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The experience of online grooming in the perspective of "digital natives"

Abstract

Online grooming is the grooming of children using the Internet, aimed for their later sexual exploitation. The present study aimed to reveal the scale of the threat by analyzing the experience of online grooming according to young adults, the first generation of "digital natives" (those raised with widespread access to the Internet). A survey method i.e. a survey questionnaire was used. A total of 136 people aged 19-30 took part in the survey. The results indicate that awareness of online grooming is still low, although almost everyone encounters its manifestations. Children and teenagers did not identify them as a potential threat. In some cases, the effects of online grooming can have a huge impact on the perception of reality in adulthood. The respondents rarely sought help in the face of their experiences, most often from their parents and guardians, least often from their teachers. From a pedagogical perspective, this indicates deficiencies in the implementation of media education tasks by state institutions, schools and families. What is required is raising public awareness of the dangers awaiting the child online, especially in view of such rapidly developing technology and the shifting age limit at which a minor independently (without control) uses Internet resources.

Keywords: online grooming, media education, digital natives.

Introduction

In today's world, technology is developing at an alarming rate, and with widespread access to the Internet, it enables people to live in a global society.

Undoubtedly, the number of risks concerning the digital age is increasing. A huge group of online users are children and adolescents, who often absorb messages that are inappropriate for their age. Many parents are unaware of their children's online activities, while the dangers are increasing. The use of the web during adolescence has important developmental consequences. First of all, it affects the process of identity formation and intensifies the process of self-education. It has also become part of the emphasis on individual construction of meaning in the postmodern world, sometimes compared to religion (Pyżalski, 2012, p. 65). The Internet has created ideal conditions for potential perpetrators of child abuse by allowing them to interact anonymously with the victim, building trust through emotional manipulation. One threat not often addressed in the public debate is online grooming – first described in 1995 by Anna C. Salter as a process of manipulation of a child by the perpetrator, aiming to make the child more susceptible to sexual harassment while revealing it less frequently (McAlinden, 2006, p. 346). From a criminological perspective, grooming is defined as the seduction of children using the Internet aimed at their subsequent sexual abuse (Dąbrowska, 2018, p. 12).

Anyone can become a victim of online grooming, although there are characteristics that predispose children to exposure to this form of violence. The most common are unmet emotional needs (secretive children, closed in on themselves, seeking relationships and recognition), need for attention (children rejected by their loved ones and peers, seeking friends), low self-esteem (susceptible to compliments, questioning their appearance, abilities), credulity (not perceiving danger), submissiveness (susceptible to manipulation) or being raised in a single-parent family (Andrzejewska, 2014, p. 153). The child's submissiveness, which is extremely important for a potential abuser, is culturally conditioned in certain circles, due to the transmission of narratives to the child about the required respect and obedience towards adults and elders (Kalka, 2007, p. 72). The principle of reciprocity is also cultivated in the family, which involves returning kind gestures even in situations where the child is not comfortable with it (Stein, 2018, p. 335). A child is an autonomous individual, has its own rights, and acquiescing to the violation of its boundaries (especially bodily boundaries) may make it easier for a stranger to do so. Groomers often choose children from single-parent families, neglected children, victims of violence (physical and psychological) as their targets, because they can offer them more than their caregivers can – meet their needs, offer care, attention and interest by responding emotionally to the child's problems (Kalka, 2007, p. 72).

Grooming is not a specific action, but a complex process of a continuous nature; it consists of many stages that bring the perpetrator closer to their goal (Dąbrowska, 2018, p. 12). No single universal model appears in the literature to describe the course and nature of online grooming. Depending on the partici-

pants and the specifics of the relationship, many different variants of grooming are distinguished. It is also difficult to determine at what point the process begins and ends, as there is a high fluidity of behavior during it (Winters, Jeglic, 2017, p. 2). Most often, the perpetrator seeks out the victim among children who are active online, and then attempts to determine the minor's interests and needs. In this way, they gain the child's trust by entering into a deeper relationship with it. Later, they proceed to gradually isolate the victim so that they keep the secret. The perpetrator pushes the boundaries by initiating conversations on intimate topics and then urging sexual behavior. At the same time, they try to shift the blame onto the victim without taking responsibility for the damage that has occurred, using violence, blackmail or threats to do so. Finally, they seek a meeting in the real world (Nowalska-Kapuścik, 2017, p. 17). In the early stages of grooming, the adult asks questions about basic information such as the age of the child who they are making contact with. This is because they have the option of passing themselves off as a peer or a person a few years older at most, although there have also been action strategies in which the perpetrator did not hide their age. Yet, this required them to communicate perfectly with the child, assuming the pose of a "cool dude" (Carr, 2005, pp. 15–16).

