Grooming Risk Factors in Adolescents with Abuse Histories: Insights from Chilean Reparative Programs

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Abstract: The increasing use of digital platforms by adolescents has brought to light critical vulnerabilities related to online grooming. This study explores the risk factors associated with grooming among adolescents aged 12 to 17 years enrolled in a Reparative Program for Abuse in Chile. Using a non-experimental, quantitative, exploratory cross-sectional design, a sample of 50 adolescents was evaluated. Data collection employed validated instruments, including the Okasha Scale for Suicidality (EOS), the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21), the Subjective Well-being Scale (EBS-8), and the Online Grooming Risk Scale (OGR-S). Findings revealed significant associations between grooming and variables such as excessive cellphone use, number of virtual social networks, lack of social connections, economic hardships, and depressive symptoms. Regression analysis highlighted that adolescents with unrestricted internet access, poor social interaction skills in face-to-face contexts, and exposure to environmental risk factors exhibit a heightened likelihood of experiencing grooming. These results underscore the necessity for targeted preventive interventions and policy enhancements to safeguard adolescents in vulnerable circumstances.

Keywords: grooming; adolescence; risk factors; social media; abuse repair programs

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has significantly impacted society, shaping influences and revealing the diverse cultures, topics, and personal information of participants using these virtual platforms. This evolution has led to increasing individual exposure and privacy violations, creating risk-laden spaces for vulnerable groups, such as children and adolescents [1]. This phenomenon represents a global challenge [2,3]. Adults, children, and adolescents actively participate as consumers and creators of content in the virtual world, often making it difficult to distinguish between real and digital life [4,5]. Along the same line, it is evident that the increasing virtualization of personal content has become an area of concern for children and adolescents since newer generations gain access to the Internet early and tend to be the primary users of virtual platforms, demonstrating a higher level of technological proficiency than their parents and adult guardians [6]. Undoubtedly, the described situation involves a series of significant risk factors for the safety of children and adolescents (Ch+A) since unscrupulous adults sometimes establish connections through virtual platforms to form abusive relationships with minors, resulting

in a severe violation of children's rights [7]. By 2021, in Europe, 60% of adolescents aged 12–14 had experienced at least one type of online sexual victimization, the most common forms being unwanted exposure to sexual content, sexual pressure, online grooming, and sexual coercion. The main risk factors identified include sexting, the indiscriminate expansion of social networking, and the establishment of intimate relationships with strangers online, which significantly increase the vulnerability of minors [8]. In 2019, the Chilean Investigative Police reported statistical data on more than 4000 investigations into crimes associated with the exploitation of minors through the Internet. However, only 1077 formal complaints were filed, categorizing these offenses as improper sexual abuse of minors over 14 years old, acquisition or storage of child pornographic material, and the commercialization and/or production of such material [9].

Grooming is defined as the behavior of an adult who carries out premeditated actions to establish online friendships with a child or adolescent, seek sexual satisfaction through erotic and/or pornographic images, or even prepare for in-person meetings [10]. On the other hand, violations of children's rights, as defined by the *Defensoría de la Niñez*, "correspond to any transgression of the rights of Ch+A established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which may or may not constitute a crime depending on the current legislation." Consequently, grooming is currently configured as a risk factor for Ch+A, as it involves deliberate actions by an adult, regardless of their sex, gender, or other characteristics, to sexually harass minors through digital platforms and social networks [7]. The strategies used by online offenders reveal a pattern of persuasion and manipulation aimed at fulfilling their sexual desires. These offenders specifically target Ch+A, who appear particularly vulnerable, leveraging social networks and online games as platforms to initiate contact [8]. They often begin by showing interest in their victims' lives and exploring family dynamics, friendships, and other personal factors. They build trust with their victims by demonstrating empathy and understanding, creating a sense of closeness and security [11]. Grooming often starts through virtual interactions, eliminating the need for physical proximity regardless of where the individuals are. Offenders, in these cases, may target multiple victims simultaneously, using attraction and seduction tactics to establish widespread contact. To strengthen the connection, they often craft "desirable" personas, adopting traits and communication styles that mirror those of their victims, including specific slang, expressions, or linguistic nuances [11]. The repercussions for adolescents subjected to grooming frequently correlate with psychological challenges, notably an increased risk of mood disorders, including depression [11]. Additionally, crimes associated with grooming, including online sexual exploitation, can increase the likelihood of maladaptive behaviors such as running away from home, sexualization, and substance use, both legal and illegal [12]. Over the past decade, research on this phenomenon has primarily concentrated on individuals identified as the most vulnerable targets for grooming. A study in Argentina found a linear relationship between age and the onset of grooming interactions. Adolescents aged 15 to 16 are more susceptible to grooming dynamics [13]. This finding is consistent with international research that reports analogous outcomes in grooming-related crimes [14]. While a larger body of research on this topic exists in the United States and Europe, there is a noticeable lack of studies addressing cases in Latin America, including Chile [15]. As a result, although progress has been made in exploring this issue [11], it remains disconnected from the realities of Chilean society. Addressing this gap requires a systematic approach that deepens our understanding of local contexts and fosters the development of effective prevention strategies.

