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Research report

Forum:	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)
Issue:	Combating the issue of online child sexual exploitation and abuse
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Introduction

Globally 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys have been sexually exploited or abused before the time they reach the age of 18, states UNICEF in a study done in December of 2021. Although rates vary across countries, child sexual exploitation or abuse is prevalent across the globe. It is one of the most common forms of violence against children. Child sexual exploitation and abuse refer to a variety of sexual behaviours directed against children that are performed online or in person. They have a devastating impact on children's physical, psychological and mental health.

The rapid developments in information communication technology (ICT) and increased internet usage worldwide, are providing more and more opportunities for technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to occur. The internet has opened a briskly growing global market for the production, distribution, and consumption of child sexual abuse, such as videos and photographs.

The development of the darknet has allowed offenders to engage in child sexual exploitation and abuse in an environment of secrecy, making abuse more difficult to detect. Advances in ICT have also allowed for new ways of child abuse to occur, such as the live streaming of sexual assault or the photographing or recording of acts of exploitation or abuse. This has led to an escalation in the scale, complexity and danger of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Research into the sexual exploitation and abuse of children online has received more attention in the past years, partly because our lives online shifted as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. While research from northern countries is well-represented on this topic, there are far fewer studies in low- and middle-income countries.

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Definitions of key terms

Child sexual abuse

Contacts or interactions between a child and an older or more knowledgeable child or adult (stranger, sibling, or person in a position of authority such as a parent or caretaker) when the child is being used as an object for the older child or adult's sexual needs. (UNESCAP 1999)

Online child sexual abuse and online child sexual exploitation

The usage of information and communication technology as a means to sexually abuse and/or sexually exploit children (Interagency Working Group, 2016, p. 23 and 28).

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)

Also known as 'child pornography, refers to materials depicting acts of sexual abuse and/or focusing on the genitalia of the child. These materials include children of all ages and differ in the level of severity of the abuse and acts ranging from children posing sexually to gross assault. (ECPAT)

Child sexual exploitation material (CSEM)

The term encompasses all other (meaning not CSAM, child pornography) sexualized material depicting children. These materials include children of all ages and differ in the level of severity of the abuse and acts ranging from children posing sexually to gross assault. (ECPAT)

Sexting

The 'self-production of sexual images', or 'the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and/or the internet. (ECPAT)

Sexual extortion

Also called 'sextortion', is the blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person to extort sexual favours, money, or other benefits from them under the threat of sharing the material beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media, sharing with other people). (ECPAT)

Live online child sexual abuse or the live streaming of child sexual abuse

Live online child sexual abuse involves coercion of a child to participate in sexual activities, alone or with other persons. The sexual activity is, at the same time, transmitted live or 'streamed' over the Internet and watched by others remotely. (ECPAT)

IP-address

The identifier or unique signature of a device, allows the device to be identified, pinpointed, and differentiated from other devices that are connected to the Internet. Every device comes with its IP address whether it is a computer, television, gaming console or another device. (ECPAT)

General overview

The sexual exploitation of children online can be sorted into 5 categories: online grooming for sexual purposes, child sexual abuse material/child sexual exploitation material (a.k.a. child pornography), non-consensual sexting, sexual extortion (a.k.a. sexual blackmail), and live streaming of child sexual activity or abuse. The most prominent ones are online grooming and child pornography.

Online grooming

Online grooming occurs when an adult uses electronic communication, such as social media platforms, in a predatory way to try to increase their curiosity about sex or lower a child's inhibitions to meet them in person with the purpose of having consensual or non-consensual sexual intercourse. This may include online chats, sexting, and other interactions.

The process may start with the submission of pornographic images to 'normalize' the conversation about sexual activity, and then move on to requests for nude images or to perform a sexual act on a webcam. Any site, game, app, or platform that allows one person to communicate with another can be used for personal hygiene. Those that are particularly popular with young people will also be popular with online predators. All young people who use technology are at risk, some more than others based on their vulnerability and other factors. Online predators are very smart, they will target those who are happy to respond when contacted. Social networking sites and many gaming platforms are designed for communication between users. Many allow the sharing of personal information, providing an easy way for online criminals to search for their next victim.