Perpetrators of grooming are deviants with pedophilic tendencies, who usually justify their actions by living under permanent stress or describe them as something that happens to them involuntarily. This is contradicted by statements recorded during therapy, which indicate that molestation and abuse of minors is a consequence of meticulous planning, seduction of victims and maintaining control in the relationship. Thus, pedophilia has more in common with the characteristics of addiction than impulsiveness to attack (Salter, 2003, p. 76). Pedophilic tendencies can develop in an individual under the influence of a variety of factors, including aspects such as emotional immaturity, sexual frustration, deviancy, psychopathology, neuroticism, phobias, addictions and disturbed self-esteem. Some of these factors may begin to form as early as in one's childhood stemming from experiences of violence, sexual abuse, being treated objectively, conflict, authoritarianism or loss of social identity. The impact of masculinization is also highlighted, especially in a cultural context, which refers to the dominance of men and their sexuality in family life. Pedophilia can also be the result of disrupted social roles, interpersonal communication difficulties and strong egocentrism (Podgajna-Kuśmierek, 2003, pp. 34–35). The Internet has given pedophiles the opportunity to communicate through the so-called pedophile circles with an organized structure. They connect people with deviant tendencies from any place on earth, because thanks to the use of the network their activities are geographically unlimited, requiring only that special security measures be maintained so that undesirable people do not join the circle structure (Bednarek, Andrzejewska, 2009, p. 312).

Online grooming is a form of sexual violence, whose effects are diverse, widespread and multisymptomatic. For this reason, it is impossible to establish one specific syndrome or pattern of disorders to identify a child harmed by it (Maciarz, 2006, p. 39). In the most general terms, the consequences of sexual abuse experienced during childhood and adolescence can be categorized into psychological (guilt, lowered self-esteem, sleep disorders, concentration disorders, mental disorders and illnesses), behavioral manifestations (addiction tendencies, acts of self-aggression, etc.), psychosexual disorders (risky sexual behavior, promiscuity, problems with building stable bonds) and post-traumatic psychiatric symptoms (e.g. psychotic symptoms, PTSD) (Pospiszyl, 2014, p. 60). A child experiencing forms of violence also loses its sense of security, a fundamental need that affects the development of its identity and personality through a distorted self-image or low self-esteem. Sexual violence experienced in childhood can result in problems with establishing healthy relationships and building bonds, as individuals shy away from contact with others or become too attached. There are also cases of projection, in which the abused person takes on the role of the abuser or victim in a given relationship (Kalka, 2007, p. 46). The occurrence of these consequences and their intensity is determined by a number of factors, among which we can certainly mention the type and form of abuse (initiation of physical contact), the age and developmental stage of the victim, the duration and frequency of experiencing violent situations, the nature of the relationship (occurrence of abuse of trust), the reaction of the closest environment to the disclosure of the fact of experiencing violence (acceptance or rejection) and the type of support received (useful, useless) (Maciarz, 2006, p. 39).

From the point of view of the social sciences, it is important to meet a variety of human needs through the Internet, especially because of different forms of meeting these needs in the virtual world. The role of the Internet in meeting social needs is fundamental when considering whether it can be acknowledged as society (Nowak, Krejtz, 2006, p. 7). The situation of students in today's world has changed dramatically. The pre-existing education system is not up to the current demands, as it was designed with a different audience in mind. The changes, although gradual, now encompass most aspects of life, clearly separating the current generation from its predecessors. Marc Prensky refers to this phenomenon as "singularity," meaning the irreversible arrival and rapid spread of digital technology (Prensky, 2001). Technological advances confront teachers with numerous challenges in education. It is particularly significant that for an ever-growing group of young people, the Internet is becoming an important influence factor, alongside family, school and peers. It is noteworthy that younger and younger people are increasingly involved in the virtual world, which leads to the weakening of traditional social institutions such as school, family, state and church, which previously played a key role in education (Jaszczak, 2008, pp.

95-96). Despite the risks involved, the media can be a beneficial tool in young people's development, however, achieving this goal requires considerable effort. This is a challenge for educational institutions, such as the family and the educational system, because one cannot solely depend on the self-regulation of game producers or instant messaging developers, whose main goal is to make a profit. The promotion of aggression, violence and deviant behavior brings significant income to the media market (Sarzala, 2009, p. 274).

