

Internet and cellular telephone usage associated with risky situations of adolescent sexual exploitation

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Original article

SUMMARY

This paper reports on a research project designed to identify the uses of the Internet and cellular telephony that could place children at risk of contact with situations associated with sexual exploitation: hooking up on-line, consumption of pornography and the production of humiliating, sexualized images. Questionnaires were administered to 147 adolescents with an average age of 13 years and 3 months old.

Results

A total of 66.2% of the boys and 71.4% of the girls reported having Facebook, followed by Hi5 (69%) and My Space (43.3%). Teenagers were observed to provide their real names (64.7% of boys and 78% of girls) and actual ages in social networks. A total of 79.6% of the respondents reported that they liked to talk on Chat or Messenger, while a significant percentage (64.1%) had done so with strangers. A total of 53.1% of the population reported having met a friend with a sexualized image of their person through a cell phone (28.6 of boys and 11.6% of girls). These images were usually shared with friends (reported by 77.1% of boys and 62.8% of girls). But others were uploaded onto the Internet (34.3% of boys and 37.2% of women) and a minority sold (8.6% of boys and 2.3% of girls). This paper indicates that true information on the person provided with no restrictions whatsoever by adolescents in social networks and their interaction with strangers in chats are indicators of unsafe web browsing. Qualitative research results indicate that these acts occur when teenagers are seeking popularity. The paper also discusses teenagers' consumption of pornography as a type of manhood that is "hot" by nature and shows that the production of sexualized images occurs in contexts where amusement is combined with sexual transgression.

Key words: Sexual exploitation, Internet, cell phone.

RESUMEN

Se reporta una investigación que tuvo por objetivo identificar los usos de la Internet y la telefonía celular que podrían poner a niñas y niños en riesgo de contacto con situaciones asociadas a la explotación sexual: enganchamiento en línea, consumo de pornografía y producción de imágenes sexualizadas y humillantes. Se aplicaron cuestionarios a 147 adolescentes de 13 años y tres meses de edad en promedio.

Resultados

El 66.2% de los hombres y el 71.4% de las mujeres reporta tener Facebook, seguido de Hi5 (69%) y My Space (43.3%). Se observa que los adolescentes de ambos sexos proporcionan su nombre (64.7% de los hombres y 78% de las mujeres) y edades reales en las redes sociales. El 79.6% de las y los encuestados reportan que les agrada platicar en el Chat o el Messenger. Un porcentaje importante (el 64.1%) lo ha llevado a cabo con personas desconocidas. El 53.1% de la población reportó conocer a algún amigo con una imagen sexualizada de su persona a través de un celular (28.6% hombres y 11.6% mujeres). Estas imágenes fueron compartidas con los amigos (reportado por el 77.1% de los hombres y el 62.8% de las mujeres), pero otras fueron subidas a la Internet (34.3% hombres y 37.2% mujeres) y una minoría se vendió (8.6% hombres y 2.3% mujeres). El trabajo señala que la información verídica de la persona proporcionada sin restricción alguna por los adolescentes en las redes sociales y su interacción con desconocidos en chats, son indicadores de navegación insegura en la Internet. La investigación cualitativa indica que dichos actos ocurren cuando las adolescentes buscan popularidad. Además, el documento discute el consumo de pornografía de los adolescentes como reproducción de un tipo de hombría "caliente por naturaleza" y señala que la producción de imágenes sexualizadas ocurre en contextos donde se combina la diversión con la transgresión sexual.

Palabras clave: Explotación sexual, Internet, teléfono celular.

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INTRODUCTION

The main results of different researches regarding the uses of the Internet and cellular telephony,¹⁻¹² indicate that children from different parts of Europe and the United States are exposed to risk situations of sexual exploitation, including:

- a) Hooking up on-line in order to sexually exploit them. For this purpose, sexual depredators – mostly adult men – usually build a relationship of confidence with the child, obtain truthful information of the victim, reduce inhibitions of the latter, lead to intimate conversations and actions as well as to face-to-face dates to exploit them sexually. Hooking up on-line is a process that implies threats, blackmail, betrayal and the victim's psychological harm.
- b) Girls and boys exposure to adults-only sexual material such as pornography. In this regard it has been reported that both boys and girls are mentally disturbed when pornographic material comes into their environment when they do not request it. Under certain conditions of social vulnerability (such as the previous sexual abuse), exposure to pornography may result in combined effects for the observer: dependence/addiction, escalation, desensitization and imitation.
- c) The production of sexualized and humiliating images of children taken by teenagers using photo and video cameras, is a phenomenon recently reported among American adolescents. These images are normally shared with other adolescents, distributed and uploaded in Internet with or without the consent of the persons being photographed or video-taped. Consequently, from the socialization of such images the victims may suffer side effects like blame, depression, low self-esteem, difficulties in concentrating, aggressive behaviors and suppressed anger and distrust.

