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REGULATING DIGITAL SPACES: COMBATING ONLINE SEXUALIZATION AND CYBER EXPLOITATION OF YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Today's digital era has emerged with unparalleled opportunities for communication, education, and social engagement. However, with the advantages come a darker reality that has raised concerns regarding online exploitation, cyberbullying, and online sexualization of youths. This paper highlights the multifaceted risks associated with the presence of youths in the digital world and their exposure to the production and distribution of sexually abusive material, cyberbullying, trafficking, and grooming. This paper also examines the psychological, social, and legal consequences of these risks, exposing regulatory loopholes and the critical need for multi-stakeholder remedies. This paper emphasizes the need to create a safer digital environment for children by examining international instruments, domestic legislation, and prevention initiatives.

This issue is not merely a random danger associated with internet usage, but it has transformed into a systematic issue facilitated by factors like anonymity, worldwide connectivity, and technological advancements such as encrypted messaging, dark web sites, and deepfake imagery. The widespread use of social media platforms has played a significant role in normalizing hypersexualized behavior, frequently pushing the youths to adapt to warped perceptions of identity and self-esteem. Cyber-exploitation, which covers grooming and sextortion, infringes the rights to privacy and dignity of the young, resulting in adverse effects on their mental health, academic success, and future relationships.

Although various international agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, establish comprehensive protective frameworks, their implementation varies significantly across different regions. Therefore, preventive strategies must extend beyond these legal frameworks to incorporate digital literacy, parental oversight, corporate accountability, and psychosocial support. This paper emphasizes that safeguarding youth in the digital era is a collective responsibility that requires coordinated

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efforts among governments, civil society, law enforcement, and technology companies to ensure that younger generations can access the internet while being protected from exploitation and harm.

KEYWORDS: online sexualization, cyberbullying, cyber exploitation, grooming, internet.

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation has brought about significant global changes, creating unprecedented access to knowledge, entertainment, and social interactions. Besides creating these opportunities for development, learning, and knowledge, it exposes the young to risks such as cyber-bullying, online sexualization, and cyber-exploitation.

The digital revolution has swept across the globe and billions of people are connected on it. Rather than calling it a luxury, the use of the internet has become an integral part of our daily lives, facilitating social interactions and digital payments and impacting many lives. The role of these platforms in spreading misinformation and their harmful impact on users have raised serious concerns among lawmakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Child Sexual Exploitation: Prevalence, Process, and Offender Characteristics

Juliane A.Kloess, Anthony R. Beech, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse (TVA)* Journal, Volume 15, Issue 2, (March 6, 2014)

An overview of current information and comprehension regarding the process of sexually grooming and exploiting youngsters online is given in this review. In particular, the frequency of online sexual grooming and exploitation is examined, along with related difficulties in detecting its presence. A thorough description and explanation of the procedure, both online and offline, as well as legal reactions to this phenomenon, round up this. To explain their potential involvement in facilitating and contributing to online exploitation processes, several elements are analyzed. Lastly, the features of "groomers" or chat room offenders in particular, as well as those of internet offenders generally, are examined in connection to current typologies. In its conclusion, this review makes recommendations for further study**.**

Online child sexual exploitation: A new mis challenge

Demetis D. S., Kietzmann J., *Journal of the Association for Information Systems (2021)*

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This study of this paper employs a grounded theory approach and organizes the role that digital technologies play in shaping online child sexual exploitation using primary data from a UK cybercrime police unit and secondary and publicly available data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. By offering a unified model for online CSE—which we refer to as the technology and imagery dimensions model—the research advances IS theory. A number of factors are examined to provide an explanation of the facilitating and contributing role they may play in offense processes online. Finally, current typologies are discussed in relation to characteristics of Internet offenders in general and "groomers"/chat room offenders specifically. This review concludes by offering suggestions for future research.

ECPAT International. (2020). Summary Paper on Online Child Sexual Exploitation[1]

ECPAT, a network in over 100 countries combating all forms of sexual exploitation of children (SEC), defines online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) as any internet-linked activity that leads to a child being sexually exploited or the creation, distribution, or sale of child sexual exploitation material. The report places OCSE inside the SEC framework, alongside prostitution, trafficking, child marriage, and tourism-related exploitation. It highlights how digital technology and global mobility are blurring the boundaries between these forms. As children's lives become more connected, OCSE has become more complicated and interconnected with other SEC situations, necessitating global prevention, accountability, and child protection activities.