For adult users who entered the world of the Internet with most of their needs already met, the Internet serves mainly as a communication tool for real-world benefits. Through instant messaging, they share experiences, make appointments, obtain the information they need for their careers and seek inspiration. For them, the real world is always a reference point, and the Internet makes it easier for them to function in it (Nowak, Krejtz, 2006, p. 7). For the e-generation, the Internet is the main environment for satisfying social needs. For them, online communication is not just a tool, but a goal in itself. This group includes increasingly younger children, as the age of starting to use the Internet is decreasing with advances in technology. Apps and devices are becoming more user-friendly, allowing even three-year-olds to operate tablets and smartphones. For young people, contacts made online can be just as important as those made in real life, and most instant messaging apps have a feature that lets them know when other users are available. Blogs or online diaries are popular, often created by people under the age of 16, who share their thoughts and experiences publicly, as if they were confiding in friends (Stein, 2018, p. 333). At the end of the 20th century, a term was searched for to distinguish the generations growing up in the digital world from their predecessors. Thus, the term "digital native" was born, referring to those who are immersed and proficient in modern technologies and grow up with them. Those who have had to adapt to the presence of the media as it has emerged over the course of their lives are referred to as "digital immigrants." This division is rigid and does not allow one to be in both groups at the same time, nor to move freely from one to the other (Prensky, 2001).

Results of the research

The main objective of the study was to explore the experience of online grooming as perceived by young adults, the first generation raised with widespread access to the Internet. It focuses, therefore, on understanding the extent of online grooming and the risk factors. The study of online grooming is set against the backdrop of media pedagogy and, from this perspective, is important for developing interventions and creating effective prevention strategies. By un-

derstanding the complexity of the problem, tools can be developed that can help protect children and adolescents from potential exploitation.

The survey was conducted from March 27 to April 22, 2023, using an online form shared via social media on a random sample of Polish young adults aged 19-30. A total of 136 people participated in the survey, including 73 women and 63 men. The author's observations show that women were more willing to fill in the questionnaire offered to them. The respondents were informed at the beginning of the survey that their answers were to relate to childhood and adolescence, stages of development during which they were exposed to online grooming.

Lack of adult supervision during a child's use of the Internet can lead to ignoring important signals that require an immediate response. The bond between a child and its parent is not always built on such strong trust that would allow the child to report any disturbing situation to the adult. In the case of grooming, the perpetrator uses a method of establishing a relationship, gaining trust through emotional manipulation, not arousing any suspicion in the minor. It is therefore worth studying at what age the respondents started using the network independently (without supervision).
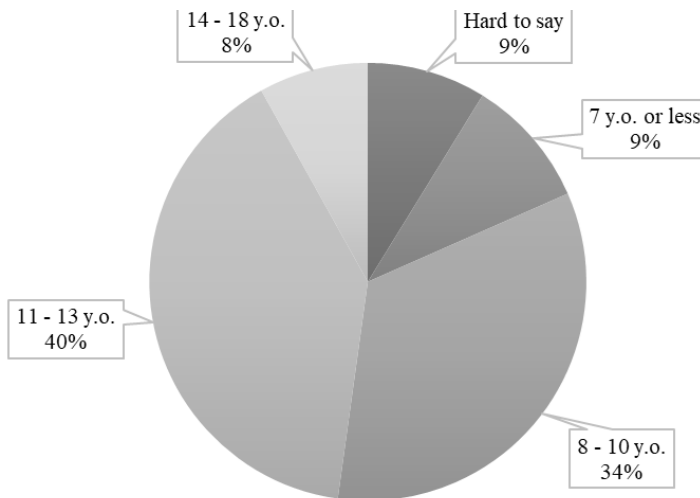

Figure *1*
The age of beginning to use the Internet independently. N = 136

Source: own research.

As can be seen in the chart, the respondents most often started using the web independently between the ages of 8 and 13. The results also indicate a significant gender divide – men were more likely to declare autonomy in this regard at the age of 8–10, while women were more likely to declare autonomy at the age of 11–13. 9% of the respondents started using the Internet without

adult supervision as early as preschool age. This group was outnumbered by males. The smallest group encompasses web users achieving autonomy in this regard at the age of 14–18.

