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"He Flattered Me". A Comprehensive Look Into Online Grooming Risk Factors: Merging Voices of Victims, Offenders and Experts Through In-Depth Interviews

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Abstract

Online grooming is the process by which an adult uses the Internet to initiate a dynamic of sexual persuasion and victimisation through online contact to obtain an encounter or sexual content from a minor. Although there is an abundant literature of attempts to define the risk factors for grooming, fewer studies have addressed the risk factors qualitatively through direct interviews with offenders, victims and experts. Further understanding such characteristics of the grooming process allows the development and improvement of evidence-based prevention programmes, designed to target specific risk factors. To deepen our understanding of how risk factors operate and how offenders exploit minors' vulnerabilities, the European H2020[1] project RAYUELA conducted 15 in-depth interviews with offenders, 8 with victims, and 23 with subject-matter experts from different European countries. The results, based on a categorical content analysis, are consistent with previously reported risk factors for victims. Social isolation was revealed as the most relevant factor. The age of greatest risk is in adolescence due to the characteristics of this developmental stage, among which sexual curiosity stands out. In relation to gender, although girls receive more requests from groomers, boys are more likely to accept them, showing a different perception of the risk. Other relevant factors found non-heterosexual sexual orientation, and poor family communication. In addition, a high percentage of offenders were found to be from the victims' environment. Thus, a relevant conclusion is that risk factors cannot be separated from structural aspects of the offline reality, such as gender stereotypes and lack of sex education, so focusing on them in prevention may be more effective than addressing exclusively Internet aspects.

Keywords: online grooming; victims; risk factors; sexuality; adolescents; sexual abuse; prevention

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Introduction

Online grooming describes a process whereby an adult uses Internet technologies to initiate a dynamic of sexual persuasion and victimisation through online contact to obtain an encounter or sexual content from a child, e.g., coercing a child to masturbate while on video call or exposing themselves to a child while doing it (Barber & Bettez, 2020; Webster et al., 2012). In order to understand the dynamics behind this form of abuse and thus adjust its prevention, the aim of this study is to look at the process in detail, in particular, to understand how the victims' risk factors are exploited and taken advantage of by the offenders. We will explore this through the analysis of interviews with victims, offenders and experts on this online crime. With this approach we try to fill two gaps in the literature on the field: the compared approach between different views and its dialogue with the prevention approach.

Worryingly, although prevention programs are becoming more frequent, they rarely are evidence-based, often lacking an evaluation or a solid theoretical basis (Forni et al., 2020), not addressing the real dynamics of this type of sexual crime against young people (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). In other words, despite increased general awareness of the phenomenon, there is still little connection between research and prevention programmes and campaigns. According to Finkelhor et al.'s review (2021), in which they consider 23 articles about preventive programs on online sexual exploitation, it is highly relevant to align the amount of solid evidence accumulated about online crimes, such as online grooming, to the content of preventive measures. Moreover, if prevention campaigns are not updated with the scientific evidence, they are in danger of reproducing incorrect stereotypes or images of grooming that do not correspond to reality, and so they risk failing their preventative goals.

Indeed, as many of the grooming manipulation techniques identified are coherent with adolescent online friendship/relationship development, one of the major flaws of preventive actions is that it is difficult to assess and detect abusive interactions (Whittle et al., 2014). Therefore, to better adjust prevention programs to real situations, there are two key elements that emerge from scientific research: getting to know the risk factors that make minors more likely to end up in a situation of online sexual abuse and the way offenders exploit these vulnerabilities. In this paper we will address both.

Online Grooming Definition and Prevalence

Sexual grooming has been defined as the process by which a person prepares a child and their environment for the abuse of this child, including gaining access, gaining compliance, and maintaining secrecy (Craven et al., 2006). Kloess et al. (2019) have discussed the problematic nature of the term online grooming, since "grooming" implies a process of preparing the child and according to their research based on the analysis of transcripts of chat blogs and police reports, while some offenders spent time in the relationship-building with the victim, others employed a direct approach, directly introducing sexual content. In addition, this also includes peer-to-peer grooming, which, in fact, could be more prevalent than grooming from an adult to a minor (Villacampa & Gómez, 2016). Nevertheless, in this paper we will use the term "online grooming" in a broad sense which includes direct sexually exploitative interactions as well but referring only to the grooming of an adult to a minor.

Online grooming of adolescents is varied, and the offender adopts a variety of manipulation techniques such as deception, sexualization, regular/intense contact, among others (Whittle et al., 2014). Prevalence figures are difficult to calculate due to underreporting, as it depends on the child's recognition of the situation as problematic and their ability to report it (Kloess et al., 2014). For instance, Greene-Colozzi et al. (2020) found through a survey with 1,133 students in the United States that 23% of participants reported having a long, intimate conversation as a minor with an adult stranger from an online chatroom. The same study found that 17% were sexually solicited online as youth by adult strangers. Although 65% of minors who chatted with adult strangers experienced sexual solicitation from them, they did not describe those interactions mainly as negative or abusive. Although less than half of the youth who engaged in an intimate online relationship with an adult met with them in person, most of those who met ended up in abusive physical sexual contact. Thus, although evidence is clear at pointing to the family as the site of most forms of child abuse, including sexual abuse (Critcher, 2002), online grooming's prevalence is increasing (ANAR, 2020; NSPCC, 2021), and it has potentially devastating consequences for children's psychological, physical, and social well-being (NSPCC, 2020).

Risk Factors for Online Grooming Victimisation

Adolescents who are victimized by online grooming dynamics are rarely passive and unaware of Internet risks, but play an active role (Wolak et al., 2008) which needs to be approached in preventive sessions far from the idea of a stranger causing harm or from the perspective of moral panics. To understand how risk factors work in victims, it is necessary to look at the grooming process from their point of view, concretely, looking at their needs or what they seek when they surf on the Internet and maintain interactions with an adult: Quayle et al. (2012) approached the victims' point of view after conducting several interviews. The testimonies highlighted the feeling of needing something more in life along with the search for someone to listen and help with problems, and the need to be connected and to have an active life online.

The theory of routine activities is one of the criminological theories of opportunity that can also be applied to the virtual space. The role of the user in cyberspace will play a key role in preventing crime, since one of the risk factors for becoming a victim on the net has to do with the risky behaviors carried out on the network (Miró Llinares, 2013). Unlike in the physical space, in the virtual space it is necessary that all the parties involved are available to enter into contact. The opportunities and easiness to initiate contact with a child in the online environment is an important motivation for offenders (Black et al., 2015). For example, the information available through the profiles of minors, such as photographs, their likes and dislikes, places they usually visit, the internal problems they share, among other factors, allow online groomers to adjust their strategies, the way they communicate with these minors, and manipulate their profiles on digital platforms to facilitate such contact with the victims. The precipitation victim theory (Malaki, 2021; Offei, 2021) also explains the relevance of the analysis of the victim risk factors. Therefore, from both perspectives, it is not a matter of blaming the victim for being victimised, but rather to understand the factors that lead to the crime for preventive purposes, so that those minors with the highest vulnerable profiles can be specially empowered.

