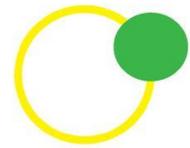
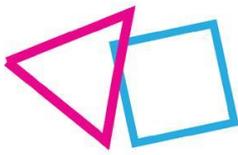


Deliverable Report

D1.3 Open report on interview results

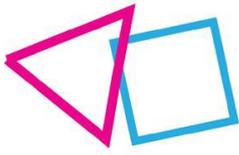


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Document information and contributors

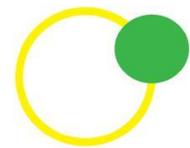
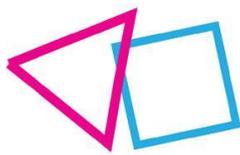
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Contributors	Organization	Reviewers	Organization		
Nereida Bueno Guerra	COMILLAS	Lynne Henderson	PSNI		
María Riberas	COMILLAS	Pieter Griffroy	Timelex		
María Reneses	COMILLAS	Rubén Fernández Bleda	PLV		
Aarón Gómez-Dorado	COMILLAS	Germán Zango	ZABALA		
Ben Heylen	UGent	Gregorio López	COMILLAS		
Erica Andreotti	UCLL				
Jeroen Op den Kelder	UCLL				
Lise Verbraeken	UCLL				
Ingrid Borarosova	BPI				



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

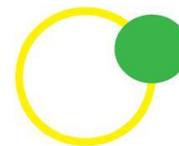
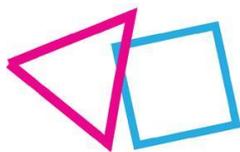
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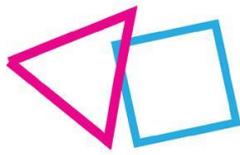


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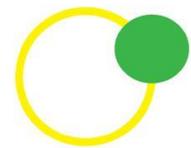
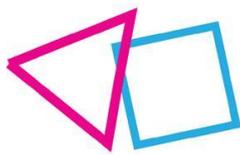
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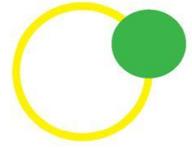
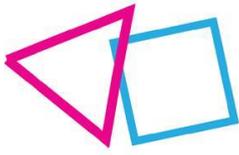
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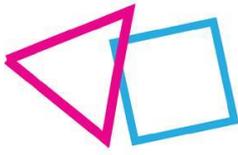
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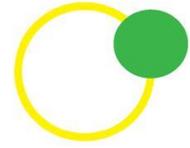
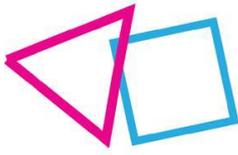
D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual and asexual
SES	Socioeconomic status
WHO	World Health Organization
CB	Cyberbullying
OG	Online grooming
CH	Cyberhate

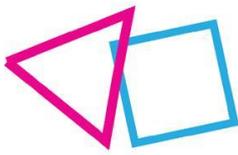


1. Executive summary

In this deliverable we present the results of the analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted with experts, offenders, and victims of the three cybercrimes studied in the RAYUELA project: online grooming, cyber bullying and human trafficking for sexual exploitation. In each crime, after a brief introduction, we describe the risk and protective factors and the main socio-demographic elements of the victims and offenders in the sample. Next, we analyse the modus operandi, with special attention to gender differences. Finally, we detail some of the consequences of the crime, and key elements for prevention. Due to the size of the sample, the analysis has been conducted as a whole and not individually for each area. Nevertheless, all the experts consulted agreed that there are no differences in the issues identified. There may be only slight differences in terms of legislation and the social awareness of society (e.g., through prevention programs). In the final section, we describe the results of the research conducted on misinformation, online deception, and cyber hate.

Firstly, regarding online grooming, we have conducted twenty-three interviews with experts in the field, fifteen with offenders and eight with victims. Although any child can become a victim and may simply be seeking new experiences or may be driven by curiosity, we found certain vulnerability characteristics in victims that can turn into risk factors, such as difficulties in interacting with others face-to-face, episodes of anorexia, bullying, sexual abuse, absent parents, and school problems. In addition, high use of the Internet -such as spending a lot of time on social networks- seems to be a risk factor, as well as having a public profile. In the interviews with the offenders, we found that most of them were males in their twenties or thirties, as indicated to us by the experts. We found that loneliness was a repeated reason to explain both spending a lot of time on the Internet and ending up in a grooming situation. It is also important to mention that at the time of the offense some offenders were at a critical time in their lives. Regarding the persuasion strategies, we found that most of the offenders lied on the Internet about their age, personality, and status to feel less vulnerable. However, interestingly, less than half used a fake profile. We can also observe the same persuasion strategies described in the literature review and by experts: deception, implication, corruption, coercion, and blackmail.

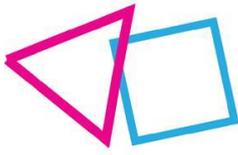
Overall, the results obtained are very similar to those we predicted within the literature (D1.1) and in the sentence analysis (D1.4). Firstly, we obtained similar results in relation to the age of both victims and offenders, with the young offender being the key to prevention. Secondly, the most used networks or platforms are related to the frequency of use, rather than to possible security breaches, and the appearance of the victim's profile does not seem to be so relevant. According to D1.4, about 20% of the crimes were committed by known offenders. Thirdly, the most common and dangerous strategy would be implication, which together with coercion usually includes the threat of breaking off the relationship. Finally, gender differences are discussed as they need to be considered for prevention.



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

Secondly, in relation to the analysis of the interviews on cyberbullying, we have conducted thirteen interviews with experts in cyberbullying, eight with offenders and twelve with victims. Though according to the experts there does not seem to be a specific offender or victim profile, we noticed certain vulnerability among the victims interviewed that can be considered as a risk factor. At the moment of the bullying, many (but not all) of the victims were feeling sad, helpless, scared, or humiliated. Plus, offenders tend to gain recognition and increase their own popularity, but in some cases, they may not be aware of the harm they cause. There are even examples of offenders who perpetrate cyberbullying as a reaction to a denigrating behaviour of the victim towards them. In general, cyberbullying is related to face-to-face bullying, and it is an extension of the latter. However, cyberbullying has the risk of becoming harsher, even when being an online phenomenon. This is because offenders do not perceive the direct consequences of their actions and there are no immediate (physical) effects. Furthermore, online bullying can happen 24/7, which makes it more difficult for victims to escape from their aggressor.

Thirdly, the problem of human trafficking of minors for the purpose of sexual orientation will be discussed. In this section, we will specifically focus on the strategies used by “loverboys” or “Romeo pimps”, as this is an especially hidden form of crime widespread within Europe but remains largely undetected in many member states. We focus on the narratives of Belgian specialists on the matter in this section, given the scarce availability of victims and offenders in most of the project’s regions which makes victim and offender interviews impossible for most partners. Nevertheless, 10 interviews with victims and offenders have been conducted, and some exemplary cases will be presented for the purpose of illustration at the end of this chapter. Unfortunately, we are not able to use all the materials from the interviews as these were collected in the countries (Romania, Czech Republic), where the definition slightly differs from the definition used for the purposes of our project. For example, in the legislation system of Romania, there is no need to gain economically through human traffic, but for RAYUELA this feature of the human trafficking is crucial. Despite this, we can claim that the main message was that the “loverboy” problem has existed all the time and is probably the most common form of human trafficking that haunts European youth. Even though no specific victim and offender profiles can be established, some core risk factors do emerge from the expert interviews. There was widespread agreement that for victims, attachment problems are at the very core of their vulnerability. Victims who are insecure, do not have a good social network or bond with their parents, who look for their identity, are all at a heightened risk of “loverboys”. In this context, special attention should be given to groups who are especially vulnerable in terms of attachment. For offenders, the main driver simply is monetary gain. As they are usually not well educated and do not have well-paying jobs, they go for the easy money by exploiting vulnerable victims. Further, and contrary to popular belief, they often are rather young, charming, and seemingly successful men, who court the victim in a romantic relationship. They do not often need to apply coercive or blackmailing techniques, as the victim is emotionally invested in the offender, and the fear of losing “the only person in the world who understands them” suffices to keep victims in their grasp. Finally, in terms of prevention, experts indicate that this form of crime is difficult to prevent, given its hidden nature, the emotional nature of the relationship, and the fact that the risk factors may be indicative of much more than only the presence of a “loverboy” problem. For this reason, they recommended

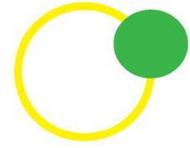
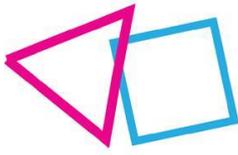


D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

a more general approach: general education of what is an acceptable sexual relationship, general education of what is acceptable in a romantic relationship and general resilience training.

Finally, for approaching misinformation, online deception and cyberhate, 11 In-depth interviews were conducted with experts in the fields together with 8 focus groups with teenagers. Fake news relate with young people concerns and interests have appeared to be the most commonly believe and shared. Although participants generally agree that traditional news is more reliable than social media, most of them tend to get informed through social media, even if they know it is not reliable. They rarely verify information and, when they do, they use some strategies that might be problematic, such as checking the comments. Regarding the online relationship with strangers, although the young people in our sample state not to add strangers to their social media, a “friend of a friend” criterion is usually followed, which may be too wide. Indeed, online grooming seems to be quite common according to the stories reported by the students.

Cyberbullying and cyberhate are interconnected, commonly including racism, LGBTIphobia, and insults around physical appearance. Both tend to be masked by humour, which often makes these situations more difficult to combat. Although different reactions to the different crimes have been found, prevention strategies should include encourage children to report more, whether they are the victim or someone they know. Regarding families, focusing more on communication and trust and less in supervision would be a good way to tackle cybercrime.



2. Analysis of interviews on online grooming

2.1 Introduction

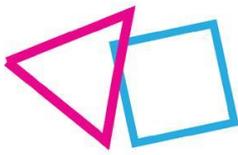
The following report covers the analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted with twenty-three online grooming experts, fifteen offenders, and eight victims, all of them coming from the four zones of the project (North, East, South and West Europe) as described below:

- Six offenders, one victim and five experts in the South.
- Eight experts in the West.
- Three offenders, three experts and two victims in the North.
- Six offenders, five victims and five experts in the East.

Within the experts, we counted with well-known academics with extensive experience in the field of online grooming from different disciplines, such as Psychology, Anthropology, and Criminology, as well as disseminators that have published books and participated in films about sexual abuse. From the point of view of the prevention and the intervention, we have interviewed different professional profiles, from managers of hotlines to psychiatrists, magistrates, and human rights lawyers. Finally, we have also counted on the expertise of police officers with an extensive credentials in investigating in computer crimes related to minors. Offenders were recruited by contacting prisons (through NGOs and/or treatment directors). Victims were contacted through police officers and mental health professionals working with minors.

Online grooming is defined by the consulted experts as the process to sexually abuse minors through the Internet. The final goal can be both to have a physical encounter and to get audio-visual material for recreation, economic profit, blackmailing, or even to use it in a new crime with another victim. Firstly, the process usually includes the building of trust of the child, establishing some sort of relationship. **This complicity with the child can be achieved through strategies that may involve, for instance, flattery or gifts.** Offenders, therefore, need to know which kind of gifts may attract children. **In a videogame depicting online grooming, some examples could be: getting access to some popular person; getting some extra score or materials at some online game; being able to play or chat privately with some popular person (who can be the offender himself).** Some experts have also pointed out that, even though we can think about the grooming process as long and subtle, research shows that sometimes it is unnecessary, as conversations and actions around sex appear sooner than we might think. This fact is consistent with findings in D1.4.

Secondly, **deception is usually pointed out as playing an important role**, as many offenders assume a different identity, role, or gender for gaining the victims' trust. For some experts, grooming is not necessarily circumscribed to adults but could include minors too. For them, the main element would be the manipulation aspect of the dual dynamic and the fact that it is aimed at sexual activity. So, grooming, seducing, building trust, power imbalance, control, and manipulating would be some keywords to illustrate the abusive process. **In a videogame depicting**



online grooming, some messages from the fake offender should contain flattering and emotional bonds.

Finally, **extortion and coercion are often used by the offenders to lure the victim into a meeting or get a more sexually explicit photo or video.** Through these strategies, the child can repeatedly be abused, often and for a long time.

Depending on the country, as explained in D1.4, the legal perspective varies: in some places to report grooming there must be a proposition to physically meet the victim, while in others asking for sexual material would be enough. According to some experts, the first option could hide the problem as, in their experience, groomers that lie about their identity prefer to get videos and pictures rather than trying to meet.

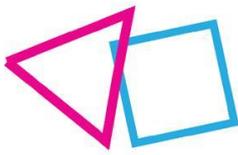
Concerning the evolution of online grooming, experts agree that there has been a notable increase of up to 70% in the number of cases of this cybercrime. Some experts justify this increase as a consequence of the development of new technologies, where offenders have a new environment where they can commit sexual abuse crimes from anonymity and with much greater scope. On the contrary, others explain that it is not so much an increase in the number of cases but stay in same tense- increased detection.

We also find experts who justify the growth of cases due to the fact that young people have access to the Internet and spend more time online. Proof of this is that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase of 300 percent as both young people and perpetrators have spent more time online. Specifically, there has been an increase in sextortion, with two trends; *on the one hand criminal networks that use false profiles through bots, and on the other hand sextortion between young people, where one receives images and extorts the other with the threat of making those images public.*

Regarding the methodology, to define the sample and to contrast the results with the findings in D1.4., a descriptive quantitative analysis was conducted. For the qualitative analysis, the narratives of offenders and former victims have been analysed to understand what happened and how. We have examined them taking into account the common information of the majority, but also considering the singular or peculiar information because in terms of prevention both the majority and the minority are relevant since there are real victims behind both processes and we, researchers, can learn how to fight both. To keep ourselves open to new perspectives, we have preferred to analyse first the narratives of victims and offenders and, in a second step, compare this information to experts' assumptions and with bibliography.

2.2 Victims

Even though we expected to reach more subjects, our sample eventually consisted of eight victims. Contacting former victims was extremely difficult due to data protection protocols, and, if we managed to contact them, it was equally hard to get the consent of the parents or the agreements of the therapists. According to our ethics roadmap (developed in D4.6), we decided not to force any interview, and respect those refusals, although it resulted in a lower study sample. **This reticence could also bias the sample, as the subjects who accepted might entail less**



severe cases compared to those found in the general population. Thus, only 2 of the 8 young people actually had a physical encounter with their offender, a much lower proportion than the percentage of offline encounters that we found when analysing the court sentences in D1.4.

Of those eight teenagers, 62.5% (n=5) were girls and 37.5% (n=3) were boys, with a mean age of 14.76 (SD= 2.55) years at the time of the events, and 18.25 (SD= 1.03) at the time of the interview. Regarding the sociodemographic data of the sample, 75% (n=6) of the subjects were single at the time of the events, 12.5% (n=1) had a partner, and 12.5% (n=1) had sporadic partners. All the participants in the sample defined themselves as heterosexual. In relation to educational level, 75% (n=6) had completed high school, 12.5% (n=1) had completed primary education and 12.5% (n=1) had followed vocational training. The age average was consistent with findings in previous research and D1.4., which shows how, unlike offline sexual abuse, **online grooming is most prevalent in adolescence** (Whittle et al., 2013). The ratio between boys and girls was also similar (Wolak et al.; 2010).

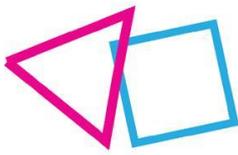
2.2.1 Risk and protective factors of the victims

Even though understanding the structure of home relationships would have required more in-depth interviews with the victims, two subjects pointed out that they were dealing with economic problems at home, and one of these two described herself as coming from a “dysfunctional family”. While we did not specifically ask the offenders about the **victims’ background**, some of them reported that victims had suffered **bullying, sexual abuse, and anorexia episodes, as well as absent parents or school problems**. When asking the experts about risk factors, they generally agree that many of the victims -although not all of them- have **major problems at home such as: paternal abandonment, maternal or paternal alcoholism, family disabilities, anorexia, bulimia, etc.** According to literature, **risk factors include having a previous history of abuse, poor mental health, low self-esteem, and poor family communication** (Jonsson et al., 2019). For most experts, **economic problems** might be a risk factor, but one of the most important factors highlighted in previous research is parents’ **low educational level** (Villacampa & Gómez, 2016).

Attending our sample, both the difficulty for making friends face-to-face and being easier to make them through the Internet have emerged as a predominant aspect of the sample. Almost 63% (n=5) of the subjects **did not find it easy to interact with others face-to-face, preferring online interactions**. Those who could easily make friends face-to-face think that it is easier to know who is having your sympathy in person, as you can see their reactions and gestures. Online relationships hardly would become as deep as one made face-to-face, since: *on the Internet, even though you've been in touch for a long time, there's no sense of security and it's as if you just start talking to everyone*¹.

On the other hand, those who **preferred online relationships** explained this preference regarding their difficulties in the non-virtual interactions, like feeling: *bashfulness and concern while online*

¹ Sentences in italics are quotes from interviewees. When they belong to two different persons they are separated by (;).



you don't have to be afraid of ridicule; If you do not see the other person straight away it is easier to make conversation. One of them related all these emotions with her background:

For a child from a neglected family, it was easier online. The access was easier... In the small community where I was born, everybody knew each other, but on the Internet, you are anonymous, and your mum does not know what you are doing. I come from a dysfunctional family, my mother was very emotionally abusive towards us, and because my parents didn't love me, I looked everywhere for it. I spent a lot of time on the web.

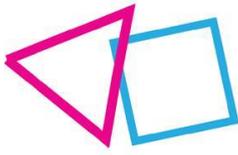
Six of the eight victims stated **they would have liked to have more friends when the grooming situation occurred.** We did **not find a preference for older people or solitary activities**, although one child remembered having no hobbies or interests when the online grooming took place.

Apart from looking to connect with people or avoid isolation, some former victims explained that **the search for attention also played a role in the situation.** For instance, one of the children with no lack of friends explained: *I didn't really want more friends, I was happy with the ones I had. But I felt like I got a lot more attention online, and I really liked it.* For another one: *When you start to socialize there, you get the attention that a child needs. Compliments, recognition, etc.*

These two types of victims, both lonely subjects (the most prevalent ones) and subjects with friends but looking for some more attention, indicate that **not just vulnerable children may end up in online grooming situations.** The effect of the Internet in social interactions is not restricted to those with low social skills. When being asked about the differences between virtual and nonvirtual identity, one of the children with no social relationship problems and with plenty of friends, pointed out that despite being the same as in real life, on the Internet, he could be *a little different, bolder.* This characteristic of virtual interactions could be considered a general risk factor. As one of the interviewed experts explained, on the Internet, anonymity together with distancing generate detachment. The **online disinhibition effect** (Suler, 2004) also plays a role in young people's interactions as they specifically tend to consider that their online identity is different from the one face-to-face (Boyd; 2014).

While some subjects indicated that their mood was fine **when the first contact with the offender** took place (*I was having a good life; I did not have any problem*), most of them recognized they had been dealing with some issues, such as having recently moved to a new city and having no friends around, not being popular at school, or being "shut off" (*I did not have any relationship. No friends. I was alone*). Another one described that she did not tell anyone as she got into a fight with her best friend and had less communication with her. As can be seen, **all these situations imply different degrees of isolation and lack of social support.**

As found in our sample, the experts pointed out that a **highly risky factor for becoming much more involved in technology is having previous difficulties socialising.** Technology may be seen as a refuge, as an alternative for those who do not have such a rich scenario in their face-to-face world. Children who are isolated from their group -lacking a safety net of support or a close circle with whom to share concerns- are more vulnerable to groomers. In addition, it is often easier to convince children who live in poverty to accept the proposal for monetary compensation. **The real**



risk factor for these experts is the social environment, in combination with the time spent online, which in the case of youngsters is immense and enjoyed without supervision.

Some experts also explain that although being isolated could be a trigger, **being bored or looking for excitement may be another risk factor**. It coincides with the classification proposed by Webster, et al. (2012) about resilient, vulnerable, and risky victims, and with the diversity of victims that were found in the analysis of the court sentences in D4.1. The feeling of missing something (in terms of friendships, identity, or rewarding situations) might be a common element involving the previous ones. In the research conducted by Quayle et, al. (2011), the interviewed online grooming victims highlighted several reasons behind their behaviour: **the feeling of needing something more in life, the search for someone to listen to them, and receiving some help for their problems**.

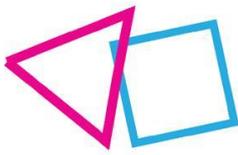
Due to ethical concern, and not blaming the former victims, we did not approach in depth the role of the exploration of sexuality in the studied process. Nevertheless, it was extensively covered in the analysis of sentences (D1.4) and will also be discussed in the offenders' section.

Regarding the most used social network by the sample, Instagram ranked the first position (71,4%), followed by Facebook (one child) and banned sites like OMEGLE (another child), a site that is known for lacking control and ways to report inappropriate behaviour. The only reasons to use them were that they were **the most used by people**, and that they are **easy to use**. They did **not seem to put much attention to the creation of their nicknames**. Eventually, they used their own name, a familiar nickname, a short name, or a character from a movie. The **time spent on social networks was high**, with an average of 6 hours per day (with a minimum of 4 hours), longer than the general population. For instance, two pieces of research conducted in Spain and the UK with adolescents found that 68.2% in the former and 79.2% in the latter spent less than five hours per day (Scott, Biello & Woods, 2019; Villanueva-Blasco & Serrano-Bernal, 2019). Previous research has suggested that the more time the child spends online, the more likely they are to become victims of online grooming (Jones, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2013), which the results from the interviews seem to support.

Another risk factor that could be considered is the information shared online and the kind of profile that the minor has. At the time of the first contact, six of the eight children in our sample had a **public profile**, while two had private one. **This tendency changed after the crime occurred**. The public ones contained pictures of the minor, and in at least one case, the age and the place where she lived. Accordingly, some experts suggest that grooming victims definitely are not the stereotypical vulnerable girls, but **victims who post much information online in public profiles**.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Even though any child can become a victim and might be just looking for new experiences or guided by curiosity, our sample shows that a potential risk factor is the ease of making friends virtually rather than face-to-face and the desire to have more friends. Some feeling of isolation was pretty frequent in most of the interviewed children, such as the lack of social support, and the need for attention, which can encourage them to search for people who



listen to them and help them. **Some kind of loneliness could be added to a scene in the video game.**

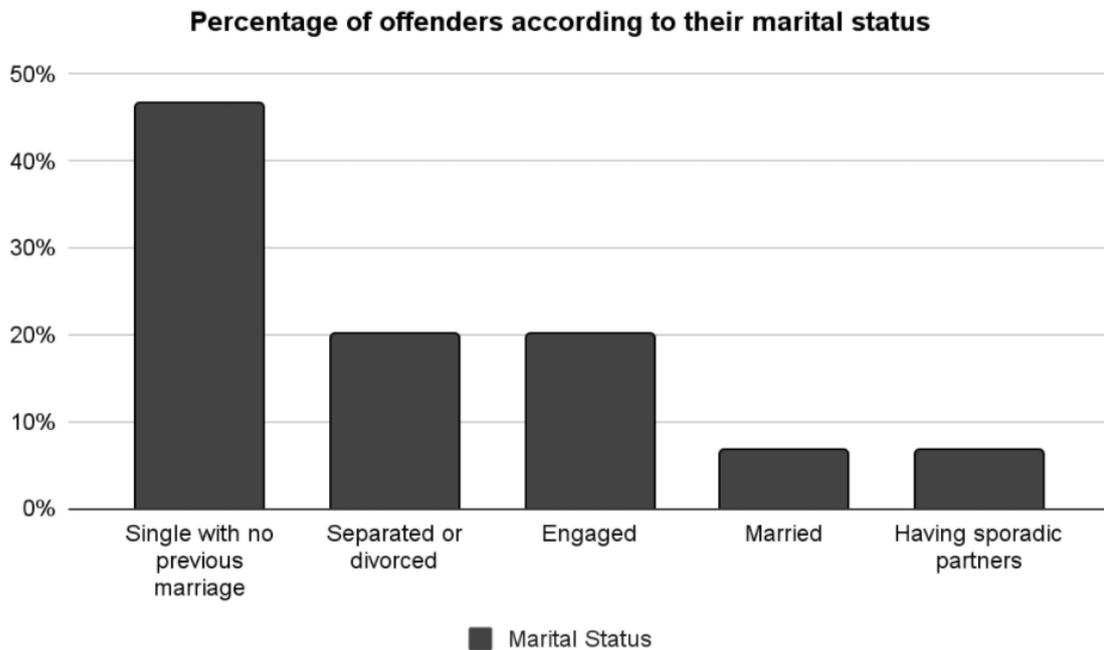
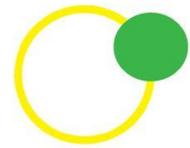
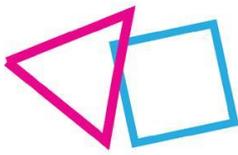
- Most of the children had their profile public when the contact took place. Yet, this changed after the crime occurred.
- The time spent on social networks was high, with an average of 6 hours per day, higher than in the general population.
- Risk factors have been identified relating to the victims: difficulties interacting with others face-to-face, anorexia episodes, bullying, sexual abuse, absent parents and school problems.

2.3 Offenders

The sample consisted of 15 offenders, 93.9% (n=14) were men, and there was only one woman. There were 133 victims, in which 121 were girls and 12 were boys. Only three offenders attacked boys, one being the only one woman. The mean age was 32.67 (SD= 10.03) years at the time of the events and 36.87 (SD= 10.52) at the time of the interview. Thirty-three percent (n=5) were 25 years old or younger. These findings are consistent with those reported by the interviewed experts, for whom it is **particularly important to pay attention to the youngest offenders and target prevention at them as well. The youngest ones might be more dangerous** as they have access to minors in a less conspicuous way, so it might be harder for the victim to identify the abuse from the beginning.

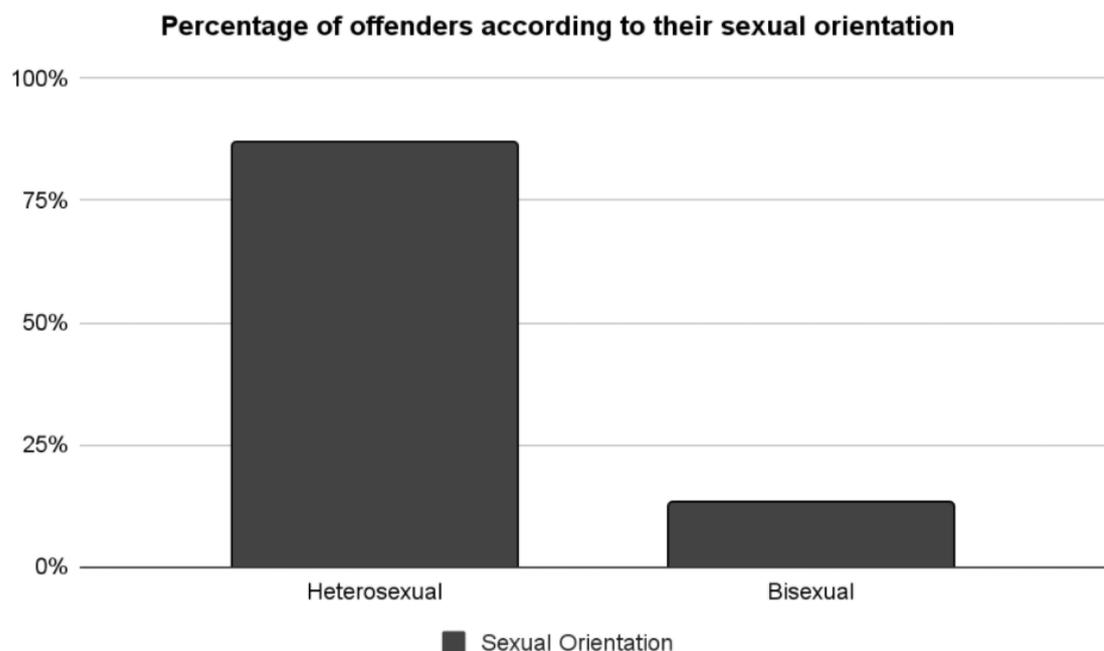
Regarding the sociodemographic data of the sample, 46.7% (n=7) of the subjects were single with no previous marriages at the time of the events, 20% (n=3) were separated or divorced, and 20% (n=3) were engaged, being 6.7% (n=1) married and a 6.7 % (n=1) having sporadic partners, as seen in “**Figure 1**”.

Figure 1: Percentage of offenders according to their marital status.



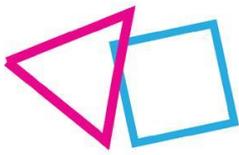
Most of the participants in the sample defined themselves as heterosexual (86.7%, n=13), and 13.3% (n=2) defined themselves as bisexual, as seen in “Figure 2”.

Figure 2: Percentage of offenders according to their sexual orientation.

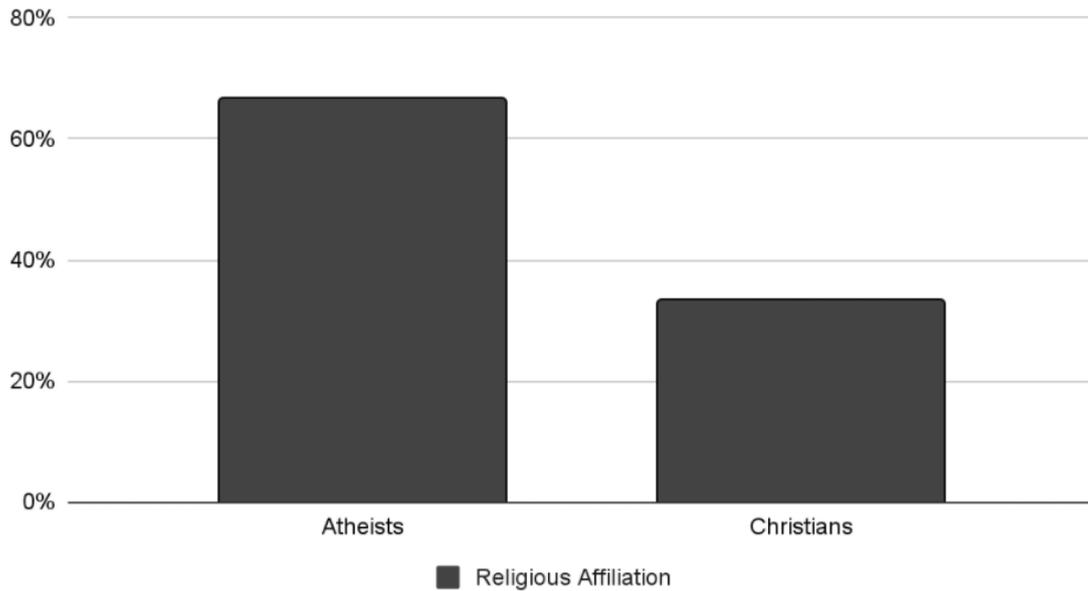


According to religious affiliation, most were Atheist (66.7%, n=6), and 33.3% (n=3) were Christian, as seen in “Figure 3”.

Figure 3: Percentage of offenders according to their religious affiliation.



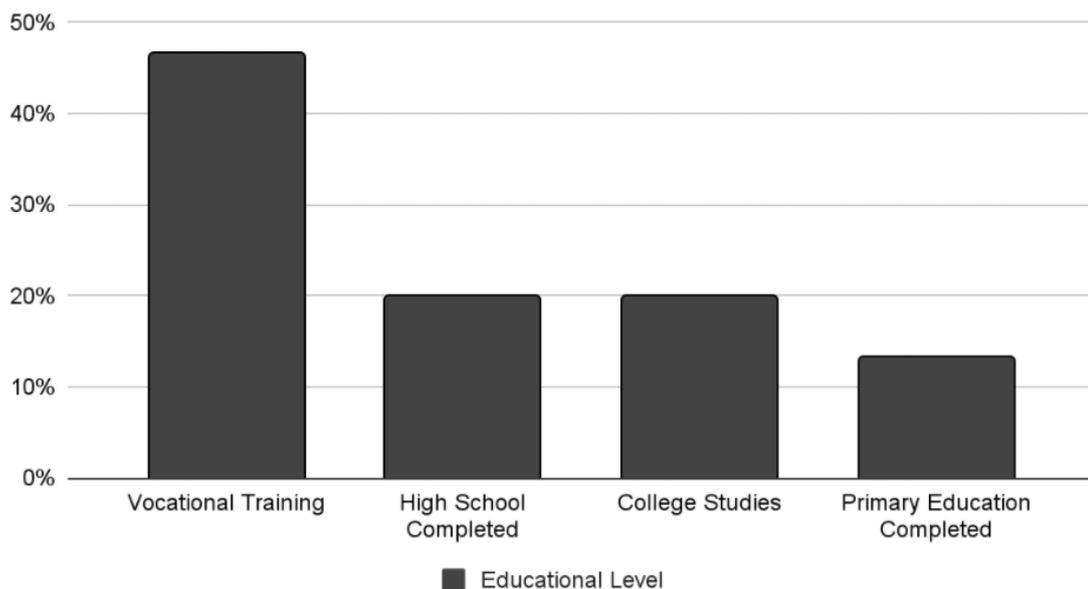
Percentage of offenders according to their religious affiliation



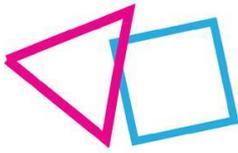
In relation to their educational level, 46.7% (n=7) had followed vocational training, 20% (n=3) had completed high school, 20% (n=3) went to college and 13.3% (n=2) had completed primary education, as seen in “**Figure 4**”. This implies that, on average, our sample did not have a low level of education, compared to the general population.

Figure 4: Percentage of offenders according to their educational level.

Percentage of offenders according to their educational level

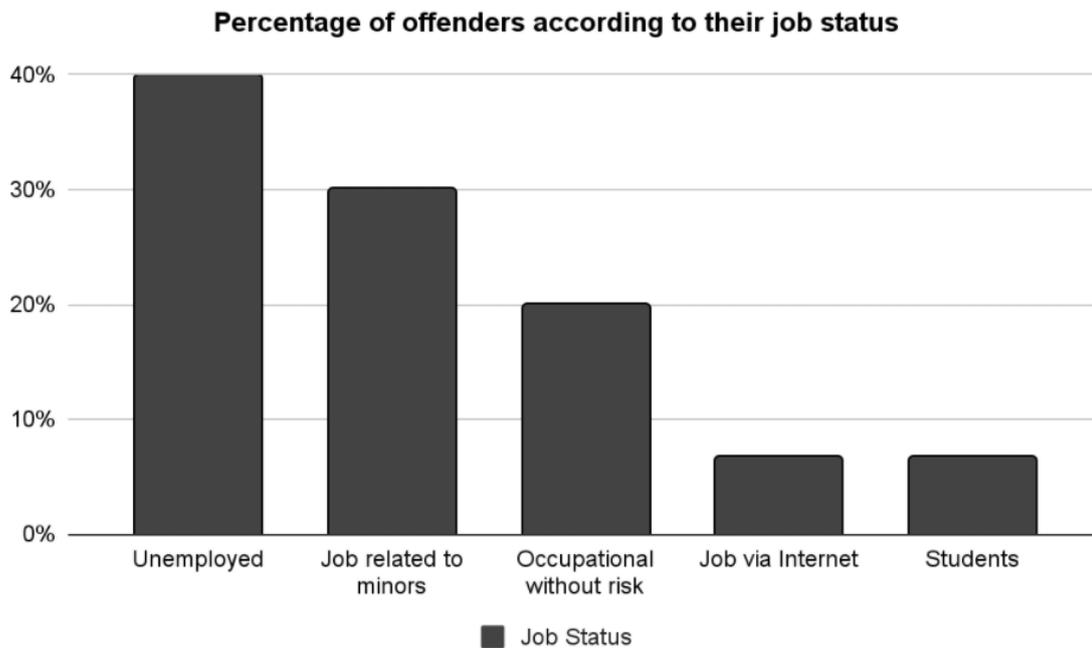


As found in previous research, at the time of the crime, 40% (n=6) of those convicted were unemployed, which is a higher percentage than what would be found in the average population.



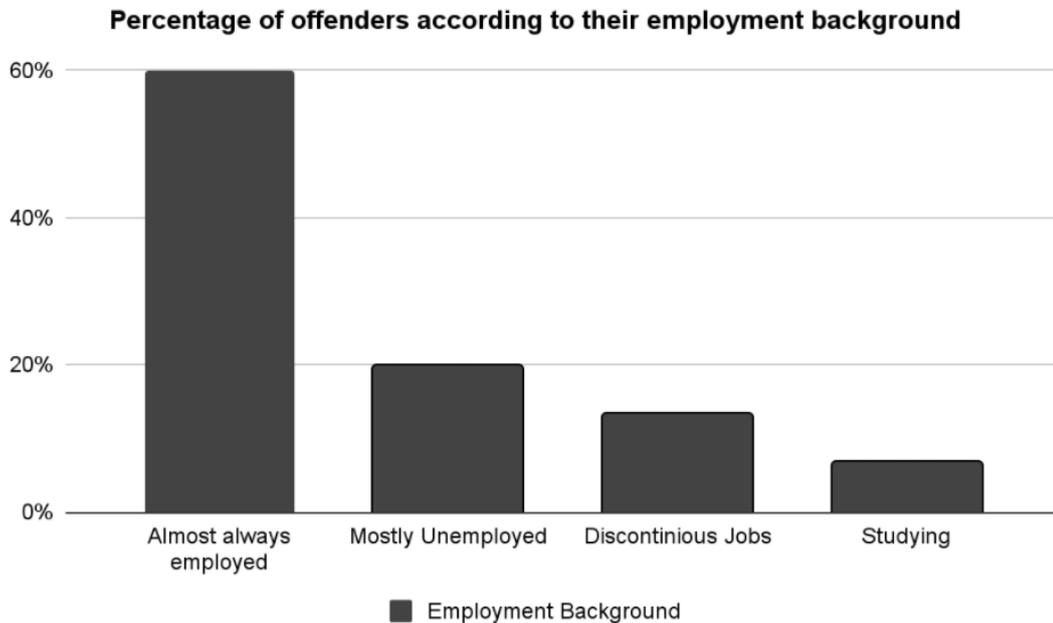
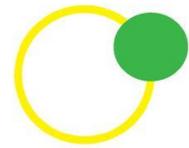
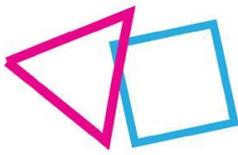
Almost 30% (n=4) had a job related to minors, 20% (n=3) were working in occupations without risk, 6.7% (n=1) had a job related to the use of the Internet, and 6.7%(n=1) were students, as seen in “Figure 5”.

Figure 5: Percentage of offenders according to their job status.



The most common employment status throughout their employment background was almost always employed (60%, n=9), followed by 20% (n=3) of mostly unemployed, 13.3% (n=2) of discontinuous jobs, and 6.7% (n=1) of studying, as seen in “Figure 6”.

Figure 6: Percentage of offenders according to their employment background.



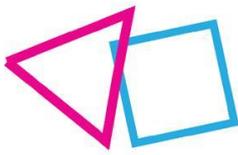
It is relevant to highlight that only in some cases we could compare the content of the interview with the court sentence to confirm whether it was mostly true or not. In addition, the amount of information provided by the interviewees was different from one to another as not all of them showed the same collaboration and sincerity. Nevertheless, from the qualitative point of view, the narrative that the interviewees construct to explain their motivations, strategies, and feelings is more important than representativity. Moreover, it may also be of interest knowing which aspects offenders lie about the most, as will be described.

Regarding the background, some of the offenders (36,4%, n=4) pointed out **not having felt enough support and love from their parents during their childhood**. This is how one offender described it:

I grew up in a very Catholic environment, let's say, very old-fashioned and very upright, more in the style of a dictatorship. At home, it was what my father said by his own bollocks, he was still guided by the 1940s, and when I was 17 or 18 years old, I saw more, let's say, freedom at my friends' houses, because of the way their parents thought, and I had a childhood that wasn't childhood or anything like that. And look, what I'm saying is harsh but it's the truth. When they died, I said, thank goodness: there was a lot of violence. From my father, there was not so much, but from my mother. She even wished me dead.

This kind of background could be relevant in terms of social and emotional development, but also when thinking about the social support at the time of the crime (and for future treatment). Furthermore, although it was not specifically asked for, **some of the interviewees expressed to have suffered from depression**.

Loneliness is the most repeated reason to explain both spending much time on the Internet and ending up in a grooming situation. When being asked about their leisure time, 60% of the sample (n=9) preferred solitary hobbies, with just one person (6,7%) preferring group activities. Fifty-four



percent (n=8) referred to having little friends (two, one, or none), and 60% (n=9) would like to have more friends. Although this could be also influenced by the prison situation, the loneliness narrative is something that is more deeply noted:

I can say that I have never had 100 percent friends. My only friend has been my partner. Nothing else; I've always felt alone. Even though I had friends and had a nice time with them, I also spent too much time alone and felt alone.

When being asked about Internet use, many of the interviewees related it with the following: *I did not have so many friends, so I started using Messenger due to my loneliness... It was a way of feeling accompanied.* As we will see below, while some subjects relate the virtual world to the possibility of deception, others explain it as a **place to break shyness**.

Only I'm more open, bolder, and talk more. But personally, I'm shyer; On the Internet, I feel that I am ... [he thinks for a while, looking for the word] stronger, I feel more comfortable not knowing who I am, I am less ashamed. There is also this idea of being able to be Who you want to be.

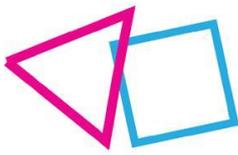
It is significant that more than half of the interviewees referred to the possibility of lying when talking about virtual/non-virtual differences. Some of them explained it as something that most people do (i.e., *the virtual world is 80 percent half-truths and lies*), some referred specifically to minors doing so, and some explicitly described how they use the Internet with this goal: *In the online world, it is all about camouflage.*

When being directly asked about this, 80% (n=12) of the offenders **admitted having lied on the Internet** and, 53.84% (n=7) of these cases stated that it was about their age, followed by their physique, gender, nationality, identity, or socioeconomic status. When being asked about the reasons for lying, one constant is that of *pretending to be what they wanted to be but could not be, like a double personality*. In the offenders' analysis of the online behaviour -which also partially reveals their own conduct- **the lack of vulnerability and disinhibition appear as the two key aspects of the virtual world**. As an interviewee summarized: *people feel less vulnerable, a sense of impunity, also of disinhibition. You feel that no one will chase you and that you can be yourself*. This effect has been studied previously as allowing groomers to separate the real self from the virtual one (Webster et al., 2012).

Other times, this pretending is much more **oriented to manipulation**, as can be seen in the following fragment:

The same thing happens on the Internet, you want to show the best, you want to show what the other person wants, what they are looking for. The other person wants me to be rich, tall, handsome, affectionate...well, I'm going to do all that, for you I'm like that. Intelligent, educated, such and such, I have studied this, and in such and such a place and I have worked in this. We all want to be something and when you want something, you offer a range, that's why people lie.