Online grooming is not a new phenomenon, although it is rarely discussed in society. In Poland, the threat was discussed in one fairly recognizable campaign under the slogan "You never know who is on the other side," in 2004. The campaign proved to be quite a success introducing online grooming into the social discourse on a large scale. The topic began to be discussed in schools and homes, which may have contributed to the results. The chart below shows whether and where the respondents encountered the concept of online grooming.
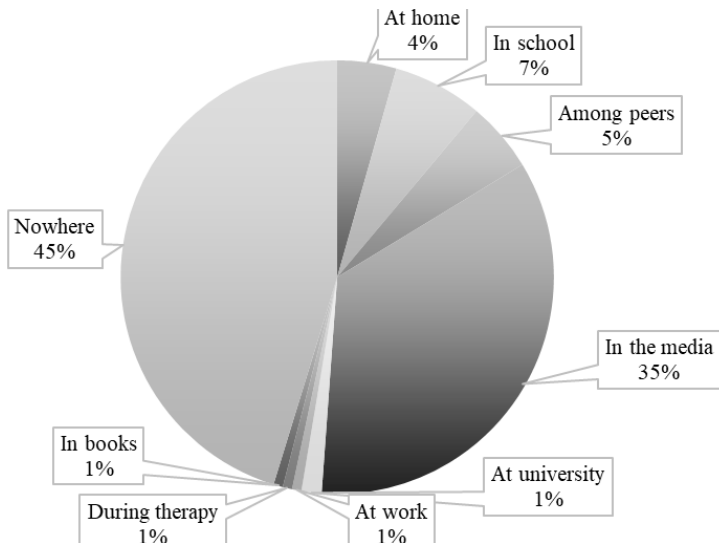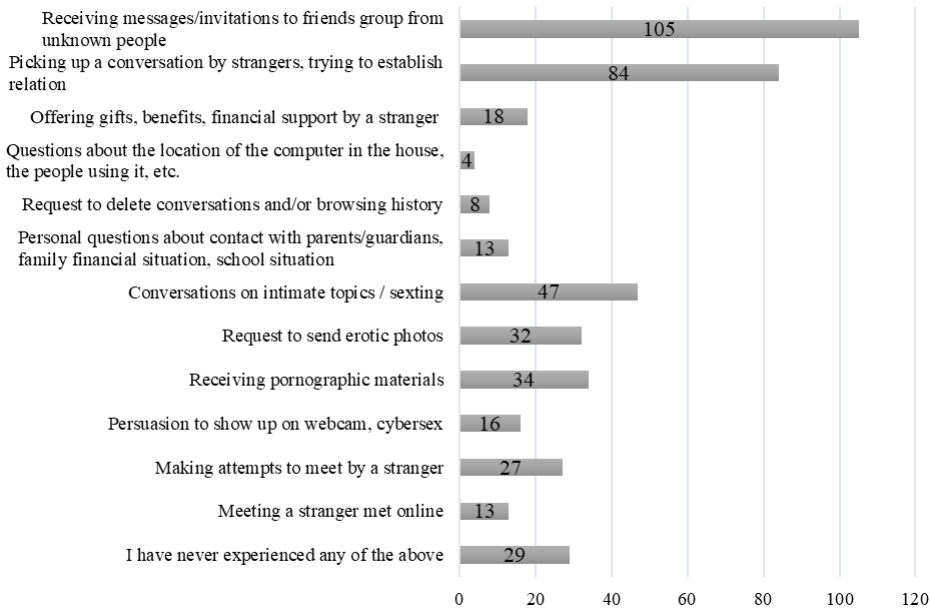

Figure 2
Online grooming knowledge sources. N = 136

Source: own research.

Almost half of the respondents (45.2%) have not encountered the concept of online grooming in their lives, proving that it is still not a widely known threat. The most common source of knowledge about grooming is the media. The institutions most important in a child's life (school and family home) received low scores, indicating lack of dialogue about media education. Higher scores were received, for example, by peers, who, despite their willingness to help, may not be an objective source of information on such complicated topics. It is worth looking into the knowledge of parents and education staff and promoting awareness among them about the dangers a child may encounter online, especially grooming.

Grooming takes place in multiple stages, using a number of sophisticated methods of manipulation, having different intentions. An important aspect of the survey was to determine whether the respondents experienced online grooming while online, what kind of grooming it was, and which of its forms were the most common.

Manifestation	Count
Receiving messages/invitations to friends group from unknown people	105
Picking up a conversation by strangers, trying to establish relation	84
Offering gifts, benefits, financial support by a stranger	18
Questions about the location of the computer in the house, the people using it, etc.	4
Request to delete conversations and/or browsing history	8
Personal questions about contact with parents/guardians, family financial situation, school situation	13
Conversations on intimate topics / sexting	47
Request to send erotic photos	32
Receiving pornographic materials	34
Persuasion to show up on webcam, cybersex	16
Making attempts to meet by a stranger	27
Meeting a stranger met online	13
I have never experienced any of the above	29

Figure 3
Experience of online grooming manifestations. N = 136

Source: own research.