RESEARCH GAP

While previous research has widely established the incidence of online sexualization and cyber-exploitation of minors, considerable study gaps still exist. The existing literature focusses on prevalence rates, psychological effects, and legal responses. Still, there is limited empirical data available on the long-term developmental outcomes for victims, particularly in non-Western cultures. The majority of research focuses on Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, leaving Africa and South America underrepresented, despite indications of increased internet penetration and vulnerability among young people in these regions**.**

Another gap is found in the influence of developing technologies such as artificial intelligence,

[1] https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ECPAT-Summary-paper-on-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-2020.pdf

ISSN: 2582-6433

deepfake pornography[2], and end-to-end encrypted[3] platforms, which are increasingly being used to exploit kids but have yet to be properly investigated and examined by the researchers. Furthermore, while international treaties such as the UNCRC[4] and the Budapest Convention[5] Also, provide a legal framework for such issues; there has been inefficient implementation, application and effectiveness across various jurisdictions, particularly in nations with weak cybercrime enforcement procedures**.**

There also exists a lacuna of child-centric research approaches that focus on the perspectives of minors themselves. Most studies adopt a legal, psychological, or criminological approach but rarely explore the lived experiences of the young generation and their awareness levels regarding the risk related to the use of digital platforms.

Adding further, many researches have not adequately examined the role of socio-economic disparities, cultural and societal norms, gender disparities in shaping the youth's vulnerability to online exploitation. Finally, while preventive strategies such as digital literacy programs, parental control mechanisms, and corporate accountability measures are widely recommended, there is a dearth of evidence-based evaluations on their effectiveness. The lack of longitudinal research documenting the impact of such treatments exacerbates the gap more, making it difficult to develop the policies that are both preventive and rehabilitative in character. The limited research on the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation among various law enforcement agencies in addressing cyber exploitation and online sexualization of young despite the inherent transnational nature of these crimes. The question also lies about how the digital and physical spaces reinforce each other.

TYPE OF RESEARCH

A non-doctrinal form of research has been employed in the making of this research paper. Primary sources have been referred to while formulating this research.

[2] Deepfake pornography is a form of non-consensual AI pornography created by altering existing photographs or videos using deepfake technology to modify the appearance of the participants.

[3] End-to-end encryption (E2EE) is a method of implementing a secure communication system where only the sender and intended recipient can read the messages. No one else, including the system provider, telecom providers, Internet providers or malicious actors, can access the cryptographic keys needed to read or send messages

[4] The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (commonly abbreviated as the **CRC** or **UNCRC**) is an international human rights treaty which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children

[5] **Budapest Convention on Cybercrime** or the **Budapest Convention**, is the first international treaty seeking to address Internet and computer crime (cybercrime) harmonizing national laws, improving investigative techniques, and increasing cooperation among nations

ISSN: 2582-6433

SOURCES OF DATA

The sources from which the data is collected are primary and secondary sources. The primary source data is collected by questionnaire-based problems faced by the youth while using digital platforms and their exposure to online exploitation. The other sources from where the information is collected are books, the internet, articles, previous amended laws, journals and various national and international laws.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

- To examine nature and different forms of online sexualization, the cyber exploitation of youths in digital world.
- To analyze the psychological and social development impacts of online exploitation of the adolescents.
- To overview various international laws, conventions, national legislations in safeguarding this generation from online exposures.
- To examine the role of digital technology such as artificial intelligence, online gaming, deepfake, and other encrypted platforms in exploiting the youth online.
- To explore the vulnerability of children through socio-economic or cultural factors in online exploitation.
- To assess the implications of preventive strategies such as parental monitoring, digital literacy, and corporate responsibility in reducing online dangers.
- To identify the vaccum and give recommendations and suggestions on strong technology-driven mechanisms from protection against online exploitation.
- To examine the role of the judiciary in shaping the legal landscape of digital exploitation, analyzing the Supreme Court's role in drafting the legislation concerning cyber exploitation.

UNDERSTANDING OF CYBER EXPLOITATION AND ONLINE SEXUALIZATION

- **CYBER EXPLOITATION:** gaining unlawful access to computer systems and networks to obtain unauthorized entry and control, generally for malicious intents like stealing data, conducting surveillance, or disrupting services.