Accordingly, when the question regards the reasons why people use the Internet, some of them referred to the **possibility of "doing evil", manipulating or earning money**. Nevertheless, the



most frequent answer was, again, because of **loneliness**. Seventy-three percent (n=11) think this is one of the main reasons to use the Internet, and at least 40% (n=6) recognize it as their own main motive.

When we asked the interviewed experts about the offender profile, they agreed by pointing out that there are all kinds and conditions, being **difficult to find a specific profile**. Some pointed out that having time might be one of the most relevant characteristics, with it being easier for an affluent person to have the time and tools to do this.

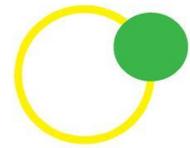
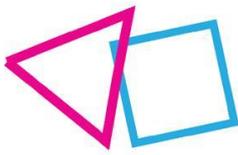
Regarding their mood at the time of the crime, 40% of the offenders were **unemployed at the moment when the event took place, which might be related to having more free time, or to a low mood or a feeling of powerlessness**. Nevertheless, **many offenders did not point out a clear-cut mood or situation** to start the grooming process rather than being excited. One of them explicitly said:

*I didn't feel alone. I felt frustrated with my partner's life. I deliberately sought to satisfy my sexual desire. Another one did it only for money and explained that he used to look forward to money. [He] was eager. However, two of them said they felt lonely, without specifying the reasons, one described the feeling of *feeling that life was shit* and two of them admitted to having started after the break-up with their partners. In one case, she denounced him for gender violence, and *he was devastated*. He had clinical depression and *didn't think, he just acted*. The other one started talking to a girl after his divorce, when he became homeless:*

She was interested in my breakup. That completely satisfied me. It was a cure for my loneliness... I had to get some girl even when I was on the street so that it would be a success for me. She was very unattractive, but I achieved mine.

These results, although not as significant, are slightly consistent with those found in the European Online Grooming Project (Webster et al., 2012), where most former abusers described some type of situation (losing the home, the partner, the job, etc) that made them vulnerable before committing the aggression. The found unemployment rate would also agree with this hypothesis and with findings in previous research (Kloess et al., 2014). Some experts also explained how **many offenders start when they find themselves in a difficult situation in life**. People with a stable job, relationship, etc, would act out this way less often.

Regarding the admission of the crime, while 21.5% found what was stated in their sentences unjust in some way, **78.6% (n=11) agreed**. However, **most of the offenders admitted that they had maintained online contact with the victims, admitted to having had a relationship, and exchanged audiovisual material with sexual content**. In addition, saying that they agree with the sentences **does not mean accepting all that happened**. For instance, from the three court sentences that could be compared with the interviews, one was pretty different. In this case, the offender lied about the girl's age (15 instead of 13) and how he described the interaction. He explained to us how he started to talk to the girl, and they liked each other. She was really sexual, liked to showed him how she showered, and even took a friend to her house to have sex with him in front of the webcam for the offender to see. He insisted on having discovered that she was 15



(which she was not) after a long time. The sentence explained the same situations from a completely different angle:

The accused told X that he had seen a video on the Internet in which she appeared showing her breasts, offering to help her to remove it from the network. To get that, she had to touch her breasts and masturbate in front of him... He told her that she should take the computer to the bathroom and keep it on while she took a shower, adding, in response to her initial refusal, that otherwise, she would not be able to remove the video from the Internet and that all her classmates would see it. When she had already dried off and put on her pyjamas, the accused asked the minor to call a friend so that they could perform the sexual act in front of the webcam? which she later ended up doing after insistent blackmail.

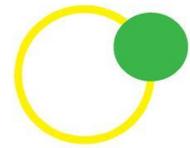
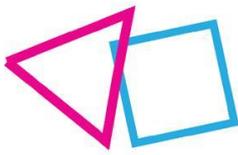
In addition to omitting that he threatened and blackmailed the girl to get all the material, he insisted on blaming her (and other young women) for what happened. In his words:

He was struck by how bold she was and how unwise she became... Yes, she was very morbid, at the age she was, she was very morbid. Because it was a very easy time, let's say, the whoremongering that was going on, the spilling over that was going on... She was the typical high-school hottie, because fuck, let's see, you can have a relationship with a boy, but with a camera on! Like they did to me... To tell you the truth, I can assure you that none of the girls I have met or dealt with on Messenger were shy. He also presented himself as a kind of a victim of her for not revealing her real age.

Regarding the other two court sentences analysed, one was exactly as described by the offender. The second one had smaller differences, mainly expanding on the 11-year-old girl's initiative, and denying having a romantic (not only sexual) relationship with her, which was taken for granted in the judgment.

Between these two offenders, we can clearly see the difference in the aspects they lie on and how they feel or do not show remorse. The motivations of the first one would enter sexually driven coercive power relationship, while the other would fit the paedophile profile. These two types, together with the less common (just one case) offender with only economic motivation, have been found in our sample. Although, as happens with these kinds of typologies, on the one hand, you always have hybrid profiles, and on the other hand, with the information we have, we cannot completely attribute our whole sample to one or another category. Nevertheless, in some cases whose interviews were long and deep enough, we found valuable information about some characteristics of these **two different profiles: paedophile abusers and diverse abusers.**

Almost sixty-seven percent (n=8) of our sample **admitted preferring minors to adults**, 50% (n=6) also admitted to **consuming child pornography** and recognized they **focused on a specific age or typology**. Many of the offenders refer to themselves as clinically identified as "deviants", and were somehow worried about being sick, about the possibility of a cure, and about *how to deal with it so that it never happens again*. In those cases where they explained the process, they explicitly described how the consumption of child pornography came first, and later they started to meet girls.



One of the interviewees started finding it inadvertently online and was going from one page to another one, and at some point, he was addicted to looking for it and finding it: *It started gradually until I was looking for a specific age (10 years old)*. When trying to understand the reasons, he thinks it could have been loneliness, as he was always feeling alone after the rejection of a girl with whom he fell in love when he was 21. Later, he met a girl who visited the candy shop he managed and started the grooming process with her through the Internet.

When being asked for the reasons for preferring minors, many of these offenders pointed out that it is **easier to have a relationship with them as they are not judged, and that, as they know more, they can teach the children**. They refer to **feeling free, experiencing an adventurous life**. One of them, after stopping for a while, thinking, explained:

adults can reproach you for your attitude, they have experience, they know more, and they can point out things they don't like about you. With an adult the relationship is one of equals, with a minor you are on top, and the other is on the bottom. You feel more comfortable, you can say and do what you like, you are free. Most of the offenders in this category described what they had as a romantic relationship, which most of the other offenders did not.

In the diverse category, **we find some offenders who do not feel specifically attracted to minors** and describe what they did in a much colder way. One of them even described himself as a Psychopath and presented several of their characteristics. He explained the pleasure he felt in these terms:

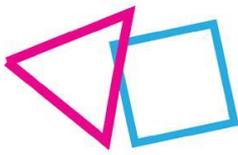
So why was this so pleasurable for me? Because I didn't have to give pleasure to anyone, it was for me, I used them, they were my sexual object, weren't they? Since the way I organised the subject, let's say, I had them as if we could say they were enslaved. When I said and wanted, they came and did what I said and wanted. Just like that. So, for me it was very pleasurable and then I got addicted to it, right?

He also talked about the fantasy of being with an Asiatic woman, as he was told that the sex with them is *kind of humiliation, kind of submission, they are ultra-submissive. In other words, a kind of what I do with them, but to do it to me, right?* When he talks about his condition, he explains how he flips the switch and totally ignores the others (*I don't give a shit if I see you being tortured, I don't give a shit*). Another offender of this category also explains a similar behaviour:

I, for instance, often added a photo that wasn't mine and said I didn't have a camera, but I did. So of course, in those moments of people's innocence and my wickedness, that's what caused confusion. It caused a lot of confusion.

Both elaborated (and described) **sophisticated manipulation strategies at the same time that showed impulsive behaviour that clearly led them to be caught**.

These two last offenders, in addition to falling into the category of **diverse sexual desire**, would fall into the category of "**abuser**" described by one of our experts, which would be distinguished from the "lover", which would also coincide with the example given in the paedophile category. For this expert, firstly, there is "**the crush/lover**", which can be considered the least problematic.



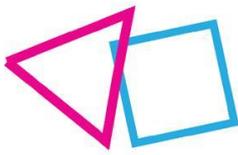
He can cheat with age but does not go beyond that. Once the other party wants to end the relationship, he doesn't go any further and goes for another victim. Secondly, a more dangerous profile would be the “**abuser**”, who when something goes off plan includes violence and threats. Finally, the most dangerous would be the **multi-victim profile**, which usually includes deception and blackmail of the type: *I'm going to send it to your family*.

Regarding other risk factors, some experts have described **narcissistic traits** as being common in these kinds of offenders, as it has also been found in the literature (Briggs et al., 2011). Although it has not been specifically studied through our sample, for instance, these two last offenders presented those traits during the interview. Even though some of the offenders highlighted advanced knowledge in computers, it was not the majority, being that 33,3% (n=5) in jobs with plenty of Internet access. The identical rate (33,3%, n=5) worked with minors, of which three committed abuses related to their professional environment.

Finally, several offenders in our sample noted not to be aware of the possible consequences of their acts, more in legal terms than in moral ones. As one of the interviewed experts explains, there is the idea that the Internet is a sort of space of normlessness, where norms are different, and you can do whatever you want. Suler's (2004) has described how the online disinhibition effect implies that online criminals tend to separate the online world from the offline world to the extent of ignoring that norms apply to both (dissociation) and that anonymity makes them do things they otherwise would not do (invisibility). One of the offenders expressed himself this way: *Being on the Internet, you think you won't get caught. You are at home, in your space, you feel safe*. Burke, et al. (2002) have also studied how the online world can be seen for sexual offenders as fiction and therefore absent of moral consequences.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- It is especially important to pay attention to younger offenders and target prevention to them as well since we must break the myth that offenders are always older men. Many offenders are young and may be more difficult to detect, as they have access to minors in a less conspicuous way, so it might be harder for the victim to identify the abuse from the beginning.
- The results of the interviews showed that some offenders had emotional deficiencies from childhood and suffered from depression in their adulthood.
- Loneliness is the most repeated reason to explain both spending plenty of time on the Internet and ending up in a grooming situation. They also perceived the Internet as an environment where they can show an image of themselves that is different from the real one. They are also less concerned about the legal consequences of their acts when they are online. Most of the offenders had lied on the Internet about their age, personality, and status.
- Some experts explained how many offenders start when they find themselves in a difficult situation in life. People with a stable job, relationship, etc, would act out this way less often. In the interviews with offenders, we found that at the moment when the



event took place, some offenders were unemployed, which might be related to having more free time, or to a low mood or a feeling of powerlessness.

- According to experts -also represented in the sample- there are three profiles; “the crush/lover” who seeks to maintain a relationship with the child, “the abuser” who uses violence and threats to get what he wants, and the most dangerous, “the multi-victim” profile which usually includes deception and blackmail.

2.4 Modus Operandi

2.4.1 Initial contact

In the interviews with the eight victims of online grooming, we found some information about the modus operandi of their offenders. In most cases (71.4%, n=5) the offenders sent a friend request on the social network to initiate contact with the minor. Only in one case, the victim (male), who was interested in learning more about a videogame, was the one who contacted the offender, who was a Youtuber. The other two former victims previously knew their offenders.

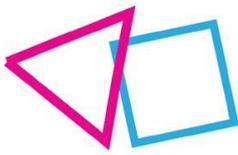
From the offender's sample, 66,7% (n=10) sent invitations/contacted the minors, 20% (n=3) previously knew the offender, and in two cases (13,3 %), it was the (male) victim who contacted the offender.

A) Close or known victims

When thinking about online grooming prevention, as previously highlighted, it is necessary to understand that it is a process that does not only occur between strangers. Our results in both samples show, as found in D1.4., that **around 20% of the analysed (and therefore prosecuted) cases were from offenders that knew their victims before the grooming process.**

In one of the cases, the offender was not really close to the victim before the grooming situation, but the manager of the candy store in the neighbourhood. Gradually, he developed a personal relationship with the minor, giving her gifts from the store, and then asked for her Facebook contact and started talking to her there. Although the aggressor stated in the interview that she was the one who asked him for his Facebook, it is clear in the court sentence that it was him. As the barriers between the virtual and the non-virtual are becoming increasingly blurred, this case would be a mix between online and offline grooming, something that is becoming more and more frequent according to some experts.

In two cases, the offender was the teacher of the victim(s). The one interviewed referred (as some of them usually do) that he was clear with the students from the beginning telling them that he was looking for sex. Nevertheless, at the same moment he recognized that he talked to them about their problems at school, not only asking for explicit content, explaining to the following question: *“How did they send me their nude photos?”*, that: *“it's been months. I was persistent. Patient. I gained confidence”*. He also acknowledges at the present that they sent him photos also out of concern, as they knew he was their teacher and that he was *“taking advantage of his superior position as a teacher”*.



In the other case, it is the words of the former victim, who explained how she became involved in the situation:

He was a teacher at my school. I know he writes to a lot of students online, but he also contacted me and others at the beginning of the school day, complimented me, praised me. Then there was a situation where we did a project under his guidance. A lot of what went on started there. But there was parallel communication on Facebook and other accounts of mine. The communication was somehow very personal, trust was established, and I did not have a strange feeling at first that it was somehow wrong.

The latter is a case that sounds so implausible that it shows how far the persistent strategies of some offenders can go. He tricked his partner's 14-year-old daughter and her best friend by posing as a girl who worked for the fan club of their favourite series. He encouraged them to "be brave" and send "her" nude photos to get VIP passes at concerts. Once he got the pictures, he threatened them and blackmailed them by saying that "she" belonged to a criminal gang and that they would send the photos to all their contacts if they did not send videos of them having sex with an adult. At that point, the offender informed the girls that he had found out what was going on and offered to help them by having sex with them, which he managed to do on several occasions for three years. He was not discovered until he tried the same strategy with the younger sister when she turned 14. To get to do the whole operation he had to access the minors' messenger accounts and pretend to be a young woman through a face-changing video application.

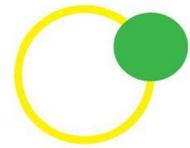
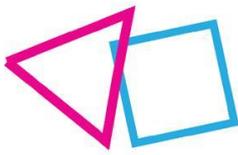
In another case, although the victims did not know the offender, they knew each other and contacted the offender. This "**chain of contact**" is a frequent situation, which explains that the contact with the offender is made through friends of the victims. Although there is not enough information for this case, the offender who explained why he incorporated his stepdaughter's friend, gave some clues about why this kind of access may be especially useful from the offender's point of view. **To share the experience with a close friend can normalize it and become a shared secret between them, who support and encourage each other.**

B) Strangers

Although it is not the most frequent and, as happened in D1.4, 25% (n=2) of the victims' sample had their **first interaction through a dating website**. Despite there was no sexual contact - contrary to what happened in the cases analysed through the sentences -, as it is a situation that is repeated, it seems relevant to include this scenario among the prevention measures.

Regarding the victims' sample, the other social networks were Instagram (in two cases), Facebook, Messenger, Snapchat, and RATE in the others. Most of the profiles were public, with pictures and, in some cases, the age, name, and name of the location on it. When being asked about what could catch the offender's attention, several victims thought that their pictures (saying two that their "childish look") and one his way of writing.

Relevantly, in all the cases, the age of the offender appeared in their profiles. Even though 71.4 % (n=5) of the victims suspected that the offender lied when specifying, they explained that they suspected that the offenders lied about their status or their romantic feelings, but not their age.



Some of them referred to the offenders as good-looking or attractive and realized the age difference: “the two I was in contact with were definitely older than me by about five years. They had profile pictures”. In terms of prevention, **these findings show how important it is to not just focus on the possibility of deception but also on the risks of starting a relationship with an adult, even though he is a young one.**

Regarding the first interaction, some of the offenders said sentences as *I like you, you are pretty*, asking later about more personal issues to get to know each other. One of the girls who had several contacts summarized some of them:

In the beginning, they said hello, would you like to get acquainted? They contacted me, and I checked who they were. The beginning was superficial, more like showing interest, at the beginning the usual, where do I live, what music do I listen to. Some of them were very offensive at first. One of them immediately asked me what the circumference of my chest was, what I was wearing if I was innocent.

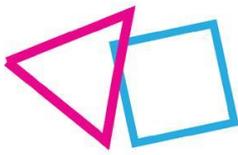
According to the interviewed experts, the conversation starts more generally about hobbies. Then the offender stops the conversation, thus giving the victim the impression that she is in charge. The next day the offender recommences, and this process goes on. Frequently, offenders give compliments in the early stages, for instance: *Do you have a boyfriend? How come such a beautiful girl does not have a boyfriend?*

From the offenders' sample, 33,3% (n=5) used Facebook for the initial contact, 26,7% (n=4) Instagram, 20% (n=3) date application, and 13,3% (n=2) Messenger. When asked about the choice of the social network, they mainly pointed out that they were looking for the ones with more people and the possibility of having a chat, pictures, and a webcam. One offender using a dating site stated that with his profile *the desired effect for me came only on this application*. Another offender who created plenty of accounts as he was trafficking with pornography explained about Instagram:

One person can create 100.000 accounts from a single IP address. At the same time, these applications do not consume much energy in mobile. Mainly that one person can do many accounts. Instagram is mainly about photos. Therefore, you can look for your victim. Few people have a private account on Instagram. Consequently, you look for the victim's mentality.

As found in the victims' sample, most of the offenders, 80% (n=12), used their real profile including their name and their own pictures. In some cases, they also showed their age. Only one of these cases lied about his age taking advantage of his childish appearance. The others used to have different profiles and used them depending on the occasion and usually sent fake pictures of younger boys (obtained online or from a former victim). The pornography trafficker created profiles in advance:

At least 3-4 months in advance. In one day, I created about 30 profiles. Each with a different name, photo, address. If you write to someone so that it doesn't look like you wrote to them the day after you created a profile. It would not be credible. It took me a



lot of time, but I continuously added a photo to each profile every two weeks to make the profile believable. Normal profile. I had all the information from someone else. Something very, very far from someone from the USA, Canada. There I downloaded all the information, all the photos, and made a profile.

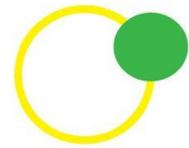
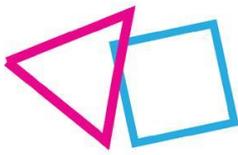
When asking about what they looked for in their victims' profiles, one of them explained that *he was not looking for a particularly pretty girl, but just for a girl that wanted to pay attention to him, because none likes rejection*. Alike, one offender pointed out that, in the beginning, he was looking for pictures, but gradually the only criteria were to be female. Another one searched by age, and the trafficker tried to *choose girls who have many active photos on the Internet, not only 2/3 times a day*. Several also were attracted to those who seemed to have an *interesting life*. One of the offenders specified to be *fascinated by the one where there were a lot of photos but also by her lifestyle: mainly sports, desire to socialize, communicate, discos, openness, playfulness, energy. The face on photos with smiles and cheerful looks*. In summary, **although some of them looked for more attractive or active profiles, many offenders do not seem to have clear preferences, and they do not seem to look for specific vulnerabilities.**

Rather than firstly looking for a particular profile, it seems that the research is expanded, to see what they like, what they study, etc. In the words of one of the offenders:

Success is half guaranteed when you find a vulnerable person, who is dependent, who does not have great self-esteem, who you can see that she is chubbier, uglier... or that you see that in the photos she does not appear so... I don't know how to say... A girl who looks super exuberant, who looks like she is eating the world, and so on, is going to be more difficult to manipulate or deceive. But everyone has their own point of vulnerability. You can approach the weaker person with the most romantic theme and the other one you can approach if you see that she is posing and so on and so forth, you can approach her with the theme of money, or propose to her to be a model. Everyone has their own weakness.

Regarding the first interaction, most of them started with general questions for firstly, getting to know each other, politely:

How are you; Do you study, or do you work? How do you do? One of them explained his own procedure: "I used to locate the profile I liked and wrote them in the first place. I used to just say "hello". I did not send any photo right away because that would have frightened the 90% of the boys. You then start establishing a relationship, showing interest in his topics, and talking about them. You need to make them feel flattered. The sexual topic very frequently arises from both parts at the same time. For example, if one says: "you're very handsome" and the other responds: "you too", then you can start talking about sex, or asking a photo, because then it would not feel weird. They are not frightened to send some photos or videos because their hormones are very altered. But boys and girls differ in this sense. Girls do not tend to send photos or as many photos as boys.



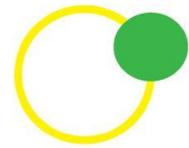
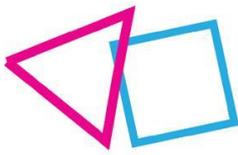
Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- According to D1.4, about 20% of the sample were cases in which the aggressor was known and belonged to the victim's environment, which implies targeting prevention to these cases as well. The family and the school environment are usually the main focuses. These cases are especially severe as the manipulation is ever stronger when the offender is socially recognized.
- “The chain of contacts” must also be approached, as it usually encourages children to go on with the abuse instead of disclosing it. It has to be taken into consideration to further propose crime prevention measures, since the contact offender-victim is made throughout victim’s friends.
- Social networks are mainly chosen by both offenders and children regarding the most used ones depending on the time. Although not in the majority some cases were started in data web applications, as was found in D1.4
- In most cases, the offenders did not create a fake profile or lie about their age. It is important to not focus prevention only on impersonation but also on the risks of starting a relationship with an adult, even though he/she is a young one.
- Although some offenders look for attractive photos and the age in their victims’ social network profiles, there does not seem to be a clear-cut pattern of choosing, as they usually contact many children.
- Regarding the first interaction, many started with general questions to first get to know each other. Later they start establishing a relationship, showing interest in the victims' topics, and talking about them. Finally, the sexual topic arises. Nevertheless, some offenders go directly to the sexual topic and quickly change their objective if finding no interest.

2.4.2 Persuasive Strategies

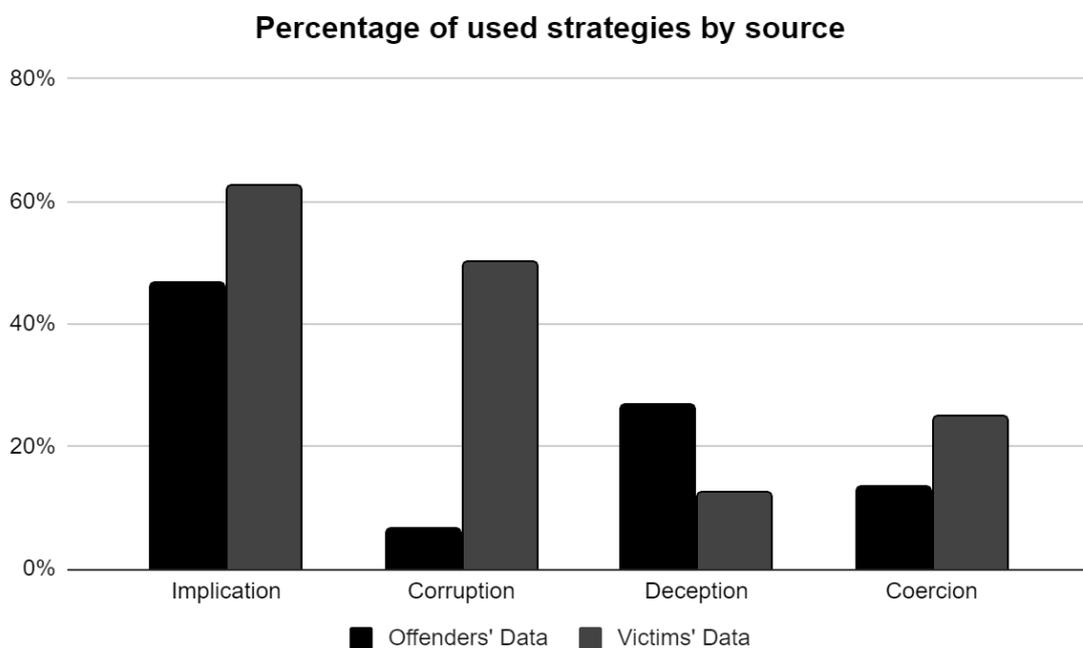
According to the interviewed experts, the main modus operandi in Online Grooming is to exploit naivety and vulnerability in victims, adapting to the minor characteristics. One important distinction is that, according to the experts, there would be **“slow types of grooming”** (more exceptional cases) where offenders look for the vulnerability of someone, and they adapt to that. But there would also be the **opportunistic one** (shorter) in which offenders just try, and if they fail, they just move to the next potential target and try again. The second kind would be more common but less dangerous, although they should also be considered in terms of prevention.

As happened in D1.4, **the manipulation strategies employed by the offenders in the sample are multiple. Yet, compared to the court sentences, percentages in the use of them, as well as simultaneity, are lower.** This could be due to two reasons: firstly, the victim sample could have a bias with less severe cases; secondly, it is very likely that some offenders hide (consciously or unconsciously) the most insidious strategies, like coercion, blackmail, and deception.



Following the classification proposed by Santiesteban and Gámez-Guadix, (2017b), we can group the most used persuasion strategies into four, which we will describe below: Deception, corruption, implication, and aggression. As in D1.4., taking advantage of sexual curiosity will be analysed as a cross-cutting element. From the offenders' point of view, the most frequently used strategy was implication (46,7%, n=7), followed by deception (26,7%, n=4), coercion (13,3%, n=2), and corruption (6,7, n=1). From the victims' sample, the most used strategy was also implication (62,5, n=5) but followed by corruption (50%, n=4), coercion (25%, n=2) and deception (12,5%, n=1), as seen in "Figure 7".

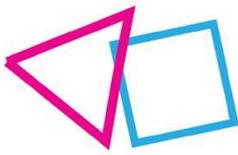
Figure 7: Percentage of used strategies by source.



A) Deception

As it was previously noted, **none of the offenders in the sample of victims used a fake profile to contact the minor**. These results are consistent with previous research that shows that not all offenders pose as minors, but some present themselves as adults to generate interest in the child (Briggs et al., 2011). However, **most of the victims (71.4%, n=5) suspected that the offender lied** about their status, skills, or their romantic feelings. Some victims simply referred to this feeling, but without being able to further specify.

Only four offenders from the other sample admitted to having used fake profiles and/or photos. One of them, as was described before, created many fake profiles in advance in order to be able to contact many and to sell their images to different buyers later: "Usually, when I went for someone, I already had a buyer ready in advance. I had someone in advance to buy it, and he told me what he wanted, what excited him the most. And that's what I looked for in the victim". He encouraged the victim to send photos by sending fake pictures from the Internet or a previous victim.



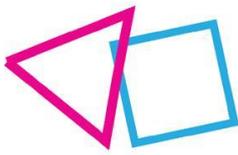
Another offender explained that he **created several profiles** in which he could *feel superior to others*. Although he did not admit to doing it with minors, we know that he did it at least once. *I'd see the others doing it too and I'd say: Well, let's play*. While he only explained to have sent fake pictures to the girl, in the court sentence it is stated that he was 16 years old and that he sent photos of a boy of about 13 years old. In the same sentence, it is described how he adopted several characters through different profiles. The offender contacted the minor telling her that he had seen a video of her showing her breasts, and that he could delete it if, in exchange, she agreed to perform different sexual behaviours in his presence. With the intention of reinforcing his blackmail, he created the character of a girl who talked to the minor, explaining that she had gone through the same thing but that her friend, instead of charging her 40 euros, charged her in another way: *you know what I mean*.

A different offender described this practice as creating an *infrastructure of people*. *I was a girl there. When it comes to that, why do you give more confidence to a girl talking to a girl, right?* As was explained before, this offender created a fake account and even impersonated a girl on video. He also described different ways to deceive potential victims. *You can enter a TV web page and get a phone number, addresses, and then create a fake account almost identical to the real one*. Another offender also created a fake profile with pictures of a girl to pretend that she posted on his photos with the goal of giving confidence to his victims. The pornography trafficker also explained: *Today it is not a problem to download the full details, everything, age, photos, address and become someone else. Simply identity theft. And these identities are freely accessible, whether on Instagram or Facebook. I can easily pretend to be a 35-year-old black man from Nairobi*.

Another strategy that was explained by an expert was to create a parallel account with the victim's images and impersonate her/him. For doing it they do not need to hack the victim's computer or to have advanced computer knowledge. They just got the information directly from the child, through games or conversations, like talking about pets if this is their security question.

Regarding other kinds of lies, **most of the offenders admitted to having lied about their age** (although not always specifically in the case for which they were convicted). Some of them also **omitted to have family or children or pretended to have more money than they had**. In order to manage the conversation, one offender explained that at the beginning he used to use some jargon, but with time he stopped it. He realized that they did not distrust him because of talking correctly, as another one described: *they did not find that weird because there are people that write rightly. A different one stated that some just appreciated being old-fashioned*. These results are consistent with the analysis of sentences, where it was **not found that the aggressors changed their way of speaking to appear younger**.

Something that some offenders pointed out as **problematic was the moment when they asked the victims for a live call or for the reasons for not uploading live streams or Instagram stories**. One of them also stated that he used to talk to 10 to 20 guys a day at the same time, so he needed to write some information so as not to make any mistakes, taking some time to check and write them to *keep active*.



Nevertheless, as explained by an expert, one recent strategy which could further deceive the victims are fake webcams. Through these applications, the offender can pretend that it is him who appears in the image while it is a different person. This police officer has worked with victims who perfectly describe offenders with a completely different appearance than the original one. It is especially dangerous as a webcam is much more plausible than a regular photo for a victim.

Once the contact was initiated, 71.4% (n=5) of the **victims' sample stated that they had common interests with the offender, which could be seen as a strategy from their offenders to keep the minor's interest.** From the sample of the offender, at least 73,3% (n=11) admitted to having conversations with their victims about their hobbies or the activities the minor liked (pets, music, anime, horses, games, etc.). One of the offenders with multiple victims explained his modus operandi:

If we wrote about something... Mostly I found a sphere that interested the victims. I clicked on a page, a YouTube, or something where the followers were, so I knew what topic they enjoyed. That's why I knew that if I found my victim on the dog fan page, I was talking about dogs. I knew she liked it. I clicked on the profile, looked at what the victim liked, and adjusted accordingly. Even though I didn't know anything about anyone, there are a million pieces of information on the Internet. That's why I could easily pretend to be a doctor from Harvard.

B) Implication

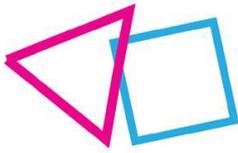
According to the answers given by both offenders and victims, **implication was the most used strategy in both samples.** This means that **offenders mostly try to achieve attachment to the child,** who may come to consider being genuinely in love with the offender. One of the first ways to get that achievement is to talk about a minor's problems and become an emotional support for him/her.

In the sample of the victims, offenders asked about **confident topics** in five cases (71.4%,) and in 42.9% (n=3) of the cases, they talked about **problems that the victim had at the time,** about family, or other issues. As one young woman stated:

He asked me whom I lived with, how I felt and other personal things. He asked me if I was worried about anything. I felt good that he wanted to listen to me and advise me. Another one referred to the feeling of being supported: I thought he was really interested, that he cared about me.

In the words of the student that ended up in a relationship with her teacher, we can see how the supportive words together with the idea of being someone older could make the minor feel flattered:

He was much older than me, seemed intelligent, made me feel privileged for wanting to talk to me, said too nice words, things that shouldn't be said, normalised... he supported and acknowledged me. It happened in real life, the web was a tool, he directly raped me, took advantage of me emotionally... For a long time, I thought I wanted it. The Internet



played a big part in our communication. He sent me articles and pictures before he used me and he sent me articles afterward.

Regarding the sample of the **offenders, around half of them admitted to having talked with the minors about their problems.** Some of them seemed slightly elusive when the topic came out in the interviews and remarked that it was not something that they were looking for. Others, on the other hand, spoke normally about these conversations, explaining that some girls felt excluded and were looking for elders as they felt misunderstood: *They asked me, older, how I would handle it.* Some offenders said that they both talked about each other's problems and *about their feelings.*

When being asked about which kind of relationship they had, **only 25% (n=2) of the victims' sample stated that they could be considered a couple.** From the **offenders'** point of view, **almost half of the sample (46%, n=7) referred to the relationship as a couple, or close friends,** while others insisted that the only bond was about sex. Even with this last group, some offenders believed that the minor could have been in love with them:

I called her love, sweetheart, but it wasn't tied to feelings. Maybe she did, but I did not. She was a very young girl... I do not know. She did not mind my age. I did not feel anything. But, yes, I flattered her, but there were no feelings.

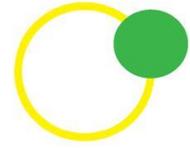
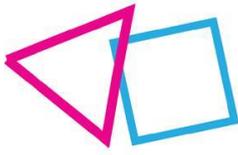
As we found in D1.4., **once this romantic relationship is established, even when the victim discovers the lies of the offender, it is possible that she will stay within the relationship.** As one offender states:

If you go with a fake profile and fall in love with a 14-year-old girl, if she is a girl with very low self-esteem, in the end, you delete the fake profile and say: "hey it's me of 50" and maybe if she has fallen in love with you, she doesn't care.

C) Corruption

This strategy was **found in half of the cases (50%)** of the sample of the victims. In three of them, the offenders directly asked the victims for photos in exchange for money. Although only in one case he got his objective, **it is important to remark how dangerous it might be if the minor is dealing with economic problems or thinks it is enough money and worth it.** While it did not happen in the studied case, once the offender has some pictures, he has a certain power to blackmail the minor and ask for a physical encounter or for increasingly explicit material.

The other case can be understood as a way of corruption, and it is about a young boy who contacted a Youtuber who made video game streamers. He started to talk to him because he wanted to learn how to play better. At the beginning, they talked mostly about the game and played together with more people. At some point, the Youtuber started to ask him for photos and to tell him that he liked him. He also put some pressure on him to stop his relationship with his girlfriend, and to become his boyfriend. Although it is not possible to know if there were also homoerotic feelings in the boy, he stated that the only reason why he sent some explicit pictures was that he wanted to keep the friendship and to continue learning about the game: *Sometimes*



he asked for photos of me and I didn't like it. He threatened me with not being my friend anymore if I didn't send him them.

The same situation appeared in the analysis of the sentences (D1.4.) with some children that sent more severe photos in exchange for some privileges in the videogame they were playing (that the offender administered). One of the relevant elements of these cases is that at least the interviewee did not attach much importance to sending the material or having these conversations, as we will discuss below.

None of the offenders, except one, accepts having used corruption as a strategy to get the material from the minors. The one who did it was the one who created a female character who pretended to be the president of the fan club of the favourite series of underage girls. As this character, he got some naked pictures in exchange for future privileges: access to concerts or other shows.

D) Coercion and blackmail

Based on the sample of the victims, there were three cases (37,5%) in which blackmail or coercion took place. The first one would be the Youtuber who "blackmailed" (in the child's words) a young boy with stopping their friendship unless he sent him some pictures. Even though it was not a severe case, we can understand it as a way of coercion, especially considering the power of the influence and the asymmetrical relationship they had (because of the age and the status). According to the interviewed experts, offenders often enjoy the power dynamic and the attention of the victim even more than the victim itself. For instance, in the case of this young boy -which was not even a romantic relationship- he explained about the offender that: *One moment he praised me, the following moment he would say I was worth nothing.*

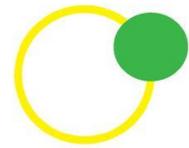
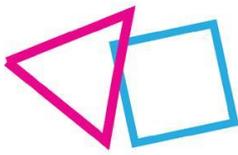
The offenders do not need to already have photos to blackmail the children. Another victim stated that he sent the offender pictures as otherwise *he would tell his friends that she had already sent photos to him. I was afraid.* Scaring a young person by threatening his or her social reputation can be easily used by offenders.

The third case was the student that ended up in an abusive relationship with her teacher. This young woman described how he first isolated her:

my contact with other people was greatly reduced during this time, with him taking up a large part of my time, somehow deliberately isolating me from other people. He said that my family didn't value me, my friends weren't as mature for me as I was. He didn't like that I went to parties, that I went home to my mum, that I was socialising with someone else, and reacted negatively if I didn't respond to him immediately in messages. If I didn't answer a question, he made a big deal that I was sneaking around.

Secondly, once the person feels isolated, the coercion appears through the threat of abandonment: *Later they force you to go together, if you don't go together, they don't communicate with you anymore. They use emotional violence.*

From the offenders' sample, most of them did not admit to having used coercion or blackmailing, explicitly insisting on it. Nevertheless, one of the offenders, upon reflection, admitted that since



the girl was reluctant to send him pictures, he blackmailed her with the threat of not meeting physically as she really liked the man and wanted to meet him.

In addition, at least two of the offenders threatened the girls with the spreading of the images they previously got: the stepfather who pretended to be the president of a club of fans, and the offender that asked a girl to shower, masturbate, and have sex in front of him in exchange of deleting a photograph of her that was on the Internet (he actually did not have this picture). Both were previously described as being part of the groups of diverse sexual desire and of the abusers, showing **sophisticated manipulation strategies, certain impulsivity, and lack of empathy**.

In the stepfather's case, the whole situation was elaborated by a mix of **the trust they had in him**, and diverse manipulation strategies. Firstly, he managed to get the pictures, building the trust through a female figure and their main interest. When they were frightened by the threat of a criminal gang, the offender presented himself as their saviour, always pretending that he was also suffering from the situation. Moreover, after three years of continuous abuse and despite the risk of repeating the same strategy with the younger sister, he did it and was discovered.

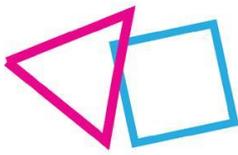
In the other case, he first asked the girl to enter the shower leaving the camera open in exchange for the deletion of the photographs of her breast. When she refused, he blackmailed her telling her that he would spread the video through her schoolmates. Once she did, he began an escalation of requests under threat of broadcasting the shower images, asking her to have sex with another child in front of him, something that she finally did. Once she refused to repeat it, he created different profiles to manipulate her, and as it did not work, he decided to call her mother to increase the pressure and was finally discovered. The same patron was found in D1.4. as some offenders that acted impulsively trying to scare their victims ending up being caught.

Another offender described a different way of blackmailing. He stated that he did not pressure in the first moment to the girl in order to take pictures but did do so afterwards with the intention of getting an apology.

E) Sex

Regarding the victims' sample, the **most frequent topic of conversation was sexual content (87.5%, n=7), followed by a request for sexual contact in 62.5% (n=5) of the cases**. Although only 2 (25%) ended up with a physical sexual encounter, four (50%) sent different types of pictures. The main facilitator of the physical encounter was, as in D1.4. the use of the implication strategy. When being asked about the topic, in some cases, the victims remembered that **the offenders somehow prepared the conversation so that at one point the topics changed from general ones to sexual** or going from talking about a relationship to talk about having sex. **In other cases, they directly go for the sexual topic**. One of the girls explained the way her offender normalized this topic:

He was very manipulative, talked about very personal things, asked me if I had fantasized about rape, had naked pictures in class, showed them to me, told me it was normal, everyone does it. He said I was very mature for my age. He showed me pictures of strangers' genitals. Afterward, he also showed me porn magazines, pictures, photos. He



explained why he was interested in naked bodies, and it seemed so normal, he was an art teacher, and it normalised the situation somehow... I realised he had been planning what he was doing to me for a very long time.

Although all the children in our sample who sent pictures or had physical contact stated that they did it because of some form of coercion or for money, **one risk factor that must be also considered is the adolescent's curiosity around sexuality and their own desire for experimentation.** As previously referred, due to ethical reasons we prefer not to explore deeply the sexual motivation. Nevertheless, by instance, half of our sample found that during the conversations with their offender: *they felt they could be attractive for another one, and that was cool.*

In the offenders' sample, **almost all (93.3%, n=14) obtained images from their victims, and nearly half of them (46.7%, n=7) had a sexual physical encounter.** The severity of the content varied from semi-naked pictures to Sadistic/Bestiality. Most of the offenders stated that their victims were not shy and that they did not have to put pressure on them to get those images. However, when asking them how they encouraged the victims, most of them **admitted diverse strategies.** The most extreme one would be the coercion through the fear of abandonment or through different threats that have been already explained.

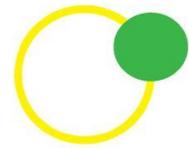
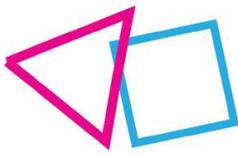
Another strategy is to **take some advantage of their lack of knowledge and explain to the victims' questions about sex through descriptions and/or by sending diverse material.** Some of them insisted that they did not pressure, but just **gained their trust step by step, after a long communication; being persistent, patient, gaining confidence.** Some of them also explained that it is important to **gradually increase the severity level of the pictures.** For instance, starting with a regular photo, secondly asking for a picture in underwear, then a nude without the face, etc.

However, some of the offenders stated that encouraging the children *is not needed, as it is something that adolescent boys commonly do.* For this offender, to have a meeting needs a bit more time, but getting the images is much easier when it is about boys. **Many of them insisted that victims were quite "sexualized" so there was no need to put pressure on them.**

Some of them maintain both narratives: the girl was looking for it, and the offender needs to work on it. As one offender explained:

I first wondered what such a young girl was doing here (on the social network). Then I asked her if she must be bothered by some perverts. When I take it retrospectively, I see it... on my part... flattery, purposeful, getting into her confidential zone. Of course, for my purpose. But we got to the nude photos so that... Once she was on a walk with a dog and she sent me a photo—she was with a dog. And I wrote back that she could send the same photo without a T-shirt. And she came home and sent such a photo. That's how we started. I didn't push her. She liked it. Because... Other times when I was at work, she sent me a video of herself experimenting, without my suggestion.

On the one hand, it is true that in this step of their life, we must consider that sexuality exists in teenagers, and they must feel curious about it. On the other hand, we also need to notice that it



is quite common for offenders to hide (for preserving their image, or because they really have a bias about it) **their own strategies to get the material**. As an expert explained, **there are several ways of denial**, and this would be the latest form of it.

When being asked, while some of the experts stated that the way young people live sexually is not relevant for the online grooming process, others pointed out the necessity of including sex education in the curriculum, as many children use the Internet as their main source of sexual information. **Avoiding the taboo around sexuality would help girls and boys to talk about dangerous situations and establish boundaries.**

2.4.3 Disclosure

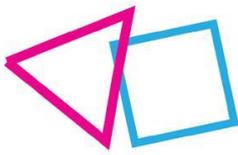
In 62.5% (n=5) of the cases of the victims' sample, the children kept the relationship secret. In most cases, it was the offender who encouraged the victims to keep it that way, yet not in all of them. Some victims also were **afraid of being blamed**: *I didn't tell anyone for fear of being blamed, disrespect towards myself*. In terms of prevention, **it is relevant to consider the fact that, although the offenders do not encourage the victims, they may not tell other people about the situation in which they are involved.**

In three cases the offender directly asked to keep that secret. In the first one, the boy was asked, and did it because he *feared that others would think he was homosexual*. In the other two cases, it was part of the whole strategy of coercion and gender violence. In the words of one of the girls: *I kept the relationship a secret, yes. He told me that I shouldn't tell anyone about it, that we could have problems, that I was just a stupid child, which I was*. In the last one, it was the student who explained the two different ways the offender did it. Firstly, by telling her that it was *their secret in common*, teaching her how to lie, explaining how he lied to other people, etc. Secondly, with more direct or indirect threats, and undermining one's confidence: *I'm actually still scared he might do something negative. He once threatened me that because I was an adulterer, I would know what they do to people like that in other countries.... Stoned to death*.

