

# Social Networks, the Internet, and risks: Portuguese parents' perception of online grooming

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## ABSTRACT

The paper presents an exploratory and descriptive quantitative study, involving 560 Portuguese parents with school children, aged between 6 and 17 years. Data collection was carried out through a questionnaire that was made available online and focused on the use of social networks, the Internet and the risk of online grooming. The results showed that about half of the participants did not know the term 'online grooming'. After defining the phenomenon, 97% of the participants considered it very seriously. To prevent risk, 52% of the participants reported talking with their children about online risks and taking precautions to reduce the children's vulnerability. Approximately 89% of the respondents said they knew where to report cybercrime. The study aimed to contribute to a greater awareness of the risks associated with the Internet, involving parents and caregivers in the prevention of situations of victimization of children and adolescents.

*Keywords:* children and adolescents; Portuguese parents; online grooming; prevention; internet and risk.

## RESUMO – As Redes, a Internet e os Riscos: Perceções de Pais Portugueses sobre o Online Grooming

O artigo apresenta um estudo quantitativo exploratório e descritivo, envolvendo 560 pais portugueses que tinham filhos em idade escolar entre 6 e 17 anos. A recolha de dados foi feita por meio de um inquérito por questionário, disponibilizado *online*, focado no uso das redes, da *internet* e no risco do *online grooming*. Os resultados mostraram que cerca de metade dos participantes não conhecia o termo "*online grooming*". Depois de definir o fenómeno, cerca de 97% dos participantes consideraram-no muito grave. Para prevenir, 52% dos participantes disseram conversar com seus filhos sobre os riscos *online* e tomar precauções para reduzir a vulnerabilidade das crianças. Cerca de 89% dos entrevistados disseram saber onde denunciar crimes cibernéticos. O estudo visa contribuir para uma maior conscientização dos riscos associados à *internet*, envolvendo pais e cuidadores na prevenção de situações de vitimação de crianças e adolescentes.

*Palavras-chave:* crianças e adolescentes; pais portugueses; online grooming; prevenção; *internet* e risco.

## RESUMEN – Las Redes, Internet y los Riesgos: Percepciones de los Padres Portugueses sobre el Online Grooming

El artículo presenta un estudio cuantitativo exploratorio y descriptivo, en el que participaron 560 padres portugueses que tenían hijos en edad escolar entre 6 y 17 años. La recolección de datos se llevó a cabo a través de una encuesta, disponible en línea, enfocada en el uso de redes, *Internet* y el riesgo del *online grooming*. Los resultados mostraron que aproximadamente la mitad de los participantes no conocían el término "*online grooming*". Tras definir el fenómeno, alrededor del 97% de los participantes lo consideró muy grave. Para prevenirlo, el 52% de los encuestados afirmaron hablar con sus hijos sobre los riesgos digitales y tomar precauciones para reducir la vulnerabilidad de los niños. Alrededor del 89% de los encuestados dijeron que sabían dónde denunciar los delitos cibernéticos. El estudio tiene como objetivo contribuir a una mayor conciencia de los riesgos asociados a *Internet*, involucrando a los padres y cuidadores en la prevención de situaciones de victimización infantil y adolescente.

*Palabras clave:* niños y adolescentes; padres portugueses; online grooming; prevención; internet y riesgo.

The continuous and rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has made information systems an important part of people's lives, companies and institutions. Thus, society as we know has been transformed into a "digital society" (Magriço, 2014). The expression "Internet social networks" are increasingly used when describing a virtual social relationship.

There are also several "virtual communities" and "social networks". The concept of network refers us to the interrelationships, interactions and bonds that involve communication relationships and the exchange of values, knowledge and traditions (Aguiar, 2007). The means of communication and sharing are also very diverse (e.g., email, web pages, chat rooms, chat).

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ICT is increasingly integrated into people daily lives and that is why it is common to see children and young people growing up in an environment surrounded by computers, mobile phones, tablets, handling them skilfully. Associated with Internet growth, ICT culminated in a new reality, causing positive changes in education, in the transmission of information and knowledge and in friendships. The Internet caused a revolution in the world, opened doors to knowledge, interaction and learning, but also to crime (Ainsaar & Loof, 2012).

