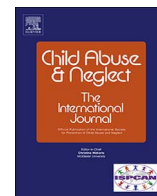


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Full Length Article

Online sexual solicitation by adults and peers – Results from a population based German sample



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ABSTRACT

Prevalence of Internet use among adolescents is high, but little is known about the online sexual activities of German adolescents. This study aimed to describe the 12-month prevalence of German adolescents' online sexual experiences with a focus on Online Sexual Solicitation (OSS, subjectively negative online sexual experiences with a peer or any sexual online experience, positive or negative, with an adult). A sample of male and female adolescents aged 14–17 ($N = 2238$) was recruited using online survey panel. The sample was representative for gender and education. Subjects completed an online survey reporting their online sexual activities (i.e., sexual conversation, exchanging pictures, and cybersex) with peers (14–17 y.) and/or adults (≥ 18 y.). Findings illustrated that 51.3% ($n = 1148$) of adolescents had experienced online sexual activity, which mostly involved peers ($n = 969$; 84.4%). In contrast, 23.2% ($n = 519$) of the adolescents experienced OSS with 2.6% ($n = 57$) reporting subjectively negative online sexual interactions with peers and 22.2% ($n = 490$) reporting online sexual interactions with adults, of which 10.4% ($n = 51$) were perceived as negative. The findings suggest that adolescents frequently engage in sexual interactions on the Internet with only a relatively small number perceiving such contacts as exploitative. In addition, females and adolescents with incomplete family situation, foreign nationality, higher education, homo- or bisexual orientation, and those without perceived social support reported OSS significantly more often.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, Internet use has become an integral part of everyday life activities (Pandita, 2017; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). The impact of digital and mobile technologies on the lives of children and adolescents has increased substantially. Internet, smartphones and social media have enabled youth to connect with others at any place or any time with messaging apps and social networks being the preferred means of Internet utilization, even for very young children (Feierabend, Plankenhorn, & Rathgeb, 2015; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Interestingly, youth often compete with one and another on social networks to achieve the largest number of (virtual) “friends” (Webster et al., 2012). These friends, however, often consist of individuals that the individual has never met, or has only a peripheral acquaintance with, in real life.

The ubiquitous access to and engagement with the Internet of our present day lives has also affected how young people experience

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sexuality. The accessibility, affordability and anonymity of the internet allows any individual to gain information on sexual health and education, to flirt and attract attention of others, to experiment with or express their sexuality, and interact with like-minded people, without limited fear of social sanctions (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000). Ballester-Arnal, Giménez-García, Gil-Llario, and Castro-Calvo (2016) reported the online sexual behavior of adolescents to include primarily: participating in sexual chats; searching for sexual material; and masturbation. Further, young people were found to often intentionally seek out, or become unintentionally exposed to, sexually explicit websites (Cameron, Salazar, Bernhardt, Burgess-Whitman, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2005) and/or engage in cybersex or sexting (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2016; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012).

Despite its potential advantages, using the Internet for social and sexual purposes may increase the risk of adolescent victimization (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). Such online risks include cyberbullying and harassment, unwanted exposure to sexually explicit material, cybergrooming and OSS (Chang, Chiu, Miao, Chen, Lee, & Chiang, 2016; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011).

1.1. Defining OSS

The conceptualizations of OSS vary considerably across the literature (Webster et al., 2012). The present study specifically focusses on two of these definitions. First, OSS is defined by Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2006) as “...requests to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk or give personal information that were unwanted or, whether wanted or not, were made by an adult” (p. 18). Second, in particular, *unwanted* OSS has been defined by Ybarra, Espelage, and Mitchell (2007) as “...the act of encouraging someone to talk about sex, to do something sexual, or to share personal sexual information, even when that person does not want to” (p. 32). Notably, this second definition does not allude to the age of the victim or the perpetrator.

Several empirical studies on online sexual victimization rely on the definition of *unwanted* interactions (e.g. Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012; Wolak et al., 2006; Ybarra, Leaf, & Diener-West, 2003), although problematic sexual interactions (e.g., legally defined child sexual abuse) may happen without the child experiencing them as *involuntary* (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Research has suggested that the majority of adolescents willingly engage in online sexual activities (Quayle, 2017). Nonetheless, despite their initial consent, such sexual interactions may turn into subjectively negative experiences if the adolescent realizes they have been tricked, coerced or otherwise victimized. However, the inclusion of only *unwanted* online sexual interactions in the vast majority of past research may have led to biased prevalence estimates of OSS. Equally to the criticism of research on offline sexual abuse (Green & Masson, 2002), research on OSS should not ignore sexual experiences that initially were based on consent, especially if they occur between adults and minors. A functional definition of OSS should therefore consider the victim and perpetrator age as well as the victim’s subjective evaluation of the interaction as positive or negative.

It is important to consider the current legislation in this context. The legal age of consent varies considerably among jurisdiction of the European countries ranging from 14 years in Germany (Fischer, Schwarz, Dreher, Tröndle, & Schwarz, 2001), 15 in Finland, 16 in the Netherlands and Sweden, to 18 years in the Czech Republic and Italy (Davidson et al., 2011). However, with respect to online victimization, The Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (2001) stated that a child is someone under the age of 18. For the present study, OSS between an adult and a minor will therefore refer to interactions between someone under the age of 18 and an adult as 18 years or older.

Reviewing these conceptualizations, the present study defines OSS of youth as *any* online sexual interaction between an adult and a minor, or as negatively perceived online sexual interactions with a peer.

1.2. Prevalence and forms of OSS

The most common forms of OSS that have been investigated are sexually explicit conversation, exchanging personal, pornographic or erotic pictures, online descriptions of sexual acts or engaging in cybersex, offline meeting and offline sexual activities (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2010; Livingstone et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2012).

Estimates of the scope of OSS mostly rely on the number of victims in large survey studies among adolescents. The proportion of young individuals reporting OSS ranges from 9% to 39.5% (Jones et al., 2012; Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014; Livingstone et al., 2011; Montiel, Carbonell, & Pereda, 2016; Shannon, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2003). These studies combine solicitation by peers and adults without reporting separate prevalence rates for different offender ages and only report offender age for specific behaviors, such as meeting offline (Livingstone et al., 2011) or forming close relationships online (Finkelhor et al., 2000). Moreover, as one offender may have hundreds of victims in a short period, victim numbers are unlikely to provide a reliable approximation of the number of perpetrators. In a sample of adult Internet users, Schulz, Bergen, Schuhmann, Hoyer, and Santtila (2015) found that 3.7% reported having solicited at least one adolescent online and 0.5% reported having solicited a child. Further, Chang et al. (2016) reported that 4.2% of their adolescent sample had perpetrated online solicitation.

1.3. Risk factors for experiencing OSS

Disclosure of personal information, talking about sex with only individuals known online, and engaging in online sexual interactions were empirically related to increased risk of OSS (Ybarra et al., 2007). Additionally, lack of social support or feeling misunderstood were identified as risk factors for unwanted OSS (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Wells & Mitchell, 2008; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2008). In contrast, the monitoring of an individual’s Internet behavior by others (e.g., parental supervision) was found to decrease the likelihood of risky online behavior (Liu, Ang, & Lwin, 2013; Lwin, Stanaland, & Miyazaki, 2008; Marcum, Ricketts, & Higgins, 2010). With respect to victim demography, several studies have found that adolescents are more frequently

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