The largest number of the respondents experienced attempts to establish contact from strangers, in the form of invitations to become friends or messages. 84 respondents felt that the conversation established with a stranger was an attempt to build a relationship. 47 respondents had engaged in sexting during childhood and adolescence. Pornographic materials were received by 34 respondents, and requests to send such materials were received by 32 respondents. Relatively rare when contacting a potential perpetrator was the risk assessment factor, i.e. asking questions about the location of devices in their homes or other people using them, and requests to delete conversations or browser history. The most disturbing data is that strangers met online attempted to meet in the real world (the experience of 27 respondents). 13 people decided to go to the proposed meeting. 29 of the 136 respondents had never experienced any of the listed manifestations of online grooming. 103 people

agreed to answer the part of the survey regarding online grooming experiences. Noticing the wide spectrum of online grooming experiences among the respondents, it was appropriate to determine the frequency of their occurrence.
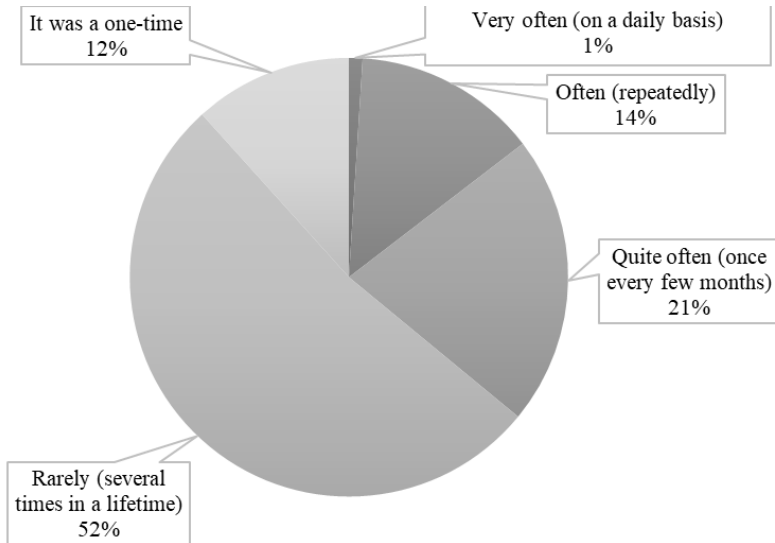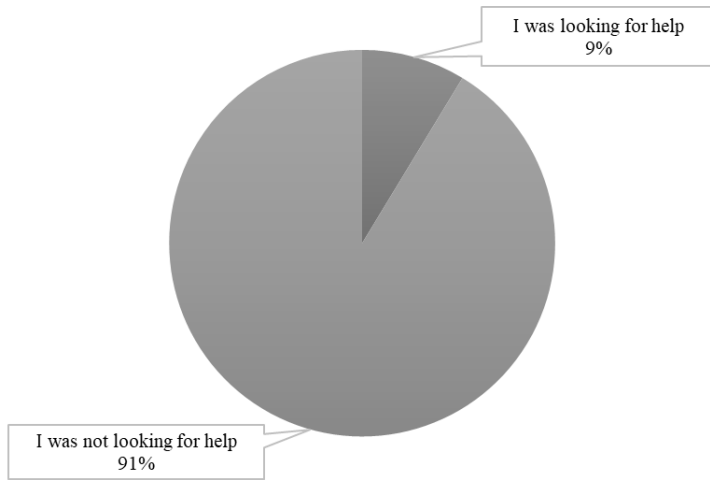

Figure 4
The frequency of experiencing online grooming threat situations. N = 103

Source: own research.

Most often, the respondents experienced online grooming several times during their childhood and adolescence. 21% of the respondents experienced it once every few months, while for 14% of them it was multiple times. Only 12% of the respondents said it was a one-time situation. There was one respondent who experienced online grooming situations on a daily basis.

In the process of grooming, the victim may be intimidated, blackmailed, or persuaded that sharing their anxieties with anyone will not have any effect because no one will believe them. Adults sometimes find it difficult to understand that children can be involved in situations such as grooming, and often downplay these situations, arguing that they are figments of the child's imagination. Nevertheless, there is a need to react before irreversible consequences occur. As the results discussed in the previous sections show, awareness of the dangers of online grooming is insufficient. Therefore, it is important for minors to develop the skills to identify potential online threats and be confident that there is someone they can rely on. Analyzing the experiences reported by the respondents, it becomes crucial to determine whether they chose to seek help at any given time.

Figure 5
Looking for help in the face of experienced threats. N = 103

Source: own research.