Technology and Internet access are generally perceived as enabling tools. Some research has highlighted the positive contributions of Internet and social network use to adolescents' psychological adjustment. These include their ability to facilitate access to educational resources, which promotes increased knowledge and self-efficacy in different

areas of their lives [16]. In addition, social networks allow adolescents to stay connected with friends and family, thus strengthening a sense of belonging and social support [17]. These platforms also offer valuable resources for emotional support in times of crisis, such as online helplines or applications designed for emotional well-being [18]. However, they can also bring negative transformations that threaten the integrity of those who require protection. In addition, adolescents who report frequent use of Highly Visual Social Media may face a heightened risk of developing body image concerns, which could subsequently contribute to poorer psychological well-being [19].

Some research has found that teens who spend more time on the Internet and social networks are more likely to interact with strangers, including some groomers [20,21]. This can be incredibly complex given that the absence of supervision can be a significant risk factor for grooming [22] since teenagers may share private and personal information, which facilitates the possibility of grooming [23,24]. Adolescents mostly search for identity and explore social relationships [25] and groomers use the same social networks teenagers use to facilitate contact [26]. These platforms allow direct and private communication, eliminating barriers to initial contact [13,27]. Likewise, adolescents with difficulties in face-to-face social interaction often seek to compensate for these limitations in digital environments [28], where they can better control how they present themselves and avoid the stress associated with face-to-face interactions [29], thus generating a higher risk of being contacted by the groomers [27]. On the other hand, adolescents living in conditions of poverty or with economic difficulties tend to be more vulnerable to grooming dynamics [22] because groomers often take advantage of these circumstances by offering financial support, gifts, or promises of economic opportunities to gain the trust of victims [30]. Likewise, family environments with high levels of conflict, neglect, or abuse increase the vulnerability of adolescents to grooming [31]. These family dynamics limit the emotional support available to adolescents, who may seek this validation online, where groomers present themselves as trusted figures [7]. Promoting healthier gaming habits and reducing adolescent escapism requires effective parental mediation and the development of strong interpersonal skills [32].

Several patterns have been identified that correlate sexual abuse dynamics with grooming dynamics. Internationally, risk factors include low self-esteem among Ch+A, sociodemographic characteristics, challenges with social skills, elevated social anxiety, and additional contextual factors [33]. The Reparative Program for Abuse (PRM for its acronym in Spanish) is part of the outpatient programs offered by the National Service for the Specialized Protection of Children and Adolescents of the State of Chile. Its main objective is to contribute to the therapeutic process of the child or adolescent who has suffered severe physical or psychological mistreatment, constituting a crime and/or child sexual aggression (sexual abuse and rape). It is worth mentioning that the Chilean Family Courts must admit the children and adolescents to these programs, considering that the reason for admission is the intervention profile of the program since the case must be in court, thus prioritizing the restitution of the violated children's rights. Connected to the above, as well as the protective measures, the intervention process is stipulated for a period of 12 months. This can be extended without prejudice for up to 24 months with the prior approval of both the Courts and the National Service for the Specialized Protection of Ch+A [34].