  Cyber exploitation also involves a broad range of offences, as mentioned below:

ISSN: 2582-6433

1. **Online grooming:** It refers to instances where an individual uses technology or the internet to form a relationship with youth, intending to deceive, coerce, or compel them into engaging in sexual activities, such as sharing images or videos of themselves.
2. **Sextortion:** It employs non-physical coercion to obtain sexual favors from the victim. It encompasses sexual exploitation involving the abuse of power as a means of coercion, and threatening to release sexual images or information.

   Sextortion is when an online predator tricks someone into giving them nude images or videos, and then demands money, more images, or makes other demands threatening to share the images with the victim's friends and family if they don't comply.[6]
3. **Trafficking Networks:** The practice of exploiting minors or the young by organized groups for financial gain. The recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation".[7]
4. **Child sexual abuse material (CSAM):** This internet technology has created a widespread distribution and consumption of illegal content.

- **ONLINE SEXUALIZATION:** Refers to an act of degrading a person's value to their sexual appeal or treating them as sex objects within digital spaces such as on social media platforms, gaming platforms or other such platforms.

  It can arise from active and passive forms:

  1. **Active participation**: people are coerced and manipulated into creating their sexualized image or content without knowing the future consequences.
  2. **Passive exposure**: Children or the young may be inadvertently exposed to sexual content through advertisements, pop-ups, or shared materials on the internet while using any social media or online gaming platforms.

RISK AND VULNERABILITIES

Using digital platforms often leads to the following risks:

Psychological and Emotional distress: Young generations exposed to online exploitation face

[6] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sextortion
[7] United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2005.

ISSN: 2582-6433

anxiety, depression, shame, and self-esteem issues. They often develop suicidal tendencies due to public humiliation. This digital exposure may also lead to trauma among the youth.

Online Grooming[8]: Predators capitalize on emotional needs and the solitude of these generations. Grooming starts with innocent conversations that gradually turn into sexual desires.

Privacy and Data Exploitation: The digital economy relies heavily on the collection of data. These people unintentionally disclose their personal information while using digital platforms, which predators might target to exploit and manipulate them.

Cyberbullying[9] and Peer Pressure: Online sexualization often interacts with cyberbullying, where the youths are bullied, blackmailed, and humiliated by the dissemination of private pictures.

Increased Exposure through social media: Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, even though the matrimonial platforms promote self-presentation, frequently forcing the youths to conform to hypersexualized standards and exploitation.

Cross-Border Challenges: The global borderless nature of the digital world makes the jurisdiction difficult for enforcement and may give rise to the risks of trafficking.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The study also focuses on the positive and negative effects of the use of digital technology:

The rapid expansion of digital technology has transformed the society by enhancing connectivity, greater access to trade and public services, facilitating finances. The pace of connectivity among people is growing rapidly, especially the young generations have now got the easy access to connect through each other. The current wave of change is likely to have profound impacts.

When it comes to social media, platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and dating apps have connected almost half of the entire population of the globe. People can easily make their voices heard and connect with others worldwide in real time. However, technology may also give rise to discord and misconceptions by providing a venue for hate speech and misinformation.

As a result, social media algorithms have the potential to exacerbate global social dispersion. However, they can also act oppositely.

[8] the action or behavior used to establish an emotional connection with a vulnerable person under the age of consent – and sometimes the victim's family, to lower their inhibitions with the objective of sexual abuse.

[9] Cyberbullying is a form of bullying or harassment using electronic means.

ISSN: 2582-6433

While digital environment can provide significant advantages, there is no doubt it can facilitate dangers.

Positive use of technology:

1. **Detection of sexual abuse material through AI:** AI can be a strong tool for combating internet exploitation. Artificial intelligence systems can detect suspect photographs, videos, and grooming trends on social media and chat networks. Microsoft's PhotoDNA and Google's AI classifiers are widely used to detect and report harmful content. These technologies can not only reduce human exposure to a harmful digital environment but can also improve law enforcement agencies to investigate and abrogate such materials available on internet.
2. **Parental Control:** Parents can also monitor their children's activity on the internet through modern digital tools and platforms. They can use screen time monitoring[10], content filters[11] and app based parental controls to block the inappropriate websites, suspicious conversations and can establish healthy digital boundaries.
3. **Awareness campaigns:** technology has raised global awareness efforts to educate children, parents, and educators on the perils of internet exploitation. Platforms such as INHOPE[12], Hotlines and Child Helpline International are some simple reporting tools that allow individuals globally to report CSAM anonymously and promptly.

