



## A cross-national study of direct and indirect effects of cyberbullying on cybergrooming victimization via self-esteem



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### ABSTRACT

The present study reports frequency rates of cybergrooming, profiled characteristics of cybergrooming perpetrators, and examine direct and indirect associations between cyberbullying victimization, self-esteem, and cybergrooming victimization. The study sample included 2,162 adolescents between 11 and 19 years from three Western (Germany, the Netherlands, the United States) countries and one Southeast Asian country (Thailand). Across countries, 18.5% of participants reported having had contact with a cybergroomer. Western girls, as compared to boys, were at greater risk to have been contacted by a cybergroomer. No significant sex difference was found for Southeast Asian adolescents. Also, Southeast Asian adolescents reported higher rates of cybergroomer contact as compared to Western adolescents. Cybergroomers were most often males and older than victims. Both cyberbullying victimization and low self-esteem increased the probability of coming into contact with a cybergroomer, and self-esteem mediated the effects of cyberbullying victimization on cybergrooming victimization. The results are discussed in relation to practical implications and future research.

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### Estudio internacional de los efectos directos e indirectos del ciberacoso en la victimización por acoso sexual cibernético mediados por la autoestima

#### RESUMEN

El presente estudio muestra la frecuencia de acoso sexual cibernético y perfiles característicos de los acosadores y examina la asociación directa e indirecta entre la victimización por cyberbullying, autoestima y victimización por acoso sexual cibernético. La muestra del estudio incluye 2.162 adolescentes entre 11 y 19 años de edad provenientes de tres países occidentales (Alemania, Holanda, Estados Unidos) y un país del sureste asiático (Tailandia). El 18.5% de los participantes de los todos países de la muestra manifestaron haber tenido algún contacto con un acosador sexual cibernético. Las chicas occidentales comparadas con los chicos tienen más riesgo de contacto con un acosador sexual cibernético. No se encontraron diferencias de sexo en los jóvenes del sureste de Asia. Además, los participantes del sureste asiático tuvieron mayor frecuencia de contactos con acosadores sexuales cibernéticos comparado con los adolescentes occidentales. Los acosadores sexuales cibernéticos son en su mayoría hombres mayores que las víctimas. Tanto la victimización por cyberbullying como la baja auto-estima incrementan la probabilidad de entrar en contacto con un acosador sexual cibernético y la auto-estima sirve como mediador de los efectos de la victimización por cyberbullying en la victimización por acoso sexual cibernético. Se comentan los resultados en cuanto a las implicaciones prácticas del estudio e investigaciones futuras.

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#### Palabras clave:

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Solicitud sexual por internet

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Undoubtedly, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have changed the way people interact and communicate with each other rapidly in the last two decades. For adolescents, the use of social networking sites, instant messenger, and mobile Internet devices are an integral component of daily life (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011). This changing media socialization has also affected the sexual socialization of adolescents (Krahé, 2015). In puberty, adolescents begin to establish independence, their own sexual identity, and start dating and intimate relationships. The use of ICTs for sexual self-exploration and self-representation, to flirt with others, to reinforce existing relationships or establish new ones and to make first sexual experiences has increased (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Such use of ICTs also includes accessing sites with information about sexuality, accessing sites with pornographic content, and accessing chat rooms, teen dating sites, and social networking sites where adolescents can meet new people. Adolescence is also marked by curiosity, uncertainties, trying, testing, and crossing borders and may give therefore rise to sexual online solicitation, cybergrooming and online abuse of adolescents. In addition, there is increasing evidence that some adults use ICTs to get access to adolescents in order to solicit and exploit the targeted victim for sexual purposes (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2010).

Several studies have tried to understand why adolescents start to talk to strangers online and which adolescents may be at higher risk online (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter 2010, 2012; Gámez-Guadix, Almendros, Borrajo, & Calvete, 2015; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2006). Although this research can help understanding cybergrooming victimization among adolescents, the magnitude of the problem is still unknown.

Varying authors derived risk factors of cybergrooming victimization from the traditional grooming and sexual child abuse research. However, only a very few clear-cut risk markers have been investigated empirically until now (Wachs, 2014). Research showed that a combination and interaction of online and offline vulnerabilities and risk factors might explain varying risk for sexual online victimization (Averdijk, Mueller-Johnson, & Eisner, 2011). Below, we report previous research conducted on cybergrooming as well as the reasons to expect why cyberbullying victimization and self-esteem might facilitate adolescents to become a victim of cybergrooming victimization.