From the sample of the offenders, **although most of them explained that the relationship was secret, only two of them admitted asking the minor to not reveal**: *one of them telling her that he could "end up in jail* and the other one saying *it stays between us*. Both strategies have already been seen in D1.4. Another offender explained that there is no need to ask for the secret because, as they have the other person's pictures, the victim does not want to be revealed.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Attention should be paid to both incrementally escalating and opportunistic offenders, as although the first ones would be more dangerous, the second ones are more frequent.
- The strategy of deception is not only limited to the age of the profile. Offenders often lie about their feelings and to get more information they have about the victims. According to D1.4. offenders did not change that much their way of speaking or writing to look younger.



- Implication was the most used strategy. Results show that it is the main predictor of having a physical sexual contact, as it was also found in D1.4. It involves talking about the minor's problem, becoming a source of support, and it can end up in a romantic relationship.
- To ask for sexual material in exchange for advice about video games is becoming a more and more frequent strategy. It may be especially dangerous as the main target are boys (who are more prompted to send images), and these offenders can be very influential.
- Blackmail and coercion are not limited to the most frequent and well-known situation - that of threatening to make photos public-. As was the case in D1.4, the threat of breaking off the relationship (both romantic and friendship) also produces a strong effect on the victims. In addition, the offenders may play with the fear of revealing material even when he does not have anything yet, as scaring a young person by threatening his/ her social reputation can be easy.
- Sexual curiosity must be always considered a risk factor, although there also seems to be a bias in offenders' narratives about their victims' sexuality. The same curiosity is exploited by offenders who take advantage of their lack of knowledge teaching their victims about sex. A stronger sexual education could diminish this risk.
- The offenders use different coercion strategies for the victims to keep their secrets. Nevertheless, the fear of being blamed or punished causes many victims not to disclose the crime.

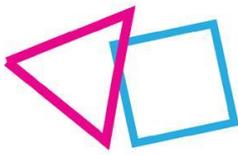
2.4.4 Gender differences

We found some gender-related differences through the interviews, although, due to the reduced number of male victims, it was not possible to contrast findings in D1.4. **From the victims' sample, boys did not attach as much importance to the situation as girls did.** Only one of the three boys felt really uncomfortable with the grooming situation, and it was because he *was afraid that people would think he was gay*. The boy who talked to the Youtuber did not understand why the police had to be involved, and when he was questioned about the situation he answered:

It didn't matter that much; my only punishment was not having my mobile phone... it only mattered to me because I did not have my phone. The boy who was asked to provide photos by a young woman simply *did not take it seriously*.

We also found a slightly greater initiative in boys than in girls, according to the results in D1.4. From the victim's sample, one victim was the one who contacted the offender, and in another case, the other victim of the sample was on a dating application. From the offenders' sample, some male victims approached the offenders through what we have called "a chain of contacts" which was also more frequent in boys in D1.4.

Both situations, **showing more initiative and giving less importance to the grooming situation, may be explained because boys are socialized to be greater risk takers and they are taught not to repress their sexuality.** This greater initiative is also found on a sexual level since, according to



experts, boys discover their sexuality as an active subject, and they are more uninhibited on the Internet, while girls are more reluctant to show their sexuality because they are more sexualized as passive objects.

From one of the interviewed offenders' points of view, when the interaction is with boys: *The sexual topic very frequently arises from both parties at the same time.* For example:

If one says you're very handsome, and the other responds "you too", then you can start talking about sex, or asking for a photo because then it would not feel weird. They are not frightened to send some photos or videos because their hormones are very altered. But boys and girls differ in this sense. Girls do not tend to send photos or as many photos as boys.

In his opinion, there is no need to encourage boys to send nudes as it is something they commonly do.

According to our results in D1.4, **some experts point out that offenders sexually solicited more girls than boys, but boys more easily enter the dynamics of online grooming.** One of the experts pointed out that an offender he caught, who pretended to be a girl, was able to get naked images from 11 boys in only two days. From his point of view, when victims are girls, offenders are not so successful.

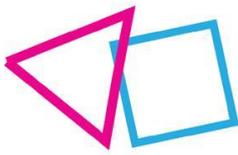
Therefore, **the strategies used are different depending on the gender of the child in the case of boys, the offender often takes advantage of the curiosity or homosexuality.** As one offender explains:

When you are 14 years old you know you are gay, but you know nothing about it. Then, it is practical to meet someone older that helps you to get started in sex. It is the same as when learning how to ride a bicycle: it is very helpful to get advice from some elite sportsman who can teach you about it, rather than from anyone that has just initiated riding. I know that I was into boys when I was 13 or 14.

In the victims' sample, an offender tried to imply a boy explaining to him that he was pansexual, which according to the minor would mean: *a person that likes other persons for their personality.*

On the other hand, **offenders use coercion or blackmail more frequently with girls. In both samples (victims and offenders), the more extreme cases of blackmailing, violence, and abusive relationships were all related to girls,** as found in D.1.4. **The search for personal vulnerabilities and the conversations around personal problems was only present in girl victims,** which could also be related to the lower self-esteem and self-image that teenage girls usually have. One of the experts explained that **self-esteem plays a role in online grooming, especially when it is about girls,** being a less important factor when it is about boys.

Accordingly, most of the girls in our sample found that during the conversations with their offender: ***they felt they could be attractive for another one, and that was cool.*** This could be related to their sexual development but also to the pressure that female teenagers suffer for being attractive and feeling desired.



These results are quite relevant as they show that **different approaches must be taken in terms of prevention. Reflection about gender roles should be incorporated** into this kind of programs, as in those more general about sex education. According to one of the interviewed experts, from the victimization perspective, *boys don't cry and are hard*, so they are less likely to report abuse. The same would apply to the LGBTQIA people. The different ways of flirting -in terms of using applications and meeting people online- take place in combination with the fact that these young people are far more in a situation of uncertainty and struggling with their identity.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Girl victims gave more importance to the situation than boys, and boys had a slightly more sexual initiative than girls. This can be a consequence of boys' socialization: greater risk-taking and not repressing their sexuality.
- For boys, the offenders often take advantage of their curiosity or their homosexuality. In contrast, with girls, the offenders search for personal vulnerabilities and conversations related to personal problems.
- The coercion or blackmailing strategies are used more frequently with girls, who suffer the more extreme cases, and in whom low self-esteem plays a greater role.
- It is relevant to take into account the gender-related differences in order to take different approaches for prevention.

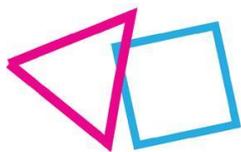
2.5 Consequences and prevention information

Most of the teens in the sample reported having received the support they needed once the situation finished. However, some interviewees insisted that they did not have the help they would have needed to complete the process earlier: *I would have needed help, wasn't too mad, would have wanted help to talk to someone, to share my concerns.*

The two victims who ended in a physical sexual contact explained how they tried to deal with the situation back in the past and how now, although they are somehow recovered, it is still difficult to overcome it. One girl *is trying to get over it, but she can't*. The student who was abused by her teachers tried to write in her diary, but she could not:

I was scared that someone would read it, the guilt was all over me, I was the one who was bad and dirty, I was a big adulterer, the hidden thing I did... I'm actually still very much unglued, I've had help, I understand that a lot of what happened to me as a child has to do with why I allowed myself to be manipulated. But I still feel like there's an emotional disconnect with me right now. Suddenly, it goes on, and from time to time the blood pressure is out of place. I feel a lot of anxiety, no more shame... The problem is also that the relationship with him is ongoing to some extent because I work there at the school. Indirectly, I come back into contact. But after I put my story in writing for the police, five pages, then I felt it was written and no longer belonged to me.

Some of the consequences referred by the experts range from anxiety and depression to eating disorders (with a weight loss of 20 kilos), drop in school performance, or even suicide. It takes a



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

long time for some of them to recover. Feelings of guilt and shame are quite common. Thus, as one victim also highlighted, **it is essentially “not blaming the victim”**. The problem of shame appears when the child thinks that he has done something he knew he should have done, and the feeling increases if it is something related to sexuality. This is important regarding recovering but must be considered too when prevention strategies are designed, as it is crucial for disclosing.

Previous studies have found, for instance, that, regarding sexting, the focus is usually on girls, recovery which blame them censoring the expression of their sexuality (Karain; 2014). Similarly, De Ridder (2018) has described how the criminalization of sexting involves stigmatization, which helps sexting become a cyberbullying tool.

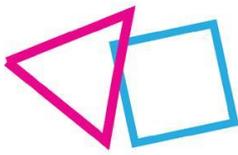
In terms of prevention, we found that only one victim had received a talk at school about online grooming. However, in half of the cases, victims had talked with their parents about online grooming: *My dad told me, I knew everything*. **It is essential that young people have information about these types of Internet risks to prevent them in the schools too, and it should be together with a more general sexual education.**

Regarding revelation, only in two cases, the victims told the parents, and in one of them, it was after one year of the end of the relationship. These results are consistent with the findings in the analysis of the sentences D1.4. **Most cases are discovered by the police or the family and not because the child reveals the situation.** A police officer explained a case in which there were 250 real victims and in which the aggressor had on occasion removed the Messenger account to blackmail them in order to receive pictures, obtaining explicit images. Of those 250 victims, only three reported to the police. In his opinion, teenagers think they can take it out on their own, anything but say it at home.

When experts are asked about it, they all agree that **the most important factor is to reveal what has happened to guarantee good family communication**. Trying to base prevention on parental control may be dangerous, as the real capacity of parents to control their children when we are dealing with the Internet is quite limited. Communication should mean both: not threatening to cut off from social networks and understanding that no topic is taboo. As an expert explains, frequently, children are afraid and do not even tell their partner because the offender may be him. There are victims who change groups of friends, lock themselves at home, or panic to go out of the house. Very often they have told their teachers rather than tell their parents because *My father is going to kill me*, and this is a problem that is even worse in the case of homosexuality.

One expert suggests that **parents should be involved in their children's online activities**. For instance, they could ask the child to show his/her favourite game or site online or ask him/her to teach them something online. With these actions, they could gain the child's trust and try to not overreact because of thinking that spending a long time on the Internet is always bad.

Another suggestion to apply in the classrooms is to use the personal stories of those who were either victims or perpetrators and convey them. In addition, sharing practical examples (Telegram chat) with both the parent and the child. Using games in prevention can also be beneficial, performing tasks (such as antivirus or friend invitations unexpectedly) and evaluating. In one expert's opinion, **regarding prevention tools, it is better not to address the issue directly but to**



start with a more general sensitization leaving the topic for the end. Another challenge would be to do online campaigns, reaching children in the virtual spaces they most often use.

Finally, we want to end with the advice that former victims would like to provide to other children, in which everyone insists on the need to disclose:

tell someone close to you about it; Talk about it with family, loved ones; If you don't know someone, don't tell them intimate and personal [information] about yourself; Immediately block it, don't let it go any further and tell your parents or a friend; Don't be afraid to talk about it. Don't be alone.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

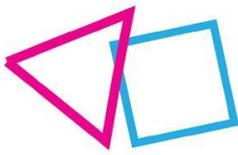
- We might consider if it could be better for the videogame to not address the issue directly. One idea would be to introduce in the videogame some general topics such as sexual education, sexual consent, gender roles, or general work on emotions like shame.
- We should also think about how to include parents in the video game. One suggestion is to add an adventure to be played by both children and parents or to have a parent's profile. As parental control is almost impossible to achieve, the focus should be put on family trust and communication, with no taboo topics or fear of being punished.
- In order to ensure disclosure, special emphasis should be also put on not blaming the victim, which could be done, for instance, through the stigmatization of sexting. Also, we should insist on the need to reveal what has happened (even though it is not to the family and it is a friend or a teacher).

2.6 Similarities and differences between zones

Due to the difficulties finding sample participants in the different zones, the data obtained for the analysis by zones are too scarce, with a minimum of two interviews per zone and a maximum of five per profile. Nevertheless, **no qualitative differences were found in the analysis** and results were consistent with those found in D1.4. Therefore, this section will be developed based on information gathered from the interviews of experts.

Most experts pointed out that there are no regional differences in the online grooming phenomenon, as the offender will always adapt to the victim and look for vulnerabilities in the victim no matter to what region the victim belongs. Therefore, experts consider that the modus operandi is the same in all regions as, in addition, offenders from different parts of the world share tricks with each other through online forums on how to groom a minor for sexual content.

However, experts say that what does change is the social awareness of the problem in different European countries and that it depends on many variables such as education, religion, the context of each minor, etc. These differences in the social awareness of the issue are related to two facts. Firstly, to the lack of unification in the definition of the crime of online grooming in the different European countries. Secondly, to the inconsistency in the definition of an age limit.



According to one expert, the findings in D1.4. related to some regional differences in recidivism could be explained by cultural singularities. In less individualistic countries or in those where the family has a greater impact, recidivism would be lower than in others with less social support and/or control.

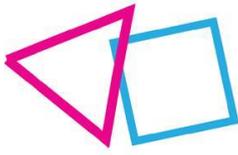
Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- No significant differences were found in the modus operandi between zones, which implies that specific scenarios do not need to be developed. The only differences relate to the definition of the crime, offenders' recidivism, and the social awareness of the phenomenon.

2.7. Other suggestions from the experts for the video game.

In this last epigraph, we point out some general ideas that the experts made regarding the videogame. As in the previous examples, this phase of the research we might consider them as suggestions that need to be evaluated and approved, and they are not yet discussed.

- One of the stimuli can also be to show bad (or negative) endings, evoke emotion, and achieve a lesson.
- It is important to remember that adults may underestimate the maturity of children when thinking about serious games. This should be considered in the pilots.
- Take care of not focusing only on the risks of the Internet (showing it also as a good tool).
- The whole responsibility should not be placed only on the shoulders of children.
- There could be a section of the game that is "I'm going to investigate this..." and that, for instance, investigates if a profile is false, seeing: 1. Whether the photo has been cropped (or downloaded from the Internet -Google images search can be used for that-). 2. Stories, which are brief videos, are usually very personal, and, therefore, it is very unusual that your picture does not appear. If it does not appear, probably the profile is fake. 3. Whether the uploaded photos have comments or not. It is very rare that none of the pictures have comments posted. Or maybe they have comments but are from weird random people. 4. See the profiles the offender is following. Usually, you follow your friends, and your friends follow you, namely, the contacts are paired. If you do not find this paired-following, it is probably fake. 5. Try asking the person for photos with his/her face on them. He would probably have some pictures. Then, insist on getting facial photos, and, if there is no answer or he sends other photos, it is fake. 6. The way they talk. Adolescents tend to talk about day-by-day things, not specific topics.
- The player would have to rank the risk of a younger online stranger and an older online stranger.



2.8. Conclusions and discussion

The interviews' results show similar trends to those found in the previous research and the analysis of court sentences. In the victims' sample, we had some limitations due to the difficulties in reaching these subjects. However, although overall the cases could be considered less serious than those found in D1.4, cases with physical encounters and coercive strategies were also included and analysed. In the offenders' sample, the main limitation was related to honesty. Although in some cases we were able to compare the interviews with the court sentences, it is a possibility that some offenders minimise situations of aggression and coercion due to the desire to please the interviewer.

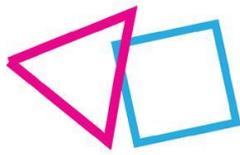
Regarding the age and sex of the victims, similar to previous research, being a girl or adolescent appears as a risk factor for online grooming (Wolak et al., 2010). It is relevant to highlight that age is a risk factor due to the characteristics of this stage of life, such as the changes that accompany puberty, curiosity about sexuality and new experiences, a certain distance from parental figures, and emotional insecurities due to greater social pressure (which is even stronger in girls).

Even though current research has not identified a single risk factor that functions as a precipitant for suffering online sexual abuse, considering that it is a dynamic in which a plurality of vulnerability factors plays a role (Shoon, 2006), in our sample isolation has clearly appeared as the most relevant factor. Due to the small size of the sample, this result cannot be generalized, but our methodology, which has prioritized former victims' narratives, could explain this difference. Other types of methodologies, such as the ones considering police records, court sentences, and offender narratives, could conceal this fundamental aspect of the online grooming process.

When talking about offenders' risk factors, it is difficult to separate their previous history from certain narratives that may have been created to understand and make sense of what has happened to them. Nevertheless, and bearing in mind this limitation, some perpetrators - although not the majority - did point out certain affective deficiencies in childhood. More congruently, we can point to a certain feeling of loneliness and isolation in adulthood, which the subjects sometimes point out as a trigger.

According to previous research, both the sample and the experts interviewed agree on the importance of including the figure of the young offender in online grooming prevention. Up to a third of our sample was under 25 years of age. These cases are particularly hazardous as they often do not have to lie to gain the victim's trust, who, understanding that the age difference is small, may not see it as a form of abuse.

As found in other studies (Kloess et al., 2014), a high percentage of the interviewees in our sample were unemployed. Although we could relate this fact to the availability of more free time, other authors (Webster et al., 2012) have also found a certain perceived vulnerability in offenders' personal situation before the crime occurs. In terms of prevention and treatment with offenders, this focus on feeling of powerlessness can be related to the desire to feel control and power over the victims.



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

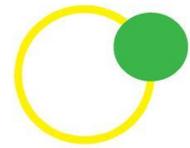
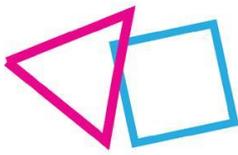
Regarding initial contact, it seems that the most used networks or platforms are related to the frequency of use, rather than to possible security breaches. According to D1.4, about 20% of offenders were known by their victims, which could even be a higher rate if we consider the greater difficulty to report when the crime takes place in a close context. These cases were particularly severe, with major consequences for the victims.

Prevention should not focus on deception (in terms of fake profiles) as it was atypical, as was also found in D1.4. The content in the victim's social network profile does not seem to be that relevant. Thus, insisting on the type of photos in the victim's profile could encourage victim-blaming (which is related to less disclosure of the crime) and not make grooming more difficult. However, keeping the profile private would be good advice, as having a public profile has emerged as a risk factor.

Similarly, attention should not be paid only to the slow types of offenders who, although being more dangerous, are less common than the opportunistic ones. The same would occur with the use of deception, blackmail, and aggression. The threat of breaking off the relationship, both romantic and friendship, should be considered as a coercion strategy.

Implication is the most common and dangerous, in terms of success, strategy, being the supportive strategy the most used. Although the romantic feelings -together with some coercion- avoid disclosing the crime, frequently, also the fear of being blamed or punished causes many victims not to disclose.

As described in D1.4., the prevention of online grooming should not be separated from sexual and gender equality education. Gender socialization appears as a risk factor in both boys and girls. In girls, the pressure of being desired and low self-esteem would make them more prone to coercion, blackmail, and aggression. In boys, the traditional male role would make them more likely to underestimate risk and engage in more unsafe behaviours.



3. Analysis of interviews on cyberbullying

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the results and conclusions of the analysed interviews on cyberbullying collected within the RAYUELA project. A total of 33 interviews with victims (12), offenders (8), and experts (13) have been analysed. They were collected in the four European zones (North, East, South, West) as described below:

- Four offenders, three victims, and four experts in Belgium.
- Two experts from Spain.
- Six victims, four offenders, and one expert from Slovakia.
- Three victims and four experts from Estonia.
- Two experts from Greece.

Experts were recruited by looking for researchers in the field and people working in contact with victims or offenders of cyberbullying. Experts from schools were taken into account as well. For instance, teachers who have the role of students counselling. Victims and offenders were recruited by contacting schools and counselling organizations dealing with young people who suffered or were perpetrating cyberbullying.

For the interviews, the same templates were used in all countries in order to apply the same coding procedure. It is worth to be noted that some data cleaning was necessary before proceeding with the analysis due to inconsistencies in coding (recording of variables is available in a separate document).

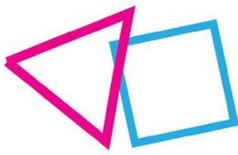
In this chapter we report on the qualitative analysis of the collected interviews from victims, offenders, and experts. This will be followed by a discussion and conclusions about the results.

3.2 Victims

In Belgium 3 victims (2 female and 1 male) were interviewed who were at secondary school. Estonia had also 2 female and 1 male victim interviewed. Two of them were attending secondary school and one was at university. Finally, 6 victims were interviewed in Slovakia: 4 female, 1 male and 1 non-binary. Two of them were at primary school and four at secondary school. The nationalities of the victims are respectively Belgian, Estonian, or Slovakian. Most of the related facts happened in a city area, only one in a town and one in a large city. Most of the victims are heterosexual, while two are bisexual and one homosexual.

All the victims seem to have a normal to good relationship with their family members at home. In addition, the educational level of the parents varies from high school diploma to a master's degree. Seven of the victims are atheist, four others are Christian, and one didn't share its religion.

In their free time, the victims declare to be mostly interested in sports, outside activities and meeting up with friends rather than naming online activities. Only one person declared to prefer



online activities. Most of them like doing activities alone as well as in group, while one victim prefers to be alone, and two others prefer group activities. Furthermore, they seem to have normal friendships: in most cases they declare to have enough or many friends, mostly both younger and older friends.

Concerning their preferences to online or face-to-face relations, the data shows differences between the victims: three of them find both relations easy, two persons find both relations difficult, 5 persons find face-to-face relations easy but not virtual not, one finds online relations easy but not face-to-face. Some of them declared that 'online communication lacks body language and emotions.

Furthermore, the victims are **aware of a variety of social networks, apps, and games**. Instagram is most popular to use, followed by Tik Tok, Snapchat, and Facebook. They use it daily, ranging from 1 hour to 6 hours a day. In the first place, these networks are used for communication with family, friends, and classmates. In addition, they enjoy playing games, watching pictures on Instagram, and video's/livestreams on Tik Tok and YouTube. Sharing these ideas and content works inspiring. For some people, it is part of their daily routine, even though sometimes they only experience temporary satisfaction.

Half of the interviewed persons prefer to use their own names in social networks. Those who chose a nickname made one up by deducing it from their name, using their nickname from real life, or choosing a random name.

The victims sometimes only have one profile, others might have two - five different profiles. Both private and public profiles are used.

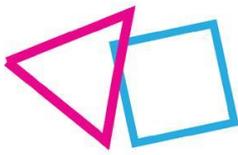
3.2.1 Risk and protective factors

Overall, the victims interviewed **seem to be vulnerable** since they were experiencing a period of low mood, or not feeling good at school or home. At the time of bullying, they were often feeling sad, helpless, scared, or humiliated. Only in some cases, there were no social, emotional, or family issues until the moment when the cyberbullying incident suddenly appeared. For some victims, the cyberbullying incident had a negative impact on their lives. A limited impact was noticed for persons who do have usual offline (real life) relationships.

According to experts who were interviewed, a feeling of helplessness returns frequently. Especially with cyberbullying it is very hard to stop. Despite this, the victim's behaviour can vary (= self-defence strategy). They can attempt to get out of the situation - either by aggressively withdrawing, clown strategy (turning it into a joke) or even skilfully turning on the bully.

All the same, according to experts, victims have a higher chance of mental health problems, lower self-esteem, loneliness and tend to be more sensitive to social anxiety. They find themselves in a more difficult period of their life and are thus more susceptible to the opinions of others. Combining this with a tendency to share a lot, their potential to be targeted rises exponentially.

Setting up risk factors or victim characteristics might be contradictory as these are motives for the bullying, rather than the actual cause. Also, it is quite difficult to profile potential victims or make



assumptions. Cyberbullying is more unpredictable than bullying, someone who is very popular can also become a victim of cyberbullying.

Essentially, we should keep in mind that none of the risk factors are absolute. Aforesaid eccentricity, deviating from the group in any way could be a risk. Insecurity, a desire for attention and approval, being cautious or even anxious, sensitive, quiet, withdrawn, and shy may all be first steps towards becoming a victim.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA's project

- Even though there does not seem to exist specific victims' profiles, it is noticeable that the victims interviewed showed a certain vulnerability at the time of the perpetration: they were often feeling sad, helpless, not feeling good at school or at home, etc. This aspect was confirmed by experts too.
- The most used social networks are Instagram followed by Tik Tok, Snapchat and Facebook. It is also important to mention that they use social media daily, between one hour and six hour a day.

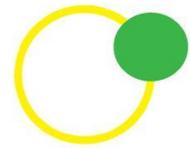
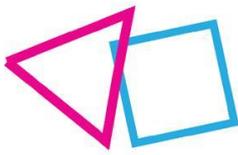
3.3 Offenders

In total eight cyberbullying offenders were interviewed, four in Belgium and four in Slovakia. Four offenders were female and four were male, all of them were between 10 and 16 years old at the time of the crime. In all cases the related facts refer to a town or city area while no case refers to a rural area. Concerning the nationality there is not much to say, only to notice that in Belgium two of the four offenders had a migrant background. Only one of the offenders declared to be bisexual, while all others declared to be heterosexual. Concerning the level of education, there is only one case in which the offender only completed the primary level, being over 18 today.

From an overview of the relationships at home everything seems normal, all offenders declared they have good or at least reasonable relationships with the persons they live with (family, friends, etc.). Only in four cases we have data concerning the educational level of the parents: the lowest level of education is high school diploma and the highest doctoral degree.

An interesting finding is related to the free time of the interviewed offenders: opposite to what one could expect, most offenders declared they like doing things like sport, playing a musical instrument, playing board games and similar activities. Spending time on social media or online games is mentioned, but it does not appear to be the most important activity. Also concerning friendship everything seems to be 'normal': they mostly declared to have enough or many friends, in some cases of similar age and in other cases both younger and older.

The offenders also have different preferences concerning online or face-to-face friendships: two of them find both types of relationship easy, only one offender finds virtual friendships easy and face-to-face not, while two offenders find face-to-face friendship easy and virtual not. Some of them also declared that while *with virtual friends you can only play online games, face-to-face you can do everything. Or that in an online environment people can create fake profiles, and in real life you can trust people more.*



Instagram seems to be the most used social network (six times mentioned), but others are mentioned too (e.g., Facebook (one time), TikTok (two times) and WhatsApp (two times)). The time they spend online is variable from person to person: some use social networks only a few hours per day, others up to 24 hours in case they are bored and don't know what else to do. One of them declared that before the COVID-19 pandemic he/she had to wait a long time for somebody else to connect to an online game, while during the pandemic he/she sometimes only had to wait 5 minutes.

Only three offenders declared to have more than one profile, two of them have two profiles. Five offenders stated to have public profiles, while two have private profiles.

3.3.1 Risk and protective factors

According to experts, the environment plays a key role: when parents and the **surroundings** in general have prejudice, a more tolerant outlook/attitude towards bullying, racism etcetera children become more susceptible (e.g., Imitational behaviour: bullying happens). As a result, in many instances offenders look positively towards cyberbullying (consider it a joke, to be funny). They may not be aware of the harm they cause.

Offenders tend to consciously look for a **power play**, often to gain recognition and increase their own **popularity**. They search for an audience, which the (online) community provides. This has dysfunctional consequences for the victim who finds themselves in a minority position. Contradictory the offender cannot distinguish popularity from friendship: "**sociometric popularity**". Bystanders do not necessarily agree but follow in line because of fear.

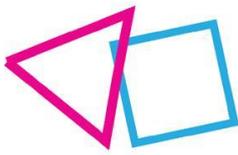
Cyberbullying has the risk of becoming harsher thanks to the online shield. Without perceiving the direct consequences of their actions and immediate (physical) repercussions are unlikely, lines are more trivially crossed. This also creates a feeling of anonymity, but as stated earlier: uncommon.

Moral disengagement mechanisms (little empathy) are powerful predictors of aggressive behaviour. Linked are low self-control (impulsiveness), low or, on the contrary, excessively high self-esteem, inability to understand consequences and refusal to cooperate.

The main message is that, in general, the bully needs help, not stigmatization.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Though the data set considered is quite small, these demographic data give a first indication that there is not something like 'a specific cyberbullying offender profile'. This conclusion was also a result of the analysis conducted on the cyberbullying sentences.
- The interviewed offenders also do not seem to prefer virtual relationships to real ones. Therefore, in the RAYUELA serious game we should point to general offender profiles instead of generating very specific ones.



3.4 Modus Operandi

3.4.1 The definition of cyberbullying and its links/differences with “offline” bullying

A definition of cyberbullying was given by the several experts we interviewed. At first glance “cyberbullying” might seem straightforward to define, it is composed of “cyber” and “bullying”. Let us start with the “oldest” part: **bullying**. It has been around for centuries and has received plenty of definitions. The most recurring elements, however, are the following:

1. Misuse of power: from an individual or group
2. Different forms: verbal and/or physical abuse
3. Intention to harm
4. Repetition (potential to)
5. *Real life*

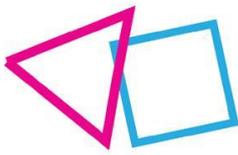
Combining these elements, bullying consists of the intentional and deliberate misuse of power in an offline (real life) relationship, exerted by a single person or group of individuals. The abuse might be verbal and/or physical and is clearly intended to cause the victim harm, be it psychological, physical and/or social. Most definitions state that bullying is a repetitive behaviour or has the potential to be repeated over time. Thus, excluding single acts of violence, aggression or similar.

Cyber relates to the digital era and involves the use of all digital devices or media. It can be split up into hardware and software. Hardware are the devices used to access the digital world and consist of, but are not limited to computers, smartphones and other smart devices, tablets, network servers and the like. Software consists of data, but in our case focuses on the array of social media, applets, games, forums etc.

The merger of cyber and bullying creates a hybrid with definite similarities, but also some differences. Bullet points’ one through four remain largely the same, but the fifth changes radically.

1. Misuse of power: from an individual or group
2. Different forms: verbal and/or visual abuse
3. Intention to harm
4. Repetition (potential to)
5. *Online 24/7*

Cyberbullying remains the intentional and deliberate misuse of power, exerted by a single person or group of individuals. But the bullying is done through another medium: cybertechnology. Through media, cyberbullying no longer takes on a physical form, but gets limited to the misuse of visuals (e.g., videos and memes) and verbal use. When these electronic means are abused to exert power and/or pressurize another person, even once, we are talking about cyberbullying. This does not mean we exclude the need for repetition, but we include the danger of the online world. The bullying does not necessarily stop once the original bully stops: the material might be online forever. Thus, the potential to be repeated is automatic. This fifth bullet point also has another element to it, which is not to be overlooked: it can be 24/7. Whereas, with bullying the



victim might be able to escape his/her oppressor, with cyberbullying the victim is never safe. The online world is not limited to school, work, or any other place: once you switch on your device, you might be vulnerable to attack at anytime, anywhere.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Cyberbullying is hard to escape and could happen **24/7**. Disturbing the player (**as a victim**) with annoying messages during normal gameplay would be a way to incorporate this.
- Online material **might be there forever**, even after the bully stopped bullying: this is a consequence the player might experience **as a bully**. They did not mean for the material to be spread as far, but it still happened.

3.4.2 Main risks according to experts

Minorities (regarding gender, sexual orientation, provenance, religion, even proficiency in sport, school etc.) have an extra risk of becoming targeted (e.g., Estonian vs. Russian speaking communities clash due to linguistic miscomprehension). Minorities are closely linked to the environment and situation. **Distinct cultures** demand nuances to prevent misunderstanding - the interpretation of a joke, what's rude, what's not, the limit of the pain threshold ...

Whereas less privileged people may prove more susceptible to material enticements. The privileged could be less tolerant of frustration caused by excessive permissiveness. Differences between private or public schools however are not noticeable, bullying is everywhere.

The importance and influence of **social surroundings** is explained in another topic. Lack of support or acceptance, unreasonable expectations, tolerance towards bad attitude and misbehaviour all have negative fallout.

A) Sharing personal information

The more personal information is available, the more likely someone might abuse it (e.g., for blackmail).

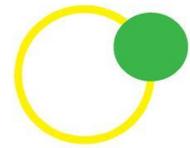
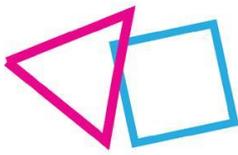
Advice: be careful when posting 'sensitive' material: make sure you are not recognizable and there is no background with reference to you as a person. If you want to do it, learn how to do it anonymously.

B) Other issues

Bystanders seldomly intervene in favour of the victim because they fear becoming the next victim or simply do not know how to react. Failure to react indirectly reinforces the behaviour.

Cyberbullying is not limited to children, adult offenders bully more cruelly with greater consequences.

Around one third of victims never come forward. Thresholds to do so need to be lowered.



C) Typical age-range

The consensus seems to be that cyberbullying can occur at any age. Concerning young people, a peak is observed from 11 to 15. This is in conjunction with children joining a new peer group.

3.4.3 Link and differences between cyberbullying and offline bullying

In general, it is safe to conclude that a large percentage of cyberbullying is an extension of offline bullying. There is a clear overlap, yet it is not absolute. Often for young people, bullying starts in the physical environment, e.g., at school, and over time it expands into the digital environment. It appears that there are limited cases where the bully and the victim do not know each other or are not connected in any way in real life. We've found that even though bullying occurs through anonymous accounts, it is quite rare. This connects to the topic concerning whether bullies are mostly anonymous, acquaintances or (former) friends. We will return to this in the next chapter.

One difference with offline bullying is the inability to escape. Wherever you go online, you're open to harassment: it's almost 24/7. This works both ways as well, an offender can attack you at any time, the victim doesn't even have to present. The offenders find themselves shielded behind the screen and rarely must deal with a direct (physical) response. Which makes it even harder to sympathize. Nevertheless, it is more common to go from bullying to cyberbullying, the other way around is rare. However, the Internet is the perfect place where an encouraged aggressor, an ideal victim and the lack of an efficient guardian are found easily. You can swiftly reach an indefinite number of people and it is very difficult, if not impossible, to remove the material completely. Therefore, even though the bully who started the abuse may have stopped, the bullying does not necessarily die down immediately. The damage may be irreversible.

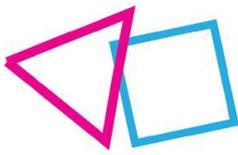
On the upside obtaining proof of cyberbullying is easier when the necessity of this is emphasized. Ugly comments or vileness are quickly deleted, as to avoid it. Confronting the offender with a pile of proof tends to be more effective.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Cyberbullying is often an **extension of real-life** bullying: create relational situations.
- Happens **24/7**, constant stressor for all: bully, victim, and bystander.
- Make players aware of the immenseness and uncontrollability of the internet: once uploaded there is almost no turning back. If they still want to, teach them how to **use the internet responsibly and if required anonymously**.
- Teach players the necessity of **obtaining proof**, it will help victims, not just hurt them more.

3.4.4 The evolution of cyberbullying during the last years

Most pre-covid numbers point to neither an increase nor a decrease in the reported cases of cyberbullying. There have not been many completed studies over the course of the pandemic, consequently we are not taking this into account just yet.



Over a larger span of time, it is possible to see several trends of normalisation of violence, antisocial behaviour and the hyper sexualisation of children. Overexposure and a tendency to overreact in general cause two extremes: a numbness towards everything, which results in people no longer caring; or on the other end hypersensitivity: with people getting overly scared, frustrated or even angry. Unfortunately, it is very hard to distinguish this across the board. There is a larger number of emoticons as there are emotions, yet the real emotional consequence of a comment, a post or message cannot really be seen nor felt. Offenders are shielded as it were from the negative outcome, they do not have to deal with tears, screams or even a victim who fights back. The threshold is lowered immensely. This is also thanks to the perception of anonymity, even though most of the time offenders and victims do appear to know each other. We will refer to this in the topic regarding “Anonymous bullies?”.

Through technological progress new opportunities for bullying (and other crimes) have arisen. Yet the underlying cause is still the same. When you look at the entire group of victims, we do see it is up to two times bigger for offline bullying than for cyberbullying. Whereas for the offenders the pool is more evenly matched. The people bullying, the victims, neither have changed, only the medium has changed somewhat. But not as drastically as might have been expected.

However, as the use of digital tools increases over time, as well as the time spent online, the incidence of cyberbullying may increase. Also, as more and more of daily life takes place online, online crime spreads. There is a clear trend of online scams, receipt of more fraud letters, emails and texts trying to lure (mostly) older people into these schemes in order to defraud them. With many online games requiring cash for extras and upgrades, young people are vulnerable to this as well. Offenders offer online gifts or tokens in exchange for concessions: pictures, running an errand etc. During the pandemic, through boredom, an extreme increase in online traffic ... A rise in cyberbullying/-crime might seem almost unavoidable, yet more on this topic later.

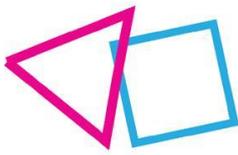
Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- The “**online shield**” should be implemented from all points of view. The inability to see the other persons’ reactions is a large part of cyberbullying. There is also a possibility of misunderstandings in which messages did not come across correctly.
- Threat of “**bribing/enticing/seducing**” people with game buffs, extras and presents is very real. Also, scammers and hackers find a lot of opportunities here (through clicks on links in game chat...). RAYUELA can warn people and help them recognise the danger.

3.4.5 Cyberbullying during COVID-19

Many experts imagine the quarantine period having an influence on cyberbullying. However, there are an indefinite number of possible stressors.

Firstly, an increase in digital media use. When more people use digital media, more digitally related incidents are going to take place. Not just children’s lives, but everyone’s became a lot more digital. Hobbies, work, school and social gatherings were cancelled or extremely limited which caused a greater interaction with digital media. People could no longer meet face-to-face, which in some cases meant an escape. Victims and bullies did not, or rarely see each other in real



life and could forget one another. This small, happy side note however, does unfortunately not undo the negative mental consequences of little to no real-life interactions and relationship-building. Even conflict in real-life has its upside for people who need to learn and resolve conflicts in real situations. The social aspect, which was lacking, should certainly not be underestimated.

Furthermore, due to the lack of face-to-face interaction behind the screen, it's hard to discern the true emotional effect of comments, chats or similar to the person on the other side of the screen. And it is not just the lack of visuals, but most definitely also the so-called human touch which is missing. There are no boundaries, no signs where the line lies or how far you may (not) go.

Lastly, all the mental issues which the pandemic brought with it. Being cut off from friends and family for prolonged periods does not help either and these were just the lucky ones. Some people had to deal with sick relatives or friends, the death of a loved one, be it due to covid or not, you were not allowed to go see them in the hospital, you couldn't even say goodbye. The enormous amount of stress on young people, on everyone was not to be overlooked. The least of all might be boredom, but this already is an important precursor of bullying.

There had been a few studies over the course of the pandemic. One study had an evaluation before the situation started, one during the lockdown and 90 days after it. They observed a significant increase in cyberbullying cases.

Telia Children's Panel survey "Children's e-learning experiences during the COVID-19 emergency" was carried out as well. They noted the opposite with less bullying than in the past versus the proportion of children who perceived an increase in bullying. Only a few have experienced an internet-related risk during e-learning. This however is only one study.

Other experts state that cyberbullying this year is much worse than before. Other online crimes are also on the rise, they mention examples such as:

- Accepting new friends without knowing the other person.
- Higher pressure to be plugged in (reachable 24/7: we know you can reply, you've got nowhere else to go).
- Many false profiles such as hate accounts:

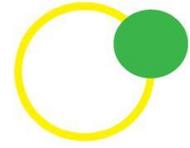
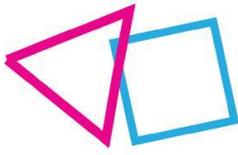
According to the interviewed experts, while cyberbullying before Corona happened once in a while, it would have happened much more often during the lockdown.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Some major predictors have increased during the pandemic: boredom, frustration, stress, other mental health issues, lack of social interaction, digital media use and so on. It seems to be probable that there has been an **increase in cyberbullying** due to the pandemic.

3.4.6 Are bullies mostly anonymous, acquaintances or (former) friends?

As mentioned before: most of cyberbullying originates out of previous bullying. People going to the same school, participating in the same hobby, or circulating in the same environment are more often than not the initiator.



It is true that it happens anonymously too, but deeper research reveals that the offenders are seldomly not part of the real environment and context of the victims. For example, an offender creates an account with a fake name and stalks someone. This increases the feeling of insecurity. The victim believes even people they don't know, hate them. This is much worse than someone they do know.

An exception to this is victimized idols, celebrities and similar. In this case perpetrators believe they know the victim because, for instance, they've seen them on TV. In these cases, the online anonymity shield is a great advantage. Except for the dupe who is none the wiser and has rarely met the offender.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Bullies are mostly in some way related to the victim.
- Rare exception with celebrities.

3.4.7 Regional differences

In general, this is rather difficult to compare. This would require one large study to be carried out in the same way in several countries. Some experts say they see no clear signs and state mainly the inner relationship is important.

Nonetheless there exist differences between Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking young people in Estonia. These are influenced by the language environment, the political background, and the educational environment. Their backgrounds mean people are offended, touched or affected by separate issues.

In Flanders some young people may have more problematic relations with persons with a disability. This might be more than in other countries because inclusive education does not exist in Flanders. While in countries where inclusive education does exist, young people encounter these problems regularly and are thus more used to it.

Identity based bullying: is a form of biased bullying. There is a societal legitimization of bullying which increases the risk to be bullied in this environment because of the societal legitimization. Unfortunately, we see examples of this in Poland concerning the LGBTQIA community.

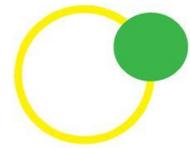
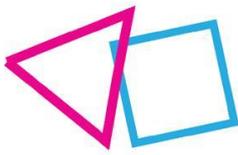
Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Realistic situations: Estonian and Russian speaking differences for players in this zone.
- **Identity based bullying:** the social legitimization of bullying for example in Poland.
- Not many regional differences.

3.4.8 Forms of cyberbullying

According to experts, cyberbullying can take a multitude of different forms, but we can attempt to discern a number of groups:

- Defamation and depreciation.



- Impersonation and falsehoods.
- Hate or anger.
- Acquisition of sensitive material and (the threat of) unwanted exposure.
- Exclusion.

A) Defamation and depreciation

Under defamation and depreciation, we understand statements which are true or close to it, but are being used to discredit, underrate, or dishonour the victim. In most cases the only thing the victim is guilty of, is being different. Most of these cases could be environmentally/socio-culturally related and are just as possible in opposite situations. In other words, they are circumstance dependent. A fact which would be applauded at one time, might be disgraced at another.

Some examples would be:

- An albino/or even a white person in a mostly coloured community.
- A person of colour in mostly Caucasian schools.
- Acing a test, but you are the only one of the entire classes who even bothered.
- Being bigger/smaller/stronger/weaker than most.
- Different political preference than once surroundings.
- Outing (unwanted exposure as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, asexual and non-binary)).

B) Impersonation/Masquerading and spreading falsehoods

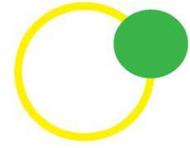
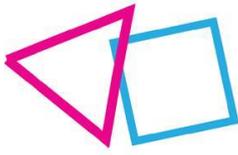
Contrary to the previous topic the bully uses fake information to place the victim in a bad light. Making use of either the creation of a fake account on social media or through hacking the victims account, the offender might spread falsehoods and lies about the victim. Replying to friends' posts in a malicious manner, sending false messages, insults, etc. are part of the repertoire. Liking or sharing certain posts could have a negative impact on the image of the victim.