Despite connecting people and transmitting knowledge, Internet also brings with it some risks, such as crime and digital criminals (Martins et al., 2009; Ponte, & Batista, 2019). Many Internet users are children and young people, who, being self-taught, learn to explore the virtual world, sometimes without knowledge, maturity or awareness of the risks of such exploitation, and without parents being able to supervise at all times, which makes them vulnerable or exposed to a diversity of hazards practiced through ICT (Magriço, 2014). In addition to the parents' lack of availability, a possible lesser knowledge of them about the use of ICT (Duarte et al., 2013) and the multiplicity of online risk, must also be considered.

The European network EU Kids Online has been studying children's online opportunities, risks and safety. The results for Portugal (cf. Ponte, & Batista, 2019) showed that more than two thirds of Portuguese children and young people showed confidence in dealing with such risks, stating that they know how to react to behaviours that they do not like on the Internet (e.g., blocking contact on the social network, ignoring the problem, changing privacy settings, blocking a person). The same report also states that Portuguese children and young people are the ones who associate less risky situations with the resulting damage, when compared to the countries in the previous study.

According Moraes and Aguado (2014) most parents have the skills to work with the Internet and, therefore, it becomes easier to control the activities that their children develop while online. When children use the Internet in a common space, such as in the living room, parents are able to better understand what kind of sites they visit, or if they minimize a window with someone approaching, indicating that they were possibly browsing a site prohibited by parents or, for example, were talking to someone unknown and, in these situations, parental supervision guarantees greater protection (Duarte et al., 2013; Moraes, & Aguado, 2014).

Talking to strangers or people who met online means talking about "virtual friendships", the first hypothesis being the one that most generates concern in parents (Desiderá, & von Zuben, 2014; Ponte, & Batista, 2019), who transport to the virtual world the same fears existing in the physical world. The study by Desiderá and von Zuben (2014) revealed that about 23% of children, aged 11 to 16, had contacted someone they did not know

personally. Within that percentage, about 23% stated that they had encountered someone they had initially met from the Internet. In contrast, within the parent group, only 1% stated that they knew that their children would encounter someone they had met online. According to Shannon (2008), although this transition from the online to the offline world may not be frequent, the truth is that this transfer exists and the severity of many attempts at online sexual offenses that are committed against children should not be trivialized.

Internet is not restricted only to the virtual world, in the sense that the data and information that is shared there are real and can be used, sometimes in a totally opposite way to what was disclosed, thus favouring a risky situation. This disclosure can lead to several consequences, such as damage to the image, reputation, psychological problems and damage to the level of physical integrity since some shared information gives indications related to geographical location, habits and activities (Desiderá, & von Zuben, 2014).

One of the phenomena of victimization using ICT resources is known as online grooming. Grooming is a premeditated behaviour with the objective of ensuring the trust and cooperation of children or young people so that, later, the offender can develop sexual conduct with them, without the situation being revealed to parents, caregivers and professionals (Choo, 2009; Williams, & Hudson, 2013). The process usually begins when the offender chooses a geographic area or location to entice children and young people, to later engage in online conversations that arouse their interest. As soon as gaining the victim's trust, the offender tries to desensitize him/her from sexual conduct and, later, rehearses conversations about them in the relationship he/she has with the victim (Choo, 2009).

Children and youth have little knowledge of online risks, and when they are presented with the definition of grooming, children and young people do not understand it, and the idea they have about sexual offenders does not coincide with reality, with the need to alert parents to prevent this phenomenon (Davidson et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2012; Wood, & Wheatcroft, 2020). There are few studies that evaluate social perceptions about this phenomenon and those that are known (e.g., Davidson, 2008; Kitzinger, 2004; Williams, & Hudson, 2013) do not necessarily focus on parents' perception. According to Williams and Hudson (2013), studies that focus in particular on public perceptions of sexual offenses, in addition to revealing contradictory data, show that the public tends to have inaccurate, stereotyped and distorted perceptions of sexual offenders and sexual offenses themselves, similar to those shown in the media (e.g., that these crimes are mostly committed by strangers, and thus will not be serious crimes). Knowledge about the phenomenon also allows for more and better responses with regard to specific interventions with victims and aggressors (Manita, 2020). In addition, no study was identified in Portugal that primarily

focused on the perception of risk built by parents, with underage children, in view of the risk of sexual grooming. The perception of school-age children is not completely unknown (cf. Branca et al., 2016), and including this population also raises dilemmas and setbacks (Martins, & Sani, 2020) to action-research purposes in this study. Accordingly, with the purpose of understanding the parents' perception of the risks of the Internet regarding online grooming, the following research question was raised: *What is the knowledge and representations that parents have about the phenomenon of children's and young people grooming through the Internet (online grooming)?*