As can be seen in the chart above, the vast majority of the respondents did not seek any help in the face of the threat they were experiencing. Only 8.7% of the respondents took the appropriate steps. From among them, an attempt was made to determine to whom they turned for help in the situation of experienced danger.
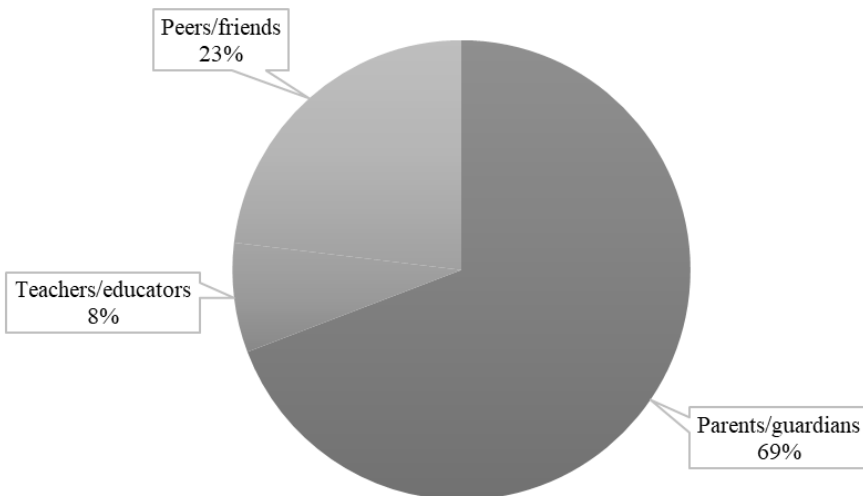
Figure 6
Sources of help received. N = 13

Source: own research.

Despite the fact that adults in the child's environment are responsible for the child's safety, the respondents were more likely to turn to their friends and peers for support than to teachers. The vast majority of the respondents (69.2%) turned to parents and guardians for help. Although this number is small in the context of the whole survey, it indicates that the family, which is the most important care and educational institution in a child's life, is a source of support in emergency situations. At the same time, it indicates trust that children and adolescents have in those in their immediate environment. These results are negative for the group of educational professions, suggesting a possible low level of trust or lack of awareness that teachers and educators can also be approached with a problem. However, there is a predominant group of people who have not approached anyone for help. Of course, this may be due to a variety of factors, which the respondents also commented on, as shown in the chart below.
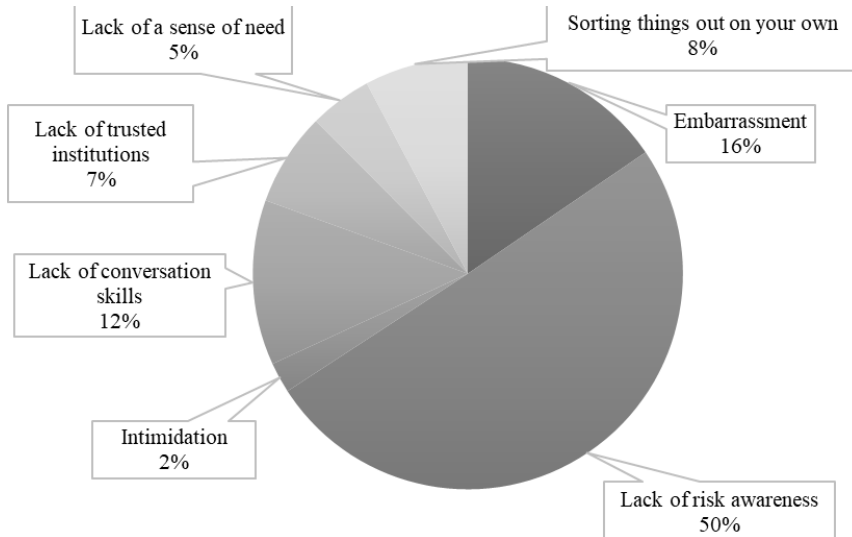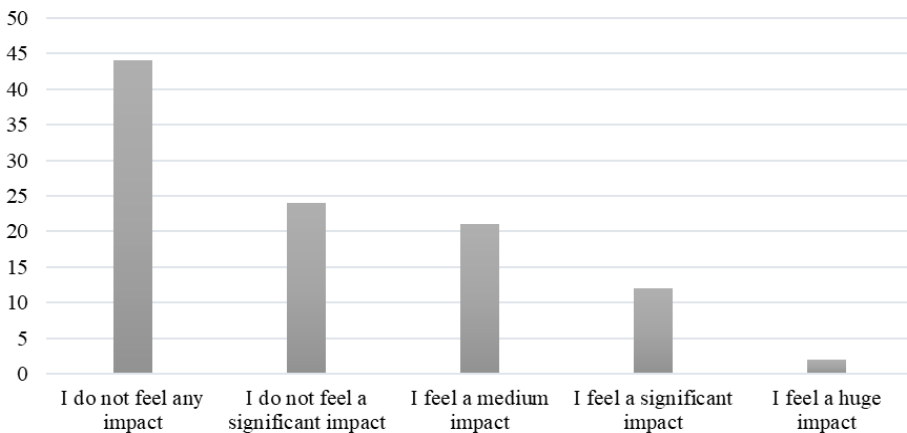