Negative use of the technology:

1. **End-to-end encryption for anonymous conversations:** While encryption is useful for privacy and security, it can be a challenge to monitor the conversations. Offenders frequently use end-to-end encrypted services such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram to groom youths, share sexually abusive materials, and coordinate trafficking networks without the potential of exposure. The anonymity given by such platforms makes it difficult for law authorities to track down and arrest criminals, sparking a complex debate over the need for privacy rights vs child safety.
2. **Dark Web Platforms Facilitate CSAM commerce:** The dark web has become a hotspot for illicit activities, including CSAM commerce. Offenders use anonymising

[10] The process of tracking and measuring the duration of time spent using digital devices and applications.
[11] An automated process that screens and blocks access to specific digital content, such as webpages, emails, or messages, based on predefined rules or criteria.
[12] https://inhope.org/EN/articles/what-is-inhope

ISSN: 2582-6433

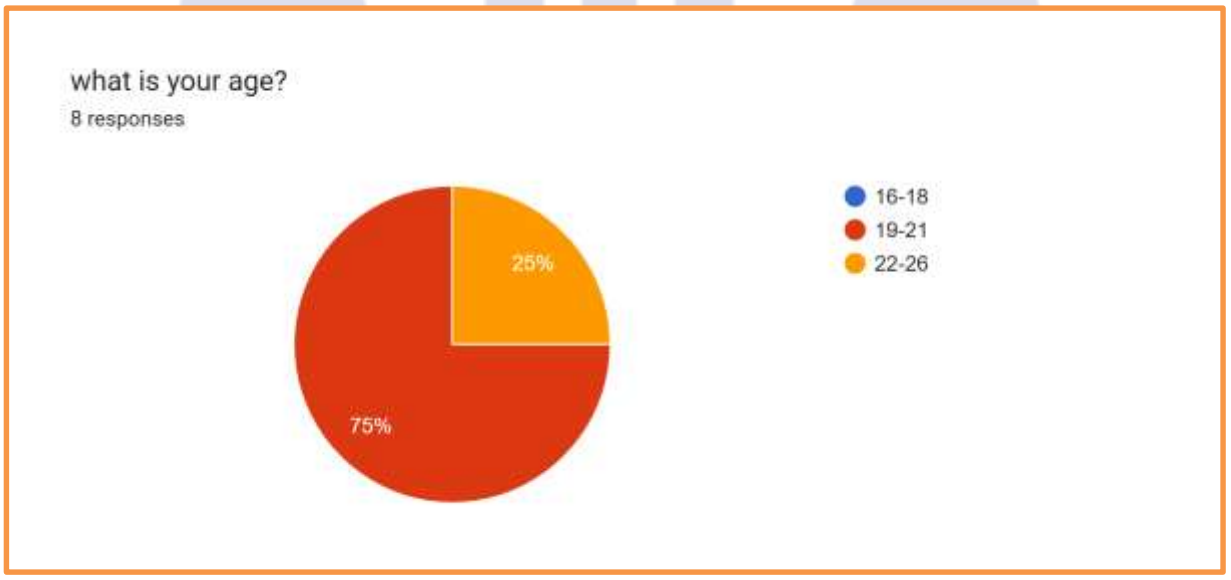
technologies like Tor [13]and cryptocurrency to run through underground marketplaces where child sexual abuse material is transferred for profit. These platforms not only contain massive amounts of unlawful content, but they also build predatory networks that normalise and perpetuate destructive behaviour. Dark web still remains a barrier to eradicating online exposure.

3. **Dark Webs:** Offenders employ artificial intelligence to generate deepfake child sexual imagery. They may use AI to convert images, photos or videos into sexually explicit material even without the participation of young. Such fabricated images blur the distinction between "real" and 'virtual" abuse. Current laws and regulations fail to address deepfake exploitation, resulting in a hazardous loophole that offenders exploit.