Above results allow to have an overview of the problem in certain European and North American societies. In Mexico there are over 12 million websurfers ranging between 6 and 17 years of age.¹³ There are no researches that enable to understand the uses of new technologies from the perspectives of their main actors as well as to reliably estimate the associated risks and the factors that cause and discourage them.

Here we report the results of a research conducted in 2011, which purpose was to identify the usage of the Internet and of cellular telephones that may put children at risk of being in situations associated with the hooking up on-line, pornography consumption and production and spreading of sexualized images.

METHOD

From May 2 through June 30, 2011 147 questionnaires were applied with the purpose to observe and describe the usage of the Internet and of cellular telephones in basic secondary education students from the municipalities of Cuautitlán Izcalli, Cuautitlán México, Ecatepec and Tlalnepantla, all from the urban area of the State of Mexico and Mexico City.

It is the most populated urban area of the country and Latin America since it amounts to over 11 million inhabitants distributed in 59 municipalities, among which Ecatepec stands out for being the most populated municipality (1,734,701 inhabitants) as well as the municipality of Tlalnepantla (660,953 inhabitants) for its urban and industrial development. All of these municipalities belong to the State of Mexico, which in different times of the last 10 years has been within the first five places with higher number of infanticide at a national level;^{14,15} the third place of armed robbery;¹⁶ the second place in homes with at least one victim^{16,17} and the second place because of its high prevalence and incidence of crimes;^{16,17} the first place in proportion of battered women throughout their relationship; and the second place of sexual violence against women in community and public spaces;¹⁸ as well as the first place in feminicides. According to some authors,¹⁹ the violence that affects the State of Mexico is a consequence, at least in part, of the corruption and lack of coordination among governmental authorities and non-governmental organizations to face it integrally.

Authorities of the DIFs [National System for Integral Family Development] in the State of Mexico and in municipalities of the urban area contacted the school institutions where these questionnaires would be applied. From 18 to 49 students took part per educational center. For this purpose students were selected randomly from different academic degrees, trying to have 40 participants.

The questionnaire applied in the four municipalities has seven sections distributed as follows: General data; school background; family background; sexual background and uses of the Internet.

Such questionnaire was applied in four secondary schools in a self-application format with a duration ranging from 30 to 60 minutes per institution. The application was conducted in the same way in the four municipalities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, which guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Protection and attention were offered to all informants in the case these were requested or required urgently. DIFs authorities in the State of Mexico and those of DIFs in municipalities were aware of all participants and alerts to receive the information of the cases hereby reported.

RESULTS

1. Psychosocial characteristics of the participants

In the application there were 147 participants (70 women and 77 men). The average age is 13.35 years old, with a standard deviation of 0.928. The youngest person is 12 years old and the oldest 16. The average age of men is 13.44 years old, with a standard deviation of 1.006. The average age of women is 13.26 years old, with a standard deviation of 0.829. 70.1% of the participants were born in the State of Mexico, 21.8% in the Federal District and 3.4% in other federal entities (the rest did not answer the question). 64.6% lives in a nuclear family with a father/stepfather, mother/stepmother and siblings; the rest (35.4%) lives within several family arrangements; most of the families are made up by six members.

It can be said that very few families of our informants lack of formal instruction (1.4%). 36.7% of the fathers and 33.3% of the mothers of our informants studied secondary school and 21.1% and 19%, respectively, studied high school. A lower percentage of parents (11.6% of the fathers and 18.4% of the mothers) has only primary school as the maximum education level.

According to our informants most of their fathers or mothers work within the tertiary sector (61.9% of the fathers and 34.7% of the mothers). 5% of the mothers and 18.4% of the fathers work within the secondary sector. The per-

ception of the family economy is similar by gender and by municipality, being the middle economy the one more perceived by the participants.