Spreading falsehoods also falls under this topic. Instead of defaming, lies are told which possibly have the same effect. The offender can easily spread these lies on social media via his own account as well, it's not necessary to pretend to be the victim.

C) Acquisition of sensitive material and (the threat of) unwanted exposure

Acquiring sensitive material is possible in several ways. Linked to the previous topic, the perpetrator could have hacked an account and found sensitive material here. Often, offenders build up a relationship of trust tricking someone into sharing pictures, videos or even passwords. Another possibility is that the victim is unaware they are being filmed/photographed in secret. This could happen via webcam, but also in real life.

Once the offender has the material they want, they may demand the victim to share even more, run errands, ask for money, steal ... All under threat of exposure to friends, family, work... When



the victim finally complies and the bully is happy, the sensitive material tends to be shared none-the-less.

The sensitive material is often of a sexual nature, but it doesn't have to be. Shaming can happen through a variety of ways: silly or altered photographs, videos, or memes, even audio recordings in the wrong context can put someone in a bad light. Where offline bullying and cyberbullying meet: the bullying gets filmed by the bully or a bystander and uploaded/shared on the web.

- Happy slapping (filming the physical beating and uploading/sharing it online).
- Filmed in the locker room.
- Dissemination of revenge porn.

D) Exclusion

In an age where everybody "needs" to be in the know all the time, being excluded could be a real drama for some. This can go from not being invited to an online game or chat room to being thrown out of a chat group you have been a member of for a long time. The latter being the more extreme, yet just as painful would be being ignored whilst still in the group and no one replies to you anymore.

- Not being tagged in a group picture.
- Being the only one not in your WhatsApp group.
- Getting thrown out of a forum.

E) Hate or anger

"Haters gonna hate" sometimes there is no apparent reason, or it could be any. Under this subject we place outbursts of anger, publicly or directly in person/via instant message. It happens that these outbursts are drawn out by so-called "trolls" who like it when people get frustrated or angry and simply post provocative messages to get under people's skin.

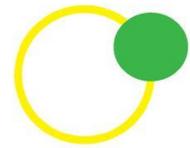
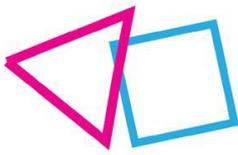
- Flaming (posting angry or aggressive messages).
- Posting of provocative messages in comments or forums.
- Online harassment/cyberstalking.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- A large variety of forms should be represented in the game, the umbrella terms are a good place to start from. Check examples and victim situations for reference material.

3.4.9 The means and/or platforms used

Moving on to the platforms for cyberbullying, some of it is linked to age groups. In primary school access to social media is (should be) limited, restricting the occurrence to games. However, children, not just young people, receive devices at an earlier and earlier age. Tik Tok is an example



of the social platforms which are seen being used by many children under 12. Consequently, once social media is introduced it often shifts here.

Every platform has its own vulnerability to cyberbullying and it could happen anywhere young people are present. The platforms mentioned the most are Tik Tok, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Instagram. Scammers are more present in online games, but these are less directly related to cyberbullying. The most common places to be bullied are social networks or instant messaging apps. The exact platforms fluctuate: it is more related to the 'place' - the platforms - where children spend the most time; boys tend to use games more, while girls use social media more. It is not necessarily the platform that provokes the facts, but the users themselves.

- Eastern Europe: Twitch, Pokec, Rate.
- Overall: Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat & Facebook.
- Sidenote: It is quite important and certainly beneficial that a social networking platform has a 'report' button.

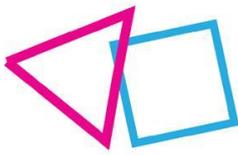
Takeaway points for RAYUELA's serious game

- Addition of a "report/help" RAYUELA button which shows tools for help and support, a way out: can be pressed whenever the player is in distress, wants to skip a scenario or simply believes a report is required.
- Location specific social platforms (check most popular per region)

3.4.10 Initial contact

In the interviews with the victims of cyberbullying, we found the following information about the modus operandi of their offenders. Most of the victims **knew their bully already at school** since they were classmates. Others were also in the same school environment: e.g., a former friend in the same class or a former friend from the neighbourhood attending the same school but not in the same class. Besides that, the victim can also be a **former friend** or may know each other through extracurricular activities such as a dancing group. Only one person did not know the offenders in advance and met online. It was a group of different nationalities and personalities which attracted the victim. Most of the victims' experience **both online and face-to-face bullying**. The real-life bullying might be verbal (calling names, insults, making fun, sexual talk) as well as physical abuse. They often feel startled, ashamed, and afraid. Generally, face-to-face bullying is experienced to be worse than cyberbullying.

When looking at the different social networks, it seems that **Facebook** is the most popular medium to start bullying, followed by Instagram. Besides that, Skype, Twitter, and rate.ee (local network from pre-Facebook times) were also used. After the first contact was made, other applications and games, such as WhatsApp and Minecraft, were used for cyberbullying. Both public and non-public profiles were accessed but most of the victims had a **public profile** with pictures of themselves on it which might have caught the offender's attention. In case a non-public profile was used, pictures were shown in some cases.



The interviewed victims indicate to have a **fair to good knowledge of the internet**. They are aware that online incidents can have a considerably negative effect on people. Misinformation can be spread, or messages can be placed out of context, leaving no opportunity to clarify them.

The offender's sample shows that in most of the cases the **offenders knew the victim already** before the facts (7 of the 8 offenders). In 4 cases the victim was someone they knew from school. In one case the offender knew the victim only vaguely and, in another case, it had to do with overweight people in the same school. In two cases the offenders mentioned they were **previously friends** of the victim. Concerning the **reason** why they chose those victims, these are different:

- In two cases they said they were just in the same class.
- In one case the offender declared that the victim was making jokes of him/her.
- In two cases the offender liked the victim or wanted originally to help him/her but this ended up in a quarrel.
- In one case the offender said it was the idea of some other classmates.
- In only one case the victim was chosen because of physical reasons (the victim was overweight).

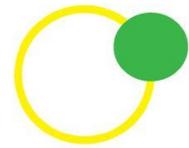
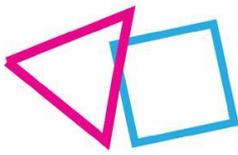
An interesting finding is that in 7 of the 8 cases the contact with the victim was held **both on the internet and face-to-face**. The data about the situation face-to-face are not always complete, but we can recognize three situations:

- In one case the offender declared not to have the intention to bully: this person found the situation funny in the beginning but understood later that what he/she did probably went too far because this had negative effects on the victim.
- In two cases the bullying actions were a reaction of the offender to the behaviour of the victim who was making jokes of the offender. For example, one explained that the victim had been bad with him/her on the day when everything started: the victim scolded the offender at school, so the offender reacted by insulting her/him in the class.
- In one case the offender actually wanted to emotionally support the victim; according to the offender it was the victim who started the quarrel.

Different **social networks** were used for the actions online: WhatsApp (three cases), Messenger (one case), Snapchat (one case), Instagram (one case). In six cases they stated the profile was a public one, in one case private. In four cases they talked about a **chat group** and not a real profile. Only in two cases, they stated to have a photograph, name and real information on it. When asked whether the profile differs from their real selves, six of them answered negatively, only one offender did not know.

Concerning the state of mind of the offender we recognize the following situations:

- Two cases in which the offender could not explain his/her feelings (Answer 'I don't know').



- One offender who declared to **know he/she was doing something wrong**.
- Two offenders were feeling **stressed** or **worried**.
- Two offenders did not feel anything special.
- One offender was feeling good or just normal (this is one of the cases of 'revenge' against the victim).

In five cases the offenders declared to have suffered bullying previously, in two cases they did not. More specifically one of them received unflattering, sexual messages, one was sexually harassed, another one was bullied because of money. Six offenders declared to have a **good knowledge** of the internet, only one admitted having an 'average' knowledge.

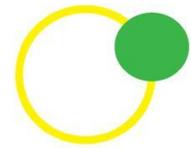
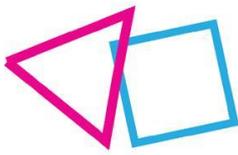
3.4.11 Facts and reactions

According to the victims, all the harassments were **prolonged over time**, ranging from one week to a month/several weeks up to a year. One victim even had to suffer this for nine years. The bullying mostly occurred in more than one situation.

Below are some examples of the facts according to the type of cyberbullying and modus operandi:

➤ Flaming/online harassment/denigration/exclusion:

- Making negative comments on online posts of the victim.
- Insulting the victim as a *fat gay* on Skype without any reason.
- Making stickers on Instagram depicting the victim raping a horse. As a reaction, the bullies were laughing with the victim at school and calling him names.
- Loading, making up gossip, turning friends against the victim. The offender also wrote insults from his profile.
- Using insults such as: *pussy, vagina, slut, dickfairy, freak*. The bullies were ignoring the victim and that expanded to the offline world - even strangers started to giggle and point fingers at the victim.
- Before the victim had a feeling that something was happening, but then it was ok again. Five days prior to receiving this message, the girls stopped talking to the victim - on the social network, no messages... The victim was feeling stressed, wondering what was going to happen next. Nobody left the group, and they were still texting each other, but they ignored the victim and did not reply to the victim's messages.
- One girl took messages of the victim and sentences from their chat out of context. Suddenly the victim looked like an intolerant and hateful person. The others started to ask, what is that about, and they started to criticize the victim and write horrible comments about the victim. They did not let the victim speak at all. The others joined the bully or were gossiping about the victim. One of them even attacked the victim on a different social network and continued spreading misinformation about the victim. In addition, the bully made a video where she was threatening and insulting the victim.



- Profile/Masquerading: Sometimes the offender was outdoors walking behind the victim trying to talk dirty and making different sexual proposals. The offender also used insults like milk breasts, slut and "gibbous whore". The victim started to avoid going outdoors and then the bully started to contact the victim online and made a fake account using the victim's name and pictures. The offender started to talk to other people online and told others that the victim was selling sex for money.
- Denigration/Masquerading: The offender started to create videos where he talked about the victim, making fun of and insulting the victim. Later, the bully posted these videos to his profile and tagged the victim. They had common friends; therefore, everybody saw that.
- Trickery receding outing: Insults and jokes towards the victim where the offender was the only one laughing about. The victim felt affected and humiliated because she told him a personal, intimate thing.
- Other: friends were destroying buildings of the victim in Minecraft every day for 2 weeks.

Looking at the data of the cyberbullying activities, we can identify the following situations:

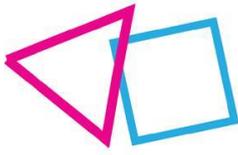
- In two cases the offender **did not plan** the perpetration in advance. In one case the offender forwarded stickers to chat groups, just for fun, not thinking this was going to hurt. In another case the offender originally wanted to emotionally support the victim, but this ended up in a quarrel.
- There are two cases in which the offender **did plan** the actions as a kind of **revenge**: in these cases, the offenders declared to have been hurt by the victim previously.
- In another case the offender **had planned** the bullying activities against overweight people.

The types of activities the offenders carried out varies depending on the situation and on the chances at the moment of the actions:

- In three cases **stickers** about the victim were sent to chat groups sometimes in parallel with **negative comments and photos**.
- In some cases, it was about **verbal abuse** in chat groups or directly to the victim.
- In one case the offender **set up a chat group** with friends where they used to insult the victim.
- In one case the offender **got into the profile of the victim** and started changing photos and sending messages to the victim's friends.

Concerning the duration, in most cases it was about **short-lasting events** (one or a few days, some months). Two cases however were not yet solved at the time of the interview: these are related with the nature of the actions and the situation (e.g., the actions are against a certain group of people because of their physical appearance; or the actions are related to a degraded relationship).

In some cases, the offenders admitted they **shared their activities with someone else** and this was mainly because others found it funny as well or because some people shared the opinion of



the offender (so they found support). There were also cases in which some people did not react to the facts or people who got scared and didn't want to be part of the chat groups anymore. In only two cases it was in the intention of the offender to share the bullying activities.

Some of the situations ended up because the **offender stopped it**. But in most of the cases there was an **intervention** by e.g., a teacher or the school director. In those cases, it ended up with a talk and/or with a **punishment**. However, there are cases in which the offender felt he/she had been treated badly by teachers and abandoned by friends. This indicates that at present admonition is still the most current method to face cyberbullying in schools, while more attention is needed in order to understand more deeply the reasons for committing cyberbullying and to prevent it.

A) Emotions and concerns of the victims about the cyberbullying event(s)

Some of the victims **felt from the beginning that something was wrong**, in particular when flaming or exclusion was used, and sometimes they could share this with their parents. Feelings of sadness, fear, confusion, and worries were noted. In one case there was at first a sudden fear from which trauma was later developed. Furthermore, another victim was worried that the bullying would expand to the offline world.

In case of masquerading, the fake profile was discovered **by friends of the victim** who noticed that there were two accounts with the same name and pictures. The victim felt quite unconcerned at first thinking it wasn't that relevant but afterwards the problem got more serious.

When denigrating videos were posted, the victim and common friends saw these videos since he was tagged. The victim was insulted and afraid that his family would also see the videos. They were indeed very angry about it when they saw it.

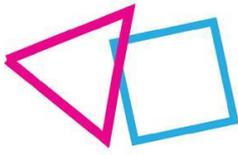
In the cases below, **the victim himself discovers the crime**. For instance, it happened by seeing the posts in which private messages were published and taken out of context. The victim was angry but also afraid that other people would believe she was really acting as portrayed by the bullies. Later, the victim felt regret by losing good contacts, although at the end they were inappropriate. She had the feeling of being unable to assess people.

In another case, the victim discovered the crime by receiving a message. First the victim was sad and regretting losing friends. Later, anger developed.

Or finally, the **offender himself could also tell the victim** what he did while laughing. This victim had mixed feelings and didn't know what to think about it.

B) Victim's, offender's, and bystander's reactions

The observed victim's reactions were mostly **anger and anxiety** causing even **aggressive or closing behaviour**. Some victims tried to manage the situation by disconnecting from social media. In one case the victim was blocking his contacts and deleting all former messages. Another case shows that the victim was not opening social media for a few days but in the meanwhile the bullies kept on writing messages. Others tried to address the perpetrator without achieving the desired result.



The offender apologized not sincerely or refused to delete the videos. There was also one case reported where the offender tried to convince its victim not to tell anyone.

When witnessing cyberbullying, it seems that **bystander's sometimes do not react in order to avoid trouble themselves**. In addition, it can **be difficult for victims to talk** about the cyberbullying whereby they are missing (immediately) support. On the other hand, some victims do have good support from their friends or parents.

But in the end all victims were able to tell friends or family about the cyberbullying. Some of them were able to share this immediately or after discovering the crime whereas others took 1 to 3 months. In one situation it even took years to tell someone.

Four offenders declared they **were aware** of the damage they were perpetrating. Three offenders were not aware, and one showed not to care much about it. There are four of them who feel no remorse for what they did, while two do not. The feelings of the offenders during the actions are varied:

- Two of them regret now what they did or declared they went too far.
- One offender was feeling good.
- One offender was feeling bad.
- One declared he/she was feeling a growing anger inside.
- One was afraid at first and angry because he/she was the only one to be punished while he/she was acting with a group.

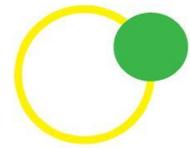
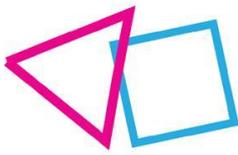
There are a couple of cases in which the offender spoke to the victim afterwards to apologize, but it is not always clear whether this really helped. For example, there is one case in which the interaction was very brief, a few cases in which the victim was angry or crying, another case in which the victim kept defending his/her opinion.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- Only in some cases, victims of cyberbullying **become aware from the beginning that something is wrong**: this seems to happen in particular when flaming or exclusion is used. Sometimes they also succeed in sharing this feeling with their parents. This is very important for prevention. So, the RAYUELA serious game should take this into account.
- Offenders seem to have **different reactions and feelings**, and these might be related to the reasons for committing cyberbullying: the RAYUELA serious game should pay attention to this aspect.

3.5 Consequences and prevention information

There is only one offender who declared to feel **good** at present. Two of them are still fighting as the situation is not yet solved. One of the offenders felt to be **unfairly** treated because the other friends participating in the actions were not punished. Only two offenders declared they had received **support** at the time of the perpetration and only two receive **support** at present.



In one case the offender was supported by classmates during the actions but was later abandoned by them. In one case the only support during the actions came from a good friend. In two cases support also came from **parents** in different ways: the parents told the offender that these actions are not good, or the parents listened to the offender and believed what he/she talked about the reasons for the actions (this was one case of revenge).

Five offenders **met the victim again afterwards**. In two of these cases everything is good at present. In two cases the situation seems to have normalized though they don't explicitly mention it. In one case the feelings of unfairness for the way everything ended are still present.

Four offenders declared they had **previous knowledge** about cyberbullying and three received some talks at school about it (although this should be increased). One of them had some previous knowledge but did not take it too seriously. Another one was told by the parents to be careful when sharing information with strangers, but this didn't apply to the bullying case where the victim was someone the offender knew.

Some of the offenders ended the interview by giving the following **advice**:

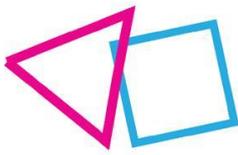
- Instead of bullying it is better to talk right away about issues with someone.
- Try to avoid people who bully you.
- Try to focus on your 'development' and don't waste energy in something unimportant.
- Think about the consequences of your actions, especially when you are posting things on the internet; one even mentioned that he/she would like to create an app able to forecast the consequences of a person's actions to prevent cyberbullying and the consequences of it.

According to experts, they encourage **face-to-face interaction** to foster social bonds in real life. Fresh air and outdoor recreation are beneficial as many abilities are acquired whilst playing with others, but nothing should be enforced to prevent opposite reactions.

Prevention days are organised in schools with games, cases, videos, where people talk about their experiences. In order for children to **empathise**, but also **identify**. Similar or slightly older children, even social media "stars" who've experienced cyberbullying are great representatives. "Influencers" can get bullied, is it not just "me"? An adult who gives a speech has a noticeably lower impact.

These representatives can explain the risks, long term impact and possible **punishable facts**. Offenders and victims might believe anything that happens online doesn't have real life repercussions, they should be made aware. Insults with image and text, racism, discrimination, and sexism are all prosecutable.

Educating **how to respond**, as a victim, but also the bystanders. Encourage bystanders to take a clear position. Make it **safe and okay to report** at school or with trustees (see circle of trust), online report buttons are a start. Part of this should be learning to **collect evidence**. Removing negative material is easier, but a trigger. Confronting the offender with proof is a more effective method to stop the bullying.



Teach children how to behave online, in general and with each other. You cannot prohibit children from testing boundaries, but you can help them do it safely, anonymously... e.g., take sensitive pictures unrecognizably, check the background for references and so on.

Work on an individual level, if necessary, involve the parents, but this is no guarantee for success.

A) Circle of trust

There is a definite barrier to talk about cyberbullying. Admitting your victim status is painful. Even within a loving relationship, the victim might not want to burden their loved ones. Therefore, creating a circle of trust is essential. People in this circle can be family, but don't have to be.

The godchild system is an option, where older children introduce others into a new peer group. This first contact can become a trustee. The stronger the trust, the better. The trustee must be willing to **listen** and intervene, not blame. If you overreact, the victim might shut down. **Encouraging social relations** helps to create a circle of trust and this in itself is already a protective layer.

In addition, the creation of routine, talking about these issues, is one way to lower the threshold. Circular questions may work as well. Ask indirectly: do you know anyone, have you seen...? This opens the conversation and you can point them in the right direction.

B) Main protective factors

Bullying is so multifaceted that when facing intervention, to get some clarity all the parties involved must be heard. Risk factors which tend to overlap both are the following:

- Lack of support from people they trust
- Troublesome family situation: neglect, lack of affection...
- Less evolved social skills which can be caused by infinite reasons

It is important to note that none of these are absolute. There are numerous cases where everything seems to be fine, yet people still become bullies/victims. Also, online behaviour may differ from the real world.

Secondly a person can be both victim and offender, being a bully does not exclude from being targeted or the other way around.

Gender related behaviour: experts report ambiguous results on this topic; it is impossible to conclude whether boys might be more physical, or girls rely on mental games.

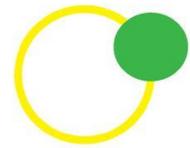
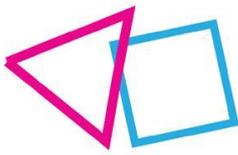
Having a social safety net (someone to trust, to talk to) is beneficial to all.

Advice to minors: if you wouldn't dare to do something offline, you shouldn't do it online either.

What seldom works: posters, adults preaching and explaining the dangers of cyberbullying.

What might work:

- **Educate** appropriate online **behaviour**



- **Discussing** and analysing different situations in a group tends to have a higher impact. Social behaviour is largely shaped by peers. This helps them discover what others think and gives them the opportunity to adapt, question their own norms.
- Develop **empathy**, foster social skills, raise **awareness** for online dangers, but also for the probable (long-term) impact of cyberbullying.
- Strengthen **resilience** & tolerance: dealing with stress or negative events, how to bounce back.
- Teach bystanders to take a stance, even in private, to not just remain indifferent.

C) Opinions on adult supervision/media limitation

A complete media ban is unanimously considered a bad idea. People always find a way. **Limiting the time** spent on devices however should be negotiated according to the age of the child and mutually respected. This may adapt as they grow, develop more skills and knowledge.

Under parental supervision, the child consciously delegates some of the responsibility to the parent, this should be placed with the child. As rules are set, lack of supervision may be a concession, the trust in this cannot be broken to maintain a healthy and honest relation. Excursions and family **quality time** are a valuable alternative to the 'lost' screen time.

Involve young people in prevention and education of adults, e.g., introducing Tik Tok to parents who can't follow the rapid media evolution.

3.6 Other suggestions for the video game.

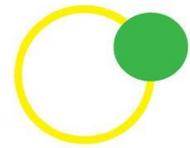
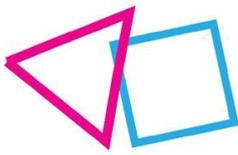
As in the previous section, this epigraph includes some general ideas -mostly from the experts- for the video game that need to be discussed, but they are not a guide of its future development. There should be **no right or wrong answers**, just paths to follow which develop the character in a certain way. Levelling up doesn't go in a linear fashion but branches out. *Throughout the game the avatar leans more towards good/evil, gains experience and so on.* Players are encouraged to (re)play a **variety of personas/roles**. Giving the opportunity to look at situations from a **different point of view**: the offender, bystander, or victim.

Allow players to identify with customizable "**avatars**" yet from a safe distance: **3rd person**. This analysis concludes the **lack of consistent stereotypes**, thus leaving the way open for the player to create their very own avatar.

Also, within the game a large variety of side characters would be beneficial. This is a great opportunity for RAYUELA to **break through stereotypes**. The big, scary, tattooed guy could turn into a helpful bystander whereas a charismatic, lovely lady is the devil in disguise.

Addition of a "**report/help**" **RAYUELA button** which shows tools for help and support, a way out: can be pressed whenever the player is in distress, wants to skip a scenario or simply believes a report is required. Sometimes it is easier to write, so that would be possible here.

1. Maybe earn bonus points later for resolving the situation later



2. Similar: “ask the parents” option, to encourage this in real life

Credible situations:

- Stay within the **same age group** as the player
- Location specific social platforms (check most popular per region)
- Bystanders remain friends with the bully out of fear, gain popularity through association, have a high-status, socially powerful friend
- Staff has been victimised and suffered distress at the hands of school-aged bullies

Opportunities to perform additional tasks which provide excitement and adrenaline to keep the child engaged.

Eccentricity keeps returning in our findings and this might be an interesting addition to the game: a difference that can be changed (e.g., hairstyle, clothing) or one that cannot be such as a disability.

Including some disruptive elements might raise awareness (shock effect): suicide as a final cause = extreme but revealing? (Without recurrently (ab)using the term).

On the contrary, e.g., the inclusion of explicit images would be counterproductive.

Lastly the most obvious: test the game on young people.

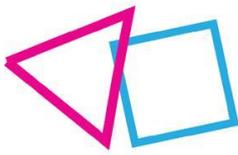
3.7 Conclusion and discussion

A variety of social networks are popular between both victims and offenders. The most used for cyberbullying seem to be Facebook when we look at victims' data, but in general other platforms are used too (WhatsApp, Messenger, Snapchat, Instagram etc.). According to experts every platform has its own vulnerability to cyberbullying, however the platforms mentioned the most are Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Facebook.

According to experts there is no typical offender or victim profile for cyberbullying. The situation at the moment of the perpetration and certain characteristics of the victim are more a pretence for the bully's actions. However, by looking at the victims' interviews, it seems they are typically vulnerable in the period in which the cyberbullying took place.

It seems that in most cases the victim and the offender already knew each other at school and/or as a (former) friend. This agrees with the statement of the experts that most of the time bullies are going to the same school, participating in the same hobby, or circulating the same environment. Only in rare cases the victim and the offender didn't know each other in advance and met online. According to experts cyberbullying indeed happens anonymously too, but deeper research reveals that the offenders are seldomly not part of the real environment and context of the victims.

Concerning the offenders there seem to be different situations: in some cases, the cyberbullying actions are a reaction of the offender to a frustrating, hurting behaviour of the victim. In other



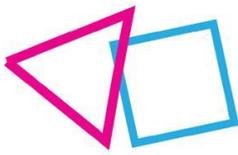
D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

cases, the offenders just do it for fun, without understanding what the consequences could be for the victim and for themselves.

Experts are convinced that most cyberbullying stems from previous offline bullying. This is also claimed by most of the victims which experience both online and face-to-face bullying. Even though online bullying can happen 24/7, the victims generally experience face-to-face bullying to be worse than cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying facts can vary in time, so we cannot find a general conclusion. The victims state that the harassments were prolonged over time, ranging from one week, to a month/several weeks up to a year. One victim even had to suffer this for 9 years. On the other hand, in the case of the offenders it can be considered as short-lasting events (one or a few days, some months). Experts however consider even one-time events to comply with the definition, as there is potential for repetition and online material might remain there forever. To conclude, cyberbullying might last from a single event to multiple years.

From the offenders interview it appears that punishment is still the most common way to handle cyberbullying cases. One point that should be considered for the future, is that punishment only not always works in the right way, as feelings of unfairness can arise, especially when cyberbullying is a reaction to something wrong the victim did or when more children are involved in the actions. Support measures to both victims and offenders should be better developed. Furthermore, prevention actions in schools should be enhanced too.



4. Analysis of interviews on human trafficking

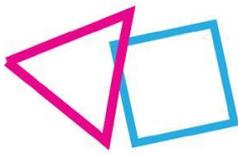
4.1 Introduction

In this section, we will discuss a specific form of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation: the “**loverboy phenomenon**”. It is a specifically hidden form of crime, due to its intricate nature, and unfortunately often remains under the radar of law enforcement and criminal policy. This is reflected by the fact that in the current project, several partners were unable to find any cases of this form of human trafficking in their respective territories. However, as will appear further down the text, according to experts it is not a rare form of crime. Rather, it is a very common and widespread problem in the entire European Union. A commonly used definition of the problem often used in literature is that of Bongers (2012):

Lover boys are human traffickers who deliberately make girls and/or boys emotionally dependent by (the promise of) entering into a love relationship and then - through coercion, (the threat of) violence or other acts of violence, extortion, fraud, deception, abuse arising from circumstantial predominance, abuse of a vulnerable position of these girls or boys - exploit them, usually in prostitution.

As it is foremost studied in Belgium and the Netherlands, where historically special attention has been given to this problem, the current text is based on data obtained from experts in the Belgian context. The data were obtained from 10 experts on the “loverboy phenomenon”. Experts had many different backgrounds, and included experts from law enforcement, victim services (in particular Ecpat and Payoke), and experts in the judiciary (prosecutors). The interview was guided by a topic list similar to that used for the other crimes studied in the RAYUELA project, but it was used as a guideline rather than a strict structure for the interview. This way, respondents could freely explain their view on the matter without being too restricted by the interviewer. Throughout the interview, a high degree of consistency was found in the narrative people put forth and thus a satisfying degree of saturation of the results was achieved.

The results are presented in a qualitative, descriptive way in the current text. For all topics addressed, the main points of agreement, but, importantly, also disagreement among experts are discussed, each time illustrated by quotes from the respondents themselves. In the first section, we discuss how the experts would define the “loverboy phenomenon” from their own professional point of view (apart from any legal definition), and potential trends in the phenomenon. This will be followed by a discussion of the typical victims of “loverboys” and the risk factors associated with them. Then, the typical offender characteristics and risk factors will be discussed. The following section will take a closer look at the process or modus operandi applied by offenders in order to gain control over the victim in order to sexually exploit them for monetary gain. This will be followed by a discussion on experts’ views on the prevention of “loverboys”. Finally, before arriving at a general conclusion, we will present some exemplary



illustrations from the scarce victim and offender interviews that have been conducted in Eastern Europe.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Definition and trends

Even though the “loverboy” phenomenon in the Netherlands and Belgium is a well-known problem and widely documented, there is **no specific legal definition** for this phenomenon; all instances of the “loverboy” phenomenon fall under the wider scope of “*human trafficking with the purpose of exploitation, prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation*”. This way, the legal definition does not discern the “loverboy” phenomenon from any other form of human trafficking. For this reason, we asked a variety of experts how they would define the problem as they understand it through their everyday practice. Wide agreement existed between experts in the fields of prosecution, law enforcement, academics and victim/offender services. Below are some examples:

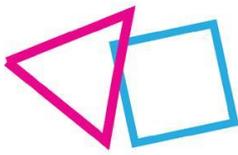
Acquiring power over a person with a view to make money on them. The person does not need to be pretty, but needs to be willing and able to be made dependent. Certainly, in the case of “loverboys”, the aspect of control is predominant.

The basis is to create a situation in which psychological, emotional as well as social pressure can be exercised so that the victim can be exploited. In the grooming stage, the social isolation process plays a pivotal role.

Consistent with existing literature, the definitions given by the respondents are more precise than the legal definition of human trafficking of minors for the purpose of sexual exploitation, with the main central elements being the **social isolation** of the victim in combination with the exercise of control through (emotional and financial) **dependency**, with a view to **sexually exploit** the victim for **monetary gain**. In line with literature, respondents indicate that this dependency can be generated in many different ways, and can consist of giving gifts, shelter, romance, money, or anything else the victim is missing (e.g., Smeaton, 2013). This way, loverboys cunningly adapt to the individual needs of the victim.

A result of this individualized approach is that it is very difficult to discern different types of “loverboys”, as their strategy and behaviours are adapted to the individual needs of the victim. However, some respondents do indicate that they see a difference in the time it takes a “loverboy” to initiate contact and move to the exploitation stage. In this sense, and similar to online grooming, a “**fast track**” and a “**slow track**” can be discerned. In the fast track, “loverboys” may start to exploit the victim in a matter of hours, whereas in the slow track “loverboys” generate a dependency and commitment slowly over time, and exploitation only takes place after a prolonged period of time. The following quote is illustrative of this:

(Types). Often, the time between initial contact and exploitation is short (48h). The other way is the long way, where a relationship is built, followed by exploitation a few weeks later.



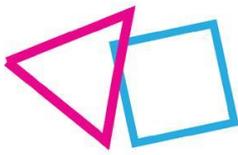
It was also indicated that in the fast-track approach, coercive approaches such as the use of violence or threats (e.g., to release pictures to family) are more predominant than in the slow track approach. In the latter, coercion is also used, but in a more subtle way: through the emotional relationship between victim and offender - a form of **emotional coercion/blackmail**. As will be discussed below, this often suffices to get the victim to do the offenders' bidding. This finding nuances the definition of the "loverboys" phenomenon described above somewhat. In the remainder of the present text, we will concentrate on the slow track approach, given that the fast-track approach resembles more a specific form of sexting, whereas experts usually refer to the slow track approach when talking about "loverboys".

When respondents are asked about the trends in the phenomenon, there is general agreement that this is almost impossible to evaluate for a variety of reasons. First, it is a generally **hidden form of crime**, and it is not easy to detect potential cases of "loverboys", precisely because of the personal emotional or romantic relationship between victim and offender. In this context, any fluctuations in registered crimes may be a reflection of the **political/prosecutorial climate** in a given country. In this sense, the problem has been a political and prosecutorial priority in Belgium, the Netherlands, and UK, for more than a decade, whereas in many other European countries, no registered cases are found, which is likely, as many respondents indicate, the result of a kind of **taboo that surrounds the phenomenon locally or non-recognition of the phenomenon**. It simply is a difficult topic, and not every country seems to be ready (yet) to recognize the problem. Consider the following quotes from respondents:

[...] By now we are recognized as specialists on this topic in the EU because we [Belgium] are, next to the Netherlands, the only place to approach this as a specific problem in its own right. This is especially regrettable, given the fact that Europol has indicated as early as 2017-2018 that the "loverboys" technique is the most commonly used form of sexual exploitation throughout Europe. [...] I would say that it is a phenomenon on the rise, especially in Eastern Europe and Spain – just go check with local NGO's. Europe is entirely being plundered by "loverboys", the victims of which are often prostituted in Western Europe.

The "loverboys" technique actually has been around for a long time, for example in prostitution in Eastern Europe. Some prosecutorial offices do not really pay attention to it, as victims are often people who run away from a youth institution and are labelled as "problem children", whilst there may well be a "loverboy" behind it. Recognizing and acknowledging the problem is of the utmost importance.

The above quotes underline the important finding that the **"loverboys" technique is omnipresent throughout Europe, but often remains undetected and unreported**, for a variety of reasons, including the political climate, the difficulties associated with the identification of the problem, and the lack of clear legal definitions to combat this particularly heinous form of crime which often affects the most vulnerable people in society. Further evidence that supports this claim is the recent joint action conducted by EUROPOL (2020), in which the phenomenon has been proven to exist in all EU countries involved therein with 388 arrests and the identification of 249 potential victims in 12 European countries. However, the recognition of the problem is underway, as is the



case in Belgium, but **a lot more still needs to be done in order to sensitize local authorities and law enforcement agencies and raise awareness of this particular form of crime.**

By means of conclusion, it can be stated that the “loverboys” problem covers a wide variety of behaviours, adapted to the individual situation of the victim, all of which are guided by the principles of social isolation, dependence, and exploitation for the purpose of monetary gain. Experts indicate that there are most likely **no regional differences throughout Europe, that the problem is widespread in Europe, and that much more is needed in order to put it on the agenda of local authorities.**

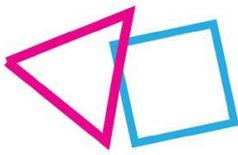
4.2.2 The typical victim

In this section we will discuss what experts say about the victims of “loverboys”. Even though they all agree that there may be a wide variety of victim characteristics due to the nature of the crime in which the “loverboys” targets specific vulnerabilities of the victim, some common elements can be found. These are, however, of a rather general nature, and can manifest themselves in a variety of ways, and may be more general risk factors for a multitude of undesirable outcomes, such as substance abuse and other forms of crime. In this section, we will discuss the most common victim characteristics the experts revealed.

A first important characteristic is **gender**. The majority of reported cases of human trafficking of minors for the purpose of sexual exploitation concerns **girls**. However, as is the case with online grooming, **the relative absence of male victims in registered crime should not be interpreted as the absence of male victims**. Especially for this hidden form of crime, socio-cultural gender roles may impede male victims from stepping forward and reporting their abuse. For this reason, we deem it important for RAYUELA to focus explicitly on boys and vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQIA community in particular, as this group displays additional vulnerabilities in terms of sexual and identity development, and are more often prone to face problems relating to attachment. For the purpose of illustration, one respondent reported that:

The abuse of boys is, however, very much present. There are a variety of cultural factors that inhibit them from reporting the crime. Even though the proportion of boys might be less than girls, it certainly should not be ignored. Also, the LGBTQIA community is a minority and easy to dominate. They often feel excluded from society, are not able to show their identity and go look for contacts online. This is an additional risk factor that entails more risky behaviours that may put them into contact with potential exploiters.

When we asked respondents about the **ethnic origin** of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, the majority consensus existed about the fact that victims can have any **nationality cultural differences** associated with certain ethnic origins, which may facilitate becoming a victim of human trafficking. In this sense, respondents make reference to Roma and Islamic backgrounds. Regarding Roma, it is said that sexuality is something much looser than in Western cultures, thus providing a cultural catalyst for the sexual exploitation of minors. As to Islam, respondents reported that in Islam girls have to remain virgin before they marry. This makes it easier to pressurize them into prostitution through a sense of shame and fear of



repercussions of family members should they ever find out². The following quote illustrates these points rather well:

They [offenders] often look for people with an Islamic or Roma origin. In Islam, it is a rule that girls need to remain virgin before marriage. This makes it easy to exploit them with, for example, pictures or after losing their virginity. In Roma culture, standards relating to sex are pretty loose. For example, it is quite normal for them to lend a daughter to someone else in order to pay off a debt. They relativize everything rather strongly. Hence, vulnerable Roma youngsters are very easy prey for human traffickers.

When discussing **age**, respondents do not really believe there to be a “typical” age at which youngsters can become victim of human trafficking, other than stating that it can start really early in a youngster’s life, reporting having seen cases with victims as young as 12 years old.

Regarding the **socio-economic situation** of the young people, respondents indicate that it can be a factor, but not always is. Especially for those young people coming from deprived social classes, the monetary gain may be an attractor to the potential victim. This is, however, more so the case with foreign girls than for Belgian girls. One respondent state this as follows:

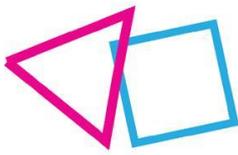
They still earn a lot of money in their eyes. Especially the foreign girls that even have to give up almost all of their earnings still earn more than they would in their country of origin. They have a reference point. Recruitment also occurs through the “loverboys” technique, but it occurs more often in person.

Whilst this does hold in many cases, some respondents indicate that this need not always be the case: children from families coming from **well-endowed social strata can also be recruited as victims of human trafficking** – and this seems to be especially the case in Brussels. This suggests the existence of an underlying condition that may be associated more with lower SES than higher SES, which respondents describe as poor family ties or lack of family/social support. So, whereas socio-economic status *may* be an indicator that someone is more at risk, this is not always the case. The following quotes illustrate this point:

In Brussels, for example, we see the same phenomenon with girls from rich families, but families in which the parents are never home, for example always working, thus not giving enough attention to their children. So, even though in Antwerp victims often come from disadvantaged families, the very root of the problem [attachment problems] is basically the very same.

The problem of attachment/family bond is a very recurrent theme. This occurs in wealthy families as well though. The percentage may be lower, but the driving force remains the same: a lack of social intimacy. In principle, someone from a very functional family can also become a victim, but this will be much harder as it is much more difficult to isolate them from their social environment.

² However, none of these claims should be generalized. Whilst such gender roles and norms may exist in some Roma or Muslim families, they certainly do not exist in all of them. Nor does the existence of such norms or perceptions of gender roles automatically entail sexual exploitation.



So even though socio-economic status seems to be related to human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, it is foremost a proxy for a common underlying problem: **problems with attachment**, in the family and/or the wider social circle of a potential victim. In this sense, it is important to note that there was wide consensus among experts that this probably is **the single most important element in any case of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation through the “loverboy” technique**, one which can be exacerbated easily by other (or secondary) risk factors (which will be discussed below). The following quotes highlight the importance of attachment in the process of recruitment:

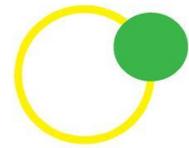
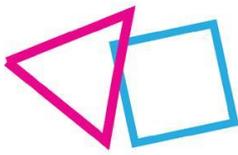
It often concerns vulnerable youngsters (“youngsters with baggage”), they often display attachment problems early on in childhood. For example, if you have been repeatedly beaten as a child, you will internalize this as normal. So being beaten in a relationship is not so abnormal to them. They are at a heightened risk of becoming victims, because offenders can more easily bond with them. Especially if they find themselves in youth institutions, a family context will be lacking. Strangely enough, offenders are very apt in detecting such issues.

The common thread is a lack of love and secure attachment to parents. They [victims] live in the conviction that no one cares for them or compliments them. The attachment problems take a very central place. This lack of social cohesion, affection, shared activities etc. makes them especially vulnerable to the affection the offender offers them.

Attachment problems being at the very core of this form of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, the experts mention a wide array of additional factors that can result from or, inversely, reinforce this lack of attachment. One such factor is having an **institutional history**, either for youth protection purposes, e.g., in the case of abuse in the family, or of a punitive nature in the case where other crimes have been committed by the young people. These people are especially vulnerable to “loverboys”, as they are even more socially isolated when in an institution, thus fortifying any pre-existing attachment problems. In addition, while in an institution, it is very difficult for young people to foster meaningful social bonds. This makes people who leave or run away from an institution a privileged target of “loverboys”. As an illustration, take the following quote:

In institutions, they change counsellors and places too often. There is no anchor point, the feeling of belonging and family is constantly broken so that they are unable to engender a real trusting relationship. Institutional life makes them even more feel like a number, it takes away their individual identity. All this makes them even more vulnerable for affection.

This way, an institutional history is a very specific element that contributes to the feeling of missing something, a lack of affection or meaningful bonds with others. We also asked respondents about the other factors that may contribute to this feeling of social isolation, based on the adverse childhood experiences questionnaire developed by the WHO (2018). There is wide consensus among respondents that, indeed, all of the mentioned factors but few can increase the risk of victimization through social isolation, but certainly not all are present in every case. This



goes to show once more that the victims of “loverboys” are diverse, and that no single “typical” profile can be derived. According to experts, any, or any combination of, the following can be considered risk factors: **neglect** (emotional, cognitive, material), **dysfunctional family**, **exposure to violence in the family**, **past abuse or violence** and **violent peers**. The factors that, according to the experts, play less a role are: forced marriage, being witness of violence in the community, and exposure to war or collective violence.

In addition, all the factors that may obstruct the formation of meaningful social bonds can be considered distal factors that may intensify the **proximate cause of attachment problems**. “Loverboys” cunningly tap into these feelings of non-belonging, of missing something, or of being misunderstood by seducing the victims, giving them complements, buying them gifts etc. in the grooming phase (see further: modus operandi), thus forming an emotional bond with the victim which thus becomes dependent on the “loverboys” for these emotional needs. One factor that has been repeatedly mentioned by experts that may further put people at risk, is an **impaired cognitive development**. The reasoning behind this is that people who are cognitively impaired, often are not able to discern the false promises of the “loverboys”, and are more prone to unsuspectedly accept their alleged love and attention for them. Even though this factor, once more, is not a necessary condition, it most certainly is a contributing factor whenever present. An illustration:

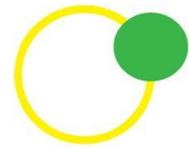
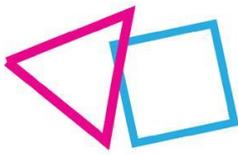
Girls and boys with a cognitive impairment are certainly more vulnerable to exploitation and rape, this should certainly not be neglected. This is definitely an additional risk factor, because these people usually have more difficulties wording their thoughts or picking up on signs something may be wrong.