Most young people are naturally curious and trusting and will engage in online discussions about things that they would not openly discuss in the physical world. Children can make poor decisions about letting people into their lives online, believing that those who seem 'nice' online will be the same in person. Many will refer to a random online acquaintance as an "online friend," letting their guard down and allowing the grooming process to take place.

Child pornography

Child sexual abuse material (also known as child pornography) refers to any content that depicts sexually explicit activities involving a child. Visual depictions include photographs, videos, and digital or computer-generated images that are indistinguishable from an actual child. These images and videos involving the documentation of an actual crime scene are then circulated for personal consumption. More recently, live-streamed sexual abuse has begun to emerge. In these cases, people pay to watch a child being abused live through a streaming video service. This type of abuse is incredibly difficult to detect, due to its real-time nature and the lack of digital evidence left behind after the crime.

Although child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is a global problem, the United States remains one of the largest producers and consumers of child abuse content in the world. Understanding the true nature and pervasiveness of child sexual abuse material is important to convey the urgent need to address this crime.

Those seeking or currently involved in the exploitation of children can connect to Internet networks and forums to sell, share, and exchange material. These interactions are facilitated through various forms of Internet technology, including websites, email, instant messaging/ICQ, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), newsgroups, bulletin boards, peer-to-peer networks, gaming sites Internet, social networking sites and anonymized. networks

The rise of these online communities has also promoted communication among offenders, normalizing their interest in children and desensitizing them to the physical and psychological harm inflicted on exploited children. These online communities often provide a space to freely share interests, desires, and experiences of child abuse, without judgment and without fear of being caught.

Collecting data

Researchers have used methods such as online surveys to examine children's experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse online, primarily targeting survivors of the production of child sexual abuse material (aka child pornography). Nearly half of those surveyed feared that people would think they were willing to participate or that people would recognize them. Interestingly, in this survey, a third refused to talk about the images and 22% denied that there were any images. Three themes were identified from the data: guilt and shame, vulnerability, and an

element of empowerment that the images sometimes brought with them. A survey for adult survivors from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection conducted an online survey of 150 female respondents whose childhood sexual abuse was recorded and/or reported online. In this survey, seventy percent of the victims also expressed concerns about image recognition.

Another study was done on 20 children who were located after suspected online sexual abuse and found that only 12 were willing to talk about what had happened. The rest denied that anything had happened at all, even though there were notable digital images of their abuse. Interviews with these 12 children indicated that they were highly critical of themselves and often had strong feelings of loyalty towards their abuser.

Despite these studies, qualitative research on children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online is still relatively rare. Such children are difficult to identify and recruit. This may partly reflect the ethical challenges of approaching children directly, also because many professionals are reluctant to approach them for research due to justifiable fears of causing further trauma. It is crucial that any investigations such as these must be completed using ethically appropriate and safe techniques when engaging with survivors.

On a positive note, an increasing number of children are being supported by care services around the world for issues related to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Data on the quality and effectiveness of these support services will ensure targeted responses. This will be an advantage for governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to be able to address this problem together.

The growing problem of child sexual exploitation and abuse online requires detailed, extensive, and sustained attention. This is especially the case in low- and middle-income countries, where the problem often lacks visibility and way fewer studies have been conducted to this date. Amplifying the voices of the young people who have lived through these experiences is vital for solving this issue.