When we applied the questionnaire, about 12.2% of participants had already started their sex life (13 men and 5 women), being the average age of starting 12.8 years old. The main persons they started their sex life were their girlfriend or boyfriend (8 men and 5 women) and cousins (2 men). One boy reported having been forced to have sexual relations with other persons at age 13.

Also, we found that 46.3% of the informants were studying the first level of secondary school, 42.2% the second level and 11.6% the third. 7.5% of the cases (4 men and 7 women) had dropped out at a certain moment, being the main reasons those related to family problems.

2. Use of internet, cellular telephones and associated risks

70.7% of the informants has a computer at home and 76.9% has a cellular phone. There are no statistically significant differences between men and women.

Although not everybody has their own computers and cellular phones, 100% uses the Internet, being places different from home (Internet cafés, school and friends' places) the most visited for using this service (61.9%). The rest of the participants uses it at home (36.1%). The number of hours used everyday in the Internet by the participants amounts to 2.58 for men and 2.68 for women. 49.4% of men and 51.4% of women use the Internet four or more times every week. There are statistically significant differences* in the number of minimum and maximum hours per week among the population that uses the Internet at home (14.55 hours and 17.77 hours, respectively) compared to people who use it outside of their home (7.16 minimum hours and 8.87 maximum hours per week).

Mainly, the persons who know how to use computer equipments in the family are the older siblings (54.4% in boys and 54.3% in girls); to a lesser extent parents appear as users of computers. 37.7% of men and 31.4% of women report that their parents never supervise them when they are using the Internet.

In accordance with the reports of the participants the older siblings (46.8% in men and 42.9% in women) are who use to a larger extent the same computer equipments than the adolescents.

Most of men (75.3%) and women (84.3%) use Internet to do homework. However, more women than men use the web for chatting (68.8% in men and 84.3% in women), for watching music videos (55.8% in men and 75.7% in women)

Table 1. True and false information posted by the participants in their personal Websites. Gender comparison

		Men (n = 51)	Women (n = 50)
Personal Photography	T	60.8%	30.0%
	F	29.4%	24.0%
Name	T	64.7%	78.0%
	F	19.6%	22.0%
Age	T	45.1%	72.0%
	F	31.4%	28.0%
Name of School	T	47.0%	62.0%
	F	29.4%	32.0%
Name and Age of Friends	T	25.4%	46.0%
	F	39.2%	42.0%
Name and Age of Relatives	T	21.6%	40.0%
	F	29.4%	56.0%
Place of Residence	T	25.5%	38.0%
	F	35.2%	52.0%
Places Visited in a Regular Basis	T	19.6%	44.0%
	F	21.6%	64.0%
Physical Description	T	21.6%	44.0%
	F	45.1%	40.0%
Likings, Hobbies and Activities	T	56.9%	30.0%
	F	29.4%	20.0%

T= True; F= False.

* $t(141) = 3.557, p < 0.05$ for minimum times; $t(141) = 3.694, p < 0.05$ for maximum times.

and for talking in Messenger (51.9% in men and 57.1% in women) as well as to download photographs of artists and videos of music groups and to watch TV chapters.

- a) *Internet use that put at hooking up on-line risk:* More girls than boys use social networks with their real names and ages. 66.2% (51) of men and 71.4% (50) of women report to have a personal website; being *Facebook* the most popular service for this population (97.2%), followed by *Hi5* (69%) and *My Space* (43.3%). Table 1 shows that most boys (64.7%) and girls (78%) provide their real name. Nevertheless, more girls than boys disclose their real age (45.1% boys and 72% girls) and the real name and age of their friends (46% girls and 25.4% boys). More girls than boys provide false information about family names (56% of girls and 29% of boys), the place where they live (52% girls and 35.2% boys) and the places they frequent (64% of girls and 21% of boys).

Also, it is important to mention that more boys (60.8%) than girls (30%) upload real photographs of their own and provide real information about tastes, hobbies, activities, etc. (56.9% boys, 30% girls).

70.6% of men and 70% of women who have a personal website confirm that any person may see their profile. 79.6% of interviewees report that they like to talk in the Chat or in Messenger. From this sample an important percentage (64.1%) has done this with unknown persons. There are no statistically significant differences, therefore, men and women have talked with strangers in equal proportion.

