized phenomena with strong presence in intimate relationships. Similar results were found in other studies.^{3,4} In various narratives of the research it was possible to identify bidirectionality,¹⁹ that is, the mutual violence within the partnership. However, it is worth highlighting that the relational dynamic as a victim or perpetrator, in some cases, did not occur in the same conflicting situation.

Some “likes” of pictures posted on social networks generated conflicts. The control of online activities leads to invasion of “digital privacy” as a way of exercising power and domain in the partnership. In addition, it may generate angst and be harmful to couples when become a standard of interaction of the relationship.^{11,20} It was also identified that the increase in internet use in cellphones seemed not to potentialize the episodes of digital violence, since the relational dynamics related to this type of violence had already occur before the pandemic period.

The delivery and/or receipt of image, text, video of oneself or of the couple, with sexual content via cellphone by means of messaging applications or social networks in a consented way is denominated in the literature as *sexting*.^{7,20} When occurs in a consensual manner, it is considered as a possibility of initiation of sexual activity mediated by the Internet and may be experienced in a healthy manner; after all, the discovering of sexual pleasure, felling desired by the parent are common behaviors in this stage of development.⁷ In this research, the narratives of some adolescents evidenced a different scenario, with the understanding that the *nudes* (colloquial term for sexting) may be spread in a unauthorized way.

“I never sent a nude. I think it’s some invasive and weird stuff, to want to expose yourself. I am not a piece of flesh for people to be looking at cellphone photos” (Adélia Prado, 18 years).

You don’t know the person physically, but the conversations are going further. Then you fight with the person. Then the person can send it to someone else and there it goes, got viral. (Lenine, 16 years).

On the other hand, the unauthorized sharing of intimate pictures,²⁰ designated as “digital sexual violence”,⁷ is an expression of contemporary violence that reaches mainly women. The victimization or perpetration of this type of violence was not identified among the interviewed adolescents. Nevertheless, digital violence, which is also recognized by behaviors of control and monitoring of the partnership, was broadly observed in the intimate relationships of these adolescents, without being recognized in their speeches.

Violence in the microsystems family, school and district

It was identified episodes of violence in the familiar microsystem against adolescents since childhood. The legitimation of violence within the family environment is concretized, for example, when parents, facing conflicts, react with little objectivity and use authoritarian methods that do not allow dialogs and reasoning. Similarly, it is verified that the use of violent acts such as cursing has been legitimated as acceptable attitudes as a natural manner of correcting behaviors, solving conflicts and even in daily interaction.²¹ Violent reactions indicates, according to BTHD, dysfunction in proximal process due to the difficulty in maintaining reciprocal shares.¹¹ In adolescence, interactions of the quotidian of family life, that is, proximal processes, are particularly important, mainly in the engagement, communication by means of dialogs, negotiations and exchange of arguments and opinions.^{21,22}

The repetition of violence that occurs within the family environment extended to intimate relationships attracts interest in the scientific community. Research

points to the understanding to the so-called intergenerational transmission of violence⁴, which, in turn, presents similarity with the concept of BTHD in the cronosystem,⁸ which comprehends the development by means of changes and repetitions of intergenerational relationships.²⁰

It is perceived, in the speeches, the manifestation of violence in the privileged microsystem, which is the school territory. *Bullying* – systematic intimidation that uses power and control over oneself, especially in interpersonal relationships between partners,²³ was identified in some cases, attenuated as only a “joke” between colleagues. A study revealed that adolescents that perform bullying continued to affirm power and control over the partner in their dating relationships when they were older, being the first possibly predictive of the other.²³

“I have a friend that is fat, I joke on him, and he knows that there is no problem in cursing him, not cursing, joking. I call him stupid nigger [...] it’s normal” (João Cabral, 18 years).

“I suffered bullying from the 6th to 9th grade. I tried to denounce, but I had no strength for this. I spent a lot of time suffering [...]. Everything I had was given. People mocked me” (Lia de Itamaracá, 18 years).

The district in which the participants resided is also marked by episodes of violence, such as marital violence, fights between neighbors, besides drug trafficking. The immersion of children and adolescents in a violent community, such as the adolescents that participated in this research, may work as a strong context of learning about the system of normative beliefs regarding violence, which generates acceptance and naturalization of violent reactions, being such cultural aspects intertwined in Brazilian society, and it can be comprehended from the macrosystem.^{8,22}

The “self defense”, “the search for justice and equality” are concerning beliefs that have strong presence in the community; instead of searching for possibilities to mitigate the occurrence of violent behaviors, they end up promoting an encouragement for oneself to take justice into one’s own hands.²¹ Similarly, a study²⁴ about DV among adolescents exposed to social risks such as intrafamiliar violence, violence in school and community, poverty, unemployment, among others, designated as polyvictimization,^{24,25} indicates that such adverse experiences seem to result in chronic stressors that would generate risk of violence.