Identifying and emphasizing the risk factors related to the grooming dynamic is essential. Recent studies, however, lack comprehensive information on these risk factors and primarily concentrate on the later stages of grooming. The stages generally encompass the initiation of interaction between Ch+A and an adult, involving the transfer of information, sexually explicit content, and/or physical engagement with the perpetrator [33]. International studies have been mainly centered on adult-led initiatives ("the groomer"), which

have overlooked critical factors such as virtual interactions or direct sexual encounters between children or adolescents and adults [11], while this study focused on "the groomed" Ch+A which rights have been vulnerated. The objective of this study was to explore the risk factors associated with grooming among adolescents aged 12 to 17 years enrolled in a Reparative Program for Abuse in Chile.

The subsequent research hypotheses are proposed based on the preceding information:

H1: *Adolescents with unrestricted access to the internet and/or social media are more likely to become victims of grooming situations.*

H2: *Adolescents who experience social interaction difficulties in face-to-face settings are more likely to become victims of grooming dynamics.*

H3: *Adolescents exposed to environmental risk factors are at a higher probability of becoming victims of grooming dynamics.*

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This non-experimental study employed an exploratory cross-sectional design. A non-probabilistic intentional sampling method was used [35].

2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 50 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years enrolled in the PRM in the Biobío region of Chile. The inclusion criteria were to be part of a PRM, have passed the diagnostic stage, be in the reparative process, be aged 12–17, be capable of reading and answering written questionnaires by themselves, signed informed assent, and signed informed consent from their legal tutor. The exclusion criteria were an incomplete questionnaire.

Regarding the size of the sample, the size of 50 participants was selected due to the specificity and vulnerability of the studied group, composed of adolescents enrolled in a reparative program for abuse in Chile, which justifies an intentional approach with strict criteria based on ethical and legal needs. In addition, this exploratory and cross-sectional study seeks to identify preliminary patterns in a pioneering topic such as grooming in vulnerable populations. A post hoc power analysis showed a power of 70% for a medium effect size (d = 0.5), adequate for initial studies

2.3. Instruments

For data collection in this study, an instrument was designed to incorporate a series of scales previously used in other studies with high reliability levels and some sociodemographic questions. The instruments were chosen because they are recognized for correctly measuring the study variables, in addition to being quick to administer, which is essential when working with adolescents.

Okasha Scale for Suicidality (EOS) [36]: This instrument was used to identify the risk of suicidality among participants through four questions related to thoughts, desires, or attempts to engage in suicidal behavior. Responses were categorized as (0) never, (1) rarely, (2) sometimes, and (3) often. The use of this scale is based on its ease of application and validity in identifying suicidal behaviors, considering the characteristics of the study participants [37]. For this study, its reliability was verified using Cronbach's α, with a level of 0.92, which is considered satisfactory. This instrument was validated in the Chilean population [37].

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) [38]: This condensed instrument measures three specific states among participants: depression, anxiety, and stress. Each aspect is evaluated based on the frequency of symptoms reported by the sample, scored from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater symptom severity. It is noted for its ease of application and validated use across different age ranges [39]. For this study, its reliability was verified using Cronbach's α, with a level of 0.7, which is considered acceptable.

Subjective Well-being Scale (EBS-8) [40]: This instrument is a condensed scale designed to identify levels of subjective well-being among various age ranges in Spanish-speaking populations. The scale consists of 8 statements, rated by participants from 1 to 6, where "1" indicates "disagree" and "6" indicates "strongly agree." For this study, the scale's reliability was verified using Cronbach's α, with a level of 0.96, which is considered satisfactory.

Online Grooming Risk Scale (OGR-S) [33]: This scale measures risk factors associated with online grooming situations, using an 8-item questionnaire scored on a five-point scale: 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), and 5 (very often). Items include the frequency of contact, sharing personal information, sending videos and/or photos, hiding "friendships," and receiving compliments, among others, with strangers online. For this study, the scale's reliability was verified using Cronbach's α, with a level of 0.92, which is considered satisfactory.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Qualitative variables were presented as absolute and relative frequencies, while quantitative variables were expressed as mean and standard deviation. To identify the risk factors associated with grooming (dependent variable), a multifactorial logistic regression analysis using the "backward" method was performed, with an inclusion criterion of 0.05 and an exclusion criterion of 0.1. Independent variables included in the model were the use of digital media and devices, age, gender, levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (high, medium, low), and suicide risk and attempts (yes/no). The proposed model predicted the combined effect of exposure to these factors, with effect size determined by calculating odds ratios (ORs). The model's goodness-of-fit was also assessed. All analyses were conducted using SPSS® 25.0 software [41], with a significance level of <0.05.