When the participants talk with strangers (62.5% of men and 65.5% of women) it is observed that 27.5% of girls and 20% of boys mention their real gender (Table 2), and 22.8% of men and 20% of women mention their real name. More men than women mention their real age (25.7% in boys and 15% in girls).

More girls than boys are wary of taking part in forums and chats. For example, most of girls never say their

Table 2. Informations that the participants share when talking with strangers through chat or messenger. Gender comparison

		Men (n = 35)	Women (n = 40)
Name	Always	22.8%	20.0%
	Never	28.5%	45.0%
Age	Always	25.7%	15.0%
	Never	37.1%	50.0%
Gender	Always	20.0%	27.5%
	Never	40.0%	30.0%
Name of School	Always	5.7%	5.0%
	Never	54.3%	70.0%
Place of Residence	Always	8.6%	5.0%
	Never	57.1%	72.5%

Table 3. Uses of the cellular telephone. Gender comparison

	Men (n=55)	Women (n=58)
Taking photographs or videos of schoolmates without them being aware	23.6%	17.2%
Seeing images or videos of naked people	25.4%*	3.4%
Listening to music or jokes	85.4%	91.4%
Recording fights of school friends	45.4%	32.7%

* $p < .05$.

name (45%), age (50%), school information (70%) and where they live (72%).

82.9% of men and 80% of women receive requests to meet them through photographs and 77.1% of men and 75% of women through the webcam. A little bit more adolescent women than adolescent men report have reported receiving proposals to be met in person and talk by the telephone with them.

Participants who chat or use Messenger receive different proposals, the main being dating (57.4% in women and 51.8% in men). It is very noteworthy that girls (38%) more than boys (5.4%) are who report that the authors of such requests are under age men. A lower but similar percentage of boys and girls (14.3 and 18.0, respectively) states that strangers made such proposals.

- b) *The production of sexualized images of girls, boys and adolescents.* 76.9% of participants report to have their own cellular phone (55 men and 58 women). Most of them use their phones for listening to music. However, it bears mention that there is a statistically significant difference between boys and girls (Table 3): more boys (25%) than girls (3.4%) report using the cellular phone to see images or videos of naked people.

There is slightly more boys (23.6%) than girls (17.2%) who take photographs or videos of schoolmates without they being aware (Table 3).

A very high percentage of boys and girls has had problems for being distracted with the phone and interrupting classes. 63.6% of men and 60.3% of women report that they have had problems for using the telephone at the school. Table 4 shows that the main problems reported

Table 4. Uses of the cellular telephone that caused troubles at school. Gender comparison

	Men (n=35)	Women (n=35)
Distracted at school	82.8%	68.6%
Not attending classes	54.3%	45.7%
Having pornography	8.6%	2.8%
Recording fights of school friends	60.0%*	25.7%

* $p < .05$.

Table 5. People reported for having Images of naked people

	Men	Women
Friends	55.8%	65.0%
School friends	62.8%	62.5%
My property	16.3%	12.5%

are: being distracted (82.8% of men and 68.6% of women) and interrupting the class (54.3% of boys and 45.7% girls). Here is another statistically significant difference: more boys (60%) than girls (25.7%) have had problems for recording fights with their cell phone. The highest sanction reported by the participants for using the phone was its removal (51.4% of women and 68.6% of men).

In general, 61.5% of the population reports knowing someone that have naked people images in their cellular phone; being phones from friends (reported by 65% of women and 55.8% of men), as well as phones from schoolmates (reported by 62.5% of women and 62.8% of men) those that have such images. It is important to mention that slightly more men than women reported that they had that kind of images (Table 5).

53.1% of the population (35 men and 43 women) reported to know a friend photographed or video-taped with a cell phone. Most of girls (65.1%) and boys (65.7%) say that the photographed persons were playing, and more girls (79%) than boys (57%) said that they were having fun. Table 6 shows that more than half of the boys (65.7%) and of the girls (53.5%) said that they were fighting. A similar percentage of girls and boys stated that the photographed persons were drunk (32.5% and 34.3%, respectively). More boys than girls said those persons kissing (28.6% and 11.6%, respectively) and exhibiting their bodies (17.1% and 4.6%, respectively).