In this sense, besides distinguishing risk factors for grooming, differentiating between the different types of victims is also key to understanding how risk factors operate. The European Online Grooming Project (Webster et al., 2012) offers a classification with three types of victims based on several focus groups conducted with young people. First, *resilient victims* are those who are able to recognize the danger and block and ignore situations they consider suspicious or weird, having the confidence to reject the sexual behavior and inform others of what has happened. These children usually come from stable environments. Secondly, we find *at-risk victims*, who interact online in an uninhibited way showing a confident attitude and a sense of control. They do not disclose the online harassment situation with the intention of continuing the conversation which is used by the offender to commit the abuse. Finally, *vulnerable victims* are minors who present affective deficiencies that translate into a need for attention due to the presence of feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem derived from their relationships with their families. Offenders exploit their tendency to maintain relationships through the Internet even if they are abusive in order to reduce their levels of loneliness.

Therefore, it is important to get to know the characteristics that victims possess and show online and offenders can take advantage to start their online grooming modus operandi in order to address preventive programs accordingly. Notably, current research has identified not only a single risk factor but a combination of them that make it more likely to suffering online sexual abuse. According to Shoon (2006), a plurality of vulnerability factors and individual psychological characteristics interact to enable online sexual abuse, especially if protective factors are scarce. Concretely, some of them appear to be normative, naturally occurring during adolescence, while some are non-normative, such as the unexpected loss of a parent (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Thus, trying to gather as much information as possible about these risk factors is advantageous because it can lead to specific preventive measures and reduce the number of victims. We can begin, following the ROBERT project (Ainsaar & Loof, 2011) by grouping the vulnerability factors into four areas: demographic, environmental, personal affective background and personal behavioural.

Demographic Factors: Age, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

Demographic risk factors include the victims' age, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. While Baumgartner et al. (2010) find the riskiest age range is between 11 and 15 years old, other researchers report that it is between 14 and 17 years old (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Wolak et al., 2008). The age range placed in adolescence and not in the pre-adolescent period points to different factors that increase risk-taking behaviours such as seeking to expand their social network by including strangers (Quayle et al., 2012). Theories as *Storm and*

stress (Arnett, 1999*)* describe features of this vital stage which include conflicts with the family, mood alterations and risk behaviours, all directly connected to online grooming risk factors. Thus, in our interview we also asked about these traits associated with adolescence.

Being a girl and being homosexual, bisexual or with unclear sexual orientation also seem to be risk factors (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013). As well as contacting girls more than boys (Mitchell et al., 2014; Montiel et al., 2016), offenders use more romantic persuasion strategies with girls and more direct persuasion strategies with boys (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). While boys are less aware of the risks related to online sexual abuse, offenders tend to be less aggressive when chatting with boys (Grosskopf, 2010). Non-heterosexual youth are more vulnerable because their curiosity about their sexuality and lack of information sources may cause them to dive in certain risky websites and to more readily trust unknown adults who offer them help and support (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012). Exploring the role of gender and sexual orientation from the perpetrator's perspective has been key in our interviews, as it is one of the least addressed issues in the field.

Environmental Problems

Environmental factors are also relevant. Shannon (2007), based on a survey with young Swedes and extracting information from police reports, found that participants reporting experience of sexual contacts from adults were more likely to self-report problems within the family and at school, as well as reports of exposure to bullying. Online contacts might work for those minors as a way of dealing with the negative feelings associated with a poor self-image resulting from these problems. Thus, searching for validation and support connections is an important factor that offenders exploit (Chiu & Quayle, 2022), and to do so, they target victims who share information about their problems at school and at home. Moreover, Whittle et al. (2013) showed in their meta analysis that young people in conflict with their parents or with family difficulties were more vulnerable to online grooming (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012). For instance, Jonsson et al. (2019) found through a survey with Swedish students that victims of online sexual abuse—in the form of sexual interaction under pressure—had poorer relationships with parents. Although coming from a single-parent or reconstituted family is also related to suffering online grooming (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012), that could be due to less parental monitoring, which is also a risk factor (Whittle et al., 2013). In addition, lack of trust with parents could explain why young people did not talk to their parents to report what happened online (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012).

Furthermore, online grooming is more frequent among minors whose parents only have primary education, according to a sample of Spanish adolescents (Villacampa & Gómez, 2016). Mitchell et al. (2007) have discussed that parental educational level is more relevant than income as the higher risk is related with the lack of information: despite higher socioeconomic status youth may be more likely to receive friend requests than lower class youth, they are still less likely to become victims of grooming (Whittle et al., 2013).

Personal Factors

Regarding personal factors, Jonsson and collaborators (2019) found through the Swedish survey that a previous history of abuse, poor mental health, and low self-esteem are risk factors for becoming an online grooming victim. All these factors imply that offenders can take advantage of such children's vulnerability and need for attention and support. Significantly, victims report one of the main reasons they end up in grooming situations is their search for someone to listen to and help with their problems (Quayle et al., 2012). Indeed, some of the immediate positive effects the victims feel are trust, love, attention and support, which prepare the ground for the dominance (Whittle et al., 2014). In our interviews, the emotional and social state of the victim at the time of the crime, and the possible relationship with the crime, played a relevant part in the interview process.

Behavioural Factors

Regarding behavioural risk factors, Baumgartner et al. (2010) conducted a survey with Dutch adolescents to find that more frequent use of online communication, such as instant messaging, increases the likelihood of unwanted sexual solicitation online. Accordingly, Jones et al. (2013) analysed data from three surveys in the United States to find that increased use of social media by young people also appears to have increased experiences of indirect online harassment. In addition, understandably, sexual risk behaviour online, such as discussing intimate topics or searching for sexual content is also related to exposure to unwanted sexual experiences online (De Graaf &

Vanwesenbeeck, 2006). Thanks to the literature produced on online grooming we know that it is a phenomenon that does not always occur because of a lack of knowledge about what grooming is or about the risks of the Internet (Chiu & Quayle, 2022), as the victims can know about the 'stranger danger', but not perceive the perpetrator as a complete stranger

Our Research

To get to know thoroughly minors' risk factors of victimisation, scientific literature on prevalence obtained through surveys is not the only source of information available. There are other first-hand qualitative methodologies that can also provide fruitful information, such as interviews with offenders (Webster et al., 2012) and victims (Whittle et al., 2014). Thus, together with the self-revealed aggressors' strategies and perspectives, it is also essential to include the victims' point of view. On the one hand, thanks to qualitative research with offenders (see Webster, 2012) we know that they usually "map the territory" by visiting different websites frequently used by children and adolescents; observing and learning which vocabulary they use and which topics they talk about. On the other hand, for instance, from the point of view of the lived experiences of adolescents, Chiu and Quayle (2022) in a sub-sample of 6 participants of the ROBERT project (Quayle et al., 2012), found that, paradoxically, the young people's own agency and feeling of control reduced their caution in the face of manipulation techniques and became a key element in facilitating this type of abuse.