This study aimed to contribute to a greater knowledge in Portugal on the topic of online grooming being able to assist in the individual and social prevention of this increasing phenomenon. This purpose is also justified based on the need to collect information for the specific assessment of the risk of the online grooming, allowing to discuss the interface of psychological assessment with school psychology and psychology of justice complementary areas. In line with this, a quantitative study was developed, of an exploratory and descriptive character, whose general objective was to understand the perception of parents and caregivers regarding the online grooming process. In specific terms, it was intended to understand if the parents knew how to prevent this process of enticement of children and young people and if, in situations in which their children were involved, parents would know how to identify that process to later report to the authorities. Thus, the specific objectives of the study

were to: (a) Understand what parents know about online grooming; (b) Estimate the predominance of references made by children and young people to parents regarding "virtual friends"; (c) Access parents' knowledge regarding the reporting of cybercrime; (d) Make parents aware of the process of grooming children and young people over the Internet; (e) Provide clues to prevent and combat the phenomenon of online grooming.

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 560 Portuguese parents of children and young people, aged 6 to 17 years old. As an inclusion criterion, it was important that, in addition to the participants being parents, that children would be under 18 and that parents had some ICT literacy.

The sociodemographic analysis of the participants (cf. Table 1) revealed that the majority were female (79.6%), belonged to an age group between 41 to 50 years old (53.3%), with an average age of 42 years ( $SD=6.6$ ). Most of the participants lived in unmarried unions or were married (80.2%) and had a bachelor's degree (57%).

This sample covered all districts of mainland Portugal and islands, with the capital (Lisbon) standing out as the residence of the majority of participants (22.5%), followed by Aveiro (central region of the country) with 21.6% of people residing there, and from Porto (northern region of the country) with a total of 11.8% surveyed individuals.

**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic Characterization of the Sample (N=560)

Category	Subcategory	n	%
Gender	Male	114	20.4
	Female	446	79.6
Age Groups	20-30	13	2.1
	31-40	212	35.0
	41-50	323	53.3
	51-60	52	8.6
	61-70	6	1.0
Marital status	Single	30	5.4
	Married/ unmarried union	449	80.2
	Divorced/separated	74	13.2
	Widow/widower	7	1.3
Education	1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle (between 1 <sup>st</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> )	2	.4
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle (between 5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> )	9	1.6
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Cycle (between 7 <sup>th</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> )	27	4.8
	Secondary (between 10 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> )	119	21.3
	University degree	319	57.0
	Master's degree (or equivalent)	71	12.7
	PhD	13	2.3

## Instruments

The survey method through an available online questionnaire, was used in this study. This instrument was partially composed of a survey of sociodemographic data and also by 16 questions with multiple answer options (most, but not all, mutually exclusive), aiming to assess the parents' perception about the safety of children under 18 when using the Internet. Among these, namely the last six issues, were directly related to online grooming, the reporting of online crimes, and the alert for the prevention of the phenomenon. The questionnaire was built from the ground up for this exploratory study, from which a scale will be developed.

## Procedure

The questionnaire was applied online to parents of children and young people under the form of a survey. In parallel with the submission of the protocol to the University's Ethics Committee, under whose responsibility the study was carried out, and made available via the Internet through Google Docs, ensuring the anonymity of the participants. Each participant accessed the study link by previously filling out an informed consent and only after acknowledgement of understanding and accepting was it possible to participate in the study.

Data collection took place between January and April 2017. Answers were later extracted to Excel grid, to be statistically analysed with the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS), version 25. As this is an exploratory study, univariate descriptive statistics analysis was carried out for all variables.

## Results

Thirty-nine-point three percent of the parents participating in this study considered to have less Internet skills compared to their children, while 12.5% thought they were totally less skilled on the Internet. Of the 560 study participants, 36 subjects (6.4%) did not respond, and all the others considered having knowledge of the Internet above that of their children (23.0%) or even considerable higher (18.8%).