Thus, even though no specific risk profile for victims can be established, on main driver behind human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation for monetary gain emerges: attachment problems. Interestingly, attachment issues are a well-established risk factor for crime as such, it even is one of the main components of Hirschi’s (1969) infamous social bond theory, but as our results show it can be equally so a risk factor for victimization by “loverboys”.

Takeaway points for RAYUELA project:

- If victim scenarios are to be included in the video game, they should focus primarily on attachment problems, and the factors related to that. As these can be quite diverse, this creates an opportunity for the serious game to diversify the profiles of the victims incorporated in the game.
- Even though most of the known victims are female, the serious game should not exclusively focus on female victims but include boys as well, as this group is also targeted by traffickers, but far less represented in official records.
- Special attention should be awarded to groups that may be particularly at risk of forming attachment problems or that may be searching for their identity, in particular the LGBTQIA community.

4.2.3 The typical offender



In this section the results regarding the “typical” offender will be discussed. Recall that in the literature review, we have discussed the “master narrative” that surrounds human trafficking, often depicting the offender as a creepy professional criminal, operating on a large and organized scale, which lures a powerless, vulnerable victim into forced prostitution and forcing the victim to remain in his service through a variety of coercive methods (Snadjr, 2013). In this section, we will offer a more nuanced view of the human trafficker – or the “loverboy” for the purpose of the present text – as it is clear the master narrative is not entirely accurate³. First of all, wide consensus exists among respondents that in the case of “loverboys”, the offender is most likely to be an attractive young man, rather than a creepy professional criminal. Take the following quote:

Offenders have a sixth sense to pick victims, and they are very able at this both online and offline. They are easy going, sweet-talking guys that can easily bend people to their will. [...] In terms of demographic profile, they often have a different ethnic background, but are born in Belgium, went to school in Belgium, and thus definitely have been given certain values.

The typical offender has a certain subcultural prestige, they are often the popular guys on the block. [...] It often concerns the typical charming “knight on the white horse”.

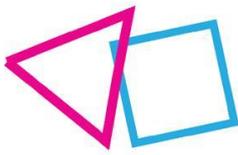
As these two quotes indicate, **the offender is more often than not an attractive prince charming, rather than a creepy organized criminal**. A similar point can be made with regard to the offender’s age. It is rather unlikely that a young girl will consider someone who is too old as anything close to a prince charming. During the interviews, it became clear that they, indeed, are not that old, but rather **young men ranging from 20-30 years old on average**, at least when the victim is a minor. For example:

Most often, offenders are in their early 20’s to 27/28 years old.

The oldest “loverboy” we had was 30 years old. On average, they are in their early 20’s.

This way, the picture often drawn in popular media and political debates often does not hold, and offenders often are attractive young guys that are able to sweet talk the victim into an exploitative relationship. Regarding gender, the offenders most often are **men**. However, a very interesting point emerges here as well. Some respondents indicate that **girls can be involved on the offending part of the spectrum as well**. That is, sometimes girls who have been recruited by a “loverboy” take up a more active role themselves, by recruiting other girls for the “loverboy”. This way, they still make the same money, but need to engage sexually with less men than they usually would have to. So, whilst it is true that most “original” offenders are men, women should not be excluded as offenders in RAYUELA’s serious game. The following quotes illustrate this point nicely:

³ By no means we intend to state that cases which reflect this master narrative do not exist. It merely serves the purpose to nuance this image, which should, in turn, help in identifying potential cases of human trafficking more accurately as this remains a very hidden crime.



There are girls who end up in prostitution at 12, and rise in the hierarchy later on in order not to stay in trouble. Then they end up in a kind of schizophrenic situation: they started as a victim, but to improve their situation they start to commit crimes themselves. This is not the case for the majority, however. Then there are others who have been victim and that have seen how much money is involved in it, and just start on their own once they step out of forced prostitution. The line has been crossed already, and they just continue to prostitute themselves for their own account. This shows how much they are psychologically hurt.

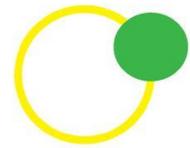
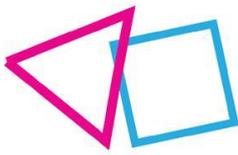
We often see girls who find themselves at the borderline of being victims and recruiting victims themselves. Sometimes they are forced to do so. Often, they need to reach a certain quota, and often they are expected to do things they do not like to do. For this reason, they recruit friends, to either reach their quota or to do the things they themselves don't want to do.

This indicates the particularly precarious situation young girls in the hands of “loverboys” find themselves in: **on the one hand they are undeniably victims, whilst on the other they commit crimes themselves, thus contributing to the very crime they are victim of themselves.** This is an important point. As we discussed earlier, human trafficking is a very hidden form of crime, and even when troublesome behaviour is detected, often girls will be considered to be “problematic girls”. It can be assumed that this circularity or the overlap between victimization and offending even further complicates the detection and recognition of them as being victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

When we asked respondents about the **ethnic origin** of the offenders, there was wide agreement that in most cases it concerned **Belgian offenders, albeit often, but not limited to, second or third generation immigrants.** Apart from the origin as such, respondents did indicate that the ethnic origin may go along with certain cultural/religious differences that may have an impact on the susceptibility of a potential offender to take up human trafficking as a viable means to make money, usually moderated by how they perceive women and their associated cultural or religious roles. For example:

Their [offenders'] specific situation at home may have as an effect that they look upon certain women in a certain way. Take someone with a Turkish background. He is more likely to choose a Western girl, who dresses in short skirts, as a victim because they don't consider it normal for a woman to dress in this way.

[Offenders often are] Belgians with an immigration background, they often are second or third generation that come from another cultural background. For example, in Roma culture, violence is tolerated, sexual exploitation is tolerated, so they don't have any problem with it. Others resent Western women, for example certain Muslims, and want to punish these women because they dress sexy, because they have the same rights, and they don't accept that. These ideas often stem from a specific cultural background and upbringing.



It is important to note that even though such cultural differences may exist, this certainly is not the rule; by no means should this claim be generalized in the sense that all Roma or Muslims will do so. A more important element seems to be their **upbringing** at home. Offenders are often raised in an environment that is tolerant towards violence and abuse, and have not been taught restraint. One respondent refers to offenders as “little gods”:

Young guys that have often been overprotected during their upbringing. They are raised as “little gods” who can do anything they want. They often do not have a sound education or a job, and find other ways to easily gain money. There are many different cultural backgrounds among them, such as African, Albanian, even Spanish. They are all raised like a little god, who can do as he pleases, and never have been taught restraint.

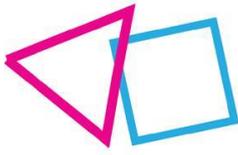
The situation at home can thus have a significant impact on what a potential offender sees as an acceptable way to obtain monetary goals, as well as impact on how he (or she) perceives potential victims. A specific factor which may further bolster this, are **popular cultural influences**. Earlier, we noted that offenders are often considered to be the “popular guys on the block” in the sense that they have a certain esteem in certain subcultural environments. **One such environment that seems to be intimately linked to human trafficking offenders (“loverboys”) is the hip-hop scene.** This scene in particular considers monetary success as an important objective, and is quite prone to violence and less favourable images of women, and can thus further bolster specific values and norms that may justify the sexual exploitation of women. One specific example in Belgium would be the rappers Moreno and Paraturk:

They often look up to their idols. Take Moreno and Paraturk, for example. Those are two pimps, and they are glorified by masses of youth. These things further normalize this [sexual exploitation]. Boef is another such Dutch rapper who is not free of crime.

Again, this should not be taken as a necessary condition for offending, but it can most certainly be a facilitator if it is present in combination with other risk factors. Finally, we also found wide consensus among respondents that the biggest driving force behind the “loverboy phenomenon” is **purely financial gain**. They are in it for the money, and they resort to illegal means to obtain it because they have been raised and live in an environment in which this is considered as a viable path to success. Take the following quotes:

As such, there is nothing necessarily “wrong” with these guys, but they just choose to sit on their lazy butts and let girls work them. They often still live with their mother, and have a “tough guy” life outside of that. They choose the easy money, and it actually is a lot of money too. Not much can prevent recidivism because of this. [...] The biggest risk is that, once you have tasted it, it is difficult to let it go. Heaps of money can be made, and it is super easy (no costs and relatively little risk) in comparison to other crimes such as drug dealing.

They often earn 2000 euros a night from one single girl. Try to tell them to go fill shelves at the local supermarket for 1600 euros a month, you won’t get far. Often, they don’t have a diploma or education, so what are they going to do you think?



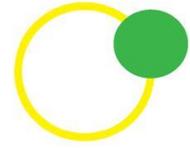
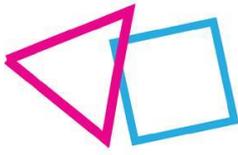
So, whilst the main driver behind “loverboys” is quite similar to the goals many people in society strive for, there is a **disconnect between the goals and the means to achieve it**. This resonates closely with strain theoretical approaches, where individuals do aspire the same goals as society in general (financial success, prestige), but they choose other means, illegal ones, to obtain it (e.g., Agnew, 2006). Whilst most people in society (and even most of those with a similar background to actual “loverboys”) refrain from using illegal means to obtain societal success, a variety of factors may render these illegal means acceptable to the “loverboy” (which would be Merton’s “innovation” approach). However, which factors these are is to be seen on a case-to-case basis; they will be different for every “loverboy”. And, as may already appear from the above discussion, the mere presence of (a combination of) such risk factors by no means always entails offending. **Respondents continuously stressed that even though the factors discussed *may* be indicative of “loverboys”, they remain very broad and general risk factors for a variety of unhealthy or antisocial behaviours.** This makes the identification of “loverboys” a very difficult enterprise, mostly left to **coincidence**. As one respondent put it, noticing something is wrong in such a situation is more of a gut feeling than solid science or criminal investigation.

Takeaway points of RAYUELA project:

- The most important takeaway point for RAYUELA’s serious game is that the offenders should be depicted as young, often attractive guys, who can be perceived as to be successful and popular (e.g., many friends). This way, RAYUELA could contribute to debunking the master narrative of the “older creepy criminal” and shift attention to the dangers associated with “loverboys”. The main message should be: if it looks too good to be true that this very popular guy contacts me out of the blue and wants to be friends...then this most likely *is* actually too good to be true.
- From the interviews it appeared that “loverboys” are often Belgians with a different ethnic background. However, we do not recommend to focus too much on this aspect, as it may reinforce certain stereotypes, and may thus direct attention away from the many “loverboys” that do not have a different ethnic background. In this context, the ethnic origin of the “loverboys” should be diversified as much as possible.
- A connection can be made with popular culture as well, especially the hip hop and rap scenes. This could be easily integrated in, for example, a fictitious “loverboy” profile.
- Particular attention should be given to the main driver for sexual exploitation: monetary gain. Players should be made aware of the fact that when it comes to money, they have not to take any responsibility for the financial situation (e.g., debts) of other people.
- Finally, whilst the majority of (known) offenders are male, female offenders can be included as well, as girls will often try to recruit other victims for the “loverboy” in their own social circle.

4.2.4. Modus operandi of “loverboys”

In this section, we will discuss the modus operandi of “loverboys”. It soon appeared from the expert interviews that “loverboys” are very adaptive to the individual situation of the victim, and



therefore will **adapt the specific modus operandi to align with the victim they have in mind**. However, some common steps can be identified in the entire process from screening for potential victims to actually sexually exploiting them (e.g., Smeaton, 2013). The discussion in this section will be structured along these common steps.

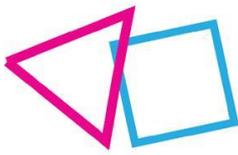
The first step is the phase of **screening** or potential targets in order to establish an initial contact. “loverboys” usually do not randomly select their victims, but do so in a highly targeted way. It has been noted before that **they have a “sixth sense” to single out girls who find themselves in a precarious situation and are insecure**. Respondents indicate that this stage is heavily facilitated by the introduction of the **internet**. Offenders have far more access to potential victims than ever before. They will often select multiple potential victims at the time, and go with the first one that actually takes the bait. The others they drop. As one respondent put it:

They know very well how to identify the girls that are vulnerable and can be manipulated. They have an entire pool of potential victims and pick those that are most easily manipulated, the rest they drop. With the internet, they have access to far more potential victims.

Respondents thus indicate that the **internet facilitates the selection and screening of victims enormously**. In the “old days” potential offenders needed to select victims in real life, making the entire process way more visible to the entourage of the victim and potential significant others. As a consequence, the problem could be more easily controlled. The internet renders this entire process hidden. It further diminishes the social control that can be exerted on potential victims. In addition, youngsters are often very susceptible to their online image, and they will often present themselves in positive ways, post much information online (which offenders subsequently use to establish a connection), and accept friend requests from anyone who looks good as many friends and “likes” are considered to be a proxy of individual success. One respondent relates this especially to the phenomenon of “influencers”:

Also, something typical are those “influencers”, all girls want to be one, and post photos in sexy clothes etc., but offenders are looking at their profiles to hey... Often they will just add total strangers to their friends, just because they look good. Likes and friends are an indicator for success.

Once contact has thus been established, the offender will start to **groom** the victim, by **generating a feeling of mutual interests and addressing the emotional needs of the victim**. He will often actively listen to the victim, show interest and understanding for their situation and needs, will often give compliments and gifts in order to gain the trust and interest of the victim. This process is again largely **facilitated by the internet**, because, as respondents indicate, potential victims often put online what is on their mind. For example, if a victim would post that she or he “is feeling annoyed by her tough parents”, this creates a very easy lead for potential offenders. The same goes with photos: often potential offenders gather a lot of information about the victims based on their photos, which often disclose the victims’ interests and hobbies, or even more intimate life events. Take the following examples:



Often, offenders will also pretend they already know the victim, for example by saying “I’ve spoken to you one day at that riding school, solely on the basis of a picture the victim posted of her riding a horse at that riding school.

It is just so much easier to commit a girl to you if you can constantly contact her [on social media], and if you can control them through those media. Unfortunately, girls often perceive this to be an ultimate show of affection and interest in them.

In the third step, the offender will engage the victim in an **affectionate relationship**. This often goes along with the **social isolation** of the victim – which often already feels isolated, shows of affection and the creation of a feeling of being meant for each other. For example:

An important element is the creation of an “us-feeling”, a feeling of togetherness. For example, if the girl has financial problems, the offender will often pretend to have financial problems as well. They are in the same boat, and will find a way out together. In later stages the offender may ask the girl to prostitute herself in order to be able to take a trip together later, for example.

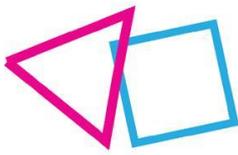
In this step, often offenders will equally try to **isolate** the victims from their family and social network, in order to further strengthen their grip on their victims. One respondent put this as follows:

These girls feel lost and look for someone that loves them. “Loverboys” cunningly play into that, and overload them with compliments etc. Family or parents that are sceptical of the relationship are excluded, “loverboys” will drive a wedge between the girl and her family, until she runs away for example, and the girl is left with only the “loverboy” and often his criminal friends in her social network.

The fourth step involves **sexual intercourse** between the “loverboy” and the victim. Respondents indicate that sex comes quite naturally to youngsters these days, and for many victims or potential victims of “loverboys”, **sex is often considered to be a form of giving attention and showing that the offender cares about them**. This, in combination with the sweet talk of the offender, makes having sex a quite normal step in the eyes of the victim. Consider the following quote:

Often, sex is considered to be nothing more than a tool to get attention, and this already happens from a very early age. They [victims] do not necessarily relate it to intimacy. This is an extremely important fact, that sex is disconnected from genuine intimacy. [KP]

In the fifth step, the “loverboy” **habituates the victim to prostitution** thus convincing her to **work as a prostitute** (step six). At this stage, the victim is emotionally invested in the “loverboy” and isolated from her social environment, often truly believing the “loverboy” is the only person who “understands her” or “gets her”. As indicated above, often the “loverboy” will create a sensation of a shared precarious financial situation, and the victim, who often already has a flawed moral conception about sexuality, is often surprisingly willing to help out by having sex with other men. This goes along with (false) promises of a better life afterwards and working towards a future together. Interestingly, and contrary to the popular vision of human trafficking enshrined in the master narrative, this does not necessarily go along with coercive measures, the victims more



often than not willingly prostitute herself to help the offender. Some illustrations may help to clarify this:

A typical situation would be an offender who calls a girl from his lazy couch and tells her to work harder because he wants new Nike shoes that cost 800 euros. The girls often will do this voluntarily, in order to please the offender. The sense of norms of the victims is completely distorted at this time.

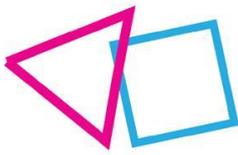
The most important quality of “loverboys” is that they don’t really need to pressurize or coerce the victim, because they are in love with them. The victims are emotionally dependent on the “loverboy”. If there were to be coercion or blackmail, they would lose this emotional dependency of the victim.

Once the victim is convinced to prostitute herself, the “loverboy” will often positively reinforce this behaviour by giving the victim compliments, attention, money or presents. The final result is that the victim is now stuck in a **continuous situation of abuse**, which constitutes the seventh and final step. Whilst it is possible that coercion is used at this stage (for example threatening to put movie clips of the victim having sex online), most respondents agree that it is not usually necessary to exert control given the romantic nature of the relationship between victim and offender. Victims often remain with their “loverboy” out of fear of being left alone. However, this does not mean there is no violence present at all. In many cases violence is present, be it not necessarily as a means to coerce the victim⁴. Unfortunately, victims often take this violence to be a form of giving them attention, which is “better than nothing”, and let the offender off the hook for it. Consider the following illustration:

Often this goes along with a fear of being abandoned, this dependence. Often the fear is so strong that they do not dare to walk away or do anything about their situation. It even happens that an offender beats up a girl, simply because he feels like it. Sometimes he will give her 100 euros afterwards, and this makes it ok for the victim.

We will conclude this section by illustrating how strong this bond can be on the part of the victim, and how difficult it must be to try to convince victims to leave their prostitution life behind. When talking to a prosecutor, she told a story about a court case in which a “loverboy” was being tried. In the courtroom, several of his victims, who all prostituted themselves for him and who were subject to violence by him, were present. At various moments, the victims of the “loverboy” were cheering the “loverboy” when the accusations were read out. The prosecutor also recalled several of his victims making heart shapes with their hands, or throwing kisses at him. So even in a context where it should be abundantly clear that crimes are being committed, victims still stay loyal to their aggressor. This goes to show the depth of the problem with “loverboys”, and clearly indicates that prevention or sensitization of this particularly heinous crime will be a daunting task.

⁴ Some respondents do note that coercion through threats of making public certain pictures or movies occurs in the cases where a loverboy is not able to fully bind the victim to him in an emotional way, or in the fast-track approach in a similar way to the phenomenon of sexting.



Takeaway points for RAYUELA project:

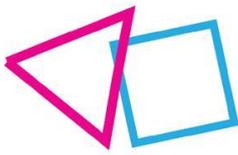
- The main message here would be to stay off the radar of “loverboys” to begin with. As they recruit potential victims in a rather opportunistic way, making yourself “less visible” to them could be a powerful prevention strategy. In this sense, players can be educated about their privacy settings in an interactive way. This could shield them from too much exposure to potential offenders.
- In a similar vein, it ought to be made clear to respondents that what they post on the internet can be seen by the entire world, and once it exists on the internet, it can easily start leading a life of its own and maybe attract unwanted individuals. The adage “do not do on the internet what you would not do in the real world” is an important message in this respect.
- It logically follows that this kind of education can also be extended to who exactly they accept as friends. Not every sweet-talking, charming young prince is a desirable contact, and friend requests from total strangers should always prompt a minimal degree of suspicion.
- An interesting and creative strategy would be to scare potential offenders away from certain profiles, for example by adding local law enforcement or other agencies to the contact list of the player. It is very likely that a “loverboy” screening a potential victim will abstain from taking contact if he sees the potential target has a direct connection with, for example, the police. In the game this could even be made out to “look cool”, thus inciting people to copy this behaviour.

4.2.5 Prevention of victimization by “loverboys”.

We also asked the experts about their thoughts on the prevention of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation using the widespread “loverboy” technique. **The general tone in the interviews was that this particular form of crime is difficult to prevent, due to its romantic, emotional nature.** As indicated above when discussing the modus operandi, offenders usually control victims through emotional and sometimes material dependence, and victims often lack the will to leave the loverboy because of the intimate connection they (think they) have with the offender. In addition, as discussed above, victims often have specific personal histories that may be conducive to looking for attention and success outside of the legal sphere, and prevention automatically becomes more difficult in such a context. The result of all of this is that this form of crime is difficult to prevent, but equally difficult to proactively investigate. For this reason, a recurrent message from the experts was that the focus should be on a more **general prevention**:

From the point of view of prevention, this really is a problem. We should focus on a more general form of prevention, and from a very early age convince young people that it is absolutely not okay to sell your body to pay off the debt of your boyfriend or to have a roof above your head.

In school as well as at home we need to teach children how to deal with a “no”, but also how to say “no” to others, and that this is ok. They should understand they don’t always



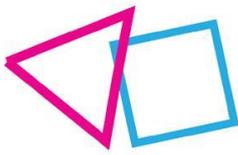
have to take what others say at face value; we need to teach them to be assertive, to relativize certain things and to guard their boundaries. They should understand what are acceptable boundaries, normal relationships (sexual, emotional), how to deal with frustrations, and the like.

This way, respondents suggest not to focus on the crime as such, but on the children themselves and how they relate to the world and their behaviours on the internet. **This way, prevention strategies that focus on resilience and setting boundaries ought to be the focus.** Even though this can have an indirect impact on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, experts readily agree that really impacting this phenomenon will remain a very daunting task. The experts also stated that not only the victim, but also **society at large** ought to be addressed in any effort to prevent this form of crime. As discussed above, it is a very hidden crime, and often it is not or insufficiently recognized by local authorities and victim services. Any efficient program ought to start with being aware of the fact that the crime itself exists, and discards possible cultural barriers that may impede the recognition of instances of sexual exploitation by “loverboys”. One expert put it as follows:

The phenomenon as such should get way more attention: familiarity with the phenomenon, how it occurs, how it can be identified, etc. This should be included in any curriculum at school. It is quite disturbing that sexuality and drugs remain a taboo at school and in society at large. We should openly discuss these themes so that everybody knows what they are – you have to “call a cat a cat” hey!

Apart from these very general recommendations regarding prevention, the experts were not aware of any efficient prevention programs, and remained sceptical of preventing this form of crime as it is firmly rooted in specific life choices and an intimate relationship with the offender. For this reason, we also asked respondents about which common **indicators or “red flags”** could be indicative of the fact that someone is becoming a victim of a “loverboy”. The logic in this is that we can educate people about the existence of this crime and equip them to identify potential cases, this could be a strong social preventive tool for this hidden form of crime. The experts came up with a variety of such indicators:

- Having a “secret lover”
- Isolation from friends
- Engaging in a new social network that they shield from other friends
- Suddenly showing up with expensive things
- Wearing sexy and provocative clothes
- Having business cards from hotels
- Permanently get calls or go make calls outside
- Visible signs of exhaustion and/or drug use
- Running away (e.g., skipping school, running away from an institution)

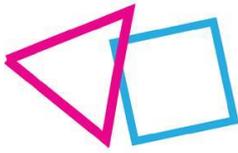


- Psychosomatic complaints such as abdominal pain without any medical grounds

The presence of any combination of such factors could be indicative of victimization at the hands of a “loverboy”. These red flags can be easily translated to certain scenarios in order to sensitize and educate people about the existence of the “loverboy” problem, thus indirectly rendering the crime – hopefully – more visible. However, as the experts note as well, these indicators remain quite general and do not necessarily indicate the existence of a problem. Often, especially at the age range of puberty, people will change clothes, or dress more provocatively, and these are normal behaviours. It is more about having a look at the entire picture, and trusting your “gut feeling” that something might be out of the ordinary. And this brings us back to the main lesson on prevention of this kind of crime: it is very difficult and will remain very difficult. **But it will be even more difficult if people are not aware of the existence of the problem, and this does give RAYUELA a firm starting point to raise awareness about a hidden and heinous crime, which is widespread throughout Europe.**

Takeaway points for RAYUELA’s project:

- The serious game should focus on **resilience training** for the players. This can be done in an interactive way, by gradually increasing the threshold of what (fictive) friends in the game environment ask of them, for example asking to be friends, followed by asking for a picture of them, followed by asking a picture of them nude, followed by asking to do sexual things in front of a webcam. This could be followed by the fictive offender asking for more or pressurizing the victim afterwards (fictive again). This kind of experiential learning presumably has a stronger learning impact than simply prompting a warning with an explanation (as is done in many classic serious games). A neat addition could be awarding points for those that do not accept the requests that are undesirable, as this would increase the motivation of the player to think options through. Such an approach would be useful with regard to the following subjects: what is a normal relationship? What is a normal sexual relationship? Which information should be posted publicly, and which should be shielded?
- In order to raise awareness among young people about human trafficking, the game could include fictive victims of human trafficking, that go to the seven stages above, and which are (fictive) friends of the player. The game could present different combinations of red flags to the player, in order to see how they react by offering different reactions to the fictive character. This way the problem of the hidden nature of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation can be, at least partially, addressed.
- As reporting remains often an issue in case of human trafficking, the game could include information or links to services where such crimes can be reported. One way to do so would be to offer victims the possibility to select “report to appropriate service”, followed by detailed information on this information. This, too, can be accompanied by a reward in points, and can be integrated in the scenarios discussed under point 2.
- As the key element in case of “loverboys” is to stay simply off their radar and not get caught up in their net of lies, youngsters need to be educated about their existence and



the dangers before they can get recruited. Once the toxic emotional dynamic starts, it is very difficult for victims to get out of it. As victims as young as 12-13 years old have been identified, the game should ideally focus on people that are *younger* than that.

- As the phenomenon is largely hidden, and consequently is difficult to proactively detect, it should be a priority of RAYUELA to widen its scope of awareness outside of the youngsters themselves. Law enforcement agencies, judicial instances, legislative authorities, schools, victim services and basically any service that regularly comes into contact or are close to potential victims play a vital role in detecting potential cases of “loverboys”. Even though this would not happen through the serious game as such, at least extensive information on the phenomenon ought to be included in RAYUELA’s toolkit and roadshow.

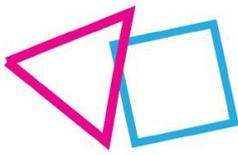
4.2.6 Illustrations from victim and offender interviews

In this section we will present some illustrations from the limited number of victim and offender interviews that we have been able to conduct regarding human trafficking. The interviews were conducted in the Eastern part of Europe, more precisely in Romania and the Czech Republic. Given the small number of victim and offender interviews we were able to conduct, the cases presented solely serve illustrative purposes and should not be considered to be a representative sample. Notwithstanding this fact, there is a high degree of consistency between the victim and offender interviews and the expert interviews discussed above.

Victims of human trafficking interviews

In the first example, a 17-year-old bisexual cis girl from Romania fell into the hands of a “loverboy”. She indicated that in the country of residence, violence was considered normal, and girls and women were considered to be inferior to men. In her home, a patriarchal structure was in place, and violence was not rare. Even though she did not lack any material or housing needs, she did lack emotional needs, insofar that she felt misunderstood, unaccepted and marginalized. Because of this, she ran away from home regularly, in search of friends that would help her. She also met other people (friends) online, who experienced similar situations. The offender she was victim of was a new classmate at her school, and made her laugh, caressed her, and was cute in her opinion. He talked to her and gave her a lot of positive attention. Initially they played a game “nude for nude” on social media, in which they exchanged nude pictures of each other. The offender, however, would distribute these pictures, and used them as leverage to coerce her into stealing and having sex with his friends. In addition, he threatened to call her father if she did not agree to do so. In these instances, more videos and photos were made which were subsequently used as leverage. He also had her recruit new victims he liked using this leverage.

In the second example, a heterosexual single young girl from Romania was struggling with her home situation. The sociocultural context of tolerance of violence towards women transpired clearly in her family, with a patriarchal structure, the father would often beat the mother when he was drunk. This would eventually lead to a divorce between the parents, leaving the girl behind confused. Being often alone as the mother was very occupied with work, she looked for new



friends. Eventually she would meet someone and got to know him better through chatting on the internet. They would get emotionally involved, and the offender would give the victim complements and promise they would be very happy together. Reality, however, would prove to be different. Whilst initially the victim was very happy in the with the offender, and she really thought they were a couple. The offender soon started telling they did not have enough money, and suggested the victim could have sex with men for money. Through emotional blackmail, he would coerce the victim into making pictures and breaking contact with family and friends. In addition, he threatened to show these pictures to the victim's father, who had an important position. The victim felt ashamed and finally gave in to his demands. He would put the photos on the internet, more precisely dating ads, in order to look for clients to trade sex with. This instance of "loverboys" was discovered by the victim's mother who looked into the victim's phone and saw that she was dating men. Subsequently the mother alerted the police.

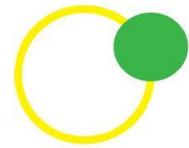
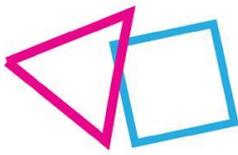
Offenders of human trafficking interviews

In this case offenders from Czech republic had an agreement with a citizen of Belgium, that they will find him girls for prostitution in Belgium. Both of them were using social media and were promising the girls lots of money. They were "responsible" for taking pictures of the girls, posting themes online, sorting out clients and were instructing girls what they should do. They also contacted a 17 years old girl through Facebook, they knew her personally so they knew how old she was when they made the offer. They moved her around quite a lot usually in a two weeks cycles, and took 50% of the money she made. They found their victims mostly in the clubs in Czech republic, where they approached them, however the whole communication was afterwards moved to the online world.

4.3 Conclusion and discussion

The above discussion on the expert opinions on the "loverboy" phenomenon resulted in a rather clear and more nuanced image of what this form of human trafficking actually looks like. When experts discussed the definition and the trends present in the phenomenon, they clearly indicated that it is not a new problem and probably has been around for quite some time. One even went so far as to say that this the most common form of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Experts do not state explicitly that there are any trends in the phenomenon, but rather are weary of claims in terms of trends. This is due to the fact that the problem remains hidden in most cases, so no such claims can basically be made. In addition, in many European countries, the "loverboy phenomenon" is recognized as such, resulting in it not being investigated or prosecuted as form of human trafficking in its own right. This finding is an extremely important one for the RAYUELA project, as the prevention of any kind of crime necessarily goes hand in hand with acknowledgement of its existence. For this reason, RAYUELA should use its privileged position in a multidisciplinary European-wide network to draw attention to the existence of this phenomenon, both in its serious game and other communication and dissemination activities.

When looking at what a "typical" victim looks like, no real specific profile could be derived; victims can be a very diverse group of people. However, one pivotal factor that is at the very heart of the "loverboy phenomenon", and on which all experts were in agreement, is the presence of



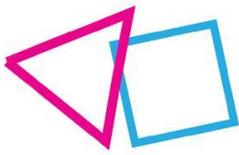
D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

attachment problems. Often, victims of “loverboys” feel lost, in search of “who they are”, and lack a warm and positive environment. As this particular problem can arise because of a great many different reasons, all those reasons can be considered to be peripheral indicators of risk in terms of victimization. It remains, however, the search for connection, recognition and simply love that renders victim vulnerable to the “loverboy problem”. Furthermore, it is exactly because the loverboy seemingly meets the needs of the victims, that this circle is so difficult to breach: the emotional investment in the “loverboy” is usually very big, and victims are not easily convinced to step away from him. Further, as this lack of attachment can easily be exacerbated for particularly vulnerable groups, such as the LGBTQIA community, we deem it important that RAYUELA awards special attention to these groups and their additional vulnerabilities.

Similarly, regarding victims, no real specific profile can be found for the “loverboys” themselves. What did become undeniably clear, however, is the fact that the “loverboys” are usually attractive, young men, who profile them as “the popular guys on the block”, and thus become attractive to potential victims as well – a finding that goes somewhat against the stereotypical idea that human traffickers are creepy criminals, lurking in the dark. Apart from that, the common thread for offenders is that there needs to be a form of disconnect between socially desirable goals (e.g., money, status) and the means to get it. They are most often pragmatists, who have been socialized in specific (negative) perception of women, and often raised as “little gods” who can do as they please. What it boils down to, however, is that they just want to make a lot of money, for the least effort.

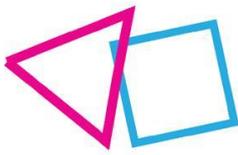
In terms of modus operandi, they usually screen multiple potential victims at the same time. The internet greatly facilitates this screening, and “loverboys” can be found on all popular social media that children use, in particular Snapchat, Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook (this may differ in other zones of the EU). They are very apt at identifying vulnerable victims, and swiftly present themselves as the knight in shining armour, coming to the rescue of the victim. They groom the victim through sweet-talk, compliments, gifts, and promises of a beautiful future, much similar to the process of online grooming. It is not difficult for victims, who are in dire need of acknowledgment and meaningful attachment, to fall in love head over heels with the “loverboy”, thus surrendering to their control. Contrary to popular belief, though, coercive techniques such as blackmailing, threats of posting pictures, etc. are not so very common after all. This is due to the fact that the “loverboy” makes the victim emotionally (but also sometimes financially) dependent on him, and the victim will do anything to stay with him – the ultimate form of control. Obviously, these are still forms of deception and coercion (mediated through the fear the “loverboy” will leave the victim), but they are much more subtle than the image often sent out by popular media or political discourse.

Finally, we also discussed prevention strategies with the experts. As the phenomenon is so hidden, often discovered by accident, and highly tailored to the individual needs of the victim, prevention will inevitably be a very difficult enterprise. However, this does not mean nothing can be done. A first common theme that respondents put forth is that the serious game should concentrate on more general prevention in terms of relations, sexual intercourse, and internet security. In this sense, people are made more resilient not only to the specific problem of loverboys, but equally



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

so to online grooming and cyberbullying, so this fits perfectly well within the scope of the RAYUELA project. Another path to prevention, is to simply raise awareness of the existence of the problem in society (schools, parents, law enforcement, prosecutorial services). We are convinced RAYUELA can play an important role in addressing this issue, or at least give some impetus to preventing and fighting this particularly heinous form of sexual exploitation of minors.



5. Misinformation and online deception

5.1. Introduction

Misinformation, deception and cyberhate are three phenomena that are very present in our society, especially since the development and the generalised use of social media. Indeed, all three crosses, to different extents, the cybercrimes studied in our project (cyberbullying, online grooming, and trafficking of minors for the purpose of sexual exploitation). First, cyberbullying frequently occurs through misinformation being spread to harm a person or to make other individuals think differently about someone. Second, deception is a key element in all cybercrimes, but especially in online grooming and human trafficking, where the offender often pretends to be another person or deceives the victim with false promises. Finally, cyberhate overlaps with cyberbullying, since, as discussed above, aggressions are inseparable from inequalities due to gender, race, or sexual orientation.

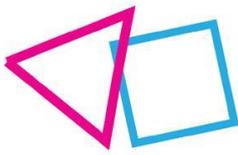
Prevention aimed at safer and more responsible use of the Internet should include the development of critical thinking around these elements. With the aim of deepening on these topics, a qualitative analysis has been conducted based on a series of expert interviews and several focus groups with young people. In addition, three workshops were done in three different classes of a secondary school in Belgium.

In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven experts in the fields of research from several European countries. Different backgrounds and profiles were covered. Firstly, academics and researchers came from political science, criminology, linguistics and psychology, specialised in human and societal factors of misinformation and in how people get informed, and in how people validate the info that they hear or read. Secondly, sexual communication with kids and cyberhate were also fields of research. Finally, professionals working in schools (counselling and head of studies), helplines for cybercrime and Cyber Security Advisor (CSA), cybersecurity consultancies, and Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programs were also interviewed.

A) Focus groups methodology:

Eight focus groups were carried out in five countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Estonia and Slovakia) with a total of 47 young people of different ages; In Spain there were two groups, one of six young people aged 12-14 and one group of five children aged 14-17; in Portugal there was a group of five young people aged 15-17; in Greece the group consisted of six students aged 14-16; in Estonia there were three groups, one of six students aged 12-14, another of five students aged 12-14 and one of 7 young people aged 14-17; finally in Slovakia the group consisted of seven young people aged 14-16.

The selection of candidates was done randomly. Although no participant knew the interviewers, half of the groups could know each other because, although they were not friends, they were



from the same school. In the other four groups, the participants were selected when they were complete strangers. Both types of groups were included in order to control for the variable of being acquaintances or not. On the one hand, a familiar environment may favour participation. On the other hand, the effect of social desirability in these environments may be greater, favouring some more challenging attitudes and/or omitting sensitive or personal information.

In all cases, students were explained about the project and about the voluntary participation, as it was described in D9.1. Depending on the country, informed consents were signed by parents or by the participants, according to their age. At the beginning of the group, the aim and methodology of the project was exposed. Permission was asked again, and it was remarked that they were not obliged to answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable and that they could stop or abandon the conversation anytime. The accent was also placed on the fact that there were no good and bad answers, being every opinion important, as well as different.

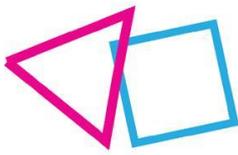
Although different interviewers conducted the discussion (using the mother tongue language of the participants) they had the same instructions for conducting the group and the same script, which was prepared according to the bibliographical research conducted in the fake news, deception and cyberhate. Although all the topics were approached, the participants had the freedom to go deeper in one or other aspect, keeping a balance between the cover of all the topics and leaving the conversation flow.

The groups were fully transcript, and were analysed by a categorical content analysis, which means that the text is broken down into units that are grouped into categories according to thematic groupings (Páramo, 2011). Following Gil and collaborators (1994) first, a reading of the entire speech was carried out to get an overview, after which some key ideas were noted down. Secondly, a descriptive analysis was carried out, structuring all the information around the main themes. Within this structure, a large number of exemplifying quotations were included to illustrate the most relevant ideas. Thirdly, reduction analysis was carried out: segmentation, dividing the text into units, and categorisation, involving a conceptual grouping of the units. As the discussion followed a specific script, this script served as an initial outline of categories, although it was also open-ended and inductive with themes that were not pre-established in the script. Once the coding scheme was obtained from two groups, it was applied to the rest of the groups. After the data reduction, the layout took place, arranging the way of presenting the data, creating a textual matrix with the groups and categories.

Finally, from the data extracted thanks to the system of categories, we carried out the conceptualisation and interpretation, looking for global meanings and connecting some elements with others. All this analysis was corroborated in all thematic blocks by at least two researchers.

B) School workshops methodology:

In a secondary school in Belgium, three workshops were carried out with 12 years old students about misinformation and deception on the Internet. The main objective was to collect data provided by the students to be used in the development of RAYUELA serious game, and to help young people learn about the forms of deception and disinformation on the Internet. The



activities were organised using the focus group template as a starting point. In three different classes, three sessions of one hour each were organised in each class. A total of 40 students participated, as well as one teacher. The sessions included practical activities, discussions and questionnaires about fake news, misinformation and cyberhate.

The dynamics were as follows: first, the RAYUELA project was briefly presented. For this, videos and interactive activities were interspersed with a questionnaire to collect information. These were completely anonymous and were distributed through the "socrative.com" website. However, information was also obtained through small discussions with the students (one of these dealt with cybercrime in video games and their opinion about). For the latter, notes were collected from the recordings.

5.2. Theoretical framework

Stating that the Internet plays an increasingly important role in everyday life of people these days is probably an understatement. Especially for children and youngsters, the Internet has become one of the main windows into the world as well as one of the main means of communication.

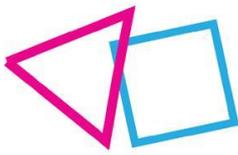
However, alongside the great advantages that the Internet offers to young people and society in general, there are also a plethora of cyberthreats. In this sense, the increasing use of the Internet can become problematic to the point of preventing people from performing their usual daily tasks, a phenomenon often referred to as "Internet addiction" or "pathological Internet use", which can lead to social, occupational, and relational difficulties (Aboujaoude, 2010; Spada, 2014; Stead and Bibby, 2017). Also, falling into misinformation and fake news is a negative consequence.

5.2.1 Fake news

The dissemination of fake news has increased in recent years, especially in this latest COVID-19 health crisis period (Destiny & Omar, 2020). The problem with fake news lies in the fact that the content is intentionally written to mislead the reader into believing that the information they are receiving is true, making detection of this type of content increasingly difficult (Shu, et al., 2017).

Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) propose a taxonomy of fake news according to characteristics and intent: *satire/parody*, *false connection* (such as captious headlines or images), *misleading content*, *false context* (real content alongside false context), *impost content* (when authentic sources are supplanted), *manipulated content*, *fabricated content*, *clickbait*, and *propaganda*. Authors such as Verstraete and collaborators (2018) have raised the distinction between intention (whether it is intended to mislead readers) and motivation (whether a financial motto underlies the content). This distinction makes it possible to differentiate hoaxes and propaganda from satire.

The main channel for the dissemination of this type of news is social networks. Fernández (2017) describes the effect of the "bubble filter" by explaining how Google and Facebook crawlers use algorithms that consider issues such as previous clicks, the place from which you access or even the brand of the device when customising search results. Thus, they end up generating what are called "echo chambers" whereby certain content becomes dominant in a user through repetition, leaving out other alternative views that could confront such content.



Duffy and collaborators (2020) investigated the fact that, in many cases, people share fake news without knowing that they are fake, with the motivation of helping or simply informing. The same elements that exist behind considering a news item attractive (its emotional content, a warning that places the sharer as well-informed, or the potential relevance for the recipient), are also characteristics of fake news. The strong relational component behind the sharing of news on social networks is also what facilitates the spread of disinformation: trust reduces the need to verify, as the reinforcement of friendship with the sender and future recipients takes precedence. Therefore, sharing this type of news can have a negative impact on the relationship between sender and receiver and on social cohesion.

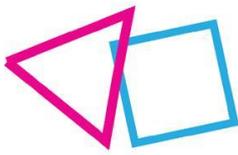
A group especially vulnerable to disinformation and fake news is young people, since their access to information takes place mainly through social networks, where content coming from friends is valued more than the original source. The fact that the content affects them or entertains them, and that it is funny, eye-catching or novel, often ends up being more valued than truthfulness. (Herrera et al, 2020).

Mendiguren and colleagues (2020) describe Generation “Z” as characterised by interaction, speed and impatience. These factors facilitate falling into misinformation: young people value the constant availability of news and being able to share it. The authors found that most young people (82%) recognized that they had assumed information to be true that was not, with Facebook being the network in which this information appeared to a greater extent. However, the same young people also indicated that they considered it important and were concerned about the credibility of the information consumed.

Chen and collaborators (2015) found out that more than 60% of the participants had shared false information, with females being the ones who had shared this content the most. Self-expression and socialisation were among the reasons assessed for subjects to share false information. However, neither the accuracy of the information nor the authority of the source was relevant to the subjects.