The aim of the work is to understand the risk factors that make minors more likely to end up in a situation of online sexual abuse and how offenders exploit these vulnerabilities in order to better adjust prevention programs to real situations. Our research tries to answer if there are specific factors that make the minors more vulnerable to become online grooming victims. To do so, we combine both sources of aforementioned information, namely, victims' and offenders' experience, as well as interviews with experts, to understand on a first-hand basis offenders' motivation and the characteristics they looked for in minors and their background, which rarely appear in legal documents. This methodology also allows us to check whether all the factors mentioned by offenders are indeed found in minors as well as how they experienced the aggression. Finally, interviews with subject-matter experts (i.e., police, researchers, magistrates, and therapists) allow us to put in context the whole set of risk factors.

Therefore, between March and August 2021, we performed in-depth interviews with victims (N = 8), offenders (N = 15), and experts (N = 23) to gather the details of grooming exploitation from the perspective of the different actors at a time. We consider that essential to better design and target the prevention and detection of the phenomenon. Indeed, we further triangulated all the results in search of trends. The qualitative analyses allow us to understand the motivations and the concrete way in which the risk factors materialise and operate in the participants. Furthermore, the contribution of this research is comparing whether the risk factors of online grooming found in the literature review coincide with the results found after performing interviews of the different actors involved in the phenomenon. Finally, through a qualitative approach, we discuss how these factors operate so as to improve prevention strategies.

Methods

Participants

Victims

Throughout 2021 we interviewed 8 juvenile victims of online grooming with an average age of 14.75 years old (*SD* = 1.03) from Slovakia, Estonia and Portugal (see Table A1). Research collaborative partners that worked as police officers and other practitioners helped us recruit victims. The inclusion criteria were people who had been victims of online grooming, not just attempted grooming, and who had filed a report. Another requirement was that they had elaborated on what had happened and that the interview would not have a strong emotional impact on them (in those cases where therapists pointed out that there was such a risk with the child, the participant was excluded, namely, we did not proceed with the interview).

Offenders

We interviewed 15 offenders with an average age of 32.67 years old from Spain, Slovakia and Estonia (*SD* = 10.03; see Table A2). We first requested permission from penitentiary institutions, and then contacted the prisons' director to ask for their collaboration by contacting participants convicted of online grooming. The inclusion criterion for this sample was that the subjects were convicted of the crime of online grooming, namely, persons convicted of sexual offences against children whose contact took place via the Internet. Participants signed a written informed consent and therefore were all volunteers, receiving no benefit and without prejudice in case they wished to leave the study at any time.

Experts

We interviewed 23 experts from different countries (see Table A3). We included academics with extensive experience in the field of online grooming from different disciplines (i.e., Psychology, Criminology, Law and Anthropology), as well as different professional profiles, such as managers of hotlines, psychiatrists, magistrates, human rights lawyers, and police officers with an extensive track record in computer crimes related to minors. To select the experts, each of the four research collaborative partners involved in this study, who were located in a different area of Europe (North, South, West, East), searched for the most representative professionals in their area in these three fields (LEAs, academics and socio-clinical intervention).

Instruments

To obtain information from the different profiles, after conducting a literature review, we designed an *ad hoc* semi-structured interview including sociodemographic, personal and environment questions as well as questions about specific aspects of the crime, such as initial contact and persuasion strategies (see Annexes in Supplementary material).

Ethics Concerns

We prepared the interviews with care to avoid feelings of re-victimisation or instrumentalization. Plus, the interview template was reviewed by the rest of the research collaborative partners. These partners were trained on how to conduct the interviews and performed them in pairs in the native language of the participant. Interviews took place in a climate of active listening and respect in which the person did not feel blamed, for instance, avoiding formulating questions as "why didn't you?". We took special care that they did not feel judged, legitimising their emotions so that they felt understood and supported. We paid attention to body language and, if the interviewee became nervous, we again asked for consent and suggested pausing or changing the subject. The conversation was used to assess whether they had received the necessary support and to check whether they require professional intervention.

We obtained the approval of the Ethics Committee of all the countries where we interviewed victims or offenders (Comillas University in Spain, Tartu University in Estonia, Gent University in Belgium, Bratislava Policy Institute in Slovakia and Ellinogermaniki Agogi in Greece). All participants signed an informed consent form displaying full information of the objectives of the study. Respect for any kind of beliefs or values was fundamental in all the interviews. Before starting the interview, we introduced ourselves and explained to the person the objectives of the research, reviewing the most relevant aspects of informed consent, highlighting the person's right to stop or leave the interview at any time. At the end of the interview, interviewers were trained to refer and offer resources outside the research if they detected some need to address some aspect therapeutically, although this situation never happened.

Procedure

The epistemological position of the interviewers was not framed in a positivist and deductive logic, but in a narrative and inductive one. It means that although we had a script, we left the interviewee to follow their own discourse, and questions from the coding process arose from the analysis of the data, rather than from a previous theoretical frame. In the case of recruitment through the police, it was emphasised that everyone, both the victim

and the guardians, had to agree to the participation. The interview was conducted in person and without the presence of the parents. In the case of the penitentiary centers, the educators of each module were in charge of approaching the offenders to comment on the objectives of the investigation and test their voluntariness to participate. From the final list, those participants who have manifested throughout the process a change of mind and did not wish to participate, were excluded. In all cases, the participants had a few days to evaluate their participation and decide whether or not they wanted to become part of the research. We kept all measures at our disposal to maintain confidentiality and to ensure that the other prisoners did not know the content of the study, to avoid potential stigmatisation.

Analysis

Each interview was assigned a random number to anonymize the information so that it could not be linked with the informant, which is good practice in scientific research (Selvi, 2019). We pseudonymised the dataset and labelled each informant with a letter, as we will reference them in the text: We used "O" for offenders, and "V" for victims ("VG" for girl victims and "VB" for boy victims). As for the experts, "R" was selected for the researcher, "L" for low enforcement agencies and magistrates and "H" for professionals from hotlines, medical services and NGOs services, followed by an ordinal number in cases of more than one category. We conducted the interviews in the local language of each country, then fully transcribed and translated them into English. We coded them in three different databases for each type of subject interviewed (victims, offenders and experts), including quantitative and qualitative variables. We then conducted a categorical content analysis (Gondim & Bendassolli, 2014), breaking down into units and categories according to thematic groupings (see Table 1 for categories), performing a reduction analysis in two steps: segmentation, by dividing the text into units, and categorisation, by grouping the units conceptually. Coding and categorization use the logical operations of induction and deduction, including abduction. The content analysis was useful as we had a large amount of data with 46 interviews to analyse in total. To analyse the data, we used some predefined categories based on the theoretical referential in the literature review—using the semi-structured interview script, also some of the categories emerged for the results, isolation and lack of social support, victims' environment, self-esteem (and it's relation with gender), search of new experiences and sexual curiosity.

Within this structure, we included direct quotations to illustrate the most relevant ideas. We adopted qualitative-based measures to assess intercoder reliability, following the guidelines outlined by Cofie et al. (2022). While the criterion specified "a minimum of two coders," we engaged three coders in our process. Furthermore, one of the coders was not present during data collection to mitigate potential bias. At least one coder had expertise and previous experience with coding qualitative data. All coders employed the same inductive framework for analysis. Consensus among coders was sought and successfully achieved through dialogue. Given the absence of unresolved conflicts, no external coders were consulted.