The expanding of CSAM content on social media platforms

When talking about child pornography, the discussion often pertains to those shady corners of the internet: Omegle, the dark web, Usenet, end-to-end encrypted chat apps, etc. However, the problem isn't limited to private groups or anonymous platforms. Thousands of images and posts containing child abuse, exploitation, and nudity are removed by the biggest names on social media every day.
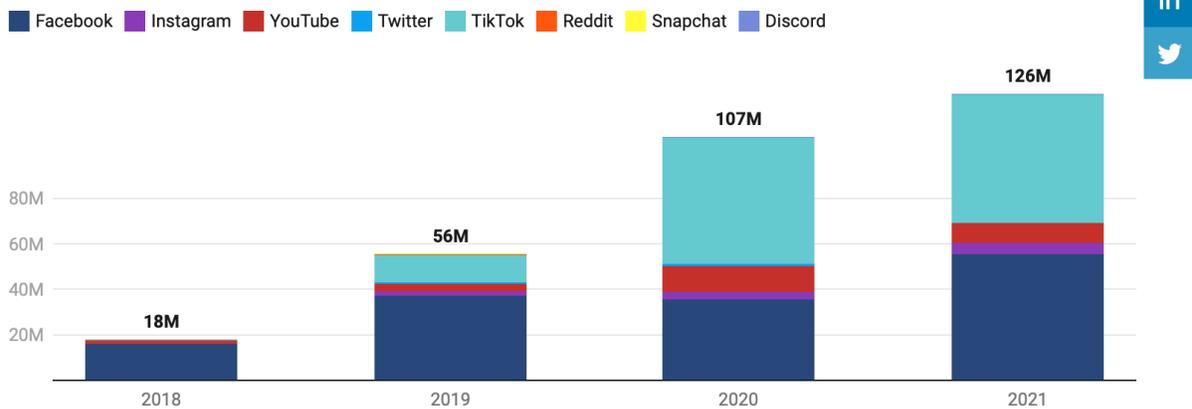
In the first three-quarters of 2021, Facebook flagged a staggering 55.6 million pieces of content under "child nudity and sexual exploitation"–20 million more than 2020's overall total of 35.6 million. Facebook isn't alone; Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, and Snapchat combined, remove millions of posts and images that fall foul of community guidelines regarding child abuse.

In the first three-quarters of 2021, Instagram saw 4,797,100 content removals for child nudity and sexual exploitation. This is 1.5 million more than the entire year of 2020. Instagram, similar to Facebook, saw a sharp rise in the second quarter of 2021 as well; with 1.86 million of the year's content removals coming from April to June. This continued with 2.1 million added removals at the end of 2021. TikTok saw a significant increase in the second quarter of 2021 as well, with 33.7 million reports compared to 22.8 million in the first. It is shocking that the content removals in the first half of 2021 (56.5 million) already outpace the total figure for 2020 (55.4 million).

Content removals are typically the result of an automated filter or users of a service flagging content they consider inappropriate. In some cases, human moderators might be used to judge whether something should be removed, though it would be impossible for moderators to examine every single thing posted on a social network.

Social media content and account removals for child abuse and safety - 2018 to Q3 2021

Legend: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Snapchat, Discord

Data unavailable for 2021 for Twitter and Reddit. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube data for Q1-Q3 of 2021. TikTok, Snapchat, and Discord data for Q1 and Q2 of 2021.

Child pornography is illegal in the United States and generally all over the world. However, under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, social media companies are protected
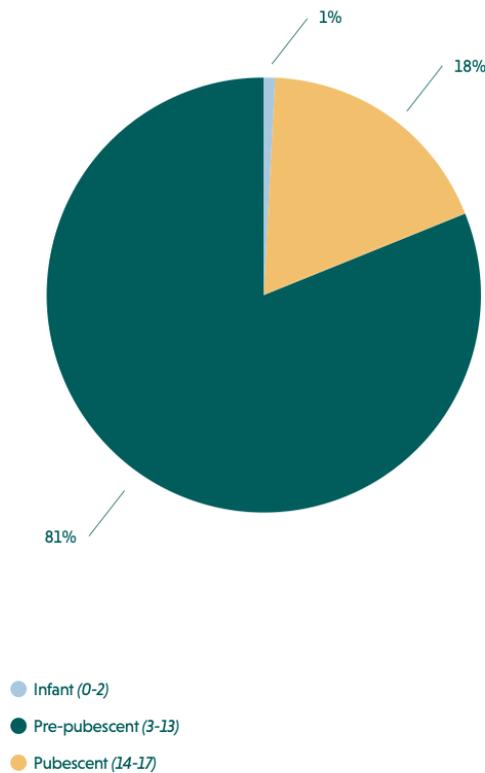
from liability when their users post something illegal. They can't be sued when their users post child abuse content.