According to the BTHD perspective, when thinking on the context as concentric structures, interdependent and interrelated,⁸ interventions directed into multiple contexts may decrease the rates of perpetration and victimization

DV during adolescence, so that it is possible to conduct them into more positive trajectories, diminishing the probability that they become victims and perpetrators of violence by intimate partners and even suffer adverse outcomes to their health later in their lives.

Gender crossings

As macrosystemic characteristics, some beliefs about stereotypes and traditional gender roles were identified, as they seem to sustain and justify non-healthy behaviors in intimate relationships, perceived as “protection”, “ways of love” and “care”.⁵ The reproduction of social gender standards makes girls and boys vulnerable in different manners. Even with some changes taking place, it seems that women are still attached to the idea of a chaste and retiring behavior as something relevant for the concretization of dating or the choice of an intimate partner, an aspect observed in this study.

It was understood that some episodes of violence were associated with beliefs of romantic love such as: “soul mates” (idea of the necessity of being complete only with the companion of the other); the omnipotence (true love can do anything); of “jealousy” (behaviors of control over the partnership are a proof of love).²⁶ Such beliefs and behaviors are present in intimate relationships of adolescent couples and mostly go unnoticed, since they are perceived as more subtle types of violence.

“I felt that he liked me, that he would never be capable of oppressing me. I never thought I was living this (control of clothes, friends and leisure activities). I thought that was protection. (Adélia Prado, 18 years).

“I think that you need to be jealous, because when there is no jealousy, there is no love. My ex-girlfriend was very jealous. If she is jealous, she loves me” (João Cabral, 18 years).

On the other hand, a research carried out with female adolescents in the city of São Paulo⁵ identified “a feminine posture that intends to break socially constructed stereotypes, however by means of violent attitudes that sometimes are not healthy”^{5,6}. Such fact was also observed in the speeches of some adolescents that desired to eliminate the stereotype of a fragile and submissive mother:

“I have never experienced physical violence, because I am strong, if he (ex-boyfriend) tried something, I would strike back, he would be knocked out, he knows this (Adélia Prado, 18 years).”

“I have beaten boys in the school more frequently. Because girls can hit and say: “I will tell my mother” [...] I’ve already slapped and pulled the hair of my boyfriend so that he knows who he’s dealing with (Lia de Itamaracá, 18 years).

The analysis of the “person” nucleus of BTHD, which includes aspects such as age, gender, schooling, self-esteem, besides behaviors that each individual brings to their relationships, indicated the use of impulsiveness as an attempt to solve conflicts among adolescents. This characteristic seems to be associated with not only adolescence, but also the growing digitalization and acceleration of relationships in our society, aspects that in this perspective were associated with the involvement and maintenance of intimate relationships marked by violence. However, since BTHD conceives the individual as an active being, in a continuous process of transformation, product and producer of development, which receives influences of systems to which he/her belongs, as well as influence them,^{8,11} impulsiveness may be comprehended as a characteristic that can be changed over the life cycle.

This study investigated digital violence in dating among adolescents. It was observed that the digital microsystem, with which adolescents are directly involved, was observed as one more context of perpetration and victimization of violence, by means of continuous monitoring of online activities or even for being a locus of learning violent behaviors.

Even with the identification of bidirectionality or mutual violence, it is not possible to affirm that the partnership is equally violent, marked by gender symmetry in the dating relationship. In order to achieve a deep comprehension that considers socio-historical specificities it is necessary to consider the type of violence analyzed, the motivations, the consequences and the recognition or not of violent behaviors for girls and boys. It was verified that the adolescents were direct or indirect victims of violence in their main microsystems of development – family, school and district – exposed simultaneously to violence in several contexts, since childhood, a phenomenon described as polyvictimization.

As a limitation of the study, we indicate that the ecological insertion, developed in the most severe scenario of Covid-19, could not be explored with all its potential, since the activities with the adolescents were suspended and the employees were alternated in scale regime.

It is recommended that preventive actions consider the various expressions of violence (physical, psychological, sexual and digital) and their repercussions to physical and mental health. We suggest the development of software such as applications or even online interventions that

stimulate a more responsible and positive use of the internet by adolescents in dating relationships.

Author’s contribution

Andrade TA, Sampaio MA, Donard V and Moraes PM: conception of Project, material analysis, writing, critic and review of the manuscript. Andrade TA: developed field research. All authors approved the final version of the article and declare no conflict of interest.

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