Similarly, according to other research conducted with adolescents (Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jiménez & Reyes de Cózar, 2020), they seemed more likely to share news or information related to their interests, even if it was not true. Likewise, the relationship of trust with the person sharing the information was found to affect the credibility of the content. These results coincided with those obtained in the Media Insight Project (2017), where it was evidenced that the user who shared a news item mattered more than the source of the news item.

The fact that young people are less and less informed through traditional media does not necessarily mean that they are less interested in current affairs. Although a small percentage read newspapers or television news, and in general few trusts traditional media, most are informed through alternative channels, with news sharing being an important part of their way of expressing identity and maintaining social connection (Marchi, 2012). Thus, whether or not to share certain content may be motivated by the need to show one's identity or affinity with certain ideas (Marwick, 2018).



Marchi (2012) indicates that, regarding traditional media, young people point out that they do not always connect with their interests, that they are boring and that they prefer to direct the type of news they read, if possible containing opinions in order to form their own vision. In addition, they value the veracity of the news, but do not trust that it is necessarily greater in professional news. It is also interesting to assess the effect that fake news can have on trust in traditional media, since on the one hand it can cause - by extension - greater distrust, but on the other hand, become a more reliable source of information (Duffy et al, 2020).

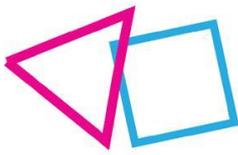
Young people may be more vulnerable to fake news because they are not as informed about current affairs. Literat and collaborators (2020) found that they trusted videos more than texts, understanding that the former were more difficult to fake, also considering that the fact that a news item was on several sites was an enough sign of credibility. In their research, YouTube was the first source of information for minors.

Another reason why fake news is especially attractive to young people is the fact that it appeals to emotion and impulsivity, two characteristics of this stage of life. Accordingly, Herrero et al. (2020) found that they were more likely to share content that connected with their interests, with veracity not being as important. Information was less likely to be verified if it came from a known source, with appearance being another key element.

The same authors studied the WhatsApp network as it is the channel through which dubious content circulates most effectively. The promise of receiving positive feedback could make them not control themselves in the face of dubious content. To analyse these issues, they put a significant sample of young people in front of different types of fake news. Among the results they found that the main motivation for sharing news was to inform others or to find it interesting. They were more relevant than more interpersonal issues such as fun or popularity, which was the last option. They also found that when information is presented in a news structure format, young people are not able to distinguish its veracity.

Similarly, McGrew and colleagues (2017) posed three different situations to deepen the relationship between young people and fake news. When they had to identify who was behind the information presented, they found that 70% selected sponsored content as the most reliable. When it came to evaluating the evidence presented, they found that the fact that data and statistics appeared was for many young people synonymous with credibility, even though they had no information about the source. When it came to seeing who was behind the content of a news item, they relied on the scientific or disinterested appearance, without delving into possible commercial interests.

Based on these findings, the authors propose rather than teaching young people to use verification checklists (which many websites with dubious content would pass, as they are becoming increasingly sophisticated), they should be taught to read laterally, as fact checking experts do. That is, they should learn to jump from one website to another to confirm the data that appears or to expand information. An Internet site may be well written and have a good design with links to prestigious newspapers, but if a lateral search is made on it, clear corporate or commercial interests may be found. Similarly, they recommend selecting entries in search



engines that do not necessarily appear first, but checking URLs and descriptions beforehand, even if that means having to move down the list. Finally, for the authors, teaching a good use of Wikipedia may also be an appropriate option.

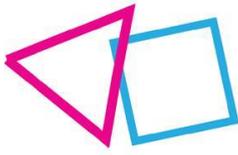
5.2.2 Online deception

A specific problem related to the spread of false information on the Internet relates to individuals misinforming potential victims in order to commit crimes. The most obvious example of this undoubtedly is the vast array of crimes of Internet fraud such as phishing mails falsely advertising certain services or falsely trying to obtain personal information from victims, either for monetary purposes or for the purpose of identity theft (Ghazi-Tehrani & Pontell, 2021; Lee, 2018). Apart from these – mainly – economic crimes, however, misrepresentation (or deception) as a trustworthy source, may also entail more serious forms of crime, such as online grooming and human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, especially for those already vulnerable to the threats of the Internet (as set out above).

As mentioned in previous sections, child grooming or the enticement or solicitation of children for sexual purposes consists of befriending a child or minor with the intention of sexually abusing him or her (Maldonado, 2019), and often occurs by means of the Internet (Lorenzo-Dus, Izura, & Pérez-Tattam, 2016). The abuse itself can take the form of having a sexual encounter, exchange sexual materials, incitation to pornography or prostitution (internal definition). Online grooming involves multiple deceptive strategies, in which offenders attempt to establish a trust or romantic relationship between her or him and the victim in order to prepare them for online or offline sexual abuse (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017), and often is the initial stage of recruitment of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation on the Internet, where children are pressured into pornography and prostitution after initial recruitment.

At the core of this process lies *deceptive trust development*, which implies a communicative process of entrapment in which the offender misrepresents his intention to abuse the victim by engaging in a false online relationship (Shelton, Eakin, Hoffer, Muirhead, & Owens, 2016; Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017), and to which especially young people already vulnerable to the Internet (*supra*) are susceptible to. This is done by a variety of mechanisms, some of which occur naturally in amiable settings (such as small-talk), whilst others can be more specific indicators of communication that is deceptive (such as deceptive complimenting the victim for her or his appearance) (for an overview of the various strategies, see Black, Wollis, Woodworth, & Hancock, 2015; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017 among others; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). As deception and persuasion strategies can take a great many forms, we will focus on the underlying (cognitive) principles around which all these strategies cluster are grouped for the purpose of this text: persuasion, consistency, commitment, authority, social proof, scarcity, and likeness (Gómez-Guadix, Almendros, Calvete, & De Santisteban, 2018), as this allows for a concise description of the inevitably complex and highly individual processes involved.

1. Social *persuasion* is rooted in six principles of social persuasion, which serve as heuristic cues in the decision-making process when one decides to comply (or not) with a request made through messages (Guadagno, Muscanell, Rice, & Roberts, 2013). The first one is reciprocity and



describes the feeling to “give back what has been given”. Often, child groomers will deceptively use compliments, flattery, attention, favours and affection in order to elicit such reciprocity in the victim (Black et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017).

2. Consistency and *commitment* reflect the tendency to act in accordance with previous action. It is argued that groomers use this tendency to gradually move to more explicit sexual actions based on nonsexual ones. For example, the case where a groomer starts out with asking for nonsexual images and in later stages moves to asking for sexually explicit images (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018).

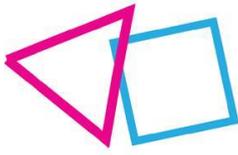
3. Authority refers to the fact that minors are more susceptible to conforming to people they perceive as authoritative or trustworthy. The fact that groomers often will foster trust among them, and their victims is by no means new in literature, it rather is a core component in the grooming process. In this context, often groomers will signal status and decency in their communication, for example by inviting the victim to meet “in a public and safe space” (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016).

4. Social proof refers to the cognitive process whereby an action is presented as being acceptable due to the mere fact that others often do it too. In the context of grooming, it is no exception that offenders often try to convince minors to engage in sexually explicit behaviour by pointing out many other minors are often engaged in similar behaviours (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018).

5. Scarcity refers to the image the groomer wishes to uphold of the relationship. Among the most cited deception techniques groomers use, is to portray the relationship as unique and exclusive. This is often accompanied by the request to keep the relationship a secret, in order not to put it into any form of risk (Black et al., 2015; Knoll, 2010).

6. Likeness. It is a natural tendency of people to have more trust in people who are like them. This trust is often engendered through mirroring the interests and passions of the minor, sharing personal information, sharing activities, and through simple sociability (e.g., Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). This is done by groomers by informing themselves on their victims (e.g., on Facebook), and thus presenting themselves as being people with a similar interest.

The signals of misinformation provided in online grooming and online human trafficking for sexual exploitation conversations are rather tricky to disentangle, as they may be similar to regular friendship relationships, with some notable exceptions. As is the case with many forms of criminality, recruitment in online grooming and human trafficking is a diverse process, and the ways in which it concretely takes forms is highly case dependent. However, the above categorization according to cognitive mechanisms based on (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018) does allow for the creation of typical risk scenarios that can be used in RAYUELA’s serious game.



5.2.3. Cyberhate

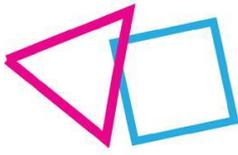
Another danger related to use of the Internet by young people is cyber hate (CH). **Cyberhate (CH)** is defined as a behaviour spreading attitudes devaluating others because of their characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation etc.), using computer technology (Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2014, Hawdon et al., 2019). It can also be defined as: *an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself* (Smith et al., 2008: 376). Nevertheless, some recent definitions are more accurate to current technological developments like the ones proposed by Quandt and Festl (2017): *“online communication initiated by hate groups with the purpose of attracting new members, building and strengthening group identity, coordinating group action, distributing propagandistic messages and indoctrination, provoking counterreactions as part of propagandistic campaigns, and attacking societal groups and individuals with hateful messages.* Also, Hawdon and colleagues (2015) highlight that cyberhate is based on prejudice and intolerance, which is also based on online hate speech (Paterson et al., 2018).

Hate speech (HS), according to the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (2016), is based on the *use of one or more forms of expression — namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression — that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes “race”, colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.*

People are exposed to CH more often due to the increase in their online interactivity (Costello et al. 2019). Study on seven European countries highlighted that adolescent people (aged 11-16) exposure to CH rose from 13% to 20% within three years (2010 to 2013) (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Ólafsson, & Haddon, 2014). Other studies have highlighted the increase in exposure to online hate, for example 3.5% of children (aged 10-15) visited hate sites in 2008 according to Ybarra et al. (2011) whereas 53% respondents were exposed to online hate according to Hawdon et al. (2015). Hateful content posted to social media predicts real-world hate crimes (Williams et al, 2019). There is an association between traditional bullying and CB (CH) (Blaya, Audrin & Skrzypiec, 2020). Oksanen et al. (2020) found that exposure to CH was associated with higher perceived societal fear. Oksanen et al. (2020: 1048) also highlight that CH is dynamic, it might take different forms, it spreads quickly, and it can be caused by dramatic and disruptive societal events. There is also evidence that emotions expressed on social media (e.g., Facebook) can affect people by decreasing positive messages, decreased positivity (and increased negativity) and vice versa (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014).

5.2.3.1 Victim and bystander

The frequency rates of CH are not known among adolescents; it is however speculated that the most common way to experience it is being a witness or a bystander (Wachs et al. 2020). Research on coping strategies for CH reveal six main strategies can be named: 1) *distal advice* (e.g. “go to



the police”); 2) *assertiveness* (e.g. “tell the person to stop it”); 3) *helplessness/self-blame* (e.g. “don’t know what to do”); 4) *close support* (e.g. “spend time with my friends to take my mind off it”); 5) *technical coping* (most frequently used) (e.g. “block that person so that he/she cannot contact me anymore”) and 6) *retaliation* (e.g. “do it back”) (Wachs et al., 2020: 12). One study also highlights those bystanders are afraid to stand up for victims because of the fear of being targeted next (UK Safer Internet Centre, 2016).

Studies have shown that discrimination affects victims’ psychological functioning and creates mental health problems (Sinclair, Bauman, Poteat, Koenig, & Russell, 2012) with the impact lasting for a long time, even up to five years (Hall, 2013; Herek, 2008). It has been found a difference in coping strategies with girls using more social coping styles (seek help or talk to someone) and boys using aggressive coping styles (retaliate) (Machmutow et al., 2012).

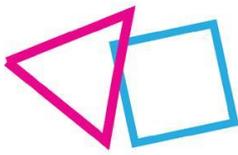
Other studies have found “association between exposure to hate messages in the online space and time spent online, academic performance, communicating with a stranger on social media, and benign online disinhibition” (Harriman et al., 2020).

Emotions, including shame, are important for exploring CH victimisation (Paterson et al., 2018) as there is some indication in the criminological and psychological literature that indicate victim of certain crimes experience shame (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Kanyangara, Rime, Philippot, & Yzerbyt, 2007) which can be increased if there is victim blaming present (Bell & Perry, 2015).

5.2.3.2 Offender

Chiluwa and Samoilenko (2019) describe that misinformation and online deception are two phenomena that have a major impact on networks and the Internet today. They consider that it requires an interdisciplinary working vision, due to the complexity it poses as a risk to users’ cybersecurity. Some authors note the main driver in CH offence is not the hate against the minority group but rather the offenders own concern over their socio-economic inadequacies which can frustrate the individual as they see the lack of their social status as personal failure (Ray & Smith, 2002; Sibbitt, 1997). There has also been little evidence to link authoritarian personality and HC (Gerstenfeld, 2004). Research shows that the effects of parenting are related to levels of self-control (According to Walters (2011: 326) Vazsonyi and Belliston 2007: 307 give an overview of these). Perpetrators in HC are likely involved in other types of crimes also (Ray & Smith, 2002; Sibbitt, 1997). Ray & Smith (2002) also report more than half racist perpetrators had other convictions (e.g., theft, assault, and drugs). Sibbit (1997) notes some offenders terrorize minorities as well as other members of the community. There is also evidence of connection between CB and CH perpetration (Wachs, Wright & Vazsonyi, 2019).

Online hate is dominated by right wing extremist groups (Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2014; Ratliff, Hawdon, Middleton, Tan, & Snow, 2015). Dominant in them is “alt-right movement”, “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and “their” civilization” (Southern Poverty Law Centre, 2019).



Personal stories narrate it as “falling down the alt-right rabbit hole” with online algorithms rapidly exposing people to extremist material (Roose, 2019). The need to understand the relationship between hateful online rhetoric and extremist violence has been identified (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011; Freilich et al., 2011; New America, 2016) and various studies have focused on the issue: 1) *on how CH is marketed* (Chau & Xu, 2007; Phadke, Lloyd, Hawdon, Samory, & Mitra, 2018), 2) *how users saw CH* (Costello et al., 2018; Costello et al. 2016; Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2017), 3) *how users were targeted by CH* (Räsänen et al., 2016), and 4) *how CH affects users* (Keipi et al., 2017; Tynes, 2006; Tynes, Reynolds & Greenfield, 2004; Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; Foxman & Wolf, 2013; Näsi et al., 2015). They do not shed light however on “who produces cyberhate”(Bernatzky, Costello & Hawdon, 2021).

5.3. Means and platforms and general use of Internet

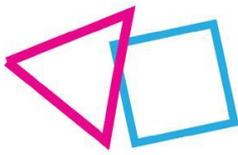
The eight focus groups started with a brief conversation about the use of the Internet and social media, in order to familiarise the group with the subject matter before exploring the three topics of study to be covered (fake news, online deception and cyber hate).

When asked about the **generic use that they make of the Internet and what they like more of the Internet**, the majority stated that they find it an interesting tool for talking to other people, communicating, and socialising. Some spend a large part of their time watching videos, mostly of short duration through Tik Tok but also -although less- on YouTube, to "kill time". Other activities also appear, such as studying, which they say they do use the computer. On the other hand, when listening to music and using social networks, they use mobile devices. Regardless of the tool, teenagers in our sample watch series and movies on platforms such as Netflix or HBO. Therefore, there are **three different uses of the Internet**: searching for **communication, entertainment, and information**.

The following paragraphs will analyse the **applications used by young people in our sample**. On the one hand, we can first highlight the following communication applications. Firstly, **WhatsApp** appears as a tool for communication with family, and in some cases with friends. Secondly, **Instagram** is widely used, being in some cases of the oldest groups even more used than WhatsApp for peer communication. This could be because on Instagram they perhaps do not have to share their phone numbers if they do not feel so or have little trust, being with the user's name enough to talk to other people. As a participant explains:

It is not necessary to have the phone number since it is easier to find a profile and follow it, and maybe that person will accept you.... If the account is public, you can start talking to that person directly. Then it's easier, you don't have to trust someone to give him your phone number.

Instagram therefore seems to be used more frequently due to its easy use. The application would be used to socialise with friends, keep in touch, gossip and to watch stories. Although most of the young people interviewed report to keep their profile private, in one of the groups the participants describe having up to 3 types of accounts on Instagram. One is the “official” account or profile, which is private. The second one is a “fake avatar”, which is public, to spy on others and double check on unknown friend requests. The third type is a private account which is shared by multiple users (up to 50 users) -friends- to have fun.



A potential risk of the application is described in one of the groups in which the students had an extensive knowledge of filters and photoshop-like applications. They refer to becoming excessively concerned about image care through the use of filters to correct the photos. As one participant explains: *I used to be very sensitive about my image on Insta. Suddenly, around the age of 16 it stopped. It coincided with me being more relaxed in my everyday life about clothing and groups.* Despite this change, Instagram still plays an important role in their social life.

On the other hand, we can highlight the following entertainment applications. Firstly, most youngsters in our sample use **Tik Tok** to watch short videos for having fun. This differentiates **YouTube** because it is used differently since some youngsters prefer short content on Tik Tok (e.g., *I used to watch YouTube more but now less because I'm interested in more short things*). YouTube is mostly used to listen to music, and in some cases to listen to videos to sleep. In addition, some participants described that during lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic they used to spend more time watching videos for entertainment using *to binge a lot of totally uninteresting material to kill time during lockdown.*

Some have reported that they use YouTube as a source to look up something they have seen online or for the type of information it offers them. We will go into the sources of information in more detail in the fake news section, but these features are relevant to consider when approaching fake news and the platforms' algorithm.

Secondly, regarding **Facebook**, although not so common, in some groups like the Estonian ones, it is a very popular tool to talk with friends and family. In addition, some students use this platform to communicate with classroom teachers or classmates. These results are consistent with the idea that Facebook is more used by older generations. Indeed, one teenager of our sample has a **ghost account** mainly to check on the content that his/her parents post about him/her, in his words: *I am a bit sensitive about what my parents post, especially if it involves pictures of me.*

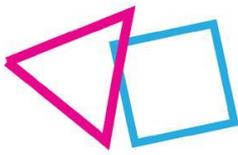
Between **Tik Tok** users, the use of ghost accounts was also found, as it appears that they mostly do not upload any content there, but only follow influencers and watch videos or consume content. This last dynamic is also used on **Twitter**, where mostly young people in our sample do not post content, they just follow accounts of famous people, influencers and watch the news.

Thirdly, **Snapchat** is mainly used for entertainment, but also to engage in conversations with others (it has a mixed use, both for socialising and entertainment). Along with Instagram, some participants report to share usernames with other people when they meet on teen dating apps, similar to Tinder.

Finally, in terms of other applications used by a minority, **Skype** and **Viper** stand out for their personal use, as they use these platforms to communicate with close family members or distant friends. And, marginally, there is a very minority use of Messenger.

5.3.1. School classroom discussion

Similar results were found in the workshop that was conducted in a school in Belgium. When asked about the most appreciated things on the Internet, students find the Internet pleasant because **they can communicate with everybody, they can watch videos and memes of friends**



or famous people. One of them wrote that he/she can **easily ‘meet’ new people**, and another stated that he/she **makes up new ideas to make similar things** by him/herself (stimulate creativity). Three teenagers stated they **like to see what other people are doing**. In general, they are very **positive** about what they can do on the Internet, only one writing that **‘there are also drawbacks’** without specifying more. Some students also mentioned that they like the Internet because they can post things themselves and send pictures.

Regarding the use of social media, the students of the workshop referred to use **various social media**, with similar uses that those found in the focus groups. First, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp to chat with friends or family and share photos or follow famous people. Secondly, Tik Tok is used more to have fun, while YouTube is used not only for this reason but also to look up things for school, as a source of **information**. Google is also mentioned for this last task. Thirdly, they use Netflix to watch movies or series. Some mentioned “discord”, which is a social platform used to chat with friends while gaming (voice and written chat).

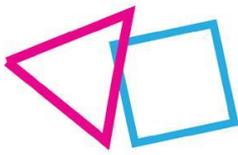
5.3.2. Takeaway point for RAYUELA

- There are three different uses of the Internet: searching for communication, entertainment, and information.
- WhatsApp appears as a tool for communication with family, and in some cases with friends.
- Instagram is widely used, being in some cases of the oldest groups even more used than WhatsApp for peer communication.
- Regarding entertainment applications: Tik Tok is used to watch short videos for having fun. This differentiates from YouTube since some youngsters prefer short content on Tik Tok.
- Some participants referred to becoming excessively concerned about image care from the use of filters to correct the photos in apps.
- Although Facebook is used among older generations, there are cases where young people use it to communicate with classmates or teachers.
- Last used apps could be Twitter and Snapchat for entertainment, or Skype and Viper for communication with distant family and friends.

5.4. Misinformation and “Fake news”

The term fake news is problematic as for some experts it is quite vague and has become politicised, tending to be misleading itself. In addition, most journalists try to avoid using the term fake news because it would be a way of legitimising its existence, and prefer to speak of false information, messages that look like information, or messages that look like news. Nevertheless, it is the term we have mainly adopted in our study as it is the most widely used.

According to the interviewed experts, we can define Fake News as a type of misinformation where the information relates to a news event. Regarding the motivation, it must be deliberate but only on behalf of the person or people creating the news, but not necessarily on behalf of the person spreading the news. One of their main characteristics is the speed at which they expand. In terms



of their effects, as an expert interviewed points out, it seems that false information has an impact on people's future judgement even if they discover the information is false.

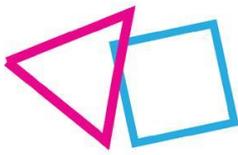
When experts answer whether this is a recent or growing phenomenon, most agree that this is not something new -the attempts to distort reality is interwoven with human history and propaganda was at its peak decades ago-. Nevertheless, nowadays the general population is more sensitised to the phenomena as due to technology, everyone becomes a broadcaster, which has escalated it to new levels of complexity and speed. Thus, it is a very old phenomenon which in a digital world has been amplified: On the one hand, the control of information disappears; on the other hand, there is a much faster dissemination of those theories of people who used to be marginal with their conspiracy ideas.

Regarding COVID-19 situation, some experts pointed out that the poor communication of some governments and the poor adherence to their message made it easier to spread the hoaxes for the anti-vaccination movement. One expert explained that they tried to study whether there had been an increase in conspiracy theories, but the research group could not confirm this. If we try to figure the ways the situation may have impacted young people, an expert describes how when a catastrophic such as this pandemic or a terrorist attack take place, children have a lot of questions. Some of them ask these questions at school, but there is also much information that circulates among the students directly coming from the Internet. In addition, during the lockdown, increasing isolation and a greater exposure to the Internet could have played a role as well.

The interviewed experts agreed that the most important factors that explain the phenomenon of fake news are: first, the bubble effect, followed by information overload, the influence of political ideas, and lastly commercial interests, although they are all interrelated. Regarding **information overload**, the experts pointed out that the content of the information we receive will be mediated according to our interests, whether political or commercial, since whatever the content is, it is related by the bubble effect or echo chambers.

Ideology and political ideas (as well as **hate speech**) also produce a cognitive bias in us when we receive information because we are more inclined to believe information that confirms our previous beliefs (Weidner, Beuk & Bal, 2019) and, therefore, not to evaluate it properly. Users want to be surrounded by like-minded people, which means that they are only or mainly exposed to a part of the story that may be partially true or totally false. To do this, the algorithm amplifies this phenomenon by creating **filter bubbles**, explaining that when you see a post or like it, it registers that you have liked that information and you will be shown more content related to it.

In relation to the **commercial interests**, some experts thought that awareness should be raised for users to understand that platforms are structurally designed to promote fake news if they want to attract more users and make them stay online longer. Finally, experts clarified that in some cases people **socialisation** and **caring for others** is also relevant when explaining misinformation. For instance, the main reason to share misinformation about COVID-19 would not be to harm people, but the concern and the conviction of what other people think is wrong. It is rarely a position of malice, but a position of wanting to educate and help other people.



When the youth in our sample are asked about what fake news is, although they all know the term, some differences appear in the focus of their explanations. Nevertheless, the main description that was highlighted by most of them is that there is an intention to lie, and that they raise suspicion. Many of them referred to celebrities as both, spreaders, and targets of FNs, which is likely related with one of their main interests. In addition, they differentiated fake news from other types of false information. For instance, Tik Tok has a lot of false information, such as people taking over other users' videos, but it is visible and fake (which could be considered a way of parody). The two main differences are, as we will see below: the platform of mean that is firstly mentioned (being social media for most of them, but specific Internet portals for others) and the susceptibility to them (being all potential victims for some of them while the others believe it is something more dangerous for old people).

A) Typology

Through the examples that are described in the focus groups, we can delimit a sort of typology about the most common fake news, as they are perceived by our sample's youth.

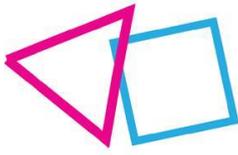
Firstly, we find misinformation related to the **health** and **COVID-19 situation** (*The first thing that comes to my mind is COVID-19*), which could be encompassed in a broader category about health. This is the most mentioned category, and indeed it was the first contact with fake news for some of the participants, as it was described by a girl: *My mother said there was a vaccine for COVID-19, and later she told me it was a hoax. I was quite impressed because I hadn't seen them before. And I've been impressed.* Negationist spreaders are also pointed out: *Like the news about the hospital being empty etc.* In these categories we also found stories about health risks, such as the one about cosmic radiation messing with our phones while we are asleep, that two boys explained they had believed in.

Secondly, we found news related to **celebrities**: mainly about their romantic relationships and about fake deaths (*the Queen of England dying by Nov. 17th; K. West hooking up with Jeffrey Star*). Many of the participants seemed to enjoy following celebrity gossip. In some cases, they themselves recognised that some of this news could be also described as marketing operations.

Thirdly, we obtained that **scary news** tried to create **social panic**. One example referred by the children would be the stories about kidnappings, or the existence of some fake "rape day" when organized massive rapes were supposed to being taken place: *I saw a lot of girls from Tik Tok, uploading Tik Toks showing up afraid to go outside because they really believed it.*

Finally, the **politics** and **propaganda** motive, which would be the main type of fake news for experts, is barely pointed out by children. Only one group referred to it as a potential content - without providing any specific example- and in another group one participant related the fake news term associated with Donald Trump, again, without a deep knowledge of the fact: *There was three years ago... spread a lot around the world with something related to Donald Trump. So, the first thing that comes to my mind when I hear about "Fake News" is Donald Trump.*

The emphasis put on the first three types may be related with the **emotional condition** of the fake news. The health risks, celebrities' lives and scary stories related with children or young people



appeal directly to children's emotions and/or interests, so they probably remember them more and are more likely to fall for them.

When we contrast these examples with the ones that are explained by the interviewed experts, we find some overlaps but also some differences. They almost coincide in the main areas (they even coincide in some of the examples) but the participants in our sample do not pay so much attention to the political and propagandistic fake news and to the sponsored content, which may be relevant for prevention strategies. The following is a description of the main types of fake news described by the experts consulted:

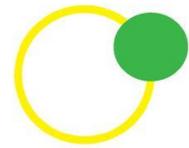
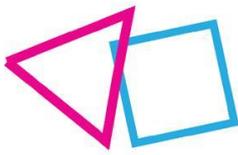
Firstly, **COVID-19** appeared again in the first position. It includes false data that supports anti-vaccination, and the spread of false information that causes feelings of insecurity and feelings of doing justice by “your own hands”. Another aspect to consider is that responding to people's doubts effectively works, which means that when people are concerned, they will look for answers, ending sometimes into a spiral of problematic information powered by social media algorithms. Regarding young people, one of the experts described how in the school where she works at, they received a lot of questions from children about COVID-19: they read some information about it, share it in class and ask questions about it. According to the expert, sometimes, they convince each other about some information without knowing whether the information is well founded or not.

Regarding fake news about **health issues**, an expert described her concern about contents such as those related with miracle diets. Fortunately, the work that is being done to verify news would be expanded to the demystification of other false beliefs, popular beliefs, myths, and legends. For example, the idea that vitamin C prevents colds in winter.

Secondly, we obtained news related to current affairs, such as some Brexit type or other international news. Here we would mainly find **propaganda** or partisan motives to stray the agenda's one way or another. Fake news about migrants and refugees would also be common, and easy to spread according to our interviewees. One expert also highlighted that there are regional differences: for instance, in the United States there is a lot of incorrect information about politicians whereas that is not the case in Central Europe.

Thirdly, the **scary news** also appeared, with the same example of the “rape day”. In April, the Portuguese Helpline received calls regarding the spread of a hoax on Tik Tok stating that the 24th of April was the “national rape day” a day where an alleged group of men were inciting other men to rape women. This hoax started in the US but spread worldwide.

Finally, hoaxes about the death of **celebrities** are also pointed out, but which concerns more to the experts -and it is something that did not appear in the focus groups- is the different misinformation that might come from some influencers about a lifestyle that is not always completely true, or though the promotion of content that is paid for.



B) Vulnerable groups:

When kids in our sample are asked about who spreads fake news, they mostly agree on two profiles. On the one hand, we would find elderly people, as they frequently experience in the familiar WhatsApp groups:

My grandmother has sometimes sent me publications and everything she said, 'look what has happened'; and immediately you know, a publication from two weeks ago and it just appeared, and she believes it, and she sends it to me, and I know it's a lie. As she doesn't bother to look at the comments and look for it and such. The first thing she does is believe the news and share it with her friends... It's not that she wants to share the fake news but that she doesn't realise it's fake.

The other vulnerable group would be younger children and teenagers. One participant, for instance, explained how her brother believed everything that appeared on YouTube. Another one explained the effect of the fake news in the youngsters as follow:

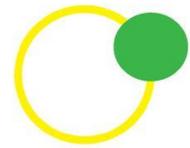
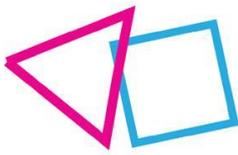
The fake news that came out that there was a day of the rape or something. I saw a lot of girls from Tik Tok being afraid to go outside because they really believed it. But girls who have been surfing the Internet for a few months or about a year, they still do not know how to handle the Internet well and really believe those things. Maybe a 10-year-old girl does not realise it and really thinks that it can happen. But of course, the 10-year-old girls who have Instagram or whatever they have, they believe everything and over time they will start looking at the comments and look more, not just see one thing and pass it on to their friends and whatever.

In attempting to delineate a hypothetical spreader profile, the interviewed experts referred to some cases (linked with QAnon conspiracy theories) in which people with low social support tend to be more trusting of fake news. Education and socioeconomic background apart from age could be crucial factors for misinformation, although they could be related to the opportunity to study propaganda or know how these misinformation campaigns work, as people with different backgrounds can end up in these situations.

According to the experts, everybody is potentially vulnerable to disinformation (“*young and old, rich and poor*”), as deception is more and more adapted to our behaviour and to our age, becoming more and more sophisticated. Nevertheless, differences in media literacy and daily media consumption habits would make some collectives more susceptible.

Regarding the **age**, young people would appear as a vulnerable group as they have not yet developed key skills such as critical and analytical skills and/or they have limited knowledge to a variety of topics such as politics. Therefore, one expert highlighted that through her research, they found that younger people were more likely to believe in fake news especially in domains in which they are less knowledgeable, as COVID-19 content. For another expert, young teenagers (12-14 years old) would be especially suggestible, while older teenagers would think and verify more what they read on social media.

According to the impression of the participants of the focus groups, experts state that research shows that other groups which are also vulnerable to misinformation are elderly people, together with people who do not have media literacy skills or people who live in disadvantaged areas. Other aspects pointed out are some psychological characteristics such as narcissistic and



psychopathic traits, people with certain specific beliefs (as conspiracy theories), and more significantly the use of social media: the more time a person spends on social media, the easier it is for him or her to participate. Smartphone users would also spread more than laptop users, as the first one usually implies a more impulsive behaviour. Both aspects related with the use of social media are related with young people, as we will see below.

Another vulnerability risk for young people would be, according to experts, that they tend to mistrust everything, so instead of only distrusting the dubious sites about COVID-19 vaccines it actually begins a questioning of fact-based things like the BBC news or the programs more direct news, as opposed to FOX or one of those. Both risk factors -sources of information and erosion of trust - are discussed in detail below.

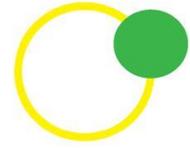
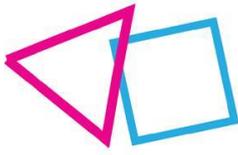
C) Sources of information

According to the interviewed experts, one of the main reasons why young people are especially vulnerable to fake news is because they are “digital natives”, meaning that they tend to find all the information online, using different social media and platforms. Therefore, it will make them more susceptible to the algorithms, being more exposed to filter bubbles and echo chambers and “less equipped” to critical thinking.

In the two focus groups of younger teenagers (12-14 years old), except for one participant who watched the news on TV with her parents, traditional media did not appear when asked about their sources of information, not even in the online format. Although some referred to using Google to look for information, they watch Tik Tok and YouTube, showing a preference for the video format. Specifically, YouTube was used for *looking for something previously seen in general Internet or in TV, to check what information YouTube gives, and also for a handy quick review of the news.*

In the older groups (14-17), there was a larger diversity. Although some of them referred not to use traditional media for getting informed, the main source for most of them would be social networks, for instance Tik Tok or Facebook. With this format, news is not selected by the viewer or by the editorial line, but for the preferences of the following users and the social network inner algorithm. As some participants summarise: *It's not so much like news appearing to you as it is because of the news that people upload or the things that people tell you like you are finding out a little more or less; I have notifications in Facebook when new news are launched [Others agree].* Another social media that is used is Twitter, but here the way in which the information displays is different, as the participants follow different mass media.

Regarding traditional media, no participant read the newspaper on paper. Many of them recognized that they rarely read the news (*We don't read news very much*). Nevertheless, in one group some of them referred to reading news from the newspaper online, while in another group some of the participants used the BBC application or the local news site app. Only two teens watched the news with their parents on the TV.



Google is the most used platform when they need to look for specific information. Only a few uses more sophisticated tools such as title and domain triage or searching for websites written in a different language (i.e., English). Although less common, they also report using Wikipedia.

It can be observed, then, that there were two trends in information sources. On the one side we found a slightly larger group of teenagers that get informed only via their social networks, through the content uploaded by the followers and the social network notifications. On the other hand, we obtained another group that got informed as well via traditional media in their online format or on the TV.

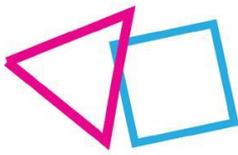
An interesting discussion emerged in some of the groups around the reliability of these types of information. Although not many of the participants referred to watch the news on TV, most of them consider them to be more reliable. Even though as one participant pointed out social networks as Twitter being the place where *the last-minute news appears first*, in general, most of the teenagers in our sample found that *news on TV is the most credible source of information*, for some of them even better than website news. Some of them seem to be aware of the bubble effect that was previously explained, as one participant described: *Twitter isn't a good source of information because I only watch things about my preferences*. In another group, the debate went from those who got informed through the traditional news channels to those who prefer to use Twitter as *everybody is there* and you can also follow the controversies.

Nevertheless, most of them assuming that traditional media are more reliable does not mean that they are chosen by the participants. Many of them recognize that they *do not trust much* in the information uploaded in social networks, but they still use them as their main source, as *you can't trust completely something*.

D) Erosion of trust

The other vulnerability that was pointed out to understand young people as an easy target for the fake news was their common condition of mistrust, and specifically a progressive erosion of trust in traditional media. For some experts, young people would use more new platforms due to the discredit of conventional media, which makes their trust in them diminish. However, in our sample, while in three groups (Slovakia and Estonia) they pointed out specific regional sensationalist *tabloid portals* or *yellow press* as the first sources of misinformation, more traditional media are not described as suspicious. In contrast, the results of the focus groups indicate that participants tend to trust information that appears in the news more than information that appears on other social networks, as they mostly find it unreliable: *When it is in the news it is not the same as if you see it on Instagram, you are downloading publications and it comes out. Then when it appears in the news it gives you more security*.

Accordingly, some experts stated that more than discussing whether young people lack confidence in traditional media, it is necessary to assess whether children are consumers of traditional media (news channels, print or online channels, etc.). In their experience, and in accordance with our sample, when young people want to consult information, they do it through Google and digital platforms or they look for other media for their news.



E) Reliability and verification

Although our results show that reliability is not one of the first reasons why young people choose a platform to get informed, that does not mean that they do not have different criteria to consider which information is reliable and which is not. In general, *the source* is considered *the most important element*, although others also pay special attention to the style. Many recognize not to check or verify the information unless they are going to share it, which is not so common.

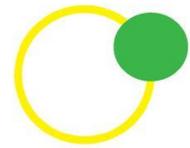
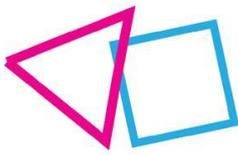
Regarding the **source**, two aspects were mainly considered: the person who sends or posts the news and by the **site** where the news is. The person who sends it is taken into account in a double sense of trust and mistrust (*it depends on the person and how it is explained*). For instance, one participant referred to a friend who easily shares fake news who is not reliable anymore. In relation to the web site, they described that there are “famous pages” such as big newspapers or Wikipedia which they trust. Only one participant suggested that before sharing, verifies the information also if it comes from one of these pages. As it was mentioned above, social networks are not considered to be reliable, which is usually solved -only in some cases- by contrasting the information: *If I don't trust something in Tik Tok I look for it on google or on the Internet*. Finally, to a lesser extent, authorship is also considered as a factor of credibility either by being a recognised author or a verified user, for instance of YouTube.

Some participants remarked on the importance of the **style** of the content. Within this category they appreciated that the website has good saturation of colours, good quality photographs. In addition, they considered typos, dodgy headlines or bad spelling can also be a sign of fake news. Nevertheless, some other participants draw attention to the fact that the appearance of the news can be easily manipulated, considering that *searching for sites that know beforehand are trustworthy* could be more reliable.

Other criteria they suggest were the **date** of publishing, if there is a **video** together with the piece of news and the **content** itself (for instance, *If the story sounds crazy*). Regarding the most common content, the examples and categories emerged are the same as those analysed in the typology epigraph.

When asked about the verification of the information, the more relevant aspect was that many participants recognized not to verify it, or to do it *rarely... Only if it is really sketchy*. As a young boy explains: *I think I just consider (the news) as not certain, but I will not check if it is true or not and I will not believe that it is really true*. Some also refer to looking at it and just *ignore it*, only checking in case they want to share, which does not happen often. Indeed, some of them prefer not to share than to check: *If I read and start to doubt then I don't share*. Between those who verify the main strategies are as follow:

- Looking at the comments of the publication: *To me for example, my older brother tells me: “look first of all at the comments, if the comments say it is fake, don't trust”*.
- Contrast the information (for instance from Tik Tok) in Google or in another web site to check if something happened that way or if even did not happen at all.
- Looking for different sources: *You have to find more sources to make sure it is not fake*.



- In the cases that they are rather familiar with photoshop-like applications this has helped them to identify crazy photoshopped pics in Instagram.
- Using a photo recognition software as Photo Sherlock.
- *Checking the author of a page or article and him or her background*
- Reviewing the Page visits, shares, and comments.
- Look for the date of publication.

In conclusion, although some participants thought they *do not need to verify if the information is true* because they *just know*, and some explained that they usually do not take the time to do it, other teenagers in our sample showed several tools to verify the suspicious content. In addition, some of the participants thought that most of the people don't check the information and just share them with one click. This could also show bias between the discourse (self-perception) and the real practice.

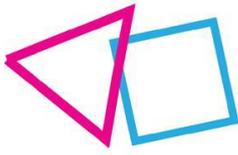
F) Reasons to spread fake news

Experts pointed out several reasons why young people share information that is false. Firstly, they indicated that their main motivation would be the wish to **gain popularity/virality** on social networks and to show a desired identity that does not coincide with the real one. In other cases, they would do it to develop and reaffirm their identity through what they share. They may find content on social networks such as edited photos that show an image or a lifestyle far from reality, which makes it easier to spread and accepted by their followers. As false information is usually designed to go viral, they may share it just to gain more likes, attract reactions, and be part of the trend.

Another important reason that several experts agreed on is the **lack of verification** of the information. For instance, on many occasions, they share false information and do not know that it is false because they have not checked the content, falling into the famous "*clickbait*" designed to attract people's attention. Therefore, the interviewed experts point out that frequently they only read the headline and they don't read more, which leads to young people sharing false content on the Internet, even if this dissemination is not done maliciously.

Experts also mentioned that sharing fake news is a form of **entertainment** (they can share false information just for fun or in an ironic way) or it can also be a way of **accepting and understanding the reality** that is happening, as in the case of COVID-19: It might be easier to think in a Villain's idea of somebody creating it on purpose that believe in a casual accident in a Chinese laboratory, as a way or accepting something.

There are two more reasons that experts pointed to, on the one hand the **continuous access to news** and, on the other hand, **the linguistic level**. Regarding access to news, they commented that there is a notable difference between the present and the past: while decades ago children used to watch TV with their parents, now children receive the news directly on their smartphones, and not all the news is true. For these experts, this easy and quick access to a large amount of content and information makes it easier for young people to share fake news. On the other hand, with regard to the linguistic level, it is pointed out that those children who have less linguistic



knowledge may not understand the content of the article when they read it and that sometimes, despite not understanding it in its entirety, they spread it.

Finally, we cannot forget that at this age the **desire to know** and to **let others know** is also relevant. Therefore, a content that connects with their **interests** or that is very **emotional** or very attractive can be shared, even if it is a lie.

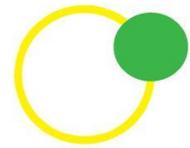
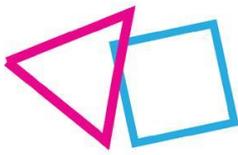
This final point is the one that better matches with the results of the **focus groups**. As we saw above, the main news that the participants remember to have received or even share were related with their interests (gossips, concerts, etc.) or were very emotional (kidnapping and rapes). Indeed, when asked about the reasons behind the spread of fake news, they suggest that it is: *to get people's attention and appeal to their interests. That is why they spread faster*. In accordance with the experts, they also think that many spreaders believe that the news is true, and that popularity and the wish to gain fame also plays an important role, as *people who are actively looking to get as many likes as possible, mentions, etc. tend to share fake news*. Finally, being bored or in the mood for fun were also pointed out: *That friend may be joking*.

The wish to gain popularity is pointed out as something that others do but not as something that the participants had, which could be understandable due to the social desirability inside the group. Nevertheless, most of the interviewed stated that neither them nor their friends usually share news. One relevant aspect that should be considered is that some of the participants believe that fake news is mainly spread by "narrow-minded people" or "uneducated people", which could make them less aware of other intentions.

According to the previously referred motivation, the fake news that were previously shared by the participants were related with COVID-19 restrictions measures, with a fake music event and with the mobile radiation: As one participant explains, it was connected with both his **interest and emotions**: *My first thought was, it's such a great festival and we can go again. But then it turned out to be fake. That was sad*. Another participant explained the role of emotions like this: *If you like it, the first reaction is one of emotion, you are happy but then when you see that it is false, it already worries you*. Similarly, a news article that sounds funny is much more easily shared, as some participants refer: *I usually share if I think it's funny, sometimes I just read the headline and if it's funny I share*. The main problem with that sharing is that even knowing that it is not true, it has an impact on the person, as another participant explains: *"I sometimes read the news on the internet because it's funny and even if it doesn't seem true, I still believe a bit"*.