Logistic regression analysis was selected due to the nature of the scales used, which had defined cut-off points to categorize the responses. This allowed the dependent and independent variables to be operationalized as dichotomous responses (Yes/No). This approach was aligned with our main objective: to identify factors associated with the probability of being a victim of grooming conceptualized as a binary variable (presence or absence of grooming).

Additionally, the choice of this statistical model allows us to calculate odds ratios, which facilitates the interpretation of risk factors and their relative impact on the probability of the event studied. This method is widely recognized in social and psychological research, especially when the objective is to model discrete events and provide results applicable in practical contexts, such as the design of preventive interventions.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Master's Program in Socio-Legal Family Intervention at Universidad Andrés Bello on 12 June 2023, under approval 1808–2023. Additionally, institutional approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from the legal guardians of the adolescents. The adolescents also provided their informed assent to participate in the study.

3. Results

The observed sample consisted of 50 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, with a mean age of 13.48 ± 1.313 years. Most were female (88%) and of Chilean nationality (96%). Of the participants, 38% were secondary school students, while 62% were primary school students. A total of 98% of the adolescents had internet access, and 88% had access to an electronic device (tablet or smartphone).

Additionally, 58% of the adolescents reported having parental control over the content and information accessible through their devices, while 42.0% reported no monitoring of their online activities.

Regarding social media usage, students used an average of 3.34 ± 1.02 applications, with TikTok being the most used (42; 84%), followed by WhatsApp (38; 76%), Instagram (37; 74%), and YouTube (35; 70%).

Table 1 shows the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as suicide risk and attempts reported by the adolescents. Anxiety was identified as the most prevalent mental health condition in its most severe forms (44%, 22), followed by stress and depression (22%, 22, respectively).

Table 1. Levels of depression, anxiety, stress, suicide attempts, and suicide risk (n = 50).

	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	n	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
Absent	21	42.0	23	46.0	27	54.0
Mild	5	10.0	1	2.0	5	10.0
Moderate	13	26.0	4	8.0	7	14.0
Severe	2	4.0	3	6.0	6	12.0
Extremely Severe	9	18.0	19	38.0	5	10.0
	Suicide Attempt			Suicide Risk		
YES	27	54.0		38		76.6
NO	23	46.0		12		24.0

Table 2 shows the relationship between grooming and sociodemographic and psychological variables. The results indicate positive relationships between grooming risk and both suicide risk and suicide attempts. Similarly, grooming risk was positively correlated with anxiety levels. All described relationships were moderate in strength. On the other hand, grooming risk was negatively associated with subjective well-being, with a similarly moderate correlation strength.

Table 2. Correlational analysis of grooming and sociodemographic and psychological variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Grooming Risk	1	−0.031	0.134	0.349 *	0.320 *	−0.386 **	0.266	0.173	0.328 *
2. Age		1	0.069	0.254	0.151	−0.217	0.144	0.129	0.019
3. Number of Applications			1	0.183	0.361 *	−0.167	0.216	0.276	0.261
4. Suicide Risk				1	0.679 **	−0.649 **	0.739 **	0.644 **	0.624 **
5. Suicide Attempt					1	−0.384 **	0.521 **	0.572 **	0.520 **
6. Subjective Well-being						1	−0.758 **	−0.541 **	−0.639 **
7. Depression							1	0.789 **	0.836 **
8. Anxiety								1	0.859 **
9. Stress									1

Note: * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

The results in Table 3 show a positive association between grooming risk and certain behaviors and sociodemographic factors. Specifically, the findings indicate that young people who cannot stop looking at their phones are at a higher risk of experiencing

grooming. This suggests that the likelihood of grooming occurring is approximately 47.569 times greater in the group that "cannot stop looking at their phones".

Table 3. Association between grooming risk, behaviors, and sociodemographic variables.