Figure 7
Reasons for not seeking help. N = 129

Source: own research.

The majority of the respondents indicate lack of awareness of the dangers as the main reason why they did not seek help in case of online grooming. This fact reveals that children and adolescents tend to underestimate the manifestations of online grooming, which may be the result of insufficient media education. 15.5% of the respondents experienced feelings of embarrassment about raising topics related to the dangers they encountered, while 12.4% of them pointed to lack of competence in this area as a reason. Some charges did not feel the need to seek help and handled the situation on their own. A small group

of respondents (2.3%) indicated that they had been bullied. This indicates the presence of online perpetrators who use violence to achieve their goals. As is widely known, groomers may use various forms of aggression to keep a child in their control and avoid exposure. Perpetrators try to avoid responsibility by shifting the blame to the victim, and may resort to violence, blackmail or threats later in the relationship.

Online grooming is a form of sexual violence with extremely severe consequences. The consequences of such experiences are observed in a variety of disorders, which, however, depend on a number of factors, including the child's developmental stage at which the violence was manifested, the nature of the contact (coercion involving violence and aggression, acceptance, initiation of part of the interaction), the child's temperamental characteristics (e.g., sensitivity) or the atmosphere in the family. The extent of the impact of experienced online seduction on the adult respondents' current perception of reality can be seen below.

Figure 8
The impact of experienced online grooming manifestations on the respondents' current perception of reality. N = 103

Source: own research.

44 respondents do not feel any and 24 of them do not feel a significant impact of online grooming experiences on their current perception of reality. This data can be interpreted positively, as it demonstrates that there is little perceived harm that could have long-term consequences for the victim. However, the other extreme of the graph demonstrates that the experience of online grooming had a huge impact on the current lives of two subjects. In this question, significant differences were observable between the gender of the respondents. Both answers belonged to women. 12 respondents felt a significant

impact of past experiences on their current perception of reality, which included 11 women in opposition to one man. Medium influence was again felt more often by women (15 respondents) than by men (6). In the other two categories, the differences between the gender of the respondents were not so significant.

In conclusion, a significant number of the respondents who experienced online grooming during childhood and adolescence are affected by a distorted perception of reality. The analysis of male and female responses confirms that the effects of online grooming differ between the sexes. The responses to the aforesaid experiences are valuable for assessing how young people deal with online dangers, and highlighting that online grooming is not a rare, but a widespread phenomenon. For this reason, it is necessary to take educational measures against this problem, involving both the people concerned and their parents, so that they are competent to talk honestly about sexuality and online safety. In the spirit of the slogan saying that prevention is better than cure, it is important to implement preventive measures and protect the youngest once they enter the cyber world.

Summary

The literature contains a significant number of publications on online grooming. They are mainly focused on developing the theoretical basis of this phenomenon, including causes, effects, profile of the perpetrator and victim, and present quantitative studies related to risky behavior online. However, it is worth noting that theory does not always translate into practice, as evidenced by the results presented above. The research results show the prevalence of risks in the online environment, which are faced by the vast majority of its users. The dynamic development of technology generates more and more new potential dangers, which in turn forces educators and parents to constantly update their knowledge and maintain extreme vigilance against any changes in children's behavior. As many as 99% of those surveyed have encountered a form of risky behavior online, primarily involving exposure to pornographic content, misinformation, violence and illegal downloading (known as piracy). The analysis of the data on online grooming yields disturbing results, as nearly half of the survey participants have never encountered the term and are unable to define it. Of the remaining respondents, most learned about online grooming through the media.