G) Main means of propagation:

As previously mentioned, some participants pointed out tabloid press and regional newspapers as the main platforms for the spreading of fake news, but this answer was not the most common. Social networks are identified as the main distributors of misinformation. Among this, the most salient would-be Instagram (*as it is difficult to trace the source because everything comes in the form of a picture*), followed by Twitter, Facebook, family WhatsApp groups and Tik Tok. On Twitter there would be two kinds of fake news, the usual one and a fake tweet, that someone creates as a screen shot.



According to the consulted experts, and in agreement to our findings, all the means can be prevalent for spreading misinformation, so it will happen more wherever young people are the most. In the opinion of these experts, it depends on consumer trends, so misinformation seeks out the channels where we are. Therefore, Tik Tok would have plenty of fake news nowadays as it is one of the most used social networks.

Two social networks that were mentioned as well, although not specific for teenagers, are Twitter and Facebook. Other experts mainly pointed to restricted groups on instant messaging platforms or streaming apps like telegram and WhatsApp, which in our case would be present more in family groups (related to older relatives).

5.4.1. School classroom discussion regarding Fake News

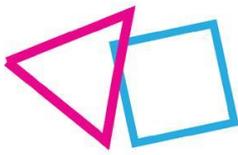
The answers in the school workshops previously described were similar to the ones obtained in the focus groups. Most of the students were aware and familiar with the term fake news, associating them mainly with certain social media, such as Tik Tok and YouTube.

Firstly, while some students (n=13) answered that they never received pieces of news that they knew to be false, most of them (n=25) admitted that they did receive some fake news. Nevertheless, they mixed in their answer's fake pieces of news with other kinds of online deception (which will be discussed in the next section).

Secondly, when asked about whether they could provide any examples of "fake news", they answered: 1) "maybe a post on Instagram about winning an iPhone"; 2) "articles about how COVID-19 vaccines are dangerous"; 3) "emails about shipping or about problems with bank accounts"; 4) "fake news about celebrities or famous people"; 5) "friend requests via Instagram or Facebook". Consistent with the results obtained in the focus groups, although most of the students referred to have received fake news, only a few stated to have forwarded them.

Thirdly, the social networks that students highlighted as the best or most optimal for distributing fake news were as follows: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Google, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Twitter and Gmail. Some students mentioned "Wikipedia". Others highlighted *all social networks*. The answer to this dynamic probably depends on the subjective use (purpose and time) of each young person with social networks (e.g., the social network they use the most).

Finally, to the question "which kind of people share the most fake news? ", the results were in order of relevance: "Those who want to gain money or fame" (n=17); "Young people" (n=10); "People who want to provoke fear or confusion" (n=3); "Those people who believe anything or share content very impulsively" (n=3); "People with bad intentions" (n=2); "Those who want to seek other people's attention" (n=2); "People who have nothing better to do and use social networks all day" (n=2) and "People with many followers" (n=1). These results were similar to those found in the focus group. The only difference is that older people were not mentioned, and that some other interesting reason besides fame and boredom, such as impulsivity, was pointed out.



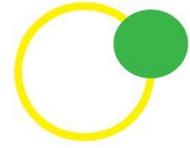
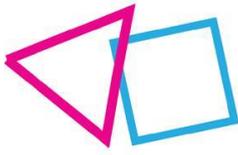
5.4.2. Takeaway points:

- The most important factors that generally explain the phenomenon of fake news are: the bubble effect, information overload, the influence of political ideas, and commercial interests.
- The typology of the most common fake news identified by the young people and experts coincide: COVID-19 or health issues, news related to celebrities, scary news, and politics/propaganda. Nevertheless, and contrary to experts, politics is the least pointed out by young people in our sample.
- Both experts and teenagers agree in pointing out two groups especially vulnerable to fake news: old people (mainly through WhatsApp groups) and youngest teenagers.
- In the case of young teenagers (12-14), experts highlight between the reasons that they have not yet developed critical and analytical skills and/or they have limited knowledge of a variety of topics such as politics, in which they are more vulnerable.
- Although previous research has shown how teenagers tend to mistrust traditional media, in our sample, most participants agree considering traditional news as more reliable than social media. Nevertheless, they almost do not consume traditional media, getting informed mainly through social media, as there you can see the controversial, the opinions and “everybody is there”.
- Most of the participants recognize that when they suspect news being fake, they rarely verify, unless they want to share it. When they verify, checking the comments is the most used strategy. Other strategies such as contrasting and looking for different sources should be promoted instead.
- The source is the main reason of reliability (including the mean, but also the person who shares). In addition, the style is also highlighted by many participants, something dangerous as it can be easily manipulated, as it happens, for instance, with videos.
- News that connects with the teens’ interest and emotions were pointed out as the most likely to be shared/believed, as well as funny stories. A potential scenario for the videogame should include one of these aspects.

5.5. Deception

Another form of fake information that children and teenagers may face when they are surfing the Internet is online deception. When asked about the main online deception, both experts and focus groups participants agree on three main threats: online advertising and commercial deception, strangers approaching minors and information, and false identities related to cyber bullying assaults. In the present section, strangers approaching minors will be further developed, being cyberbullying more widely approached in the next section.

Commercial deception will not be developed as very little information was referred in the focus groups. The interviewed experts highlight that it increases especially around specific dates, such as Christmas or Black Friday. In addition, some teenagers in our sample were recognized to have been victims of fake sellers losing money when using their parents’ credit card. Mostly all remember to have seen **fake offers** and **fake products commercials** mainly on Instagram and online games. They also referred to the typical scams of *the Prince of Nigeria* or about winning a



prize, which they think are easy for them to discover: *If I wouldn't know how to use the Internet, I wouldn't know that this is a scammer, but I know.*

Another threat that emerged when asking about committing online deception was the figure of the **adult groomer**. As we will further describe below, it is relevant that at least in some groups it is normalised and many of the participants have stories related to this behaviour: *I have been approached by men who were 50 or 60 years old, and I blocked them, and they could not talk to me or anything. You must be careful with the men who talk to you.*

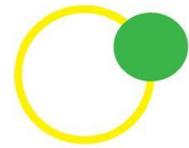
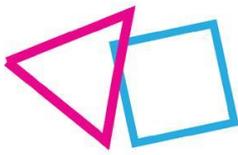
Finally, peers are also pointed out. The younger participants vaguely referred to *Kids that want attention, they are envious, wicked, and malicious*, explaining the older one's specific forms of **cyberbullying** and aggression between equals, especially in the form of nasty and bullying comments from fake accounts. *So, it's not just strangers, fake accounts can be used to break up relationships or to make people mock other people.* As an expert referred to, a very simple disagreement may turn into online bullying or misinformation being spread to harm another individual or make other individuals think differently about a person.

When kids were asked if the grooming situations happen more to girls or boys, they all agree that it happens most often to girls. This may have important implications for both: on the one hand, it may decrease the perception of risk for boys; on the other hand, it could have an impact on girl's subjectivity in development. It seems to be accepted that: *Boys harass girls, they are never girls to boys. Yes, you do not need to be of different ages or having something different in the profile. They write to you even in an obscene way, it is always from boys to girls.* When the topic is cyberbullying instead of sexual harassment, although boys are still mostly pointed out, some participants state that girls also take part of this practice, especially after a breakdown: *There are many girls also that do it to ruin the ex or to hurt him.*

Considering both online grooming and some kinds of cyberbullying threats, knowing the way teenagers face unknown people when online becomes crucial. For this purpose, in the focus groups they were specifically asked by their criteria for accepting strangers and about their experiences interacting with them. Both questions allow us to contrast discourse and practice.

When **younger teens** were asked in the focus groups about **criteria for adding strangers**, they seemed to be more conservative than the older participants. In one of the groups, most of them stated that they add only good friends, except one that recognizes that now he is *starting in Tik Tok and Instagram to follow the person who requests, to see who he or she is*. In the other group, girls only add *very good friends of people who are very good friends of mine*. When a stranger talks to them, they generally *ignore him/her, and if he/she insists, he/she gets blocked*. One participant also refers to asking her mother to check if she knows him. In contrast, boys seem to tend to ask for more information to see who the person is, and if he or she has a private account they follow to check the profile.

In the older groups, in general, they all seem to have a private account, explaining that they have many requests and only accept some of them. Nevertheless, there is also some diversity in their criteria for adding strangers. Only the participants of one group refer to add only people they



know (*except one that adds friends of friends in case they are meeting in person later*). The rest use different criteria, described as followed:

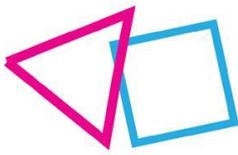
- **Common friends.** This is the more widely accepted criteria, but it is also not so specified, as in some cases it seems that those friends need to be close friends, while in other friends act as a synonym of followers. In some cases, they ask common friends *do you know him?* and in others they check and if *the name is not familiar at all, or you've been told about him they don't accept*. The implication of this criteria for threats as the chain abuse will be discussed later. Basically, they consider a friend of a friend as a friend. *For example, on Instagram I can see what we are following and if I see that my close friends are following him/her then I know that person is ok*. One participant justifies this procedure: *It's only talking a little, you are not going to meet him*.
- A diffuse criterion of **proximity**: *well-known people and people from our neighbourhood or maybe another nearby neighbourhood*.
- **Verification of the Account:** This criterion is also widely applied meaning that *you can see that it is a person, and that it is not a fake account*. Between the aspects the participants refer to, we find the profile **picture** and the **bio** and the **content** available in the profile. If it is public, they check content to look for *lame/cringe or cool stuff*) or if the account is mostly empty. They also check if the person has **very few followers**, which would mean that *"he can be anyone you do not know at all"*:

For example, to me, if someone writes to me by Face, someone without a profile picture and says, "hello", I don't... it gives me a bad thorn from the first moment. He could still be a real person, but I don't know.

This verification is problematic as if the account is not public, many participants describe that they follow the stranger in order to check his/her information: *Or you follow him so you can watch his videos and publication, and if you see that he has nothing, then it is noticeable that the profile may be fake*.

- **Having common interests**
- If the stranger is an **older** person, it is a criterion to not add him/her: *"They have spoken to me... if I do not accept it, they send me a request to speak"*.
- **Good looking photo.** Although it does not appear as a criterion, when they are asked specifically about it, two refer to have previously done: *"I got a guy who I thought was handsome at first and I started talking to him on Snapchat"*.
- Having **previously met online** although not physically.
- There are other strategies that our participants explained in order to verify a profile person such as searching and google everyone to see who they are or where they're from, or using application ns to check photos, as Sherlock:

On Tik Tok I saw that there was an application called Sherlock Photos, and I uploaded one of his photos. The app takes you to Google and takes that image and looks for it on other social networks, and it took me to Twitter to an account that was trying to discover fake accounts. Then, I went down, and the real guy appeared saying that it was not him and that it was a fake account.



As mentioned above, as a way of contrasting discourse and practice, in the next question the participants in our sample answered if they had **interactions** with strangers. For instance, the group that first said that only added people they knew, specified later, once they were asked about interactions, that for them that means friends of friends as well. In another group, one girl who affirmed not adding strangers, remembered several conversations with a stranger about common interests. Nevertheless, one of the two groups with the youngest participants is the only one in which they only chat with actual friends and family. Although the contact with complete strangers does not seem to be frequent, but rare, it takes place in most of the cases.

Slight differences between younger and older participants in our results, the former being somewhat more conservative, contrast with the affirmation of some participants regarding their early adolescence: *When I was younger, I had a snapchat full of strangers because it seemed cool to me to have so many friends*, or in the words of another one: *I felt like I had to have a lot of friends*. Previous risky conducts could point against a development trend or might also reflect that nowadays young people are getting more conscious about these risks. Nevertheless, the social pressure around having plenty of followers must be taken into account.

Regarding the platforms where our participants detected more deception, they were mainly Instagram and Tik Tok. Tik Tok is specially highlighted *because there you don't have to be yourself. Your account is private so you can be or do whatever you want*. In this respect, many participants point to differences between social networks when it comes to deciding whether to add strangers. In Tik Tok, most of them tend to follow strangers, on Instagram we find both trend (*On Instagram I follow then I like the content*), being that in Facebook and Snapchat the criteria tend to be much more conservative: *On FB I still only interact only with my friends, and I accept friend requests only when I know the person*.

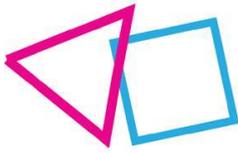
Finally, without this being a specific question, specific experiences of situations that could indicate that online grooming or cyberbullying took place appeared in different groups. It seems quite normalised for children in our sample to meet strangers who talk about sex, as this girl explains:

I know it because it has happened to many of my friends and even to me that someone has written me an account saying... First, you start talking to that person and then after a few minutes, if the person is very desperate, the person behind the phone starts pressuring you to send him photos. He says he is not going to send them to anyone and that nothing is going to happen. But it's true that it has happened to my friends that they have sent a photo and it's been captured. It hasn't gone any further, but it has happened.

Or another one: *Yes...I once had a situation when a person from a private account wanted me to send a picture of my breasts. But he wrote that he wanted a picture of my peaches, and then I sent him a real picture of the fruit.*

In two different groups, different girls described online grooming situations, one that took place directly (in one of the older teenager's groups):

I do not know if you know this application, some of you know it, it is like a Tinder for teenagers. During the lockdown I was bored, and I saw it by Tik Tok, and I installed it for a try. I met a guy who



at first seemed handsome and I started talking to him with Snapchat, then I gave him my Instagram and started talking to him. He told me that he was going to live where I lived and after a few months I discovered that it was a lie.

In the other group (a younger teenager's group) two girls referred to a situation that indirectly happened to her friends. In one of the cases, the participant described that a man started talking to her friend, incorporating sexual themes into the conversation. In the second case, the matter ended up in the hands of the police as it seems that a harassment dynamic developed in which the boy, despite the girl's repeated attempts to cut off contact, continued to insist by creating different accounts to talk to her friend.

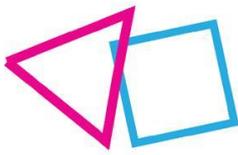
Some other experiences were described for explaining the role that deception may take in cyberbullying. In one of the cases, somebody made a fake account and started to talk to a child that was going to sixth grade. After the boy sent a nude photo to the fake account it was later distributed around the whole school. In another group, the participants explained a deception which they consider to be common among teenagers. Someone who has something against a person says that person that someone else has said something bad about him/her, manipulating the person into a situation in which he/she responds with comments about that person. Then, they secretly record the person and spread it.

5.5.1. School classroom discussion: Deception

The results in the school workshops showed that around half of students add people they do not know on their social networks or in video games, either sometimes or on a regular basis. However, as it happened in the focus groups, these persons might be people they do not know personally but know somehow through other friends.

Regarding the criteria considered when adding people, and similarly to the findings in the focus groups, most students mentioned that they add people they know directly or indirectly (*I check if other friends also follow this person*). In addition, they mainly consider *the age, the place they live, the language they speak, the name and the profile picture*; As in the focus groups, to a lesser extent they also consider whether they have similar interests. Only a few of them stated to add everyone: *I usually add everyone, but if they start doing weird things, I block them.*

In relation to the frequency with which they talked to or exchanged information with people they do not know, the same students who answered that they accept everyone in the previous question, refer to frequently talk to people they do not know. However, the majority of students (n=25) answered that they never talk to people they do not know, while a quarter of the students (n=10) answered that they sometimes or almost never talk to people they do not know. From this last group, some students explained that they do not give any personal details or that they would not meet these people in person. In general, most students answered that they share pictures, e-mail addresses and sometimes telephone numbers with people they know, sharing nothing with people they don't know. Nevertheless, in a few cases they admitted to sharing pictures, age, Spotify playlist also with people they don't know.



5.5.2. Takeaways points:

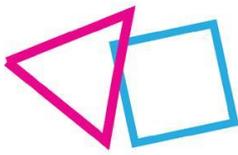
- Both experts and focus groups participants agreed on three main threats related to online deception: advertising and commercial deception, strangers approaching minors and false information, or false identities related to cyber bullying.
- Even though many of them think it is easy to recognize online scams (mainly on Instagram and online games), some of them refer to have been victims of them.
- It is striking how online grooming is almost normalised, as many participants tell third or first-person stories about adults approaching minors. This perception is bigger in girls, which may have a double implication: in girls' subjectivity, and in boys' perception of risk.
- Younger adolescents appeared to be more conservative than older participants in the focus groups on the criteria for adding strangers. Differences between social media also appeared: for instance, in Instagram you need to follow someone to see his or her content.
- Some participants in the older groups refer to having felt social pressure in the past to have many followers, which led them in accepting many unknown people. This trend does not appear in the youngest groups, which could be a sign of improvement.
- In the older groups, the category of friend of a friend (which may be really open) works as the main criteria for adding strangers. This criterion has implications for threats as the chain abuse, previously described. Together with it, other aspects are considered as: proximity, verification of the account, common interests, If the stranger is an older person, good looking photo or having previously met.

5.6. Cyberhate

When asked about a cyberhate definition, the interviewed experts agree in describing that it would be the contents that may cause distress because contains some allusion to characteristics that may lead to a ground of discrimination on different grounds, being the main referred: national/ethnic origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and race. Whether one factor is more relevant than the other also depends on the context. For example, in Northern Ireland, past conflict continues to influence a kind of hatred around religion and people's origins. Nevertheless, racist, and national origin content (for instance regarding refugees) would be highly and generally highlighted.

Several of the experts interviewed suggest a connection between fake news and cyberhate, especially with regard to homosexual people or transgender people, as well as migrant people. The explanation would be a potential link between misinformation and polarisation: people with more radical ideas would be more sensible to misinformation. This practice would imply to spread negative stereotypes against those collectives.

Some experts also referred to the hatred that appears when placing in a public discourse the judgement of someone's behaviour, image, or way of thinking. That would happen, for instance, when there is a massive response to a comment made by someone who is judged as foolish by the majority. This would be a behaviour that can end up in a sort of bullying.



Regarding evolution, some interviewed experts confirmed that according to their data, online hate speech would have increased during the pandemic. On the one hand, a large portion of the world population were having most of their social interaction online (Buil-Gil et al., 2021), which was especially relevant for young people. On the other hand, COVID-19 also brought political polarisation, and some distrust on democratic institutions, which would have been exacerbated via fake news. Discussions around COVID-19's origins, cure, treatment, measures and vaccines were especially relevant. Fake news would spread in this context as people want to defend their position, looking for arguments that support their beliefs.

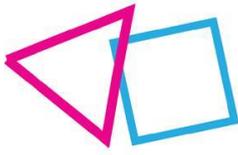
Definitions and targets emerged in the focus groups are consistent with those offered by the interviewed experts. In the case of the young participants, when asked about cyberhate both cyberbullying and hate speech topics appear, although as one participant explains in one group, cyberhate refers to *attacking ethnic, social, etc. groups and cyberbullying refers to attacking individuals*. Both Cyberbullying and Cyberhate are mixed probably as bullying that has inherited a lot of hate speech: *anyone can be a victim, nowadays those of a different race or who don't quite look the part are shamed*. As one interviewed expert also highlights, expressing hatred can be a form of bullying against a person, so both phenomena would overlap in some cases, but not always. In the following analysis, results will be presented making a distinction between those referring to cyberbullying and those related to cyberhate.

The definition given by one participant is consistent with the previously stated: *An attack against people or groups based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability etc.* In one group, the connection with fake news is done as a definition: *Spreading fake messages*.

Consistent with the interviewed experts, the most referred situation **targets** are race and racism: *Well, because people don't want people to immigrate to our country, for example*. LGBTBIphobia would be stated in second place (*People mess with those things a lot*). Together with the common forms of discrimination, the physical appearance is repeatedly highlighted. In two of the groups (in Estonia and Slovakia) the economic status is also pointed out: *Modest children being or economically weaker and without family support children*. In a lesser extent, age is pointed out: *Fat people, Asians, gay, Black, old people...* Finally, being an influencer is also referred: *Digital influencers are more often targets, because they're very present online*.

There is a relevant connection that appears in several groups between **victimisation and confidence**, involving that *people with lack of confidence* would also be a target. If the general explanations places defects - especially physical - as one of the main reasons for becoming a victim (*as big ears*) some participants deduce that as everybody has got defects, it is not enough to have them, but you would also have to feel insecure:

So, the physique for example is very evident. If it is a person who is very fat and has insecurity with his body, people will possibly take advantage of it more than someone who is fat and is comfortable with his body and does not care. If there is an insecurity it is more likely, but there is no specific defect to say such, because we all have defects.



This idea, although not present in all the groups, is especially relevant in terms of prevention and for avoiding ending up blaming the victim, a common behaviour that might hide abuse practises. This reasoning is not only made with regard to bullying, but also with regard to cyberhate, which again could undervalue the effect of this type of discourse. As another participant follows:

In my town, there is a guy who is gay. Well, there are two. One has it normalized and is super happy and nobody messes with him because they know that no matter how much they insult him, he doesn't care. But the other one is super insecure and super confused and doesn't know what to do. They take advantage and mess with him and make him feel bad. The other, no matter how much you insult him, he will not care, and they know that they cannot hurt him.

Regarding a potential profile for a person who spreads hate speech via online, some interviewed experts suggest that it could be related to having fewer social skills and empathy. In addition, we would find people who were particularly exposed to fake news and who were more vulnerable to being polarised, because of their social and educational background.

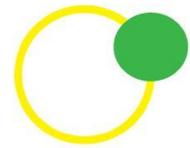
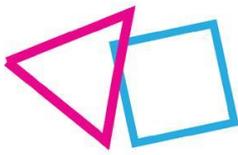
Between the reasons given by the participants for being involved in cyberbullying would find *thinking they are superior*. This statement is also connected with the characteristic of bullying -in a greater extent than to cyberbullying- which implies that **some form of asymmetry must be present**, as a participant explains: *bad people who decide to mess with other people, but do not mess with people... it is not a popular person of the school that mess with another popular person. They go against people who cannot, that cannot do anything*. Other reasons would be *not having attention and seeking for it, being insecure, having been previously bullied, being young and don't think through what you might cause with your comment, having issues and wanting to belong*. When thinking about cyberhate, more serious reasons are exposed such as having any needs, being predisposed or being sick.

In general, most of the participants seem aware of the phenomenon, although some live cyberhate from some distance: In two groups they refer to have experienced it only with celebrities and famous people (*Not personally. Only famous people for their colour or their life choices*). It could also depend on the inner diversity, which could be not so present, for instance, in a private school. As it is referred to in a different group (also from a private school): this idea emerges: *I did hear the stories but nothing personal; We didn't have cases like this at school either; This is a nice school, and we are kind of a closed community*.

5.6.1. Cyberhate and gender

The connection between cyberbullying and cyberhate can be easily noticed by paying attention to how gender roles and sexism permeate cyberbullying. According to what was explained in the cyberbullying section, in the focus groups several examples emerge in which girls are especially insulted by their physical appearance (*for being fat; who is flat; for her face and body*). The following participant reflects the dualism between girls and boys that was previously described:

For example, I see the people in my class, like girls, tend to be more complexed by their bodies and boys tend to... I mean, most kids in my class if you call them gay, they make you cross, and they don't talk to you again. That's like they have a fragile masculinity.



Certainly, and as some participants suggest, this trend does not mean that boys are not insulted for their appearance, but for girls it would be like a much more systematised practice, as the following example shows: *In fifth or sixth some guys in my class made a WhatsApp group to talk about the girls, and in particular they messed with one, with her body and with her face.*

While explicitly sexist content in social networks was not approached in most of the groups, in the two groups where it was addressed, participants explain that videos with exaggeration of feminine roles or *videos making fun of what women do* are common in social networks. As we will be approached later, they are usually sort of masked in the form of jokes.

As previously discussed, gender related issues are especially sensible for ending up blaming the victim. Firstly, just because this type of sexism does not only involve men does not mean that it is not sexist, as a participant suggests: *For example, on Tik Tok I see a video and I get into the comments and many times I see more criticism of girls towards girls than boys did boys.* Indeed, pressure above the ideal of femininity would be stronger in girls. Secondly, the idea of girls with complexes who are offended by this is also presented in a special way. Thirdly, although it is not explicitly mentioned, a last risk could be related with the fact that, as some participants explain, the comments about physical appearance take place more frequently according to the style of the photos, especially *If the girls show more or less.* Finally, and as will be described in the next section, when comments, videos or posts are supposed to be funny or jokes, the problem can turn on a lack of sense of humour instead of a form of aggression or of abuse.

Another characteristic that is pointed out is how inside a group the peer pressure acts, especially regarding the heterosexual normativity:

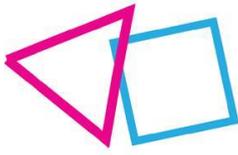
They feed each other and that makes them mess more with people, it does not matter if they are girls or boys. I, for example, have seen it more in groups of boys. For example, with homophobia, between them they feed back and make a circle of homophobia even though none can be outside, but inside the circle because they are called faggots among them, but reluctantly. I think when it's a group of people they kind of give feedback and then they get the thing out at the end, and they mess with the people from outside.

This would mean to first start as an endo group dynamic for going late to the exo group. When asked in one group about if **CB** offence is more related to boys than girls, they mostly answer boys. This trend is even more accurate when talking about **Hate speech** (not being directly asked about gender), as they answer: *Insecure men; White straight men; Super Straight; Conservative.* Similarly, in another group they explain: *they are boys or men.*

5.6.2. Trivialisation of aggression

Participants also describe how cyberhate is often **masked as humour**, which reflects some contemporary debates about the limits or censorship surrounding humour. As a participant explains when talking about sexism:

In Tik Tok there is a lot of humour with a theme of sexism and everything, with homophobia, racism, and everything. I have seen a lot of sexism in humour and people do not take it as sexism because



it is humour. Then, if someone comments something of, "this is sexism", everyone tells him: it is humour, you do not have humour and that. Nobody sees it as sexism but as a joke.

The same strategy is pointed out regarding cyberbullying. It would imply to *try to disguise it with humour, instead of saying it with a criticism they mess with them with jokes*. Stickers and memes would enter in this kind of cyber bullying modus operandi. These thin boundaries regarding humour are also present in the groups when participants reflect about their own experience: *5 years ago, we used to tease each other with girlfriends, we used to kick each other out of groups, but it was more of a joke.*

In another group, the **humour** also appears in the discussion, and the participants agree that young people *talk together differently with lots of joking around*, which would mean that they might be perceived badly from an outside person. The potential solution to the dilemma of who to define these boundaries is proposed in the same group as being *when the person doesn't like it anymore doesn't take it as anything funny anymore*. Nevertheless, it might be a hard distinction to make for both victims and offenders. Here we could find again the risk of underestimating the effect of the joke and ending up blaming the victim for being too sensitive, as a participant in a different group refer: *And you know some people can take a joke and don't really care about other people's opinions, and some not.*

Although not trivialised, cyberbullying seems to be quite normalised, meaning that in those groups where the topic was approached most of participants describe it as being pretty common. For instance, in one group, the participant explains that due to the anonymity, bullying is quite frequent in Tik Tok and Instagram: In Tik Tok a lot of young children are being bullied (9-13 years); In Tik Tok you'll get bullied the minute you post something somewhere.

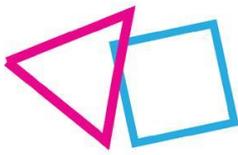
In those groups where they talk about experiences, many participants have heard stories (of third persons), ending up two of them (in different groups) in suicide. As one participant explains:

Recently, in my town, a girl ended up committing suicide because of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is not always going to happen either, there is no way.... There were only a few children, and all the children were against her, and the school was also against her, and on social networks and in person. And the girl ended up committing suicide.

5.6.3. Main means and platforms

When asked about the main platforms for the spreading of cyberhate, all the interviewed experts agree in pointing out specially to Facebook and Twitter. Particularly Twitter would have some characteristics such as the issue of hashtag mentions, the ability to spread a message without necessarily interacting with it by retweeting, which would favour very rapid communication and encourage the vitalisation of messages. In addition, messages are shorter and much more consumed, and are not necessarily accompanied by an image, which would facilitate writing and replying, easily achieving a certain notoriety.

Regarding the focus groups, the platform most frequently mentioned by all groups related to cyberhate is Tik Tok. In less general terms, the following are also noted: Instagram, online gaming, and Twitter. This last one would be addressed as a *specific social media where anything works to*



hate. Any little thing angers everyone. Anything suits to argue. When they are discussing cyberbullying, Tik Tok would still be the most mentioned, followed by WhatsApp groups.

In addition to finding differences between the platforms reported by the experts and the young people (which could be explained as Twitter and Facebook are not so popular among youngsters), another issue is especially raised by the participants in the focus groups. Firstly, the participants especially remarked that hate speech is done in comments, and not only in the produced content in form of posts or videos, as if it were a form of reaction as well. Secondly, platforms such as Tik Tok are described as being not only the vehicle of hate speech, but also a way of contesting it, as these two participants' state:

It is true that in Tik Tok there is a little bit of everything, in Tik Tok you can get out racism, homophobia, transphobia, but just as you get people who mess with it, you also get people who defend it, you can get out of everything; Sometimes I do watch videos of that kind that make fun of people who are gay. But I really see more support for all the things that have happened [recent homophobic aggressions] and I see more messages supporting them than discriminating against them.

5.6.4. School classroom discussion: Cyberhate

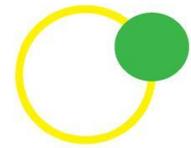
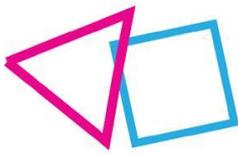
In relation to the information obtained from the discussion among the students, when asked about cyberhate, most of them already heard about this and gave the following examples: *people who write under a picture that this person is very ugly, people who write bad things about another person or people who post hate messages in general.* Some of them alluded to *famous people are mostly the object of hate on the Internet because they are beautiful or just popular.*

Secondly, they were asked who was usually a victim of cyberhate, and many of the answers they gave can be classified into two groups: on the one hand, people who are considered "weaker" (e.g. people who are different, who have mental health problems, less attractive people, with less economic resources, marginal people, black people, immigrants, homosexual people, among others); on the other hand, those people who are considered "stronger" (e.g. famous or attractive people, with many followers, popular, influencers, etc.).

In terms of which platform, they perceive higher levels of cyber hate they pointed to Tik Tok (n=25) and Instagram(n=25). However, other platforms such as Facebook (n=12) or YouTube (n=11) were also highlighted, although to a lesser extent. More marginally, we can mention: Twitter (n=6), Snapchat (n=4), WhatsApp (n=3), video games (n=2).

In relation to what kind of people spread hate messages on the Internet, the students gave different answers, most of the young people said that they are people who spread hate messages out of boredom, or that they are jealous, or that they feel lonely or have been victims of cyberhate. Another small group of young people considered that those who send hate messages are people who do not feel good about themselves, who do not dare to talk in person, in particular young people and one person mentioned that they are people who have different opinions.

Regarding why people share these messages, some participants alluded that perhaps wanting to look cool jealousy are some reasons why they share content. There have also been references to



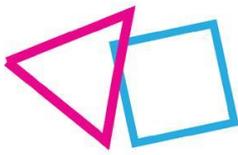
them aiming to harm another person or searching attention. Similarly, they may do it because they disagree with other people, or perhaps they may want to express their frustrations, or because they have been bullied themselves.

Young people's reactions to these hate messages were also assessed. The results obtained can be divided into different groups: In the first group we found students who would report the facts or at least defend the victim; in the second group, some students said that they would get angry with the aggressors; in the third group we found students who would not know what to do or who feel shocked, in the fourth group we found young people who ignore the situation. Lastly, we found three similar reactions, on the one hand one student answered that everybody has the right to have their own opinion and on the other hand, one student said that he got angry but did not react because when people reacted there was a dispute on the Internet that kept growing and finally another student said that he got angry but did not react because it happened so often.

Finally, participants were asked what reactions we should have. Some reported that it should be ignored, as long as it is not serious, since in these cases the most convenient thing to do is to report the facts, help the victims and try to put a stop to the facts. It is also possible to adopt a proactive stance, but in a respectful way, without insulting. Other options are to block the user who did it or delete the message. However, some students responded that they would not know what to do in such cases.

5.6.5. Takeaway points for RAYUELA project

- There is a connection between fake news and cyberhate, due to a possible link between misinformation and polarisation: people with more radical ideas would be more sensible to misinformation.
- Online hate speech has increased during the pandemic.
- The most referred situation targets are race and racism, together with sexual orientation and physical appearance. In a lesser measure we find the economic status and age.
- There is a relevant connection that appears in several groups between victimisation and self-confidence which might be dangerous as it can lead to blaming the victim.
- Different reasons are attributed to CB and CH, although some form of asymmetry is commonly assumed.
- There is a connection between cyberbullying and cyberhate, which can be exemplified on how gender roles and sexism permeate cyberbullying: physical appearance being the way for insulting girls and homophobia when it is about boys.
- Cyberhate is often masked as humour, which reflects some contemporary debates about the limits or censorship surrounding humour. The same strategy is pointed out regarding cyberbullying.
- While Facebook and Twitter are pointed out by the experts as the main platforms on which cyberhate spreads, young people refer in a greater extent to Tik Tok, Instagram and online gaming. When they are discussing cyberbullying, Tik Tok would still be the most mentioned, followed by WhatsApp groups.



5.7. Prevention

In the section, we will explore different elements that can be considered relevant in terms of prevention. First, we will analyse the most common reactions to the different forms of phenomena previously analysed: Fake news, deception, cyberbullying and cyberhate. Secondly, we will discuss the role of parental supervision. Finally, some prevention strategies will be discussed.

5.7.1. Reactions

The main responses to fake news are to ignore it and show disinterest in the content: *I ignore it. Yeah, I just ignore it; it doesn't do anything to me.* To a lesser extent, participants refer to blocking the source for not receiving more fake information, or to alert the person who shares it: *You know it's come out that it's a lie and such.*

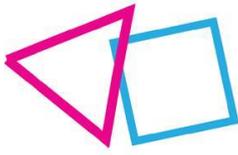
Regarding deception, in one group, participants describe how when confronted with nasty comments and harassment from stranger accounts, they first share the information among them for later reporting to Instagram as much as they can. Acting like that, they closed some accounts and received thank you messages from the platform. Nevertheless, it is not the most common procedure. Participants usually block those accounts if they are insistent, otherwise they simply ignore it or ask more questions to know who the person is, but they do not generally report.

When specifically asked about telling an adult, in one group while one minor describes that she would speak if there were another child in danger, two other students reported not telling if the situation would not concern them. In another group, in one of the exposed cases, the victim told a friend who showed the Instagram content to her mother. After that, they talked to the victim's family and to the school. This case shows how prevention should be addressed to all the potential situations, including the one in which a girl or a boy discover that a friend is involved in a grooming offence.

Regarding cyberbullying reaction, it can be highlighted that participants understand that there are "three types of people": on the one hand, those who support the bully and laugh with them, on the other hand, those who do support the victim, and finally, there is a *third group that sees it but gets to do nothing*. The most referred reaction is trying to calm and support the friend who has been harassed instead of stopping the bullying. In addition, the fact itself is not the most important but the way the person feels the bullying, since *I don't think he was affected because I also told him, because I saw the video, that it didn't matter what they thought about him because what mattered was what he thought about himself.*

Moreover, not only the subjective aspect of bullying (how the victim feels the bullying) matters, but also the relationship of the proximity of the relationship with the victim, since the less warmly or close, the less support she/he will receive:

Well, a lot depends on the situation. If it's in Tik-Tok, it doesn't matter. But if it's with my close friends, I'll say something; if it's someone close to you, you still react and speak up. You don't react to strangers.



Finally, participants agree that no one who is victimised usually asks for help in a bullying case. Although it only appeared in one group, one especially dangerous point of view is that the less a bystander does, the less good, as less attention is paid to the offender:

P1: Nobody does anything if I comment.

P2: If they are looking for attention, they will have more strength to continue bullying.

P3: Yes, I agree.

On the other hand, regarding cyberhate reaction, although they do not like it, participants seem to mostly ignore cyberhate content, as racist content, preferring to ignore such content or to pass over it. It happens even when two black participants give their answer about the racist content: *M1: Well, it depends on the day, but many days I pass... Because I don't feel like arguing; M2: No, in Tik Tok sometimes videos appear, and I just give it to not to see more content like that.*

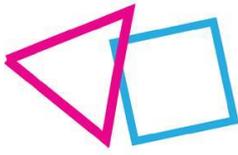
Nevertheless, some students explain that although they usually do not react to hate speech, they see that many people do it. The same participants that previously referred to report fake accounts, also practised extensive denunciation of cyberhaters, which in some cases ended up being blocked. This is related to the ease with which users can report cyberhate content in virtual spaces, according to one expert. For another expert, there is a big amount of passive bystanders and young people frequently share or repost cyberhate or fake news. For this expert, we should encourage them to act differently by explaining the negative consequences of taking an active part in sharing and reposting false information or cyberhate.

When directly asked about reporting, some of the students in our sample say that, although it is difficult to report an online grooming situation, they think they would tell their parents, even though *it is difficult to report it because not everyone is so brave*. Moreover, some students referred to the chance to go to the police or contact a web counsellor.

Regarding the police, students are not sure about being legally able to report, but they mostly thought that minors can be prosecuted for causing harm online. A dangerous perception to work on is that (regarding the nude from a boy): *when a photo is on the Internet, I don't know if the police can do much. You can do, you can look for the one who has sent it, but the photo will still be there*. Similarly, some of the students believe that most of the young people would not go to the police, as one participant explains: *I've heard so many young people say that the police don't do anything, that you can go to them, but they won't help you. You must talk about that in the videogame too*.

5.7.2. Parental supervision

Regarding prevention strategies towards the Internet risks, parental supervision must be approached. When we refer to the **control exercised by parents over their children**, we can point out that this can have effects contrary to those intended, as it was developed in the previous sections. In general terms, in the younger groups of minors in our sample, participants turn to their parents to report an incident they have suffered, and only a few of them first talk to their friends or peer group to verify and decide whether it is appropriate to discuss it with their parents



afterwards. The former ones consult these issues with their friends before their parents because either they may have more trust with their friends (e.g., *Well, because I have more confidence with my friends than with my parents*), or because they think that their friends can advise them better as they live similar situations (e.g., *more than confidence, it is because my friends understand more about this than my parents*). An interesting factor is that they wait until they are encouraged by their friends to tell their parents: *I always first tell a friend, and if he/she tells me that I should tell my parents, and I see that, I talk with my parents*.

Age seems to be a differential factor in adopting one or the other dynamic. In the 14 to 17 age groups, two distinct responses or trends are apparent: in two groups of five in total, all members stated that they would only tell these issues to their friends or peer group (e.g., *No, we don't tell our parents how we spend our time on social media. And they don't ask*). The other three remaining groups seem that they would not only talk to their friends, but would also tell their families -mainly parents, and in one case the sister-. Some specified that they do so because they *are very close with the family*, as knowing that this relationship is not that common. One claimed not only to tell their parents, but also perhaps a teacher -in particular- (e.g., *Yes, I tell my parents and maybe my teacher*).

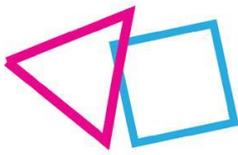
This dynamic is related to the effects of an overprotective parent model (Walters, 2021) could discourage young people from sharing their concerns with their parents, possibly because by violating the privacy of their children, they lose confidence in parental figures:

M1: I think that the parents offer you their help and they tell you: I am here, and if you need something, you can tell me, and I can help you. But there are many parents who force you to give them the mobile, to look at the conversations you talk to people. And that's getting into a person's intimacy and at the end, you end up taking away all trust in your parents and you don't tell them anything. I think it makes everything worse.

Although this alludes to those supervisory behaviours that are more aggressive, there are others that could be classified as "passive-aggressive" that could also discourage children from maintaining fluid communication with their parents (Walters, 2021). Nevertheless, there is an intimacy that is not bad, but to some extent and possibly necessary:

I think parents do not have to control their children all the time because having intimacy is not bad. My parents have always told me that if someone told me to send pictures or whatever, I told them because that wasn't right either. They used to say that to me when I was younger too. Now they know I know how to handle it and they know I'm not going to send anything like that because they know me.

When being asked about talking about their negative experiences on the Internet with anyone, most students commented that they talk about it with their parents at least in case it is serious. A group of students also responded that they talk about it with friends or relatives of a similar age. A smaller proportion of students mentioned that they usually share this information with teachers.



Regarding experts' opinions about parental supervision, it can be highlighted that parents should be engaged with their children to online activities at early ages, in order to understand how the platforms or online games work, so children's Internet safety can be improved. This has the main objective of helping teenagers to make better choices without the necessity of parent's supervision. So, for this reason, it could be necessary to give young people information to help them to make the right decision due to the difficulty of controlling them at any moment. Therefore, more actors could be involved, like school, teachers and even peers or friends. One expert state that if the minor is younger than 14 years old, it is a good idea that parents check and limit the usage of the Internet, although if they are older than 14 years old it is more difficult, because they can spend more time outside with friends, having connection to the Internet at any moment.

5.7.2.1. Parental supervision and level of trust as victimisation factors

One of the **factors that prevent future more serious victimisation situations** is the seriousness of the issue-perceived by the child. This is because it has been found that one of the reasons why young people communicate these issues to their parents is because of the seriousness of the problem (e.g., *I would tell them when they start hurting me*). Thus, this "seriousness" is not objective, but subjective, i.e., it depends on the perception of the minor (e.g., *If it has hurt you then yes, but if it has not hurt you then it is not necessary* -regarding a Cyber bullying offense-. As well as:

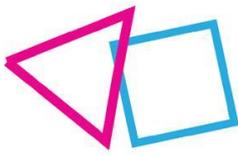
No, I find it wrong when a stranger starts talking to me or asks me something that is not right for me (pictures of my body or something like that); or when someone talks about me (which I have never done) and starts hurting me.

In addition, one of the factors referred to in the previous paragraphs alludes to the **level of trust of the minor with his or her parents**. Some subjects in the sample stated that they had a good relationship with their parents and that is why *they can share all issues with them. Nothing cardinal needs to happen, or they just talk about topics that somehow bother them, it doesn't have to be something specific to them*. The main reason young people in our sample emphasise the trust or good relationship they had with their parents is because trust itself allows young people to talk to them about the experiences they have and what happens to them:

Most things, if not all, I tell my mom, but because she gives me the confidence that I can tell her openly and she's not going to tell me anything. She just likes to know, who I talk to or who I don't talk to, or.... For example, I tell her: I met this guy, I met him on Instagram, and she tells me: Share the location, just in case... But she doesn't forbid me to meet him.

The same has been found in other cases when analysing focus groups' information in relation to having a good communication between parents and children:

It's the same for me as M3, I have a lot of confidence since I was little, and I have told her everything. Not because she asked me to but because I like to tell her, and I feel I can tell my mom anything and.... I like to have that confidence with her. I have confidence with my mother and with my father to tell them anything that happens to me.