Results

This compilation of data is the result of a dialogue between the analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with victims, offenders, and experts. Next, we will present information about risk factors in victims in Table 1.

Table 1. *Interview Categories*.

Construct	Subconstruct	Categories	Subcategories
VICTIMS	Risk factors	Demographic	Age
			Gender
			Sexual orientation
		Environmental	Isolation/lack of social support
			Family relations
			Victims' environment
		Personal	Low self-esteem
			Difficult to make friends face to face and anonymity
			History of abuse and poor mental health
		Behavioural	Sharing personal information online
			Time spent online
			Searching for experiences
			Sexual curiosity

Within this section, we will provide information found about risk factors grouped into four categories: sociodemographic, environmental, personal, and behavioural factors, since these were the common areas that the literature review usually investigates, as we mentioned in the Introduction. We present the information ordered according to the source of the subjects interviewed: victims, offenders, and experts. We triangulate this information with the literature in the discussion section.

Demographic Factors

Age

The mean age of the victims when the crime took place was almost 15 years old (M = 14.75 years, SD = 1.035). However, the mean age of the victims reported by the offenders was thirteen years old (M = 13.25 years, SD = 1.87). The experts did not reach consensus: most of them said the crime usually starts at 11–13, some experts indicated younger ages such as 7–9 years. Nevertheless, most of the experts agreed that teenagers would be the group at the highest risk as "victims need to be in the sexual exploration phase, if not, offenders do not have a connection point with the victim, which usually starts at 12–13" (H3). Other characteristics related to this period of development that the experts highlighted were "having doubts, seeking thrills and experimenting" (L2) and "seeking identity, sexual exploration and feelings of isolation" (L5). According to some experts, when teenagers are older (17 or more) they are less likely to become victims because they are in a different phase of their life and become more resilient (H1, H3, H6).

Gender

We interviewed 5 female and 3 male victims of grooming. Of the offenders' reported victims, 121 out of the 133 were girls. Although girls are more likely to be contacted, a risk factor associated with boys is the underestimation of the risk associated with the situation. In the interviews with the victims, the boys gave less importance to grooming. Two of the three boys stated that they did not need any help as the process they came through was not something disturbing for them (all the girls said they needed help):

> "There was no reason to call the police. I would stop talking to him and that's it… I didn't need to talk to anyone because I was ok. It didn't matter that much. It only mattered to me because I did not have my phone [as his parents took it away from him to avoid contact with the offender]" (VB3).

Accordingly, one offender pointed out that in his opinion boys were more accessible because with them "the sexual topic very frequently arises from both parties at the same time." For example:

> "If one says you're very handsome, and the other responds 'you too', then you can start talking about sex, or asking for a photo because then it would not feel weird. They are not frightened to send some photos or videos because their hormones are very altered. But boys and girls differ in this sense. Girls do not tend to send as many as boys do," (O4).

Similarly, according to the experts, being a victim of online grooming is more common among girls, with "some isolated cases of boys…4 women for every male" (H7). Another expert (R9) also highlighted that not only do more girls end up in online grooming situations, but even more encounter unsuccessful grooming. Nevertheless, a third expert highlighted that an arrested offender who pretended to be a girl was able to get naked images from 11 boys in only two days, something that would be much more difficult with girl victims (L7). Notably, another expert (H1) suggested that although boys are also victims of grooming, they are less likely to report the crime, which could imply the existence of unknown numbers with regards to the predominant gender of victims of online grooming.

Sexual Orientation

Although none of the victims from the victim sample identified themselves as homosexual, two of them were approached by offenders trying to promote their sexual curiosity about homosexuality. One victim said an offender approached him claiming to be pansexual, which according to the victim meant "a person that likes other people for their personality" (VB3). In these situations, the fear of being revealed as a homosexual also plays a role and may make it more difficult to report, as another male victim approached by a male offender explained: "I was afraid that others would think I was homosexual" (VB1).

There was only one offender that identified himself as homosexual (O4). He explained the way non heterosexual sexual orientation could act as a risk factor:

> "When you are 14 years old you know you are gay, but you know nothing about it. Then, it is practical to meet someone older that helps you to get started in sex. It is the same as when learning how to ride a bicycle: it is very helpful to get advice from some elite sportsman who can teach you about it, rather than from anyone that has just initiated riding. I knew that I was into boys when I was 13 or 14."

Also, some experts pointed out that having doubts about one's sexuality was a risk factor for victims (R7, H7), as well as the desire to explore homosexuality (R9). In addition, another expert explained the case of one offender who, after getting intimate photos by pretending to be a girl before outing themselves as an adult, successfully blackmailed minors into engaging in sexual practices under the threat of unveiling their alleged homosexuality (L7). Thus, the fear of being outed as homosexual would also make reporting the crime difficult ("If my mother finds it out, she'll throw me out of the house," L7).

Environmental Factors

Isolation/Lack of Social Support

During the interviews, several factors related to school, family environment, and social support seemed relevant, but isolation was the most prevalent factor. Six of the eight victims we interviewed stated that they would have liked to have more friends when the grooming situation occurred. Most of them reported dealing with relational problems when the crime took place: having a fight with their best friend, having no friends around after moving to another city, not being popular at school, or being "shut off": "I did not have any relationship. No friends. I was alone," (VG5). On the other hand, one interviewee did not talk about suffering from social problems but acknowledged that he was seeking some attention: "I didn't really want more friends, I was happy with the ones I had. But I felt like I got a lot more attention online and I really liked it," (VG1).

On other occasions, offenders induced isolation or persuaded victims to isolate themselves. One victim described how the offender told her,

> "That my family didn't value me, my friends weren't as mature as I was. He didn't like that I went to parties, that I went home with my mum, that I was socialising with someone else, and reacted negatively if I didn't respond to his messages immediately," (VG2).

Some offenders said they took advantage of the victims' lack of emotional support to abuse them. More specifically, one offender described that many girls have isolation problems or have grown up with parents who abused drugs, so the interviewee, "had acted as their parents did not" (O5).

The majority of the experts agreed that the victims' lack of social support was one of the main risk factors (H4, H7 L2, L3, L4, L5, L7, R4, R6), and that the fear of loneliness could make them search for intimacy and social connections online (R4), as well as "the lack of a safety net and a close circle with whom to share concerns and secrecy" (R5).

Family Relations

Regarding the family structure, although several victims referred to their parents' divorced status, they did not associate it with bad family support. Only one subject described her family as a "broken family" (VG2), and specifically linked her lack of affection with looking for it online: "because my parents didn't love me, I looked everywhere for it; I spent a lot of time on the web." Another element that emerged regarding the family was the confidence to disclose what had happened, as one victim highlighted: "I didn't tell anyone for fear of being blamed, disrespect towards myself. My parents are strict" (VG1).

In contrast, three offenders referred to talking with their victims about their feelings derived from their parents' divorce and feeling of parental absence. One specifically highlighted that "Some girls had problems: they were from divorced families, they lacked a stricter upbringing, they did not have a father, the mother was very busy, the girl was alone," (O5). Experts also highlighted the importance of family (H5, H6, H7, L2, L6, L7, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9) in terms of parental supervision and support, since "If the child does not find the parents' attention, confidence, and interest, he seeks it elsewhere" (H6). According to the experts, "if the groomer feels that the victim has a good social safety net, he will probably leave the victim alone" (L6). Finally, other situations include: "paternal abandonment, maternal alcoholism …. violence between family members, violence towards the children" (R9), or coming from an unstructured family where abuse took place (R4).