	B	Standard Error	Wald	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I. Para EXP(B)	
						Inferior	Superior
I Can't Stop Looking at My Phone	3.86	1.201	10.345	0.001	47.569	4.521	500.529
Economic Difficulties	3.72	1.397	7.114	0.008	41.544	2.687	642.437
I Have No Friends	2.11	1.010	4.375	0.036	0.121	0.017	0.875
Constant	−2.87	1.029	7.745	0.005	0.057		

Note: Exp (B) represents the odds ratio, with 95% confidence intervals (CI). All *p*-values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Similarly, young people who perceive economic difficulties are at a higher risk of experiencing grooming. The data indicate that the likelihood of grooming occurring is approximately 41.544 times greater in the group with "economic difficulties" than those without this variable. Conversely, young people who do not have friends are at a lower risk of experiencing grooming.

In addition to odds ratios, effect sizes were calculated for significant predictors. The analysis indicated that the model presented a Nagelkerke's Pseudo-R^2 of 0.633, suggesting that the predictors explain approximately 63.3% of the variance in the risk of grooming. In particular, predictors such as excessive cell phone use (Exp (B) = 47.569) and economic hardship (Exp (B) = 41.544) stood out for their substantial contribution to the explanatory model.

4. Discussion

This study has identified several risk factors associated with grooming dynamics that could affect the adolescents included in the research sample. It is important to note that the main objective of this study focuses on identifying the risk factors associated with grooming among adolescents aged 12 to 17 years who are part of a PRM.

The incorporation of effect sizes in this study strengthens the interpretation of the results by complementing the information provided by the odds ratios. Predictors with larger effect sizes, such as excessive cell phone use (Exp (B) = 47.569) and economic hardship (Exp (B) = 41.544), highlight the need to design interventions aimed at regulating and monitoring the use of digital technologies in vulnerable adolescents. These findings reinforce the importance of developing public policies and preventive programs focused on reducing exposure to risk factors, also considering that the model explained 63.3% of the variance in the risk of grooming (Nagelkerke's Pseudo-R^2 = 0.633).

H1: *Adolescents with unlimited access to the internet and/or social media are more likely to become victims of grooming situations.*

The development of technology, particularly social media, has brought numerous advances, fostering growth in various areas. However, it has also created environments threatening the well-being of individuals using these technological tools [42]. Currently, newer generations gain early access to new technologies, increasing the use of various platforms. This increased usage leads individuals to interact with third parties in virtual spaces [43].

Additionally, it is essential to highlight that grooming dynamics are characterized by manipulative actions carried out by the perpetrator. These actions are designed to foster

feelings of closeness and attachment in the victim, thereby creating spaces of intimacy that facilitate the perpetration of abuse [44]. Considering a series of studies on this topic, it is evident that children and adolescents experience a progressive increase in the use of virtual platforms. While these platforms provide opportunities, they also create contexts of vulnerability to risk situations [13].

4.1. Association Between Grooming and Constant Phone Use

It was observed that among the adolescents participating in the study, those who reported "not being able to stop looking at their phones" were at a significantly higher risk of experiencing grooming. The data indicate that the likelihood of grooming occurring is approximately 47.569 times greater for those in the "constant phone use" group than those without this variable. This finding aligns with other research, particularly studies on Spanish youth, where over 23% of adolescents reported using the Internet for more than three hours daily [45]. Furthermore, other studies suggest that increased exposure to and interaction on virtual networks by adolescents creates an environment where young people explore various forms of expressing their sexuality [46].

Given these findings, future research must investigate a potential correlation between compulsive and/or addictive behavior in adolescents toward virtual platforms.

4.2. Association Between Grooming and Well-Being

A correlation was observed suggesting that as adolescents experience more significant difficulties in their well-being, they may also become more exposed or vulnerable to grooming dynamics. These findings highlight that, according to the characteristics of the sample, increased levels of well-being impairment are directly reflected in variables such as depression, anxiety, stress, suicide risk, and suicide attempts [47], thereby increasing the risk of becoming a victim of grooming.

These results align with findings from other studies worldwide, where the grooming dynamics established by the aggressor exploit the "emotional fragility" of their victims as a key factor in creating spaces of intimacy and transforming themselves into a "trusted person" [33]. This emotional manipulation then facilitates abusive online dynamics.

It is important to note that while the findings from this study are not representative of the general population due to the specific characteristics of the sample, they provide several elements that could serve as a foundation for future research. Such studies could inform the modification or updating of public policies and legal frameworks.

