Project: "Grooming" Prevention in Minors

Iram Rodríguez Reyes, Montserrat Ramos de la Rosa, Elizabeth Gálvez Santillán
(School of Philosophy and Literature, Autonomous University of Nuevo León, Mexico)

Abstract: This document is a community project proposal aimed at preventing risks in minors by the use of virtual spaces. Particular attention is paid around the practice called grooming for preventive actions, which consists of the creation of a false profile on social networks by an adult, with intention of passing as a minor and establish virtual contact with children or adolescents. the main objective of this proposal it's to generate tools and knowledge for preventing the risk of sexual abuse of children and adolescents. Be able to bring this information to the children of Nuevo Leon will help to raise the awareness about the risks caused by idle and unresponsible use of social and other networks as well as create the feeling of self-protection to avoid manipulations of third parties.

Key words: grooming, minors, virtual spaces
JEL code: I

1. Introduction

Virtual spaces for socialization such as social networks and videogames are part of the daily nature of children and adolescents (CA). These environments offer a wide opportunity for a socialization within peers where they can share common interests with others and develop new learning methods, and so on.

However, virtual spaces also can contribute to children for being exposed to several risks, including pornography exposure, contact with strangers and the possibility of being deceived by ill-intentioned persons.

One of the main contact risks that CA may suffer in a virtual space is a practice called "grooming" which consists of an adult person adopting a false identity to pass as a child or adolescent thus creating a friendly relationship or even a courtship with a minor (Arab & Diaz, 2015). this with the intention of obtaining some benefit such as access to personal information, intimate photographs, face to face meetings, to commit some kind of abuse or to introduce minors into criminal or human trade activities.

Reports such as REDIM and OBC (2021) highlight that in recent years social networks and videogames have begun to be listed as a way which different criminal groups can use hooking mechanisms to recruit minors for human trade purposes, especially those in a socio-economic vulnerability context.

In the case of adolescents, courtship and sentimental relationships operate as a main attraction of predators that aim sexual exploitation reasons, making social networks such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram

---

Iram Rodríguez Reyes, Student, School of Philosophy and Literature, Autonomous University of Nuevo León; research areas: employment, decent work, social and sustainable development. E-mail: iram111200@gmail.com.

Montserrat Ramos de la Rosa, Student, School of Philosophy and Literature, Autonomous University of Nuevo León; research areas: employment, decent work, social and sustainable development. E-mail: iram111200@gmail.com.

Elizabeth Gálvez Santillán, Professor, School of Philosophy and Literature, Autonomous University of Nuevo León; research areas: employment, decent work, social and sustainable development. E-mail: elizabethglvez@yahoo.com.mx.

an option for them to create a connection with girls and adolescents. For boys, the main reason of predators resides in human trafficking intentions for criminal purposes, making that online games that are related to the use of weapons serving as virtual spaces for socialization whereby malicious people seek to capture male children to introduce them into illegal activities.

Considering this general framework, is appropriate to take action to prevent the exposure of children from risks in virtual socialization environments, such as social networks and videogames.

It is not intended to present a premise that places social networks and videogames as dangerous spaces themselves that, therefore, should be removed from CA. Contrarily, they are recognized as legitimate spaces for socialization which have become inevitable today, thereby, CA must be assured of their right to safe and risk-free access to them.

2. Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, CA are in a social context where the use of virtual spaces, such as social networks and videogames are part of their daily basis and are among the main kind of places for socialization. Children and adolescents are age groups, which have developed their lives in parallel with the latest developments in Information and Communication Tehcnologies (ICT). At the same time the search for forming an identity and belonging to peer groups, as well as the transfer of pre-existing relationships from the real life to the virtual environment, or the creation of virtual friendships are aspects that contribute to social networks and online videogames to appear as spaces for socialization in CA.

Some of the dangers that appear in virtual environments that children and adolescents are exposed to, are related to the development of addictive behavior, depression, attention deficit and violent behavior situations that are generated by the excessive consumption of videogames and social networks.

Astorga Aguilar and Schmidt Fonseca (2019) distinguishes three types of sexual nature hazards to which CA are exposed when browsing on the internet: 1) of content, for example access to pornography; 2) of contact: such as sexual harassment by social media, can also be considered in this category the "grooming" itself (an adult who creates a fake profile to maintain contact with a minor through trickery) and sexting (exchanges of messages and sexual images. these latter two can work as an instrument to subtract personal photos what makes the difference, is that grooming implies the presence of a false situation regarding the identity and age of one of the individuals; 3) commercial: related to the use or diffusion of personal photos of CA.

For this community project proposal, its punctual to highlight sexual risks in the virtual space, specifically intends to work on preventive and awareness-raising actions about the grooming, which consists on "a set of strategies that an adult person uses to gain the confidence of the minor through the internet, acquiring control and power over him/her with the purpose of sexually assaulting him/her" (Arab & Diaz, 2015, p. 10).