Nine hundred and nineteen responses answering to the type of activities related to the use of the Internet that parents would develop with their children, among the options available, were given. Of the 560 participants, 19 subjects (6.5%) indicated exclusively (e.g., without another simultaneous appointment) the option "I have not carried out activities related to the use of the Internet". The remaining participants indicated several options and the activities most exercised by parents were "Chatting about risky situations whenever news appears in newspapers or TV" reported by 36.0% of the participants, as well as "Creating rules and limits on Internet use" selected by 36.1% of the sample. In addition to these activities,

21.3% of parents also considered "Doing the monitoring of browsing history and content filters".

Participants were asked about the frequency reported by their children in social networks. About 49.6% of the participants stated that their children "always report a case/event". Approximately 16.1% of the participants stated that their children turned to their parents only when they needed help and 16.6% stated that their children only comment on something when asked. Finally, 17.7% of participants said that their children never make any reference to events related to the Internet.

In relation to the possible behaviour of the children to minimize the windows of the computer with the approach of the parents, the majority (65.0%) of the participants reported "I am always attentive and never noticed this detail". Of the total number of participants, 24.3% stated that "I am always attentive and have already noticed this detail", with a very low percentage of parents (5.9%) who said that "I never paid attention to this detail". It should also be noted that 4.8% of parents stated that they have already realized this situation and, subsequently, a problematic situation was detected.

Fifteen-point five percent of the parents stated that they never spoke to their children about virtual friendships, 4.6% of the participants mentioned only that they spoke about the topic once and 37.1% sporadically spoke to their children. Most parents (42.7%) reported to often talk with their children about friendships made over the Internet.

Parents were also questioned about the frequency with which children referred to "virtual friends", alerting them in some way to this issue that often goes unnoticed. The majority of participants (75.0%) stated that their children never made any reference to a virtual friend, in contrast to 4.6% of the participants, reporting that their children have many virtual friends. The remaining respondents (20.4%) indicated that their children will have referred to "virtual friends" once or more than 2 times.

Regarding the feeling of insecurity about Internet use, 22.9% of parents said they felt safe and 40.2% reported they felt this security most of the time when their children access the Internet. Of the parents expressing a greater perception of insecurity, 12.5% reported that they do not use specific forms of protection, while 24.5% of these parents reported seeking to find specific protection strategies.

Asked about the greatest fears that parents would have regarding the use of the Internet by their children, given the four response options, these are not exclusive, and 1127 responses were thus obtained. The majority of participants (35.5%) stated that the main fear was that their children would meet people online and, later, try to establish personal contact without the accompaniment of an adult. The other situations were also object of concern, with 21.4% of parents being afraid that their children would find content on the Internet that would

support violence, 22.4% reporting that their children would suffer some kind of humiliation, defamation or intimidation online and 20.8% stating that their children would encounter pornographic content.

As for topics considered priority for discussion with the children, 56.1% referred to “Meeting people on the Internet and wanting to meet them in the real world without being accompanied by an adult” and 33% mentioned “Sharing personal files (e.g., photos, home address)”. The items “Downloading unknown files” (4.8%) and “Using the webcam” (6.1%) were less reported by respondents.

In relation to the monitoring on Internet use given to children, 57.9% of the participants stated to partially follow, with specific limits, 30.7% of the parents reported controlling the browsing history of the computers, and a lower percentage of parents (8.9%) stated that their children are free to use the Internet without supervision, while only 2.5% of the parents say they do not follow, but use filters to control the accessed content.

Regarding the term ‘online grooming’, 48% of the participants stated that they had never heard of such phenomenon, unlike the other respondents, for whom it was not totally unknown, although some might not be sure what it was (10.5%), others admitted having a vague idea (26.3%) or know what grooming is and even try to know more about the theme (15.2%).

After mention that grooming is an online process practiced by adults for children or young people, parents were asked about the severity they would attribute to it. A significant percentage of parents (97.0%) consider this to be a very serious type of crime, while 2% rate it as serious. Only 1% of respondents disregarded the phenomenon as “nothing” or “not serious”.