The average age of the photographed or video-taped friends is 13 years old. The main attitudes these persons adopted when they became aware of the photos

Table 6. Activities performed by the photographed or video-taped persons

	Men (n=35)	Women (n=43)
Being drunk	34.3%	32.5%
Fighting	65.7%	53.5%
Kissing or caressing each other	28.6%	11.6%
Exhibiting their bodies	17.1%	4.6%

was laughing (57.1% and 65.1% in men and women, respectively). Nevertheless, an important percentage of boys (34%) and girls (24%) said that they got angry, and a minority said that they accused them (14%) and fought (14%).

The main persons who took the images were friends and acquaintances. 22.8% of men and 16.3% of women report that these persons were completely unknown.

Figure 1 shows that the images obtained were used to be shared with friends (reported by 77.1% of men and 62.8% of women). Many said that they had deleted them (mentioned by 54.3% of men and 41.9% of women). Nevertheless, others uploaded them into the Internet (34.3% men and 37.2% women), collected them (34.3% men and 14.0% women) and a minority sold them (8.6% men and 2.3% women).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Part of the result shown hereby reveal that girls and boys from the State of Mexico disclose publicly real information of their own (approximately 70%) and interact with strangers through the Internet (approximately 64%). These percentages seem greater than the European average with a public profile of unrestricted access in the social networks (57%) as well as than the European average that interacts with strangers (34%).²⁻⁶

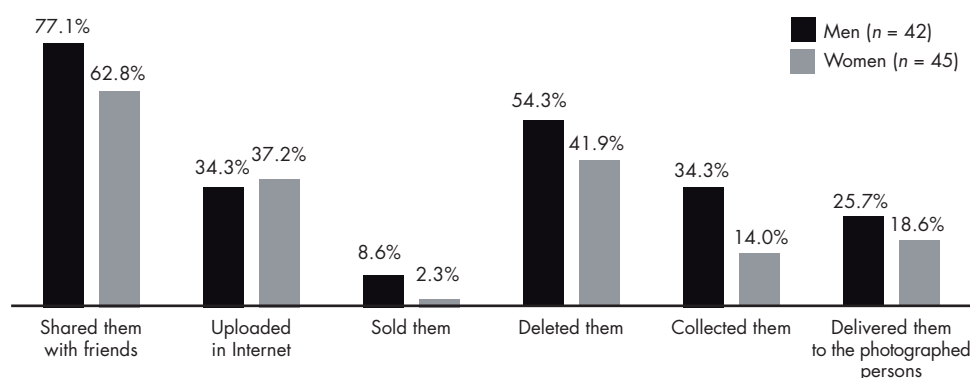


Figure 1. Uses of the images taken by the cellular telephone. Gender comparison.

Although the results obtained do not include cases of hooking up on-line attributable to the use of a public profile in social networks and to the interaction with strangers, such practices are present in the samples dealt herein and may be considered as indicators of unsafe Internet surfing. IT safety engineers,^{20,21} international organizations and civil society organizations in support of boys y girls' rights,^{1,8} cyber-crime police,²² among other specialists, point out that unrestricted access to personal information in social networks and interaction with strangers in the Internet, increase the probability of suffering different cyber crimes, including sexual exploitation.

Girls and boys disclose their profile publicly in the social networks in order to be updated within the collective imagination of all their acquaintances, including ex-boyfriends/ex-girlfriends and strangers. Girls and boys of the same generation and school,²³ said in different focus groups that they published and updated their real information in the social networks, expecting that such information was commented and discussed by their acquaintances (friends, close and distant relatives, ex-boyfriends/ex-girlfriends and ex-friends), and even strangers. All this allows adolescent girls to gauge their popularity, know how they are seen and estimate to what extent they can feel that they belong.