As one expert summarised: "Any problems (relationship, existential, financial, etc.) can cause parents not to give a full parental performance" (H5). Nevertheless, as another expert highlights (R2) even if the relationship and financial situation is good, they may have little time for their children, which would turn into a risk factor as well.

Victim's Environment

Another environmental risk factor was being familiar with a potential offender. Four of the 15 offenders had jobs related to children or worked with minors who became their victims (such as running a sweet shop, being an influencer, a sport trainer, and a school teacher) and one was living with his victim (his stepdaughter), so they were not strangers to the victims. In the victim sample, in one case the offender was the victim's teacher (VG2) and in another case a video game streamer (VB3).

Personal Factors

Low Self-Esteem

During the interviews with the victims, although self-esteem was not directly measured, it somehow appeared underlying some dynamics of the offenders' modus operandi, as described by one victim: "I felt privileged because he wanted to talk to me, he flattered me. Others treated me badly, my family didn't value me, but he supported and acknowledged me," (V2). Similarly, several offenders referred to self-esteem as a vulnerability factor they identified in the victims. More specifically, one of them alleged that the most remarkable thing about his victim was her "weak confidence. She had a low opinion of herself," (O10). Another offender who reported hebephilic tendencies described the whole process as follows:

> "Success is half guaranteed when you find a vulnerable person, who is dependent, who does not have great self-esteem, who you can see that she is chubbier, uglier… A girl who looks super attractive… is going

to be more difficult to manipulate or deceive. But everyone has their own point of vulnerability. You can approach the weakest person with the most romantic theme… If you go with a fake profile and fall in love with a 14-year-old girl, if she is a girl with very low self-esteem, in the end, you delete the fake profile and say: 'Hey it's me [and I'm] 50,' and maybe if she has fallen in love with you, she doesn't care," (O6).

In fact, 7 experts stated that "low self-esteem and low self-confidence" (H5, R2, R3, R4, R6, R8 and L7) are risk factors for victimisation of a child. One (L7) specified that the factor was more prevalent in female victims: "Low self-esteem in children, especially in girls, is a risk factor, increasing the likelihood that they will trust people who treat them well and show them appreciation and affection." Similarly, according to one of the experts (R2), when a child feels no interest or attention to him or herself, and feels little appreciation, the offender can make the child feel praised and valued, and even get the child to fall in love with him.

Difficulty Making Friends Face to Face and Anonymity

Another factor that may influence children to spend more time online and talking to strangers is the difficulty of making friends face to face. Indeed, according to the victims' interviews, 5 of the 8 victims did not find interacting with others face to face easy, preferring online interactions and feeling more supported online. As two of them explained:

> "It was definitely easier for me to make friends with strangers on the Internet, it was easier to start a relationship there. I'm quiet and shy at first and if I don't see the other person straight away it's easier to make conversation" (VG1).
>
> "On the Internet I can be a little different, bolder" (VB3).

Another explanation for this preference is given by one of the victims interviewed who reported that she preferred to socialise through social networks because it provides anonymity:

> "For a kid from a neglected family [like me] it was easier online. The access was easier. In the small community where you are born everybody knows each other, but on the Internet, you are anonymous, and your mum does not know what you are doing," (VG2).

One expert (R6) also pointed out the "preference for the Internet world for communication" as a risk factor. The vast majority of experts (H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6 and R9) highlighted more the feeling of false anonymity offered by the Internet, that produces a disinhibiting effect on victims that precipitates them into online grooming situations, starting, for instance, by revealing confidential information to the offenders.

History of Abuse and Poor Mental Health

Although history of abuse or mental health problems was not directly addressed in the interview with victims, one of them referred to having a mother "very emotionally abusive" (V2), explaining that she had a hard childhood. From the sample of the convicted interviewees, when they talked about the problems the victims had, one commented that one victim suffered from anorexia (O12), and another had been previously sexually abused (O2). Some of them also admitted to taking advantage of this variable. Some experts pointed out some emotional factors that could act as victims' risk factors, including fear of loneliness, stress or depression (H7, R3, R4, R5, R6, R9).

Behavioural Factors

Sharing Personal Information Online

One relevant factor is related to the amount of victims' public information available online. Six out of the 8 interviewed victims referred to having a public profile when the facts took place. The profile usually included a personal photo, and some of them suggested that their childish look might have attracted the offender. Indeed, one convicted interviewee referred to use the content available in their victims' profiles in order to know the hobbies or the interest of the victims and approach them more easily:

> "Mostly I found a sphere that the victims were interested in. I clicked on a page, a YouTube, or something where the followers were, so I knew what topic they enjoyed… Even though I didn't know

anything about anyone, there are a million pieces of information on the Internet," (O11).

Another offender explained how it was so easy to get private information through regular conversations: "they would give you their school address, their home number, their mobile number" (O1). In addition, several experts highlighted that victims who post much information online become more vulnerable (L3, R6).

Time Spent Online

Victims in our sample reported spending an average of 6 hours per day (with a minimum of 4 hours) on the Internet, much more than the average for the general population. As we previously described, one victim explicitly linked the time spent with the look for attention: "Because my parents didn't love me, I looked everywhere for it; I spent a lot of time on the web" (VG2). Some offenders also reported seeking young people who spend a lot of time online: "I tried to choose girls who have many active photos on the Internet that are not passive, not only 2/3 times a day on the Internet. Rather active" (O11). Some experts (L7, H7, R4, R5 and R8) also identified spending a lot of time online as a risk factor since it is a space where minors are not fully aware of all the potential dangers that exist.

Searching for Experiences

As we described in the social support section, not only being isolated but looking for attention and entertainment would also be a risk factor ("I didn't really want more friends, I was happy with the ones I had. But I felt like I got a lot more attention online and I really liked it," VG1). Being bored or looking for excitement (L6) and being open-minded (R6) were also highlighted factors. Some experts also linked boredom to spending more time online (H1; R4).

Sexual Curiosity

Although due to ethical concerns, no sexual topic was approached in the interview with victims, several of them stated having found their offender good-looking and that the feeling of being able to be attractive to someone else was pleasant for them. Significantly, at the time of the first crime committed, 5 of 15 of the offenders were 25 years old (being the mean age 32.67 years (*SD* = 10.03). None of the eight victims in our sample reported that their offenders lied about their age or their identity. Only four of the fifteen offenders in our sample admitted to having used fake profiles and/or photos.

On the other hand, while most of the offenders stated that their victims were not shy and that they did not have to put pressure on them to get sexual images, they admitted diverse strategies including different forms of coercion to encourage it, such as taking advantage of the minor's lack of sexual knowledge and answering the victims' questions about sex through descriptions or by sending diverse material. Nevertheless, it is important to note that offenders insisting on victims being sexually curious could be also, according to one of the experts (R8) a way of denying the abusive status of the relationship they initiated. Some experts referred to exploring sexuality as a risk factor (L4) and several pointed out the need to improve sexual education:

> "We need to talk to young people about sexuality, that it is not taboo and that not everything has to happen in secret, in the dark. They have to set limits and find a safe place and a safe person" (R5).