According to Bennett and O' Donohue (2014) there are three stages of "grooming": 1) friendship, which is the phase where the abuser pretends to be a minor in the search of gaining the victims confidence and obtain his personal data. 2) trickery, which occurs when the abuser pretends to be in love with the victim, with the intention of obtaining photographs or videos of sexual nature. 3) blackmail, which is when the abuser manipulates the victim and threatens it, for example, to publish or diffuse the shared material if the minor decides to report or stop sending such content.

Even though, the theoretical characterization of grooming revolves around the fact that a minor is a victim of trickery by an adult person who intends to commit a form of sexual abuse in the virtual space. It isn't dismissed that deceit through social networks and videogames is for sexual ends only, as minors can also be victims of hoax by members of organized crime to involving them in criminality activities.

Inquiry into reports submitted by non-governmental agencies and dependencies focused on eradicating issues such as traffic and disappearance of persons, indicates that the hooking mechanisms for CA used by criminal groups focuses on sexual exploitation for female children and abduction with criminal ends for male children (REDIM & OBC, 2021; REDIM & CNB, 2022)

According to the presented information, the abduction mainly happens in urban areas and slums. People involved in criminal groups (gangs, criminal families or hit man) usually invite children to parties and recreational spaces where alcohol and drugs are offered. Subsequently, through the creation of social links with friendly or community traits, they are introduced into criminal activities (REDIM & OBC, 2021; REDIM & CNB, 2022).

Identity aspects, the search of acceptance, belonging to a group and social aspirations models, consists of some elements that, combined with vulnerable situations, put CA at risk of being recruited by criminal groups to introduce them into organized crime:

One necessary element to emphasize is that when CA are recruited or used, they receive a certain type of indoctrination to voluntarily assimilate or not the identity of the concerned group. Capacitation and grounding are practices that assist the professionalization of CA in their ephemeral criminal career (REDIM & CNB, 2022, p. 18).

In this sense, online videogames can be regarding as conducive spaces where such aspirations can be disseminated, especially with games such as Free Fire, where the topic is about the use of weapons and violence. This can influence in CA to being motivated to get involved into criminal activities or training in the use of weapons, activities proposed by predators in their communication via social networks.

More accurate data about cases where CA have been involved through social networks and videogames for criminal or sexual exploitation are provided in the consultation of newspaper archives. For example in the presented case by Muller (2022) where eight adolescents between 12 and 17 years old in the state of Mexico, where contacted through the game Free Fire by fake profiles who convincing them to leave their homes for being transfer to other federal entities, it is noted that six were females who were sought to be introduced to human trade for sexual exploitation while the two males were intentionally recruited to be introduced to organized crime.

The hooking mechanism used in video games and social networks to recruit CA for criminal purposes, consists in the victimizers seeking to generate contact with the minors through videogames and then pass to communicate through more personal networks such as WhatsApp and Facebook, building friendly or trusting relationships with CA through fake profiles. Thus, minors are invited to leave their homes, and sometimes they are told that such invitations come from organized crime gangs. When the meeting is held in person, criminals abduct CA and transfer them to other states in the country to introduce them into organized crime (Padilla, 2021; Muller, 2022; El Universal, 2022).

In this regard the proposal for a community project presented here is focused on promoting prevention practices and care in the use of social networks and videogames by CA, with special emphasis on preventing risks related to the exposure of CA to fake profiles in the virtual space that places them in a vulnerability situation to risks such as "grooming" and deceit as a hook method for sexual exploitation and criminal ends.

Considering that socio-economic vulnerability conditions are an important factor for malicious adults to benefit from children and adolescents, this community project, proposes to work in first instance in the Juarez municipality of the Monterrey Metropolitan Area which is the fifth largest municipality in Nuevo Leon by population terms; at the same time, it is estimated that 25.9% of the population of Juarez lives in poverty conditions (INEGI, 2020; SEDESOL, 2010).

3. Planning of the Community Project

Overall objective:
- Generate preventive actions regarding the use of virtual spaces such as social networks and videogames by CA in Juarez, Nuevo Leon.

Specific objectives:
- Reduce the vulnerability of children and adolescent population to risks like "grooming" and exposure to malicious people within virtual spaces.
- Raise awareness of parents and teachers about the risks of CA in the use virtual spaces.
- Inform parents and teachers about preventive actions for grooming.

4. Methodology

A methodological process was developed for the project, which would be target children and adolescents between 10-14 years old who, by age, would be studying 5 or 6 grade of primary school, or one of the three grades of secondary school. This age group is considered to spend a large part of its free time in front of the computer, cellphone or console, playing on servers such as Discord or Free Fire, as well as interacting on various social networks. This type of platforms allow interaction with other people by audio and video, creating an environment, where you can develop any thought, sensation or feeling.

Contact would be made with primary and secondary schools in the elected municipality. The planning covers different educational activities involving the participations of parents, principals, teachers and students. Similarly, it is expected to resort to the invitation of experts in the subject, such as professionals in psychology, social work, pedagogy, etc., from the Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon.