DATA COLLECTION

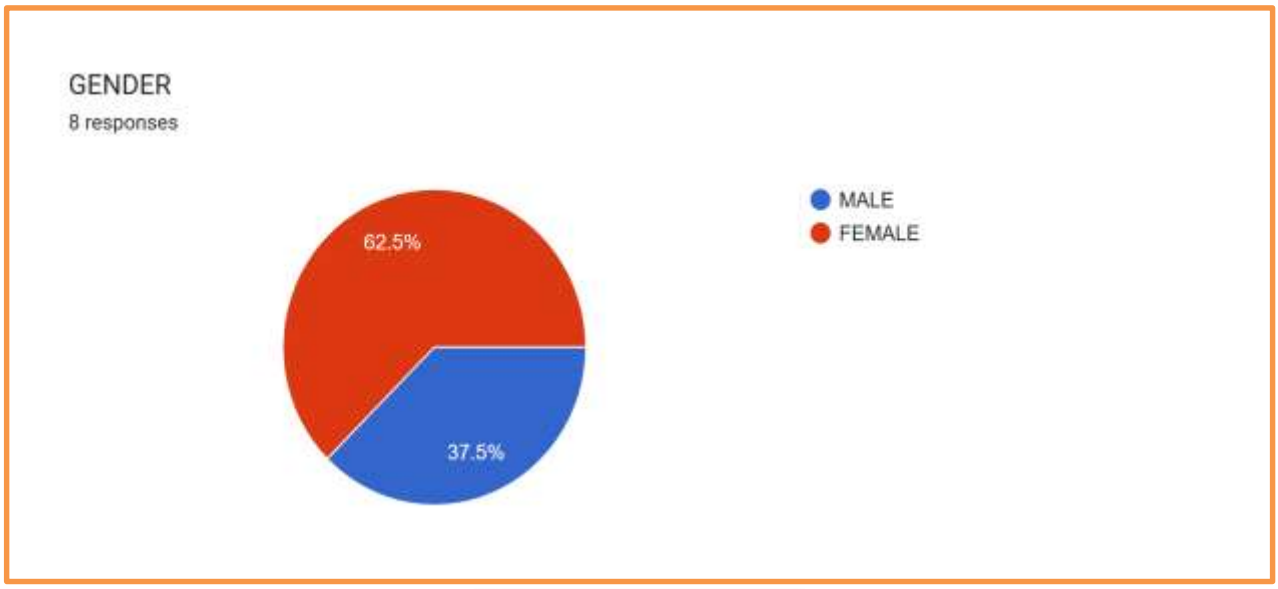
This data is based on primary as well as secondary data.

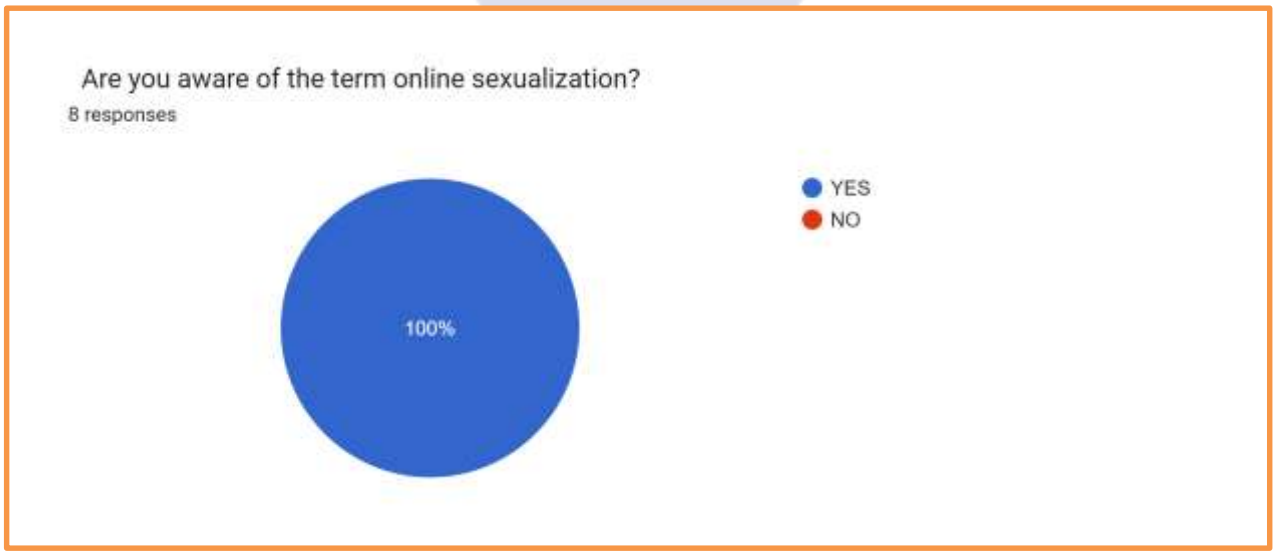
Primary data was collected from the respondents with the help of questionnaire using convenience sampling method. The survey questions can be tailored to gather information about awareness on online sexualization and its impact on individuals' life.