Discussion

We have conducted this study with the aim of addressing the phenomenon of online grooming, in particular, to delve into the risk factors for victimisation. To do this in a comprehensive way, we have taken into account the point of view of experts, victims and aggressors, to understand not only what the main factors are but also how they materialise. In addition, we have attempted to translate these findings into concrete recommendations for prevention.

As mentioned in the introduction, although awareness of the risks of the Internet for minors in recent years has led to more prevention measures, including education about online grooming, these programs are frequently not evidence-based (Finkelhor et al., 2021). On the contrary, many campaigns and interventions are based on panic-

driven recommendations (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016) that not only might fail to connect with young people but neglect the reality of the phenomenon and could increase the risk of real threats.

We think that our results might be useful both for detection and treatment. The interviews we have conducted with online grooming victims, offenders, and experts have allowed us to make our understanding of the online grooming process somewhat more complex by analysing the way in which the risk factors materialise. Our results are in general consistent with previous research (see Table 2 at the end of the section) and we found only slight differences among the three types of sources consulted (offenders, victims and experts). The most significant risk factors to become victimised were: being in the middle adolescent age; feeling isolated; having low self-esteem; having family problems and lack of parental supervision; surfing the Internet during many hours per day, searching for new experiences and sexual curiosity. In addition, specific dynamics emerged regarding gender and sexual orientation. Next, we will review them one by one, check them against the scientific literature, and later, we will discuss their implications for prevention programs.

Isolation was the most common and relevant risk factor in our sample of victims for suffering online grooming, both in terms of quantity and subjectively experienced by the participants in their explanations. Indeed, offenders and experts also particularly emphasised it. This finding is relevant as, according to Whittle et al. (2013), although the evidence is strong on the role of peer isolation and social difficulties in offline child abuse, research on the same factors in relation to online grooming is not that extensive. This factor would work in several ways. First, the search for someone to listen to and help with problems would be the main entry point for the offenders (Quayle et al., 2012). Indeed, we also found relevant the difficulty of making friends face to face and the disinhibition caused by the feeling of anonymity that the Internet produces (Whittle et al., 2013). Second, low self-esteem and lack of support would have an impact on both the establishment of the dynamics of abuse and violence and the difficulty of reporting or seeking help in the environment. Our findings are consistent with those of Chiu and Quayle (2022) who found that many victims sought safety and validation from perpetrators because of their own feelings of inadequacy. Finally, isolation leading to feelings of loneliness would also affect other risk factors such as time spent online (Viñas Poch, 2009), another relevant risk factor that we will see below.

Although it was not a consensus among experts, our findings show that 14 years old is the average age for the highest risk to become a victim of online grooming, similar to previous findings. This result is relevant, since the age of consent in the countries studied—and the maximum age for the crime—ranges between 14 and 16 years of age, which means that most victims were in the upper age range, not in childhood or early adolescence, but in middle adolescence (Salmela-Aro, 2011). Although some authors (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2001) found that the age range between 11 and 15 years are at greater risk of victimisation, other researchers place the higher risk in the middle years of adolescence (14–17; De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014; Montiel et al., 2016; Quayle et al., 2012, Whittle et al., 2013; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013).

In our sample, more girls were victims of online grooming than boys (5 of 8 were girls in the victims' sample, and 121 of 133 in the offenders'), as found in previous research (Mitchell et al., 2001, 2007; Wolak et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the way gender determines how grooming occurs is a more novel result. In our study we found that, in the case of girls, abuse is often combined with a dynamic of gender violence whereby the offender controls and isolates the victim. Unlike what was found by Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Lamb (2016), we did not find that aggressors of girls were less sexual and explicit. However, and in agreement with Grosskopf (2010), we did note that they were more likely to seek a domination relationship through the use of threats and blackmail. Moreover, it is important to remark that according to our findings, offenders would approach more girls, but would be more successful with boys, as we also reported elsewhere (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2023). This result is consistent with the findings that women are sexually solicited more often than men but take fewer sexual risks online than men (Baumgartner et al., 2010). Grooming attempts are more likely to succeed when the victims are boys. This may be due to a tendency to minimise the situation and to a low perception of risk shown more frequently in boys (Lau & Yuen, 2013), or to a sense of invulnerability associated with their ideal of masculinity.

In addition, we also find that non-heterosexual orientation in boys is a relevant risk factor, as previously found (Suseg et al., 2008; Wolak et al., 2008). The content of the interviews shows that on the one hand, this factor contributes to those boys eliciting contact to fulfil the desire to experiment and learn things that are less accessible offline for them, and on the other hand, this factor may contribute to remaining in the abusive relationship as these boys may feel they cannot reach out for help from their parents or friends if they have not come out yet.

Moreover, the main personal risk factor according to our results would be low self-esteem, as it was remarked by offenders and experts, especially in the case of girls. Victims probably did not mention it as it is a difficult factor to

assess by oneself. Moreover, we found some examples of personal risk factors related to the victim's background such as a history of abuse and poor mental health also found in previous research (Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2007; Wolak et al., 2008). Some studies have also found that girls with symptoms of depression experience online sexual solicitation more often (Ybarra et al., 2007), and are more likely to respond to them (De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006).

As found in previous research (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2013), victims in our sample reported spending a lot of time online, with an average of 6 hours per day, longer than the general population (which is less than five hours per day according to Scott et al., 2019; Villanueva-Blasco & Serrano-Bernal, 2019). It is unclear, however, whether the time spent has an effect on the greater exposure or its relationship to the greater isolation. Having a public profile and posting personal information has also appeared as a significant risk factor in our study, as in previous studies (Saridakis et al., 2016). Indeed, all the behavioural risks are closely linked to the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) whereby we are less aware of the consequences and dangers associated with our actions when we are online. The same effect of invisibility, asynchrony and confidentiality also explains why participants with difficulties in relating face-to-face find the virtual medium easier.

Family problems plus lack of parental supervision and care are also, according to our results, relevant risk factors as well. Parent's involvement in the offspring's Internet use appears to be a protective factor as these young people experience fewer negative online events than other same-age peers (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012). In addition, offenders in our sample highlighted the lack of family support as a key risk factor, as previously found (Whittle et al., 2013).

Finally, we cannot understand online grooming without taking into account the adolescent search for experiences and the sexual curiosity (Whittle et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2007) that offenders exploit. Although adolescents may vary individually in this variable, the very idea of the absence of sexual drive in young people may lead offenders to justify their approach when they find profiles with sexy or suggestive photos who do not fit this idea. Under their logic, if a young person is already sexualized, they would be sexually mature despite their age (Webster, 2012). Although in our research offenders emphasised this aspect more than victims or experts, we believe that there is a two-way bias that explains this tendency: on the one hand, perpetrators tend to overemphasise the sexuality of victims, but on the other hand, the taboo of adolescent sexuality and the fear of blaming the victim make it common to avoid this aspect of grooming.