Girls and boys interact with acquaintances and strangers looking for esteem in the Internet. It is common that in chats the latter want to meet them by a picture or through the webcam.²³ Also, dating proposals and sexual harassment – both from acquaintances and strangers – are common. According to the results reported herein, most of the girls who chat do not provide their real data. Nonetheless, qualitative results indicate that this could change after some days of interaction.²³ Adolescents of the same generation and school confess that after several times of interacting with a stranger, they may provide him/her with their own real information if they notice that he/she is interested in their problems and tastes and proves to be thoughtful. Even some girls have agreed to meet him face-to-face. These girls express that the idea to attend the meeting is exciting, but they do consider it a risk because they believe they can be kidnapped or stolen. They try to go with friends and before the meeting they spy on the person in order to corroborate that the age and the on-line projected image correspond. If he does not satisfy this requirement, then they avoid the meeting. It seems that the adolescents fears are not exaggerated; the Mexican cyber police is aware of hundreds of girls and boys who were sexually exploited after disclosing their personal information to strangers through the Internet, communicating on-line and attending face-to-face encounters with them.²²

Due to different (religious, moral, gender inequality, human rights, good taste, etc.) reasons, pornography is not considered appropriate for underage minors in Mexico.

However, our results reveal that more boys (25%) than girls (3.4%) see images or videos of naked people (pornography) in their cellular telephone. This practice seems normalized among students, since 61.5% of the general population reports to know a student having naked people images in the cellular phone.

From a sociocultural perspective, the normalization of pornography consumption during the adolescence occurs in sociocultural contexts where prevail discourses and practices that tacitly assume that male adolescence is a "hot by nature" period.^{23,24} A masturbatory and morbid stage governed by "out of control hormones" or "sexual instincts" experienced as impersonal desires, obsessed with some body partialities of women.

Adolescents appropriate partially or totally the cultural discourses and practices of the "adolescent horniness",²³ combining and integrating them in order to consume pornography in their own way, either in private or in public. Several adolescents say that "porn" may make them sick, but also help them to get excited and masturbate in private, know sexual positions and see naked women.²³ Likewise, adolescents consume pornography collectively to publicly prove their manliness at school. It is about a dramatized, spontaneous and grotesque demonstration of their "horny manliness",²³ in which is common to see small groups of boys gathering to see pornography in a cell phone screen. While they are seeing pornography they pretend to be excited (moaning, shouting, panting), masturbate or practice a sexual position from behind an unprepared schoolmate, while others laugh their heads off or make kinky comments about the exaggerations of pornography. This is not the only proof of "horny manliness". Girls complain about the boys calling them "morbid" because they usually talk in sexual double entendre, try to see the girls' underwear while they go upstairs, grope them, taking pictures under their skirts, kiss them, etc.

On the other hand, students use their phones to capture images of their schoolmates playing and having fun, but also when they are fighting, drunk, kiss each other or exhibit their bodies. They share images with others; they even upload them to the Internet and sometimes they sell them.

According to interviews and focus groups of adolescents of same generation and school,²³ many of these images are taken while having fun ("desmadre"). This is a common cultural practice between girls and boys of secondary schools, which is governed by rules such as "everyone against everyone" ["todos contra todos"] and "if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen" ["el que se lleva se aguanta"].²⁵ Some "desmadres" combine the collective joy with sexual transgressions between boys and girls (groping, pulling skirts and trousers down, erotic dances, among others). Sometimes this kind of "desmadre" is video-taped with cell phones and their participants seem to agree: they

talk, smile, drink alcohol, kiss and grope each other, exhibit their bodies while dancing erotically in front of the cell camera. In the middle of the collective joy some girls/boys could agree (although not others) that such images are uploaded to the social networks or even to YouTube. Anyway, it is common that some persons who see themselves in the Internet repent or get angry about this. Then they consider those images shameful and humiliating, either because they are sexualized (close-ups of their behind, legs, breasts, underwear), or humiliating (drunk, beaten, defecating, vomiting, etc.) images. As a consequence the offended persons may get angry and fight with those who produced and uploaded such images in the Internet. In case those images are seen by relatives, teachers and/or neighbors, the girls can experience stigmatization, low self-esteem and depression.²³

Since the results hereby reported are restricted to non-representative samples of the State of Mexico, they are insufficient to legitimate the inclusion of the on-line security theme for boys and girls within the agenda of the government public policies. For this purpose, it is necessary to develop epidemiological researches about Internet uses and the associated risks in representative samples of students at municipal and state levels, as well as to promote ethnographic and qualitative researches allowing a deeper understanding and a rapid assessment of the new technologies use and the role of the adolescent agency before risks associated with situations of sexual exploitation in small samples of students, teachers, parents, etc.

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