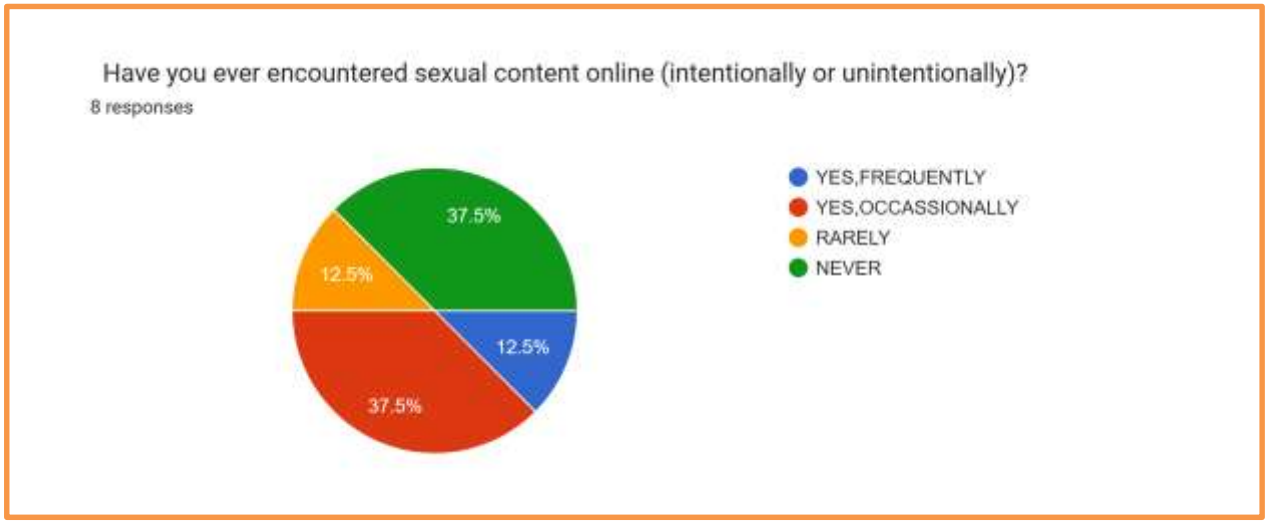


[13] A free, open-source network and software that provides anonymous communication by routing internet traffic through a global network of volunteer-operated servers, known as "nodes".