In alignment with the findings, Hypothesis 1 is supported, as adolescents who constantly use their phones and experience difficulties in their well-being are more likely to be victims of grooming dynamics.

H2: *Adolescents with social interaction difficulties in face-to-face settings are more likely to become victims of grooming dynamics.*

Adolescents today frequently emphasize the positive aspects of new technologies. However, another segment of the population has also identified certain negative aspects, particularly regarding the display of sexual practices [48]. Grooming dynamics, where an adult prioritizes their sexual needs at the expense of a minor's integrity, have significant consequences for the health and functionality of the child or adolescent [49].

In this context, several hypotheses have been established regarding the study of grooming phenomena. It has been observed that adolescents who exhibit introverted traits or face challenges related to self-esteem often turn to virtual platforms as a means or mechanism for social communication [50].

4.3. Association Between Grooming and the Number of Virtual Social Networks

The study's results, considering the specific characteristics of the sample, indicate that the more virtual networks adolescents use, the higher the probability of becoming victims of grooming dynamics. Additionally, it was observed that the greater the number of applications used by adolescents, the more they are exposed to depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal ideation.

In line with this and based on recent research, it has been noted that social networks and virtual platforms facilitate immediate contact and interactions among individuals with similar communication needs [27].

4.4. Association Between Grooming and Having No Friends

Based on the participants' responses, it was identified that adolescents who have no friends are at a higher risk of falling victim to grooming dynamics. This suggests a greater degree of vulnerability associated with social isolation, which may increase the likelihood of risk.

It is worth noting that other studies suggest emotionally vulnerable adolescents who experience social isolation are more exposed to exploitation by cyber predators [51]. Additionally, other research has found that adolescents often develop different personas through virtual platforms [52].

In this context, Hypothesis 2 is supported, as this study highlighted a high probability that adolescents with social interaction difficulties in face-to-face settings are more exposed to becoming victims of grooming dynamics.

H3: *Adolescents exposed to environmental risk factors have a high probability of becoming victims of grooming dynamics.*

Adolescence, as a developmental stage, exhibits various characteristics. Although this research focuses on the interactive aspects of Ch+A through virtual platforms, it is crucial to emphasize that this stage of development is distinguished by the acquisition and application of social skills [53]. Additionally, adolescence is marked by the development of sexuality [46].

In this context, forming friendships through social networks eliminates physical, social, economic, and geographical limitations, allowing connections based on shared interests [53,54]. This aligns with the dynamics of grooming, in which an adult exerts power over a minor, leveraging this power structure to create inappropriate interactive spaces and exploiting the emotional and cognitive maturation process of the child or adolescent [55].

4.5. Association Between Grooming and Perception of Economic Difficulties

The results of this study indicate that adolescents who perceive economic difficulties are at a higher risk of falling victim to grooming. Specifically, the probability of grooming occurring is approximately 41.544 times greater for those in the "economic difficulties" group than those without this variable.

This association is particularly relevant given the specific characteristics of the participants, who are part of an intervention program and were judicially admitted to the PRM due to being victims of childhood rights violations. The inability to access private therapeutic processes highlights economic difficulties as a potential risk factor.

While no studies directly addressing environmental risks or economic difficulties were found, one study did identify that an individual convicted of grooming established contact with victims by promising financial benefits through deceit and subsequently storing material from the victims [11,46].

4.6. Association Between Grooming and Depression

Another result obtained through the instruments used in this study indicates that as mental health issues, particularly depression, increase, so do anxiety, stress, suicide risk, and suicide attempts. These states create a higher likelihood of being victims of grooming dynamics.

In line with other research, depressive symptoms in adolescents make them more vulnerable to experiencing online sexual solicitation [15]. Additionally, other studies note that a lack of affection and attention, the presence of depressive episodes, or experiences of rights violations, such as sexual abuse or physical maltreatment, correlate with transgressions within grooming dynamics [11].

Based on the findings discussed above, Hypothesis 3 is supported, as a correlation exists between the study participants' exposure to grooming dynamics and environmental risk factors.