Recommendations and Implications for Prevention

Our results show different elements that are key to preventing online grooming. Beyond explaining the phenomenon within the framework of Internet risks, it is necessary to address other issues that transcend, in fact, the virtual world, such as sexual education (and sexual diversity), the deconstruction of gender roles and training on abusive relationships and addressing isolation and loneliness. Any programme that tries to tackle grooming should not only not ignore the existence of sexuality at this vital stage, but also provide sexual education tools that prevent offenders from exploiting young people's lack of knowledge. In addition, such programmes should take particular care not to blame the victim, as often happens with campaigns to prevent sexting (Karaian, 2014). This potential blaming also has another perverse effect: it makes it more difficult to disclose the crime. If a young person feels that they have done something wrong when sharing an image, it will be more difficult for them to tell their parents or even a friend. As mentioned above, this can be even more difficult for non-heterosexual young people. In any case, accepting adolescent sexuality and its expressions, both male and female, is a crucial aspect for the prevention of online child sexual abuse.

Thus, it is relevant, as well, that the period of greatest risk is not in childhood or early adolescence but middle adolescence, since this period is characterised by curiosity about sexuality and new experiences, affective insecurities and a greater distance from parental figures. As we have discussed before, all these are key risk factors that allow us to understand the grooming process (Hollenstein & Lougheed, 2013). This is also of especial relevance in order to anticipate and address preventive measures before this age range.

Yet prevention programmes might conflict with adolescents' habits. First, the amount of time adolescents spend on the Internet, rather than being an addiction, may be the result of the loss of spaces for face to face interaction and the privatization of leisure (Jewkes, 2010). The online search for adventure typical of this age group is, according to Jewkes (2010), a pleasure for many young people. Adolescents seek on the Internet the type of freedom they lack in their daily lives, therefore the more restrictions they have in their offline lives, the more they

need to explore new experiences online. Second, most teenagers consider that their online identity is different from their offline identities (boyd, 2014), and that they can lie and polish their online identity, which may also make them more forgiving of the possible lies of potential groomers. Third, their sense of privacy is also different from that of adults, trying to keep the content of what they post away from their parents, while trying to become visible and part of the online community (boyd, 2014), which might lead them to publish personal information.

So, despite being risk factors, interventions should legitimise and accept young people's ways of relating online, encouraging them to consider other ways of connecting and being part of communities offline. In addition, as we have pointed out, loneliness and isolation were the most relevant risk factor in our study, so education in face to face and online social skills as well as the false anonymity of the Internet would help prevent online grooming. For instance, programs could include explanations about the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) whereby people are more impulsive and disinhibited when on the Internet and therefore can do things they would not do in the offline world due to a dissociative effect. A focus on how to avoid taking online risks when trying to cope with loneliness should be also part of prevention programmes, along with teaching that there are people including adults who may take advantage of victims' loneliness, both offline and online. Moreover, as we know that this is a common problem, we must consider what we can do to address isolation in adolescents both at the societal level and in the different environments of minors. At the family level, it might be more useful to encourage friendships, increased peer groups, and offline plans than to restrict online activities. At the school level, time should be spent checking how students are feeling in this regard.

Moreover, prevention should be carried out with families to improve their knowledge of Internet risks and to work on family communication, as this seems to be a key factor in online grooming (Jonsson et al., 2019). According to our results, improving intra-family communication can be much more effective than parental control, because the threat of cutting off networks can lead to non-reporting for fear of disconnection.

The fact that both factors, mental health and self-esteem, have a greater impact on girls, and the different dynamics that the grooming take in girls and boys make it necessary to introduce a gender perspective in online grooming prevention: not only do boys underestimate the risks of grooming; girls are more likely to end up in abusive dynamics. This should be prevented by teaching about general gender violence and abusive relationships. For instance, the signs behind a controlling relationship, such as jealousy, excessive flattery, checking the cell phone, isolation from the group, etc., should be taught in order to recognise them when one experiences them both in the first and third person. Interventions should thus focus on breaking gender role stereotypes and the dual construction of sexuality in which men are characterised by omnipotence and the absence of limits (Chmielewski et al., 2017) and the woman's desire is subordinated in romantic relationships. In addition, education on sexual diversity would be necessary to confront the fear of coming out and to also facilitate homosexual exploration, since it continues to be taboo in this age group.

Finally, our results show that prevention might focus on the youngest offenders, who may be more dangerous as they have less conspicuous access to minors, and it might be harder for victims to identify the potential for abuse at the beginning. In addition, as happens with offline sexual abuse, offenders who are not strangers tend to be close to the environment of the victimized minor (e.g., Del-Real Castrillo, 2019) and have easy access to minors (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Even in the case that the offenders were not previously known, victims tend not to perceive them as a complete stranger, as they have spent time engaging in an online friendship with him (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Accordingly, prevention programs should not focus on the idea that online strangers are the only potential abusers, but on the more general recognition that there are emotionally manipulative adults who might try to abuse children both online and in person (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). Indeed, one of the risks of the exclusive focus on strangers is that young people may not be aware when an acquaintance becomes abusive, especially offline, which is still much more frequent (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012).

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Although both victims and offenders are sensitive populations, we obtained access to fewer participants than we would have liked in the case of victims. Some bias in the sample could be related with the willingness to participate in both the victims and the offenders. In the case of the victims, although some did have a physical encounter with the online offender, it was a smaller proportion than the one found in other studies (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2023), probably because milder cases imply greater ease in talking about the subject. In both cases, perpetrators and victims, we only included cases that had been prosecuted and convicted, which could also imply a bias as we did not analyse only attempted grooming or not reported situations.

Regarding experts, although we got a varied and representative sample from different fields of knowledge and expertise, they could reproduce some of the common stereotypes in the field. For example, they barely mentioned sexual curiosity in victims, the fact that many perpetrators come from the victim's background or gender-related dynamics, issues that we have shown to be crucial. Regarding offenders, the main bias would have to do with social desirability. For example, they mostly denied the abusive component of the process by overemphasising the initiative and sexual curiosity of the child and denying the strategies of coercion and violence that appeared to a greater extent in the interviews with victims and experts. Finally, in the cases of victims, due to ethical considerations related with the potential revictimization, we decided to not explore sexual topics.

Conclusions and Future Research

In conclusion, the contrasting of the information gathered from the different testimonies has probably moderated the biases of the different points of view, while providing very relevant information, showing the importance of broadening the lines of research on online grooming and incorporating the testimonies of victims, offenders and experts. For instance, our research reveals that the prevention of online grooming should not be separated from sexual and gender equality education. This is because gender socialisation appears as a risk factor for every child regardless of their gender. In girls, their low self-esteem and traditional passive and submissive role, together with the role of boys as controlling and aggressive (Barter, 2009) make them more vulnerable. In boys, traditional male roles make them more likely to underestimate risk and engage in more unsafe behaviours. Victims of online grooming are usually active in the process, sending and/or asking for explicit material, due mainly to their sexual curiosity. They will not identify with educational representations of grooming that represent them as passive. Sex education that encourages autonomy rather than guilt and which conveys the diversity of sexualities will be key elements for empowering children so that they do not need to ask strangers to satisfy their natural curiosity. Finally, we must teach that the risk of sexual abuse also exists with acquaintances and that the age difference, even if it is not so great, always entails an asymmetry that leads to abuse. We must also teach this to young people who might potentially be future groomers (Letourneau et al., 2017).