### Definition and Prevalence Rates of Cybergrooming

Cybergrooming can be defined as a “process by which a person befriends a young person online to facilitate online sexual contact and/or a physical meeting with them, with the goal of committing sexual abuse” (Webster et al., 2012, S.5). Hence, cybergrooming can comprise unwanted sexual solicitation (i.e., requests to engage in sexual activities), online harassment (i.e., threats or other offensive non-sexual online behavior), flattery, force, threats, bribery (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013a). Although cybergrooming should not be considered as a linear process, five stages have been identified that include: (1) friendship formation - in this stage the cybergroomer first gathers information, such as sex, age school grade of the intended victim and gets to know the victim; (2) relationship formation - in order to gain the victim's trust, the cybergroomer starts to discuss more private topics with the victim, such as about the family, friends, school, and daily life challenges; (3) risk assessment - at this point the cybergroomer gathers information in order to reduce the likelihood of getting caught, which includes the location of the PC at home and parents' work schedule; (4) exclusivity - the cybergroomer encourages the victim to not disclose their relationship to others; and (5) sexual stages - in this final stage, the victim is persuaded or forced to

have sexual conversations online, to send sexually explicit images of themselves and/or take part in sexual activities via video chat (Berson, 2003). Depending on the responses of the victim, one or more stages are skipped and sometimes the order is changed.

Online environments possess favorable conditions for cybergroomers due to the possibilities of anonymized interactions, the lack of geographic boundaries, increased possibilities to get access to an intended victim without getting disturbed through the social environment, and the possibilities to victimize simultaneously varying adolescents (Berson, 2003; Wachs, 2014).

Research on cybergrooming has mainly focused on self-reports (more qualitative approaches than quantitative approaches), police reports or law-enforcement agents interviews. Hence, the prevalence rate of cybergrooming is difficult to determine given the paucity of research and limitation of each method (e.g., unrecorded data when analyzing police reports or self-report bias in survey studies). In addition, previous research does not uniformly define and measure cybergrooming, making it difficult to compare. Finally, the sample sizes and characteristics differ among studies greatly and so statistics vary (Wachs, 2014). Statistics in the following paragraph represent some of the research conducted on sexual online solicitation and more specifically on cybergrooming victimization.

In Germany, 5% of the participants ( $N=700$ , age=10-18) reported of unwanted sexual online solicitation through an adult perpetrator and additional 7% reported being online solicited by peers (Bitkom, 2011). In another study, 21.4% of participants ( $N=512$ , age = 12-18 years) reported cybergrooming victimization within the last twelve months (Wachs, Wolf, & Pan, 2012). In the Netherlands, in a representative study ( $N=1,765$ , age = 12-17 years), 5.6% of the male participants and 19.1% of the female participants reported unwanted sexual online solicitation (Baumgartner et al., 2010). In a recent study in the Netherlands, 25.4% of the participants ( $N=4,453$ , age = 11-18 years) reported receiving online sexual requests (Kerstens & Stol, 2014). In the USA, in a national survey ( $N=1,500$ , age = 10-17 years), 19% of the participants reported that they had been victims of online sexual solicitation in 2000 (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007), compared to 10% in 2010 (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012). One of the few studies, investigating online risk for Thai adolescents, found, in a convenience sample of 557 Thai participants between 11 and 18 years old, 80% of participants using ICTs without parental monitoring, 52% reporting no problems with depictions of nakedness, and 33% having encountered people wanting to speak to them about sex in chat rooms (Michelet, 2003). More recently, in a study with a sample of 420 Malaysian adolescents aged between 9 and 16 years old, 17.9% of participants reported unwanted sexual online solicitation (Teimouri et al., 2014).

One of the few cross-national large-scale studies was conducted in 25 European countries ( $N=25,142$ , age = 9-16) and revealed that 22% of the 15-16 year old participants experienced unwanted sexual online solicitation (Livingstone et al., 2011). In sum, the studies show that sexual online risks are a concern of adolescents around the world.

### Demographic Characteristics of Cybergrooming Perpetrators and Victims

Research on cybergrooming has focused on both the victims and the perpetrators. Although cybergroomers are predominantly male (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2010; Webster et al., 2012), there is some evidence that women also use ICTs to groom adolescents, especially male victims (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011). Concerning the age of perpetrators, studies based on recorded police cases have shown that cybergroomers are not a homogeneous group. In the National Juvenile Online Victimization study (N-JOV), 23% of online sexual

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