As the main area of opportunity, it is pretended to develop the capability to pass judgements, analysis and at the same time enhancing the sense of observation through teaching approaches that provide children with the opportunity to develop such skills, focusing on the prevention and care practices in virtual environments such as social networks and videogames.

Regarding the financing, the project could be considered as an activity linked to social responsibility that can capture financial resources from companies, educational institutions or government, so that it can reach as many children and young people as possible. About the staff required to do so, it will be based on financial support and availability of institutions to carry out the project.

To provide greater support for the project and, above all, thinking about the continuation of the project in future periods or school cycles, the possibility of registering the program in a collaboration between the municipality of Juarez and the UANL, with the intention to involve social service students to increase the human resources available for the implementation of the proposed activities.

5. Conclusions

The grooming phenomenon is a major problem that must be addressed, and as a society we must not close our eyes to it. This is why this project proposal is being prepared from the university, considering it as one of the social partners suitable for promoting prevention and awareness of the risks to which CA are exposed in the use of social networks and online games.

The implementation of projects such as the one proposed in this work is considered necessary, so as to bring information to the children of Nuevo Leon in view of the knowledge of their rights during the use of communication technologies and digital media, while being aware of the risks in these platforms and thus having the necessary tools to strengthen protection against them in order to avoid manipulation by third parties.

Finally, it is important to note that this proposal aims to inform and raise awareness of the risks affecting children in online socialization spaces, but not to categorize such spaces as risky and insecure in themselves, more exactly, in order to contribute to the construction of safe digital spaces to which children and adolescents can access, as nowadays social networks and online games are unavoidable part of everyday life and minors have the right to access to them in a safe and age-appropriate manner.

References

Arab L. E. and Díaz G. A. (2015). "Impacto de las redes sociales e internet en la adolescencia: aspectos positivos y negativos", *Revista Médica Clínica Las Condes*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 7-13, doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmclc.2014.12.001.

Astorga-Aguilar C. and Schmidt-Fonseca I. (2019). "Peligros de las redes sociales: Cómo educar a nuestros hijos e hijas en ciberseguridad", *Revista Electrónica Educare*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 1-24, doi: https://doi.org/10.15359/ree.23-3.17.

Bennett N. and O'Donohue W. (2014). "The construct of grooming in child sexual abuse: Conceptual and measurement issues", *Journal of child sexual abuse*, Vol. 23, No. 8, pp. 957-976, doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2014.960632.

Campo Pereira I. (2022). "Videojuegos y socialización diferencial de género: preferencias y práctica", *International Multidisciplinary Journal CREA*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 12, doi: https://doi.org/10.35869/ijmc.v1i1.3895.

Chitupanta Chasipanta J. A., Quijije Benavides J. I., Vargas Coello H. M. and Escobar Delgado G. R. (2019). "La influencia del video juego Free Fire en la conducta de los adolescentes", *Revista Caribeña de Ciencias Sociales*, Agosto, available online at: https://www.eumed.net/rev/caribe/2019/08/influencia-video-juego.html.

El Universal (2022, 14 de julio). "Localizan con vida a Angélica Giovanna, niña enganchada a través de Free Fire", *El Universal.* Recuperado 7 de septiembre de 2022, available online at: https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/metropoli/localizan-con-vida-angelica-giovanna-nina-enganchada-traves-de-free-fire?fbclid=IwAR2l_jej8cDgNxQbmh9jYS6cei-3WKccG6aTh1Xoacpwz SRa7aMfZiorNo8.

INEGI (2020). *Censo de Población y Vivienda* 2020.

Müller O. (7 julio 2022). "Crimen organizado utiliza videojuego Free Fire para 'enganchar' a menores en Edomex", *Milenio.* Recuperado 7 de septiembre de 2022, available online at: https://www.milenio.com/policia/free-fire-crimen-organizado-recluta-menores-edomex-videojuego.

Padilla M. (20 diciembre 2021). "Criminales enganchan a menores por medio de videojuegos", Martín Padilla, Recuperado 7 de septiembre de 2022, available online at: https://martinpadilla.com.mx/criminales-enganchan-a-menores-por-medio-de-videojuegos/.

Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México [REDIM] y Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda [CNB] (18 de julio 2022). "Desaparición de mujeres adolescentes, niñas y niños en el Estado de México", Recuperado 5 de septiembre de 2022, available online at: https://issuu.com/infanciacuenta/docs/informe_edomex_versio_n_pu_blica.

Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México [REDIM] y Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano de Seguridad, Justicia y Legalidad [ONC] (7 septiembre 2021). "Reclutamiento y utilización de niñas, niños y adolescentes por grupos delictivos en México. Acercamientos a un problema complejo", Recuperado 5 de septiembre de 2022, available online at: https://issuu.com/infanciacuenta/docs/reclutamiento.v.digital-6_sept-final.

SEDESOL (2010). "Informe Anual Sobre La Situación de Pobreza y Rezago Social", *CONEVAL*, pp. 42-44, available online at: https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/45937/Nuevo_Leon_031.pdf.