Nevertheless, social media companies undoubtedly don't want to be associated with child abuse, thus they do what they can to remove such content rapidly. To this point, their tactics are largely reactive, not proactive. Pre-screening content would be too burdensome, plus, it would come with serious privacy concerns.

Although recently Apple has found a possible alternative for pre-screening content. They have started hashing image files on users' iCloud storage to see if they match those in a law enforcement database of child abuse images. This allows Apple to scan users' storage for child porn without truly viewing any of the users' files. Certain privacy advocates still take issue with the tactic. It's not perfect, nevertheless, it might be a compromise that other tech companies will adopt.

Age of victims

1%
18%
81%

- Infant (0-2)
- Pre-pubescent (3-13)
- Pubescent (14-17)

Gender of victims

- Female 96,35%
- Male 2,13%
- Both 1,52%

The effect of covid 19

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, sources such as law enforcement agencies, child helplines and online reporting mechanisms indicated an increase in reports of a variety of child sexual abuse and exploitation. This may be because children and offenders face restrictions on movement and being online more frequently. It could also be that during movement restrictions, global attention turned to our lives online and increased surveillance led to more concerns being raised. Many agencies issued warnings of an expected increase in abuse and exploitation that occur in domestic settings.

Technological expansions, growing Internet coverage, and the widespread availability of mobile devices are increasingly digitising our society. Criminals that sexually exploit children online are becoming more entrepreneurial with these technological developments and profiting financially. It is incredibly important that nations work together to solve this hastily expanding online issue.

Major parties involved

The Netherlands

For years, the Netherlands has been a prime location for hosting child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Data on the hosting of CSAM is collected via INHOPE, the global network of national hotlines to combat CSAM. Analysing data from 2019, INHOPE listed the Netherlands as the second country worldwide and the leading hosting location in Europe. Globally, the Netherlands and the United States have the largest share, each harbouring over 20% of all CSAM. In Europe in 2019, 79% of all CSAM was hosted by a provider located in the Netherlands.

In 2020, the Dutch Minister for Security, Ferdinand Grapperhaus, made several important interventions aimed to tackle the amount of child sexual abuse material hosted in the Netherlands. Tu Delft University in the Netherlands was commissioned to produce a **CSAM Monitor report**, which was published in September 2020.

In the most recent INHOPE report of 2021, the Netherlands is still one of the most prominent locations for the hosting of CSAM (aka child pornography). They are the biggest CSAM provider in Europe with 76,01% of all the content hosted in Europe.

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The United States of America

In March 2022 the MIT Technology Review stated that new research has found that the USA hosts more child sexual abuse content online than any other country in the world. The US accounted for 30% of the global total of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) URLs at the end of March 2022, according to the Internet Watch Foundation, a UK-based organization that works to spot and take down abusive content.

That abrupt spike in the material can be attributed to the fact that several prolific CSAM sites have switched servers from the Netherlands to the US, taking a sizable amount of traffic with them, states Chris Hughes, the director of the IWF's hotline. The Netherlands had hosted more CSAM than any other country since 2016 but has now been overtaken by the US.

India

In terms of the absolute number of reported CSAM events, India is number one. In 2021 they had 2,725,518 reports, which is a factor of two more than its runner-up.

The Philippines

The Philippines is number two on the list of most CSAM-reported events. Having 1,288,513 reports in 2021.

