Identification of online sexual dangers and coping strategies: The case of Estonian teenagers

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Conference Risk-taking Online Behaviour – Young people, Harm and Resilience
23-24 May 2012, Berlin
The aim

The paper focuses on the meaning of online dangers and exposure to such situations among Estonian young people.

What are the risky situations online that young people talked about in the focus group interviews?
What are their personal experiences with such risks?
What are their responses to risky situations?
What are the gender differences in talking about online (sexual) risks?
Internet use among Estonian children

Estonian children start using the Internet younger and go online more often than their peers in many other European countries.

82% of 9-16 year-olds go online every day.

Estonian children’s exposure to online risks is one of the highest among European countries.

19% have seen/received sexual messages online in past 12 months.

More than half of Estonian children have contacted with someone online, a quarter has gone to met someone never seen personally. (Livingstone et al. 2011).

Parental awareness and mediation remains at the bottom of the pan-European rankings (Dürager & Livingstone 2012).
Method

The data includes 4 focus group interviews with young people:

1 interview with boys and 1 with girls from general population
1 interview with boys and 1 with girls in residential care

The focus groups consist of between 3 and 7 participants.

Sample: 11 boys (aged 14-16)
8 girls (aged 14-17)
Unwelcome and dangerous situations on the Internet

The list of (sexual) situations perceived unwanted, disturbing or which may lead to a dangerous occasion:

- receiving enticing comments “Oh, how beautiful you are!”, “Hi kitten!”;
- receiving requests to communicate online or meet offline;
- receiving requests to use webcam or send photos, videos of oneself;
- receiving half-naked photos or seeing them in the profile of a stranger;
- adding an unknown person to friend’s list;
- replying to a stranger online, chatting with him/her;
- disclosing personal information, sending (revealing) photos to a stranger;
- going to meet a person never met face-to-face.
Sexual undertone of messages/approaches

The girls and boys avoided considering messages sexual or abusive. Only some regular boys named terms as paedophiles, pornography.

The participants used abstract words: strange pictures, weird comments, disgusting things, funny questions. Sexual undertone of messages appeared from their reactions.

“Interviewer: Well but before the meeting one could offer something else, through the internet.
Aliis: What then, sex?
Interviewer: You have the webcams and ...
All simultaneously: Striptease. Turks. Mostly the Turkish people are kind of.“
The identification of potential harassers (1)

- A stranger adult;
- A foreigner who communicates in (poor) English, uses google-translate;
- An adult Estonian from another region;
- A man;
- A seductively behaving women “I guess that it comes from this, that well there is a teenage boy, and of course he also has some sort of sexual needs. When he sees the naked breast of someone, if there is a picture, and I think that with this picture the boy is seduced. He starts to communicate /.../ and then there is some sort of hairy man behind it (laughter).” (a boy)
- Not a (female) unknown peer.
The identification of potential harassers (2)

The potential harassers are called ‘perverts’ and ‘Turks’.

- ‘Pervert’ – an odd stranger who may have an abstract account name, no profile picture, and sends weird or funny messages.
- Turk – a stereotype and a synonym for pervert. A foreign person who may conceal his/her identity using oriental (Turkish) name and face image.
Identification of potential targets

The potential target:
• is mostly a girl, a younger girl;
• uploads lots of photos of oneself, particularly revealing, half-naked photos "This exactly attracts these perverts, that someone puts her bosom in the internet, that from here and there the décolletage is so much visible, and then come some sort of strange questions."
• is naive, "beautiful but dumb"
• draws attention with own behaviour

→ The assessment of potential targets was rather negative and somehow accusive.
Description of abusive behaviour via the Internet

Two different ways how a potential harasser may approach to young people:

1. A stranger writes flattering comments, makes indecent proposals to use webcam or meet in real world at the outset. The stranger does not hide his/her intention.

Young people response: deletion of such messages and blocking the sender.
2. The stranger approaches to young people as a peer or a friendly adult. At first, he/she creates a trustful relationship. Later, however, the stranger introduces sexual issues, demands naked photos and manipulates.

Young people response: try to solve themselves, don’t tell anyone, finally talk to teacher, police officer, parents.
Exposure to online risks

Mostly the participants distanced themselves from dangerous situation.
They denied the probability of becoming a victim and getting into dangerous situation.
They presented themselves as careful Internet users and being aware of safety rules.

They admitted receiving messages (friend requests, requests to use webcam, meet offline or chat online) from strangers that is a quite common phenomenon.
• They admitted chatting with a strange person (an adult man, a foreigner) for fun or curiosity.
• They stressed having control over the situation.
Some girls in institutional care narrated stories on chatting with an adult man who manipulated and threatened. The stories ended up with informing the incident to police.

“I had once, /.../ it was the whole year that one man wrote me all the time. He wrote not only to me, but to my classmate too. /.../ He kind of threatened and like this… At first, he spoke completely calmly and my classmate had spoken about him a little. /.../ And my classmate had done there something with him and discussed, tried to somehow play along and then I finally started to talk to him. /.../ A month later started to write again, and then started saying some disgusting things there, and then finally kind of… My classmate had told this to our teacher and then the teacher contacted the police about this.”
In conclusion

• Unwelcome (sexual) approaches online are quite common among the participants.
• The participants have learned to cope with these approaches.
• The participants replay to strangers’ messages for fun.
• The participants presented themselves being aware of online safety rules.
• Younger girls and children in institution may be more at risk.
• More educational programmes to vulnerable groups.
Thank you!

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