Additionally, it is relevant to be able to speak about topics with their parents that concern the minors, even if they are not bad for themselves. In other words, having a fluid and dynamic conversation sharing concerns and thoughts as, for instance: *I talk about topics that somehow bother me, it doesn't have to be specific to me....*

5.7.3. Prevention strategies

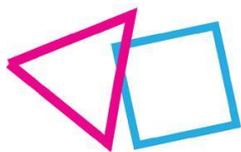
Regarding the **prevention of Internet risks** developed in school programs, when being asked, most of the students mention that they have had some talks or conferences about online grooming, cyberbullying, etc, in some of the cases during sixth grade. Therefore, the police are a figure that has been remarked on several occasions because they have been responsible for giving these talks (e.g., *At the school, we met with the police and he told us about Cyberbullying, online crime, Internets threats, on-line grooming etc.*). Similarly, according to students, on several occasions referred to, teachers, during their classes, have informed students about cybercrime (e.g., *we talk about the dangers of the Internet in a computer lesson and a humanities lesson; Yesterday I gave it in English, and I know how to explain it. Cyberbullying is a way where people bully another person online.*).

This information is related to what is stated by some **experts**, who consider that every resource that is interactive and has activities for children and youngsters to actively participate in is a good resource. For instance, a resource created by a Berlin based NGO called Tactical Tech, that was translated by APAV. In addition, the Data Detox X Youth is a kit that has several activities that tackle issues like cybersecurity, online addiction and Fake News and Misinformation.

However, there are opinions that determine that these programs are not enough and that other prevention strategies should be articulated, such as the possible increase of media knowledge among young people. These programs should include different sources of news, how do algorithms work, etc. According to some interviewed experts, media knowledge of young people is very low, being important to teach and show minors and young people to read the full article in the case of fake news and make it a subject that can be explained in schools. Also, one expert suggested a campaign entitled "pause and think before you share" to encourage teenager to learn how stop and think when dealing with online content. In general terms, they agree that any program should be a structural and long-term strategy.

Regarding dangers, while cyberbullying seems to be more of a concern for the older sample of students, younger students seem to be more concerned about online grooming. This could be due to the fact that, as they themselves report, cyberbullying is a phenomenon that you cannot avoid and to which you are exposed involuntarily (González-García & Campoy-Torrente, 2018), because according to their reasoning, the decision to share or not to share photos with strangers is up to the subject himself/herself:

The most serious thing seems to me cyberbullying because there is no way to avoid it. As H2 said, you can avoid not passing the photos, that is the decision of the person. But cyberbullying cannot be avoided, if it is your turn to mess with you it has touched you and it is not fair.



When asked about fake news, students of our sample seemed to not worry about them, as someone stated: *I don't think we are really concerned about fake news. All: Yeah, we just ignore it.* In addition, phenomena such as the Blue Whale Incident or the application *Tellonym.me* (in which you can create a profile and invite anonymous comments about anything or yourself and share it in your Insta profile) are also highlighted.

As it was previously mentioned in the Online Grooming section, it is also important to consider how to approach the prevention activities for not blaming the victims. One of the cases in which it must be especially taken into account is sexting. As one student pointed out: *If a person shares a photo with another person because she trusts him, and then that person distributes the intimate image to the rest of their classmates, it is not the victim who is to blame, but the aggressor.*

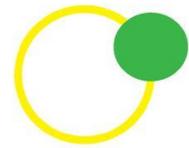
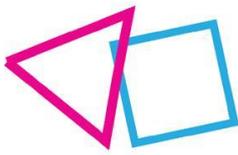
Some experts have reported that not all schools contemplate preventive programs or activities because cybercrime in general is not seen as a problem or a major issue. According to one expert, although there are European projects, most of the links are down, because these frequently are actions contemplated for a certain time, then no further action is taken, and the impact is not measured.

When talking about prevention, it should be borne in mind that it does not only refer to the occurrence of cybercrime, but also to intervention when it occurs, and the prevention of future situations already suffered. This is related to the figure of the victim, given that, as one expert has pointed out, it is vitally important to help them by offering them legal information and psychological help, removing obstacles, and eliminating Internet content that may cause harm - physical or psychological- to the victim.

Finally, one of the issues referred to by one of the experts is that for certain cybercrimes, such as cyberhate, it is difficult to think of prevention strategies, since these should be adopted before the criminal act is committed. Ergo, censorship and the limitation of the right to freedom of expression would be promoted, as preventing people from writing, and publishing any type of content on the Internet would be unfeasible. Therefore, it is easier to develop, in his opinion, **reaction strategies**, such as would be the buttons offered by each publication of Instagram, Twitter or Facebook (being these two applications in which more cyber hate can be observed, according to his criteria) that allow reporting the content for infringing some rule of the social network. Subsequently, it would be reviewed by a technical team that would take the necessary measures. In addition, this is facilitated because it is convenient for the user to report, since only one of the reasons for which the publication violates the rules must be alleged and no further reason is requested.

5.7.4. Takeaway points

- Reactions depend on the cybercrime, but stronger reactions should be encouraged. When the participants face fake news, they mainly ignore them or as much block the accounts that publish them. When it is about strangers contacting minors, although some report to the social network, most of them simply ignore or block the account. While general attitude toward cyberhate is quite passive, it seems to be a bit more energetic when the person knows the victim, although more addressed to calm the victim than to stop the



bullying. Prevention should be addressed to all the potential situations, including the one in which a girl or a boy discover that a friend is involved in some crime.

- Many participants would tell their friends before (or instead) of their family in case they are dealing with any cybercrime. As previously remarked, an excessive parental control could discourage reporting, being a good establishment of trust and communication much more effective.
- Some elements must be considered regarding prevention: It should be dynamic and interactive, included in the school curriculum is possible. Special care should be taken for not blaming the victim.

5.8. Video Games

First of all, some students stated that they played video games to have fun. Minecraft was pointed out as a game played on mobile. Some teenagers highlighted that they played with the PlayStation console device. In general terms, they usually did not play video games on mobile. Firstly, they spend their time on social networks like Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter and YouTube:

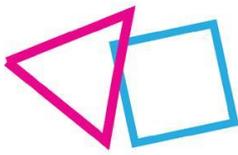
The most I've played is Candy Crush. I have it on my mobile but only when I get very bored and I have already been bored of Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter, YouTube, and everything because I get to play there but to get a little out of my way.

Then, only when they are bored, they play games like Candy Crush on mobile. One of them pointed out that he/she does not like to play alone, so they play FIFA or Call of Duty with their brother. Nevertheless, with the pandemic caused by COVID-19, they stated that they used to play more games, like Tetris, on mobile phones just to spend spare time, which is correlated with the study carried out by De Pasquale and collaborators (2021).

Thus, League of legends was also mentioned as a game played during lockdown. In addition, it seems that FIFA is played among teenagers on PlayStation. They affirmed to chat with their friends through Discord, while playing (e.g., *I play FIFA with friends through PlayStation, and we talk in Discord.*). What is more, the Greek sample was interesting because they mentioned a lot of games, like Sims, Fall Guys, Untitled Goose Game, Assassins Creed, Bitlife and Nomogram. Meanwhile, the Estonia sample stated that they played more Roblox, but they usually don't play video games due to lack of time and because they want to spend more time with their friends and training. So, they use mobile phones to play spend-time-games, which is important when developing RAYUELA, a serious game, if there is the intention to reach a wider audience.

Secondly, the majority of teenagers pointed out that young people of 10 to 12 years old are more sensitive and vulnerable to the dangers of the Internet than those who are used to surfing on social networks and the Internet, in general terms (e.g., *they are more innocent because they have just started with social networks, and they don't know what they are facing*). So, minors are more exposed to danger because it is when they start playing video games or interacting through social networks with the Tablet or parent's computer.

In third place, the students who knew about RAYUELA, a serious game project, stated that it is an important initiative because there are people -minors- who do not know the dangers they could



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

have to face while surfing on the Internet. It would be great if the game could prevent cyberbullying, racism, LGBTBIphobia and sexism. Although some of them preferred to play as a team instead of playing alone, they accepted the importance of playing a storyteller game in which you face the scenarios. Nevertheless, some students of the sample pointed out the importance of adapting the cybercrime to be prevented to the age of the children who will be playing RAYUELA (e.g., *Bullying is among 12–16-year-olds, so the game should be for 11–12-year-old or younger*), and to build the game around levels to make the game more motivating. Finally, it is relevant to make the game multi-platform since some teenagers asked if it would be only available on PlayStation (e.g., *Where do you think the video game is going to be? Because it seemed that it was a PlayStation, but I do not know if it is mobile*).

Regarding Fake News, the Spanish student sample stated that this topic could be added by showing high quality images from Google attached to information whose content is modified by a certain newspaper-typology and font, or to cite sources to substantiate arguments. One of them pointed out that fake news could be added by receiving a notification of a message with a fake information attached to it to your phone in-game. Additionally, Slovakian sample affirmed that they are not concerned about fake news, instead they highlight to ignore them (e.g., *I don't really pay attention to anything like that*). So, what is relevant is to achieve *a game that would inform people about fake news and that directs them to credible sources*, as a student stated.

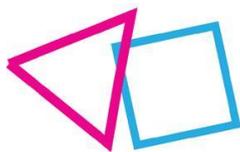
Additionally, and as an idea, students of our sample suggested that it would be nice to have their avatars to be customizable, since they considered relevant to be reflected in them:

F2: My avatar will have to be very customised. M1. Yeah, it should depend on us, and we should choose. F1: It will be cool if you can create your own avatar. Let's say it will be a girl who is 16 and I can play as her and at the start of the game you should be able to choose different hair, nose, male female, age, clothes, glasses etc.

Meanwhile, non-playing-characters should be random (e.g., *The other characters (baddies) should be more random*).

Likewise, when talking about cyberhate, some teenagers emphasised that *some players face regular and ongoing hate and harassment while playing*. So, this could be added as a scenario where the player could face a cyberhate matter through Instagram or any social network, and then they could report that through the App's system, since it seems to be efficient (e.g., *Reporting cyberhate on Instagram and Facebook as the good reaction; I previously reported something, and they took it off*). In conclusion, real scenarios based on real stories with dramatic plots, where correct choices lead to bonus points for correct answers, in order to teach how to behave correctly.

According to the experts interviewed, it is claimed that young people or digital natives have an easier time on the Internet, so to speak, *they have special powers*, but like any power *they have to use it responsibly*. For this reason, gamification techniques are used, so that they can learn about many things by playing video games, since *knowledge is power*, so the more skills they gain



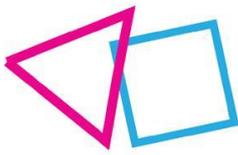
and practice such as "critical analysis, fact-checking, etc.", the less likely it is that minors will be victims of dynamics such as fake news or cybercrime.

It is important that they bear in mind that the world of online video games is not the same as the real world, so it is essential that they identify the elements that are part of the outside world and take into account that there are risks that are currently transferred from the physical to the virtual space, taking into account experts' opinion. In this line, some studies have measured fear of crime, for example, using 360-degree technology, so that the person playing the game and playing the role of victim or perpetrator is immersed in the scenarios (Noh & Lee, 2019). Likewise, and as an idea, the scenarios could have certain essential characteristics if they form part of serious games, as they should immerse the user in the video game, as has also been highlighted from the information extracted from the focus groups.

The latter is closely related to protective factors, as scenarios that accurately and in detail simulate situations of cyber-victimisation help to identify deprivations, risk factors and triggers for criminal behaviour and those characteristics that are conducive to offending. As an idea, some of the dynamics that have been used could be like the EUNOMIA project, whose objective was to create a comic book that provides advice and information to help users of social networks to fight against fake news and disinformation, as one expert stated. This is important because, according to expert's opinion, young people and minors absorb information like "sponges" and most of the time they do not stop to read things. This influences role modelling, as they can learn many behaviours, ideals, and ways of thinking from influencers or celebrities, which later has an impact on the behaviours they will adopt, the way they think and/or act.

According to experts' opinions, "co-designing approach" is highly recommended, and it can be achieved by inviting relevant stakeholders, including young people in workshops or other formats, in order to design pilot video games. Some scenarios regarding video game prevention towards cybercrime could be: firstly, when talking about young people it is relevant to discuss about selfies and edition filters, because there are influencers who use them and people are getting used to searching for details if that photo was edited or not, but also, they use to making a lot of selfies about themselves and then post them right away. So, these can be possible ideas. This also has to be correlated with the idea of immediate content publication on Twitter or Instagram, where a minor user can post anything that could be considered as hate speech.

Secondly, thinking about fake news it could be appropriate to build a scenario where minors are exposed to misinformation, and they are required to search for the true facts about that. And then it could be interesting to ask them about how they feel after the exposition. A vital question that has to be taken into consideration is that there is a difference between male and female population who play video games. There are more boys than girls playing video games and one reason could be that girls get bored with video games that have been made for boys, they do not feel attracted to, so it's a fact that has to be discussed since girls are more vulnerable to online grooming and hate speech. This can be due to sexism in online video games (Fox & Tang, 2014) or since more video games still appear to be aimed at a male audience (Ivory, 2006).



And, finally, a type of scenario proposed by experts is about the creation of an intelligence agency where young people have to search through fake accounts and discover the right person through false information and photos of people. If they get to discover who the person is, then the behind story can be told. This could provide young people with skills for detecting misinformation and to use tools that unmask fake news.

5.8.1. School classroom discussion: Video Games

In relation to the data obtained by the school classroom discussion related to video games and RAYUELA, a serious game, it can be highlighted that most participants mentioned playing: 1) Grand Theft Auto (GTA); 2) Minecraft; 3) FIFA; 4) Call of Duty; 5) Roblox, which correlates with the most played video games according to the information extracted from the focus groups. In addition, they emphasised that a good video game should have, first of all, good graphics and be playable online with other people. It could also offer enough entertainment so that it does not become boring after playing for a few hours, and a good and interesting storyline can help to keep it from being boring. In the same way, one student has said that a good game has to include *action, cars and fights*. Thirdly, the possibility of choosing the courses of action of the game among many possibilities by the player is important. Finally, it was mentioned that it should include fantasy elements.

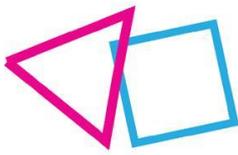
When asked about what they expected from a video game about cyberhate, they referred that they would expect that the player would experience a cyberhate situation in the game and that the player would have to make choices, influencing the outcome depending on the appropriateness of the situation: *I would expect that you experience this in the game, and you have to make some choices: when you make the right choices you get rid of it; Also, I imagine something where you receive comments and you have to give the right answers.*

Some more specific scenarios they came up with were first, a situation where the player had to publish a post about hate speech; second, a situation where the player is a victim of bullying; third, fake accounts used to threaten third parties; fourth, hacking. In relation to the fake news scenarios, it is suggested that the player could be the one who writes the messages and news, or that he/she could be a naive character who believes everything. It could also refer to being able to see the "likes" of the publications and see how many times a publication is shared.

Finally, some scenarios related to deception could include a phishing situation in which the gamer loses all his money, or a scenario related to Discord (a communication platform between gamers that was also mentioned in the focus group sample), in which false information is spread.

5.8.2. Takeaway points

- Young people usually do not play video games on mobile. Firstly, they spend their time on social networks like Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter and YouTube, and then as a last option to entertain themselves, they play video games on their mobile phones.
- Minecraft was highlighted as the first option to be played on mobile phones. FIFA was stated to be played on PlayStation, and League of Legends on PC.
- Due to COVID-19, young people stated that they used to play more games to spend their spare time.



- Most of the participants pointed out that young people of 10 to 12 years old are more sensitive and vulnerable to the dangers of the Internet than those who are used to surfing on social networks and the Internet.
- The students who knew about RAYUELA, a serious game project, stated that it would be great if the game could prevent cyberbullying, racism, LGBTBiphobia and sexism.
- The importance of playing a storyteller game in which you face the scenarios (depending on the criminal phenomenon) was also mentioned, together with the discussion if RAYUELA should be a multiplatform game.

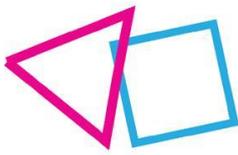
5.9. Conclusions and discussion

The aim of the research is to contribute to the improvement of Internet risks through the inclusion of the development of critical thinking around misinformation and fake news, online deception, and hate speech on the Internet. In order to explore these issues further, a qualitative analysis was carried out based on a series of expert interviews and several focus groups with young people, as exposed in the methodology section. Conclusions and extracted ideas are being exposed and commented hereafter.

On the one hand, according to the interviewed experts, **fake news** is defined as a type of misinformation where the information relates to news or events. It has to be deliberate on behalf of the person creating the news, but not necessarily on spreading the news. The fast speed at which they expand is one of their main characteristics, which would differentiate it from other kinds of misinformation such as older propaganda -as anyone may become a broadcaster. Moreover, false information has an impact on people's future judgement even if they discover the information is false. This situation, as we will see below, is specifically problematic for young people, as Herrera and others (2020) state. Accordingly, Mendiguren and colleagues (2020) emphasise that this could be because young people tend to share and look up for information rather fast, which makes it easier not to pay attention to the characteristics of the misinformation.

The most important factors that explain the phenomenon of fake news seem to be: firstly, **the bubble effect** (Fernández; 2017), followed by **information overload**, **the influence of political ideas**, and lastly **commercial interests**, although they are all interrelated.

According to the results obtained after the application of the described methodology, the typology of the fake news identified by the young people and experts coincide: the most common fake news described are about COVID-19 or health issues, news related to celebrities, scary news that causes social panic, and politics/propaganda. Nevertheless, and contrary to what experts point out, politics is the least pointed out by young people in our sample. The reason for this difference is probably that the students interviewed in our sample reported the most influential topics according to their perspectives and the content they mainly consume. These results are consistent with previous research that found that young people seem more likely to share news or information related to their interests, even if it is not true (Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jiménez & Reyes de Cózar, 2020).



Secondly, the main **vulnerable groups** towards misinformation phenomena that have been identified would be, first, older people whose access to misinformation is through WhatsApp groups or social networks such as Facebook, and secondly, minors or young people. Among the reasons for the former's behaviour would be, as noted previously, the continuous search for and rapid consumption of information (Mendiguren et al., 2020). In addition, interviewed experts also suggest that not having yet developed critical and analytical skills, together with having limited knowledge to a variety of topics such as politics, could also play a role in this greater vulnerability. Nevertheless, as the interviewed experts highlight, this is a phenomenon that affects the entire population, regardless of generation and social and/or economic situation.

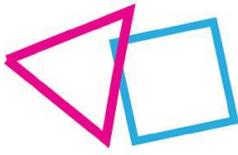
In relation to the **sources of information** that young people use, although previous research has shown how teenagers tend to mistrust traditional media (Spilker et al., 2020), in our sample, most participants agree considering traditional news as more reliable than social media. Nevertheless, they almost do not consume traditional media, getting informed mainly through social media. This trend would make them more susceptible to algorithms, being more exposed to filter bubbles and echo chambers and "less equipped" for critical thinking.

Among the reasons for this preference in the consumption of information, previous research indicates that traditional media does not connect with young people's interests, and that it does not contain opinions, which teenagers take advantage of in order to form their own vision (Marchi; 2012). Similarly, participants in our samples describe social media as places where you can find last minute and controversial information, with different opinions and with "everybody there". Getting informed would have this component of interaction and creating one's own identity.

Although previous research has suggested that the exchange of news would be an important part of young people's way of expressing identity and maintaining social connection (Marchi, 2012), in our sample most of the participants state to not share so much news, reading in many cases mostly only the news that appear in their social networks posted by friend. This could be the reason why, in general terms, they are neither especially concerned about fake news.

Among the **reasons why people share information that is false**, both the interviewed experts and some literature (Duffy, et al, 2020) highlight that people share fake news without knowing that they are fake, with the motivation of helping or simply informing, especially when it is information that connects with the beliefs or on an emotional level with the people who receive this information. Gaining popularity or fame, not verifying, entertainment or even a way to accept and understand the reality are also suggested by the experts in our sample. Regarding teen participants, news that connects with the teens' interest and emotions were pointed out as the most likely to be shared/believed, as well as funny stories, as it has been found in previous research as well (Herrera et al, 2020) where content affecting them, funny, eye-catching, or novel, often was found out to be more valued than truthfulness.

Most of the participants recognize that when they suspect news being fake, they rarely verify, unless they want to share it. Nevertheless, they have different criteria to evaluate the information **reliability**. First, the source appears as the main element to consider, being the site where the



information is hosted or the authority from whom the information emanates. Secondly, some participants also stress the importance of the style of the content, that it is cohesive and that it is presented in an appropriate and professional manner, since, together with the date of publication of the information, in video format or the content itself, are indications to determine its veracity. Nevertheless, as it has been highlighted in previous research (McGrew et al., 2017), many websites with dubious content are becoming increasingly sophisticated, so young people should be taught how to jump from one website to another to confirm the data, instead of evaluating the web page.

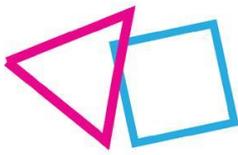
Finally, one of the main strategies for verification, which is also relevant for other Internet risks, is looking through the comments of the publication for signs of falsehood. Although checking comments can be considered a way of critical thinking, it is not exempt from risks, as it can be easily found when for instance, the marketing of a product, also includes sponsored comments. This trend, together with the preference for news with opinions and controversial topics, would fit in the description that Daum (2019) makes about the new generations using less the critical thinking and more the *in-group/out-group* thinking, in which one takes a position after seeing what others think. Thus, being sceptical about comments should be included in the prevention programs.

Regarding **online deception**, it can be defined as another form of fake information that minors and adolescents may face when surfing on the Internet. Both interviewed experts and focus groups participants agree on three main threats: online advertising and commercial deception, strangers approaching minors and information, or false identities related to cyber bullying. Although some teenagers in our sample acknowledged having been victims of scams and recalled seeing fake offers and advertisements for fake products, mainly on Instagram and online games, the other risks were intensified.

There seems to be differences between the younger and the older participants when they have to decide whether or not to add a stranger to a social network, being the **youngest more conservative**. This trend would be consistent with research showing online grooming to be more dangerous for 14–17-year-olds than for younger ones (Mitchell et al., 2014; Montiel et al., 2016; Wolak and Finkelhor; 2013). This fact could be related to the characteristics of the vital stage (Whittle et al., 2013), such as seeking for a wider social network- which may include strangers-, searching for new experiences, and having sexual curiosity and/or certain insecurities that are usually increased in adolescence.

When asked about the criteria for adding new people, some participants in the older groups remark the **social pressure** they used to have in the past to have many followers, which led them in accepting many unknown people. This trend does not appear in the youngest groups, which could be a sign of improvement -a change in the trend- or simply something that is not being revealed due to social desirability.

In general, there are different criteria used to add people on social media: having common friends, house proximity, verification of the account (profile image, name, etc.), common interests, age of



person. Some participants also recognize that they usually take into account a good-looking photo and having previously met online although not physically.

The category of “**friend of a friend**” works as the main criteria for adding strangers in many cases. This is a widely open category, as it may include really close friends or simply followers. This criterion, which has similarities with the verification process through comments, has implications for threats such as the chain abuse, previously described in the online grooming section. For that reason, **prevention should also focus on it.**

Finally, online grooming seems to be pretty **normalised**, as many participants tell third or first-person stories about adults approaching minors. This perception is bigger in girls, which may have a double implication. On the one hand, girls have to build their subjectivity considering this as an actual threat. On the other hand, boys’ perception of not being at risk would reinforce, despite the fact that they actually are.

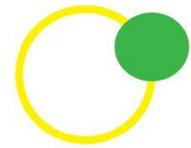
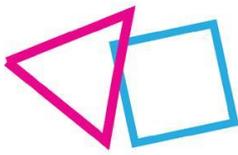
The last cyber risk that was approached in this section was **cyberhate**. It is defined as a behaviour spreading attitudes devaluating others because of their characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation etc.), using computer technology (Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2014, Hawdon et al, 2019). In the past, hate speech (cybercrime in general terms) used to be spread through physical spaces, but these days it is facilitated by new technologies and virtual spaces (Weulen Kranenbarg et al., 2019). As one expert states, it is important to take into account new technologies for developing prevention strategies, and due to its difficulty, it is more accurate to talk about “reaction strategies”.

The most referred situation targets in both participants and experts are race and **racism**, together with sexual orientation and physical appearance. In a lesser measure economic status and age are also mentioned. A connection between **fake news** and **cyberhate** is also highlighted and could be due to the link between misinformation and polarisation, being people with more radical ideas more vulnerable to misinformation.

One of the most common differences found in the groups was **gender variable**. Consistent with the results of other deliverables (D1.1, D1.4 and D1.5), girls were found to be especially insulted because of their physical appearance, while insults directed at boys were more related to their sexual orientation and masculinity.

Another trend found was that cyberhate is often masked as humour. This can make it very normalised in society and on social networks, as cyberhate is not always carried out in a direct way. One possible solution to this problem of masking cyberhate through humour is to establish the limits of humour. The young people set this limit when it is not funny to the other person. The difficulty with this solution is that the perception of the victim and the offender may be very different and could result in the victim being blamed for being too sensitive.

Similarly, another connection is made by the participants between that **victimisation** and **self-confidence**, which might be dangerous as it can again lead to blaming the victim. Other aspect that appears as worrying and what could be investigated further is the effect of this form of cynicism on networks, for example in comments to strangers on Tik Tok or Twitter. Will it affect



or reshape the more interpersonal dynamics of CB? Also, does having a certain passive stance towards networks, not commenting on flaming or racism, have implications for more direct experiences?

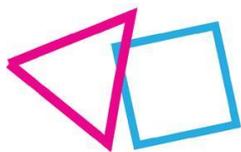
Regarding the main platforms for the dissemination of cyberhate, all the experts interviewed agree on stating **Facebook** and **Twitter**. Twitter would have some characteristics such as the issue of mentions with hashtags, the possibility of disseminating a message without necessarily interacting with it by retweeting, which would encourage very fast communication and promote the viralization of messages (Bustos et al., 2019). Nevertheless, when participants are asked, they refer to a greater extent to **Tik Tok**, followed by Instagram and online gaming. Similar to what has been described in other sections, it seems that beyond the characteristics of each social network, what ends up prevailing is the number of people using it (and age preferences).

Finally, it is important to highlight how **peer pressure** acts within a group and how it is easy to fall into feedback dynamics. Notably, the participants agree in pointing out that these behaviours are more common in **boys** than in girls. However, other studies (Blaya & Audrin, 2019) have found a higher number of male offenders, although almost half of them were girls (40%). Therefore, it seems that although there is a higher number of male perpetrators, girls would also be active in this phenomenon of cyberhate.

In terms of **prevention**, we should first talk about the **reactions of minors to fake news**, as they tend to ignore them or, as much, block the accounts that share and broadcast this information. When it comes to deception, although the possibility of denouncing, reporting, and informing app support teams exists -as some of the teenagers describe-, most of the participants usually block those accounts if they are insistent, otherwise they simply ignore it or ask more questions to know who the person is, but they do not generally report.

On the other hand, in the case of **cyberbullying**, it depends on the victim: if they are close to the person who observes the abusive situation, they usually intervene, more through direct support to the victim than through reporting, while if it is an unknown person, they tend to ignore the content. However, in this aspect there are three types of profiles: those who derive entertainment from it, those who actively oppose it, and those who do not react. In addition, cyberbullying is correlated to **cyberhate** and hate speech, which has to be taken into account, since young people are vulnerable towards this phenomenon (Bauman et al., 2021; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). Finally, regarding **online grooming** situations, although it is hard, some students in our sample said that they would end up telling their parents about it, and at the end going to formal control mechanisms of crime, which correlates with literature review (Sobrino, 2020). However, as described in deliverables D1.2, D1.4 and D1.5, disclosure to parents is one of the most difficult actions once the online grooming situation occurs due to different factors such as shame, embarrassment, and fear of punishment.

With regard to **parental control and supervision**, this factor should also be taken into account when developing prevention programmes, as previous studies have found that an overprotective parent model could discourage young people from sharing their concerns with their parents (Walters, 2011). However, according to experts' criteria adequate supervision can be positive for



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

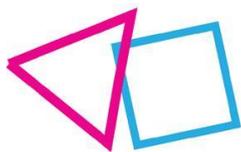
children to know how new technologies work and what self-protection strategies they should carry out. Participants in the focus groups highlight that good communication is necessary for reporting, and it includes not fearing the reaction of the parents. Therefore, the level of trust between children and parents is a **victimisation factor** that also needs to be considered when developing prevention strategies, as trust itself allows young people to talk to them about the experiences they have and what happens to them (Walters, 2021).

Finally, regarding **prevention strategies for Internet risks**, some students in the sample mentioned that lectures on online grooming or cyberbullying were held in some schools. These criminal phenomena do not affect children equally, but subjectively, younger children have a more worrying perception of online grooming, while older children have a more worrying perception of cyberbullying. This could be related to the fact that the latter phenomenon is suffered involuntarily, not participating (in)directly in the development of the crime, where situational precipitators of the crime playing a very relevant role (González-García & Campoy-Torrente, 2018).

In our students' sample, the police have appeared as one of the responsible of preparing and giving prevention programmes, talks and awareness-raising conferences in school centres. Additionally, the role of teachers and tutors is also relevant, because they can include these criminal phenomena in their classes, as some students in the sample mentioned. Meanwhile, the interviewed experts point out that these programmes alone do not have an immediate impact, that they are a way forward, and that we should rather talk about reaction strategies for certain crimes such as cyberhate, since developing prevention strategies in the latter area would advocate a system of absolute censorship on social networks, as also is found in Castaño-Pulgarín and collaborators (2021).

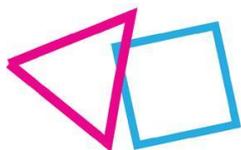
Finally, in general terms, when talking about **video games**, young people do not play them as the first option of entertainment. Firstly, they spend their time on social networks and then decide to play video games. The ones that are most played by platform are: Minecraft on mobile devices, FIFA on PlayStation console and League of Legends on PC. In relation to the literature review (De Pasquale et al., 2021), children have spent more time playing video games during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which could reflect an increased exposure to risks, increasing the likelihood of suffering from cybercrime, and more during lockdown period (Buil-Gil et al., 2021).

What is important regarding RAYUELA's development, and according to the focus group's sample, it would be optimal to be playable in multiplatform modalities, which is endorsed by previous literature (Leung & Pluskwik, 2018; Ardiana & Loekito, 2020), especially on mobile devices. It could be an online game since it is preferred to be multiplayer. It also could have good graphics, although it is not vital. Finally, regarding possible scenarios, they will be further elaborated in D1.7, considering the rest of crimes and the preliminary game script.

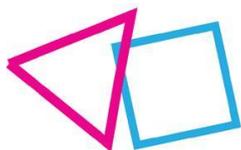


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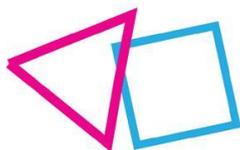


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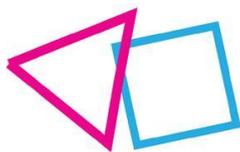


D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

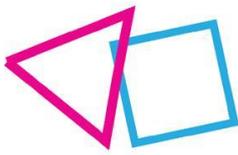
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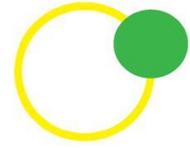
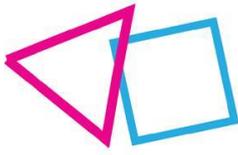
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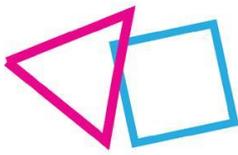
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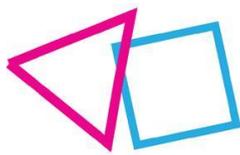
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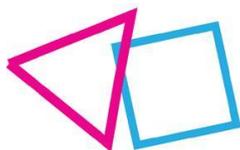
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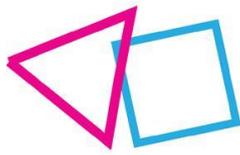
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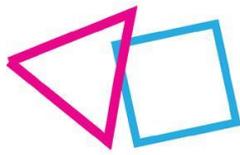
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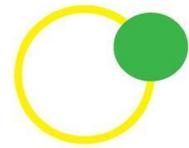
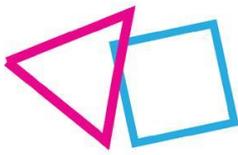


D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

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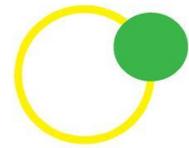
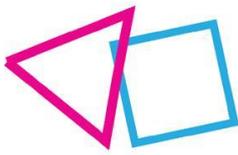


Annex

(I) INTERVIEW TEMPLATE: MISINFORMATION AND DECEPTION EXPERT

First of all, thank you so much for participating in this conversation. We are sure that all your expertise in the field will be very helpful for our research. To begin with the interview, we would like you to tell us briefly about **your career** in relation to online misinformation, fake news and cyberhate: projects, activities or institutions you have been involved with.

- **How would you describe fake news?**
- **Can you tell us what kind of fake news you encounter in your organization/daily work? And specifically, regarding young people?**
- **And what about cyberhate?**
- Speaking of **evolution**, would you say that fake news is a growing phenomenon, or an old one but with new amplifiers?
- **We believe that a group that is particularly vulnerable to misinformation is young people, do you agree with it or not? Why? Would there be other groups?**
- **What are the reasons why young people share false information?**
- Through what **means or platforms** may a minor be cheated on the Internet? According to the studies we have consulted, they use social networks, digital newspapers, internet forums dedicated to specific subjects. Are there any other means missing? Would you say that one of these means is the most prevalent?
- **What factors and reasons would you say are most relevant when explaining fake news?**
 - Ideology/political ideas dissemination/Hate speech
 - Commercial interests
 - Bubble effect (echo chambers)
 - Wish of virality/popularity
 - Self-expression/socialisation/caring others
 - Propaganda
- Some authors has pointed out the relationship between **fake news** and the **erosion of trust in public institutions**, a shift in social trust. One example would be young people's lack of trust in traditional media. How do you see this association? If fact checking is something you can easily work on, how would you work on that trust?
- **Can you say that there are certain profiles which are typically more vulnerable to fake news? Perhaps more impulsive young people, or with fewer social skills, or with low social support**
- **What about cyberhate? Would there be any profile more proactive to spread it?**
- Regarding **COVID situation**, would you say that this type of speech has increased? It has been pointed out how this cyberhate feeds on **personal distress**, a distress that may have grown in the last year, do you think it is related? Some authors also explain the role of fake news in the production of distress, What do you think?
- **On which platforms or social media do you observe the most cyberhate?**
- **What would be the main targets, of cyberhate? We mean which collectives are more susceptible to suffer it. What do they have in common with fake news?**



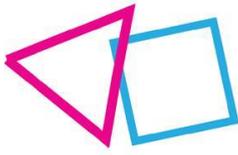
- How do young people usually react to this kind of content? Is it like in cyberbullying situations, ~~where~~that you have a big amount of bystanders? How can we encourage young people to act differently?
- We would like to remind you that we would like to make a video game as realistic as possible, but without introducing an idea of fear or negative index pointing towards the use of the Internet. To avoid doing so, what do you think **should or should not appear so that the player regarding fake news and hate speech**? For example, there must be special abilities that young people, as digital natives, have: how could we take advantage of them?
- What would be **the main protective factors**? It seems to us that simply a poster that educates or teaches about the risks of a certain behavior may not be very effective. In your experience, what do you think works best to keep teens from falling into these situations?
- And in this way, thinking about **prevention**, what is being done to prevent misinformation and deception that is working and what else should be done?
- One of **the prevention strategies** they recommend is **supervision** by parents when children use social networks, online games, etc. However, with adolescents demanding more privacy, parental supervision is more difficult. What do you think could be useful in the case of adolescents to prevent them from getting involved in such a situation? Do you think that explaining to them the risks of using social networks is a good resource?
- In case of young people which have been 'victims' of misinformation, what do you do to support them and to avoid they will fall again into this?
- Finally, can you think of **any idea or question** that we should incorporate when designing a video game to prevent misinformation and deception? We are especially interested in stage credible situations.

Thank you very much for your collaboration

(II) INTERVIEW TEMPLATE: FOCUS GROUP

A) General guidelines for the focus group development:

- Do not force the rhythm, allow time for them to respond. Do not interrupt or rush with questions. If the conversation takes a different direction than the guide, let it go: you can come back later.
- Leave the conversation flow. First, wait to know the spontaneous answers, and only in those cases where the indicated topics do not appear, propose them. Give priority to the questions that are underlined.
- There is no need to ask every question. The important thing is to cover the highlighted issues.
- Dynamization of the interactions: try everyone to give their opinion on the different topics. Ask specifically if everybody agrees, if someone differs, if anyone has a similar



experience. Encourage them to explain further: please, could you share this other experience/opinion with us?

- Active listening: nod, collect, paraphrase, rephrase (when possible, link your answer to the next question).
- Let them not feel judged, legitimize their emotions so that they feel understood and supported.
- We must be attentive to signs of discomfort and offer support, letting the person cry, express anger, etc., stopping the interview if necessary. At the end, it will be assessed whether he is receiving the help he requires, and we may propose to the family referral to a support service.

B) Introduction

RAYUELA will develop a serious game environment with interactive and interwoven storylines on cybercrime. In order to make this, RAYUELA will research online habits and user profiles related to cyber security and cyber criminality. On the basis of this research we will model, in a friendly and non-invasive manner, these habits, and create an educational game based upon this.

In order to gather the right information to develop the game, we would like to have your permission to interview you. All information will only be used for the purposes of this project and it will be treated anonymously.

If at any time you are not comfortable with a question, let us know. If necessary, you can stop or abandon the conversation anytime. In any case, the purpose of this conversation is not to judge you but to get the right info.

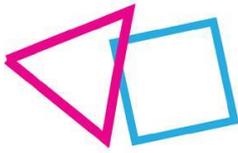
There are no good and bad answers, feel free to comment on what you think is appropriate throughout the interview. Remember that we value your own opinion because we want to understand this topic better, so every opinion is important, as we all are different. Please, be respectful with the other participants. If you disagree with something, we encourage you to say it, as it is one of the purposes of this group. But, please, do it in a respectful way.

With this information you can provide us a lot of help, because we may be able to approach the Internet risks and protect future children.

Thank you very much for participating in this conversation

6. General questions about social media interactions (5-10 minutes)

- **What do you like more of the Internet? Which social media do you use more and for which purpose?** *Discuss media/purpose (like twitter-information, tiktok for fun, etc). Leave the conversation fluid freely. If not appear in the discussion, ask specifically for examples of purpose: information, fun, socialization (asking for differences between knowing new people/keeping in touch with well-known people).*
- **Regarding information, what are your main sources of information?**

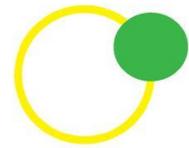
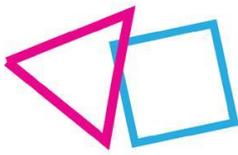


- **In what media? Digital (news, meme-sites, reddit, etc), paper, TV, radio? Do you use different platforms in different situations?** *[For example, someone can watch news on TV with the family, and later watch Youtube with the mobile]* **Which do you consider to be the positive and negative aspects of both?**
 - **Why those? Why not the others?** *Explore if it does not appear in the conversation possible reasons: Trust / verified information; Format (video, images, short/long text); entertainment/fun vs boring; Time spent; Being participated with comments/opinions (by unknown and/or known people); Having last time information; Possibility of selecting content*
- 7. Fake news (15-20 minutes)**
- **What comes to your mind first when you hear the term fake news? What types of false information do you think are on the Internet? Let us know some examples.**
 - **Have you received news that you knew were false? Describe**
 - **Do you know if you have shared news that turned out to be false? Describe how it was, what happened then (others' reactions, own reactions), if you didn't know how do you later realize.**
 - **What kind of content is easier to be fake news? What social network/media?** *[Explore whether or not they trust in traditional media]* **What kind of people share more fake content?**
 - **How often do you check the information you read online?**
 - **If a close friend shares a piece of news with you, do you question whether it might be false?**
 - **Discuss and give some examples of possible reasons under the dissemination of fake news:**
 - *Popularity/virality*
 - *Political/ideology*
 - *Difficulty to distinguish content*
 - **Discuss important element to consider veracity. What are your criteria for considering a news item to be false?**
 - Appearance
 - Format
 - Source
 - Double check

C) Practical activity (to break the rhythm)

Let's see if you can create a piece of news right now that **sounds** true about coronavirus and the vaccine, but which in fact is not based on real data. You have 3 minutes. *Here we can see what strategies they would use to construct false information. They will probably use numbers (percentages) or try to quote important bodies (the university of...).*

Another option: To use a real fake news item, let them read it, and ask whether they think it is true and why



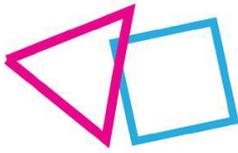
8. Deception (10 – 15 minutes)

- Do you sometimes add people to your social media that you do not know?
- When you have to decide if adding or not a person to a social media platform, What things do you take into account? Free answer. To explore:
 - Is trustworthiness important? How do you measure it?
 - What do you consider? *Having common friends, nicknames, profile pictures, profile descriptions, first interactions, etc.*
- If you receive a message from someone you don't know, which factors do you consider to reply or to not reply?
- To which extent do you interact online with people you have never met in real life? Do you usually ask unknown people to become your friend? And do you accept people you do not know? Would you consider yourself a so-called listener, or you are actively searching for new contacts?
- Which information do you share online
 - With people you know
 - With people you do not know
- Do you know of any experience of someone who has found a fake advert on the Internet and been tricked?
- And any experience about someone posting fake information about another person?
- Do you talk about negative experiences in an online environment with your parents, teachers, or other adults or minors?

9. Cyberhate (10 – 15 minutes)

- Have you ever listened to talk about cyberhate? What could it be? Which people do you think are usually targets of cyberhate? (*refugees, immigration, raze, gender, homosexuality, transgenderism, etc*)
- You have mentioned very different people. What do you think they have in common? (*they're different from what it is considered normative: hetero, white...*)
- Which target do you think is more common and why? On which platforms or social media do you observe the most cyber hate? Which kind of people are behind that speech? Some people talk about cyberhate feeding on people who are in a moment of emotional distress, what do you think about that?
- Do you know anyone who have ever suffered for cyberhate? Think about examples, from big things to small gestures
- What is your reaction when you see this type of content? And other people's reactions? (*Explore if sharing, responding, denouncing*). What reaction do you think we should have?
- Can a minor report something to police? And What about a minor that posts some cyberhate content, can he be prosecuted?
- If it does not appear before: have you seen fake news related to cyberhate?
- [*Practical activity (optional) video/Cyberhate material*] **Discussing it:** reasons for distributing it, how can people feel when seeing it, how could we stop it...

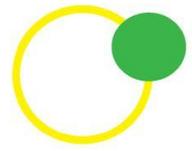
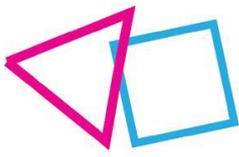
10. Videogame



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]

As we explained to all of you, we are planning to create a videogame for educating against these kinds of risks. [Optional activity: Play RAYUELA's video to encourage discussion]

- Which video games do you fancy playing?
- How do you imagine a videogame about cyberbullying, fake news and people who seduce you through the Internet?
- **Which things of the previous conversation you would highlight in the videogame?**
- Can you think in any situation that the character could face regarding fake news?
- And regarding people that lie or fake advertisements?
- And cyberhate?



D1.2. Report on interview results [1/2]