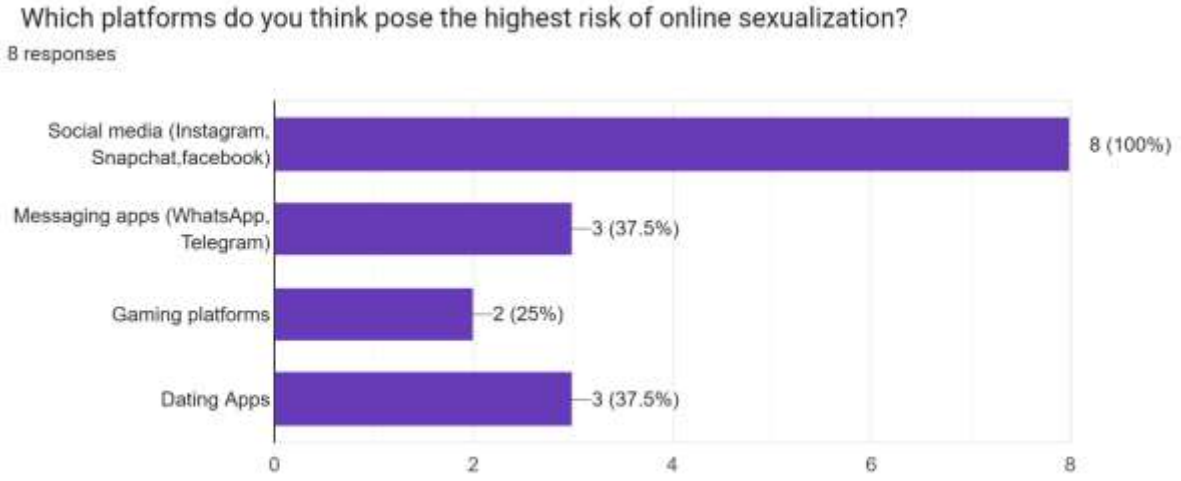
 ISSN: 2582-6433

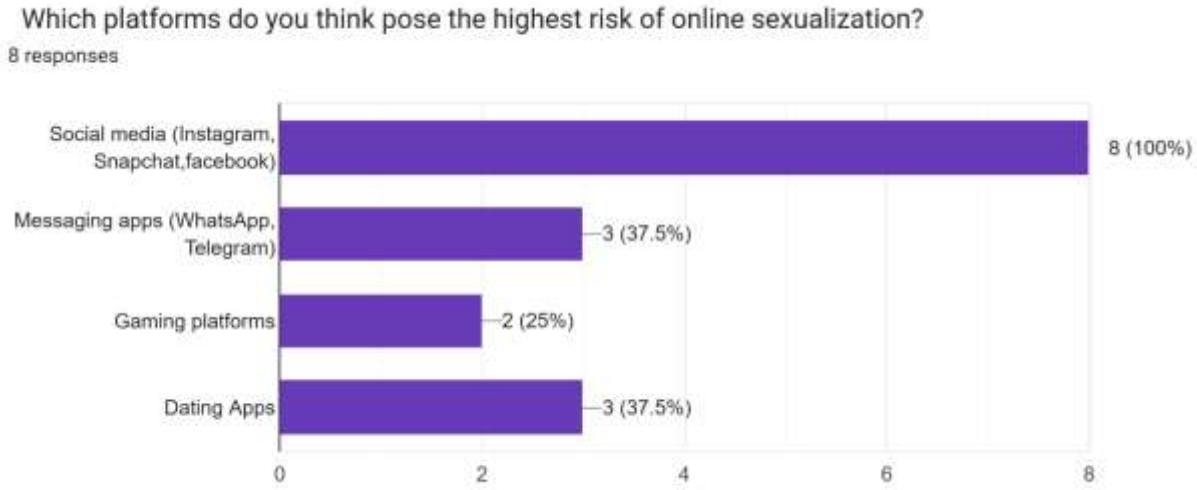


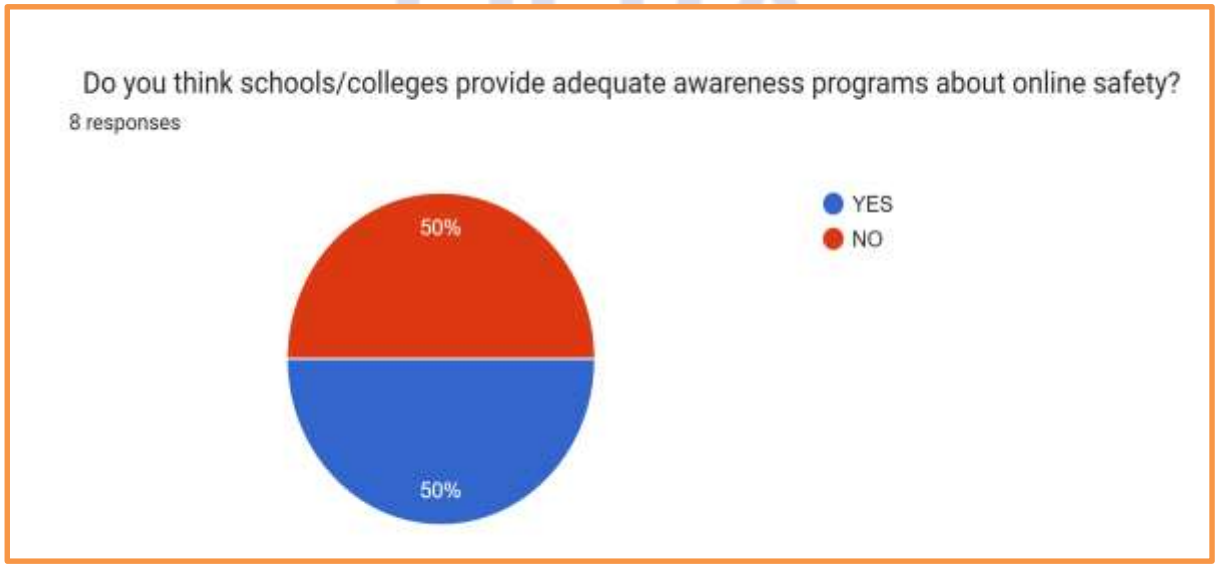




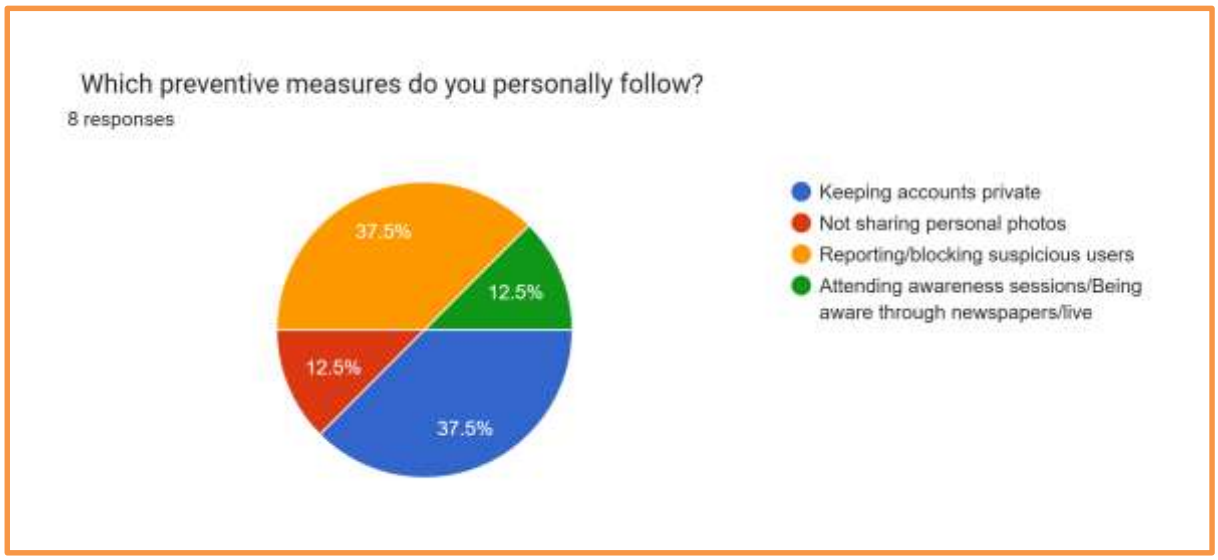
ISSN: 2582-6433







ISSN: 2582-6433



DATA ANALYSIS

On the above data collection, the majority people have encountered online exploitation. The maximum people in this survey are aged from 19-21. 50% of them are in favor of creating awareness about online sexualization. and almost 100% feel that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat pose the highest risk of online sexualization and exploitation.

PROTECTIVE AND PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES TO COMBAT THESE ISSUES

LEGAL REFORMS: The legal vacuum should be filled by creating harmony between international laws for cross-border cooperation. There should be stronger sentencing and penalization for these offenders.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND EDUCATION: Cyber security should be integrated in the school curriculum; children should be taught about the usage of internet and the probable risks associated with them. Parents and teachers should be provided with adequate training so they can identify the warning signals.

TECHNOLOGY-BASED SAFEGUARDS: Strengthening the AI monitoring systems for detecting grooming and exploiting activities, using content moderation and mandatory age verification systems to reduce such risks related to internet.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT: Youths can be counselled regarding the use and the misuse of the internet, and counselling service should be given the victims of cyber sexualization**.**

RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS: Public awareness of online violence can be raised

ISSN: 2582-6433

through campaigns, educational resources, and bystander intervention programmes that also promotes prevention strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a global treaty focused on exploitation to enhance international coordination beyond the current treaties.
2. Require the digital platforms to monitor, report, and protect the youth as part of their corporate social responsibility.
3. Prioritize capacity building for law enforcement agencies, particularly in developing countries.
4. Create an anonymous reporting system accessible to the youths.
5. Ensure youth participation in policy dialogues.

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