Designing effective prevention strategies requires understanding that the problems and risks of digital technology are not unique (Finkelhor, 2014), but are related to structural issues that cut across the offline world as well. Despite the trend to develop prevention programmes on Internet risks, we must include crucial aspects of offline education that are also key to understanding online grooming in particular and sexual abuse in general. These include sex education that encourages autonomy and consent and enables children to detect abuse, including from people they know, to understand the effects of gender stereotypes, to promote the acceptance of sexual diversity, and to create and sustain strong peer bonds that create community. Future research could further explore the relationship between research and preventive practice in order to bring the two closer together in a way that benefits from each other. Thus, research on online grooming must, on the one hand, continue to delve deeper into the ways in which offenders achieve their goals as they change and become more sophisticated. On the other hand, it needs to assess whether prevention programs are actually working and to go deeper, especially by focusing on working with young people and victims on the most effective way to address this prevention, both at home and at school.

Table 2. *Common Victim Variables Across Interviewee Profiles.*

Variable		Literature Review (used for theoretical framework)	In-Depth Interviews (Offenders & Victims)	In-Depth Interviews (Experts)
Sociodemographic	Age	Adolescence (Baumgartner et al., 2010; De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2001, 2014; Montiel et al., 2016; Quayle et al., 2012, Whittle et al., 2013; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013)	V: 14.76 years, *SD* = 2.55 O:13.25 years, *SD* = 1.87	12–13 (H3) Characteristics (L2, L5) Minor risk 17 (H1, H3, H6).
	Gender	Girls (82%; Mitchell et al., 2001, 2007) over boys (66%; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013)	V: 5 Girls 3 Males O: 121 Girls 12 Males	Girls (H1, H7, L7, R9)
	Non heterosexual orientation	Suseg et al., 2008; Wolak et al., 2008	O	H7, L7, R7, R9
Environmental	Isolation/lack of social support	Whittle et al., 2013	V O	H4, H7, L2, L3, L4, L5, L7, R4, R5, R6
	Bad family relations/ lack of supervision	De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006; Jonsson et al., 2019; Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012; Whittle et al., 2013	V O	H5, H6, H7, L2, L6, L7, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9

Personal	Low self-esteem	Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2007; Wolak et al., 2008	V O	+H5, R2, R3, R4, R6, R8, L7
	Difficult to make friends face to face and sense of anonymity	Whittle et al., 2013	V	H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R9
	History of abuse and poor mental health	Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2007; Wolak et al., 2008 Ybarra et al., 2007	V O	+ H7, R3, R4, R5, R6, R9
Behavioural factors	Sharing personal information online	De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006; Saridakis et al., 2016	O V	+ L7, H7, R4, R5, R8
	Time spent online	Baumgartner et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2013	O V	L3, R6
	Searching for experiences	Whittle et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2007	O V	L2, R4
	Sexual curiosity	Whittle et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2007	O V	R2, L4

Note. "O" refers to "offenders' interviews"; "V" refers to "victims' interviews".

Footnotes

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Conflict of Interest

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Authors' Contribution

María Reneses: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing, project administration. **María Riberas-Gutiérrez:** methodology, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft, visualization. **Nereida Bueno-Guerra:** conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing—review & editing, supervision.

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Appendix

Table A1. *Interviewed Victims' Characteristics.*

Victim ID	Gender	Age when crime was suffered	Nationality	Sexual Orientation	Gender Offender
VG1	Female	14	Estonian	Heterosexual	Male
VG2	Female	16	Estonian	Heterosexual	Male
VG3	Female	14	Slovakian	Heterosexual	Male
VB1	Male	14	Slovakian	Heterosexual	Male
VG4	Female	16	Slovakian	Heterosexual	Male
VG5	Female	14	Slovakian	Heterosexual	Male
VB2	Male	16	Slovakian	Heterosexual	Female
VB3	Male	14	Portuguese	Heterosexual	Male

Table A2. *Characteristics of the Interviewees Convicted of Online Grooming.*

Offender ID	Gender	Age when crime was committed	Civil Status	Sexual orientation	Number of victims	Gender Victim	Age Victim
O1	Male	40–45	Engaged	Heterosexual	1	Female	13
O2	Male	30–35	Engaged	Heterosexual	1	Female	11
O3	Male	25–30	Separated or divorced	Heterosexual	1	Female	11–17
O4	Male	25–30	Single with no previous marriage	Bisexual	1	Male	12
O5	Male	50–55	Single with no previous marriage	Heterosexual	9	Female	-
O6	Male	30–35	Sporadic couples	Heterosexual	4	Female	14
O7	Male	25–30	Single with no previous marriage	Heterosexual	1	Female	13–14
O8	Male	20–25	Engaged	Heterosexual	-	Female	13–14
O9	Male	35–40	Separated or divorced	Heterosexual	1	Female	10
O10	Male	20–25	Single with no previous marriage	Heterosexual	20	Female	15–16
O11	Male	15–20	Single with no previous marriage	Heterosexual	70	Female	12–17
O12	Male	40–45	Separated or divorced	Heterosexual	11	Female	16–17
O13	Male	35–40	Single with no previous marriage	Bisexual	4	Male	-
O14	Male	50–55	Married	Heterosexual	2	Female	-
O15	Female	20–25	Single with no previous marriage	Heterosexual	6	Male	12–16

Table A3. *Interviewed Expertise Characteristics.*

Expertise ID	Origin	Information
H1	European	Association for assistance to victims of sexual crimes
H2	European	Psychiatrist at University hospital—forensic psychiatric unit
H3	European	Prevention service, sensibilisation campaigns and prevention campaigns
H4	European	Hotline manager and disseminator
H5	European	Director at a company that enables youth to behave digitally responsibly and promoting digital citizenship
H6	European	Lawyer
H7	European	Expert that works at foundation which helps children and adolescents at risk
L1	European	Policy department of team of child focus
L2	European	Federal judicial police, section of child abuse
L3	European	Magistrate of sexual infractions
L4	European	Local police
L5	European	Local police
L6	European	Local police
L7	European	Police agent
R1	European	Criminologist at University Hospital
R2	European	Teacher, lector; and member of an association of sexual abuse of children
R3	European	Expertise in the methodical management of educational counselling and prevention facilities
R4	European	Expert, social pedagogue and head of the Orphanage Service of the Child Protection Department of the Social Insurance Board
R5	European	Expert, has worked for the police since 1994, has been involved in fighting against cyberbullying and juvenile delinquency since 2004
R6	European	Psychologist works as psychiatrist at a Hospital to deal with involuntary patients. Also works at a national prison, in the social department counselling sexual behaviour
R7	European	Anthropologist, child abuse prevention and treatment center where he/she did research on responding to victims of different kinds of online exploitation crimes
R8	European	PhD in Social Policy, Professor of Criminology
R9	European	PhD in Clinical Psychology. Prison Intervention and Teaching

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