4.7. Legislation

It is important to note that crimes are often manifested as cases of grooming, even though grooming itself is not classified as a crime under the Chilean Penal Code [56]. This highlights the inadequacy of the current legal framework in Chile to fully address grooming as a specific offense, resulting in insufficient penalties for offenders or cyber-predators [57]. Since 2000, the need to regulate the "information society" in Chile has been recognized. The rapid technological evolution, particularly the adoption of the Internet and social networks, has generated new forms of social interaction and, at the same time, has exposed children and adolescents to new risks, such as grooming. This situation poses the challenge of adapting the Chilean legal framework to a dynamic reality to protect minors in cyberspace [58]. Under this framework, on 22 June 2011, Law 20,526 was published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Chile, amending the Penal Code to penalize sexual harassment of minors, virtual child pornography, and the possession of child pornographic material [59]. In Argentina, another Latin American country with a similar reality to Chile, the law is more advanced. Grooming is identified as a serious crime, which highlights that Chile is not advancing legislatively at the same speed as technology and associated types of crime. Argentine legislation incorporated grooming as a crime in its Penal Code in 2013, explicitly stating in Article 131: "Anyone who, through electronic communications, telecommunications, or any other data transmission technology, contacts a minor with the intent to commit any crime against their sexual integrity shall be punished with imprisonment of six (6) months to four (4) years" [60]. Argentina's legislation highlights the urgency and feasibility of strengthening legal measures in Chile.

5. Limitations

Several limitations that warrant consideration were identified during the development of this research. First, using an intentional sample, while methodologically appropriate for the study's objectives, resulted in certain specific characteristics that limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations.

Second, the sample composition presented a notable gender imbalance, with 88.0% of participants being female and only 12.0% male. This limited diversity in the participant group constrains the ability to explore potential gender-based differences or identify other variables and associations that may emerge with a more balanced sample. This limitation underscores the importance of future studies incorporating more representative gender distributions.

Third, grooming remains a relatively new and underexplored topic in academic research, with limited qualitative and quantitative studies available globally. This gap is

particularly evident in Latin America, where research on grooming is scarce, making meaningful regional comparisons and contextual insights challenging. The lack of robust data further underscores the need for increased attention to this issue in future research.

Fourth, although the instruments were chosen because they are recognized for correctly measuring the study variables and are quick to administer, which is essential when working with adolescents, only two of them have been formally validated in the Chilean population (Okasha Scale for Suicidality EOS and DASS-21). The Subjective Well-being Scale (EBS-8) and Online Grooming Risk Scale (OGR-S) should be validated in an instance with a bigger sample to ensure their cultural relevance and enhance the accuracy of the findings.

Finally, there is a pressing need for more extensive, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies to deepen understanding of the risk factors that children and adolescents in Chile and worldwide may face. Additionally, it is crucial to investigate other unexplored aspects of grooming dynamics, as current research has yet to address severe violations of children's rights adequately. Expanding the scope of research in this field will help to bridge these critical knowledge gaps and contribute to more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Practical Implications

We must establish the importance of promoting active parental supervision through digital controls and by building open and constant communication between parents and children about the use of the Internet and social networks. Likewise, educational programs should be implemented in schools to teach adolescents how to identify and avoid grooming interactions on social networks, including strategies to safely manage their privacy and recognize signs of emotional manipulation by groomers.

In addition, interactions with other variables such as well-being, suicidality, depression, anxiety, and stress with grooming should be further investigated, while also considering contextual factors such as the economic conditions, family environment, and social dynamics of the adolescent, which could exacerbate their vulnerability. Finally, these studies should help to raise awareness in society in general and especially among legislators to advance in the criminalization of these behaviors, as well as in the creation of intervention programs aimed at at-risk adolescents, with a comprehensive approach that combines legal, educational, and psychosocial measures.

6. Conclusions

The risk factors associated with grooming among adolescents aged 12 to 17 years enrolled in a Reparative Program for Abuse in Chile were excessive cellphone use, economic difficulties, and having no friends.

In addition, regarding our hypotheses, it was confirmed that adolescents with unrestricted access to the internet and/or social media are more likely to become victims of grooming situations (H1); adolescents who experience social interaction difficulties in face-to-face settings are more likely to become victims of grooming dynamics (H2); and adolescents exposed to environmental risk factors are at a higher risk of becoming victims of grooming dynamics (H3).

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