United Kingdom

The UK is one of the more prominent locations for hosting the production of CSAM in Europe. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) is a technology-led, child protection organisation from the United Kingdom that has been active for more than 25 years now, covering 50 countries. They focus on making the internet a safer place for children and adults across the world. They are a not-for-profit organisation working closely with police, governments, and NGOs globally who actively search for imagery of child sexual exploitation online.

Worldwide Hosting

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Timeline of Key Events

1993 - 1994   The world wide web became first popularised.

1996   The Child Pornography Prevention Act made it a federal crime to send images of real children engaged in explicit sexual activity and to use computer-generated images of the same.

1998   There are over 3000 reports of sexual abuse imagery this year.

2001   There is a rise in the popularity of online pornography, including the consumption of content of sexual exploitation of children.

2009   Yearly reports of online sexual abuse of children are around 100 000.

2014   This year tech companies report around a million photos and videos of the sexual exploitation of children on the world wide web; it is stated as a crisis by the United Nations.

2019   Tech companies report more than 45 million online photos and videos of children being sexually abused this year, more than double than the previous year.

2020   Because of Covid-19, the quick rise of the usage of online platforms results in an even bigger expansion of the exploitation of children on online platforms.

2022   The number of online child sexual exploitation arrests rises by 50%.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund has uploaded a detailed report on the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children Online:

https://www.unicef.org/media/113731/file/Ending%20Online%20Sexual%20Exploitation%20and%20Abuse.pdf

Several organisations focus specifically on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse of children online.

For example, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), who have assessed 1.8 Million reports with human eyes in the past 25 years. Of these, 970,000 showed imagery of children being sexually abused. Since 1996, they've helped to remove millions of child sexual abuse images and videos from the internet. They specifically focus on making the internet a safer place for children and adults across the world, being a not-for-profit organisation working closely with police, governments, and NGOs globally who actively search for imagery of child sexual exploitation online. This organisation makes the internet a safer place, rather than targeting its offenders.

Another foundation called INHOPE focuses more on supporting and guiding victims of sexual exploitation online, It is the global network of hotlines combatting online Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The network consists of 50 hotlines in 46 countries (as of December 2021) that provide the public with a way to anonymously report illegal content online with a focus on CSAM. Reports are reviewed by trained content analysts who review and classify the reported material. If confirmed illegal, Law Enforcement Agencies will be advised, and a Notice and Takedown order will be sent to the relevant Hosting Provider so that the content is removed from

the digital world as rapidly as possible. They have statistics for the past 10 years on the activity and hosting of CSAM (Child pornography) around the globe.

Possible solutions

Several things must be done to sustain the sexual exploitation of children online, yet it is an extremely complicated issue. Mostly, because the execution of punishment is particularly complicated because of privacy laws and anonymised identities on the internet. The most prominent complication to solve is how we can prevent the sexual exploitation of children online, without violating international privacy laws.

Several innovations can sustain images sent online without violating such laws, think of the previously stated alternative for pre-screening content found by Apple in 2020. They have started hashing image files on users' iCloud storage to see if they match those in a law enforcement database of child abuse images. This allows Apple to scan users' storage for child porn without truly viewing any of the users' files. Certain privacy advocates still take issue with the tactic. It's not perfect, nevertheless, it might be a compromise that other tech companies will adopt.

Here is a summary of seven of the most prominent recommendations for the prevention of this issue.

Recommendations on reporting mechanisms

1. Promote information and awareness about risks in the online environment related to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as about reporting mechanisms and available support services when harm occurs.

2. Provide educational programs for communities and family members about the prevention of online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

3. Improve the availability and dissemination of reporting mechanisms, create child-friendly tools, and make use of digital methods.

4. Impose legal duties on and promote collaboration with Internet service providers and social media companies.

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5. Better promote the availability of a full range of specialized support services for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online.

6. Commit financial resources to provide training and capacity-building opportunities to law enforcement officers and legal professionals on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

7. Improve the investigation and prosecution of online sex crimes against children.

Further reading

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https://safer.io

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