Children and adolescents in vulnerable situations are generally reluctant to seek support from adults, preferring instead to contact their peers or use Internet resources. To increase the willingness of the youngest to share their experiences, it is important to build trust in the family and at school. This trust would allow them to easily report situations that worry them. One reason for such

avoidance of help from adults may be the lack of sufficient sex education. Often this education is not carried out by competent people, and children seek information from unreliable sources. In Polish schools, according to the syllabus, the subject called upbringing for life in the family is taught and it aims to familiarize students with the subject of human sexuality, but often fails to fulfill its role. Online grooming affects a wide swath of society, and yet the awareness of this threat remains low. Children and adolescents often do not understand that they are exposed to risk and that some behaviors are not appropriate. In addition, the experience of online grooming can strongly influence later life and the way they perceive the reality around them.

There have been several social activities related to online grooming, but only one campaign has achieved significant popularity in Poland – almost 20 years ago. It seems that online grooming has been somewhat forgotten in the face of other online threats, such as hate speech and scams. However, this survey proves that the phenomenon still exists. The respondents have experienced it, but even now when they are starting or will be starting families, many of them still do not know what online grooming is, what are its manifestations or where they can obtain help. Even as children, aware of the danger, they were reluctant to seek help from adults. This may suggest some deficiencies in the role of family and educational institutions, which should be the main source of support for school-aged children. In order for children to be willing to seek help in crisis situations, it is important to have dialogue with them based on trust, from an early age. They should be made aware that the Internet is a place of tremendous opportunities, but one must be vigilant when using it. Children should know they can report any problem to an adult. It is worth preparing them for certain situations they may encounter as Internet users, but doing so in such a way so as not to discourage them from using the media. From a prospective parent's perspective, it is important to take an interest in online dangers, as technological advances will not make the task of raising the next generation any easier. Although it is difficult to keep up to date with all technological innovations, the most important thing is to ensure one's child's safety. It is crucial to conduct outreach activities both at school and in the family. Teachers and educators, as well as parents and guardians, should educate themselves in order to use the acquired knowledge in the process of raising children and satisfying their need for safety. As the research results show, some situations experienced during online use have a lasting impact on a child's psyche in later life. This should prompt widespread pedagogical reflection on providing the youngest media users with comfortable conditions that will enable them to use the Internet properly.

It should be emphasized that combating online grooming effectively is a task that requires special cooperation of various players. Government organizations, child and youth protection institutions, schools, parents, technology companies

and society as a whole must join forces to effectively prevent and eliminate this problem. Education is a key element in achieving this goal. Awareness and the ability to recognize the signs of online grooming are extremely important for parents, teachers and caregivers. It is necessary to provide them with the right tools and knowledge to protect children effectively against this threat. In addition, schools and educational institutions should teach children how to use the Internet safely, equip them with media competence so that they can recognize online threatening situations and know where to seek help. In conclusion, combating online grooming requires concerted efforts and developed public awareness. We cannot leave children and young people unprotected in the online world. Action is needed to raise awareness, improve education, develop technological solutions and support victims of grooming. Only through these joint efforts will we be able to create a safer space for the youngest online.

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Doświadczenie groomingu w perspektywie „cyfrowych tubylców"

Streszczenie

Grooming online to nawiązywanie kontaktów z dziećmi za pośrednictwem Internetu, mające na celu ich późniejsze wykorzystanie seksualne. Celem niniejszego badania było ujawnienie skali zagrożenia poprzez analizę doświadczeń z groomingiem online według młodych dorosłych, pierwszego pokolenia „cyfrowych tubylców" (osób wychowanych przy powszechnym dostępie do Internetu). Zastosowano metodę badawczą, tj. kwestionariusz ankiety. W ankiecie wzięło udział łącznie 136 osób w wieku 19–30 lat. Wyniki wskazują, że świadomość groomingu online jest nadal niska, chociaż prawie każdy spotyka się z jego przejawami. Dzieci i nastolatki nie identyfikowały ich jako potencjalne zagrożenie. W niektórych przypadkach skutki groomingu online mogą mieć ogromny wpływ na postrzeganie rzeczywistości w dorosłości. Respondenci rzadko szukali pomocy w obliczu swoich doświadczeń – najczęściej od rodziców i opiekunów, najrzadziej od swoich nauczycieli. Z pedagogicznego punktu widzenia wskazuje to na braki w realizacji zadań edukacji medialnej przez instytucje państwowe, szkoły i rodziny. Konieczne jest podniesienie świadomości społecznej dotyczącej zagrożeń czekających na dziecko online, zwłaszcza w obliczu tak szybko rozwijającej się technologii i przesuwającego się wieku, w którym osoba nieletnia samodzielnie (bez kontroli) korzysta z zasobów internetowych.

Słowa kluczowe: grooming online, edukacja medialna, cyfrowi tubylcy.