Near the end of the survey, the following information about online grooming was presented («Harassment or online grooming is operated by an adult with an implicit sexual purpose [e.g., conversations, photographs] or explicit [e.g., meeting]»), so to that everyone had the same general knowledge about the phenomenon. Participants were then questioned whether they had heard of this process and 42.7% of parents said they had heard of it and taken precautions. Despite having heard of this type of crime, approximately 29.0% of respondents did not seek to know more about the topic. About 1.4% recognized having knowledge of this reality because they had already experienced an identical situation in the family. As for the remaining participants (26.8%), they had never heard of online grooming until participating in this study.

When asked if they had ever talked to their children about exposure to intimacy and the possible risks of exposure online, most respondents (40.5%) stated that they had already had this conversation, and even explained what was appropriate according to the age of the children under 18. Still, 37.3% of parents said

they felt the need to reinforce this information. A smaller percentage (17.7%) of participants pointed out that their children were too young to be alerted to these aspects and a small percentage of parents (4.5%) think that they should learn this type of information from teachers.

About 89.1% of the participants stated that the reporting of a crime committed over the Internet should be done with a criminal police body. However, 4.1% of the parents said they did not know which entity to contact, 6.4% said they would look on the Internet to report this crime and 0.4% suggested the complaint on the website itself.

About 52.0% of the participants agree that the involvement of parents, alerting and talking to their children about topics such as grooming, works as a way of preventing this type of crime. Approximately 40% of the sample has already taken precautions regarding the phenomenon. A low percentage of parents feel that there are no risks for their children (1.4%) and therefore do not agree that parental involvement is necessary for effective prevention. Only 5.7% of the participants had never thought that involvement with their children could work as a way of preventing online grooming.

## Discussion

The risks caused by the use of ICT are a well-reported reality (Ponte, & Batista, 2019), with children and adolescents being a privileged target. The low awareness of risk by young people (Wood, & Wheatcroft, 2020), associated with limited parental supervision, reinforced by self-perceived low digital literacy by parents, when compared to their children, constitutes a vulnerability factor. In this study, despite the fact that most of the participants had the licentiate academic degree, 51.8% of the sample revealed to have less Internet use skills, when compared to their children, a condition in line with what is found in other studies (e.g., Duarte et al., 2013). This result highlights the need for families to assess factors that may expose children, young people and their families to some of the risks of ICT use, including the online grooming of minors. It is necessary for parents to become proactive in discovering Internet browsing features, as they may be more sensitive to possible online risks (Davidson et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2012). With this sample having a medium-high skill level, it will be expected that, due to the need for professional training and experience, the participants may be opened to improvement at the ICT level. The participation in this study also intended, although indirectly, to awaken a more proactive stance in this sense, which also entices children to turn to parents when necessary (Ponte, & Batista, 2019). In addition, all the information collected by this study and intended to respond to the specifically defined objectives, may also

serve the purpose of materializing an instrument for risk assessment and management in what relates online grooming.

The total absence of activities with children related to the use of the Internet does not constitute the typical behaviour observed in this sample. Several attitudes revealing awareness towards Internet access were taken by the participants, namely the creation of rules and limits regarding the use of the Internet, as well as the conversation about risky situations made publicly disclosed. Both behaviours are particularly important in the prevention of online grooming criminal phenomena, which can be all the more effective as supervision and control are combined with monitoring and debating risk situations. As mentioned by Duarte et al. (2013), activities related to the Internet, such as discussing about risks and opportunities, should be developed within the family, allowing parents to play a mediating role in order to generate a positive impact when it comes to safe navigation.

The results showed that there is communication between parents and children with respect to social networks, with a very low percentage of respondents whose children never made any comment about Internet browsing. The vast majority of children usually talk to parents about events related to social networks, either when they are questioned or on their own initiative. It is possible to realize that children and young people report events related to the use of the Internet to parents, making their monitoring more effective. The relational proximity between parents and children is perhaps one of the most important protective factors here, capable of enabling, among others, conversation about aspects of children's daily lives, whether in the online or offline world (Ainsaar, & Lööf, 2012).

The surveyed parents reported being attentive to behaviours that could indicate a need for children to hide something they might be doing when they were at the computer. The majority of the sample revealed that they had not observed this behaviour, expressing their vigilance. The need to conceal behaviours may indicate some type of risk (e.g., access to a website that is prohibited by parents, conversation with someone who is not authorized), so parental vigilance is crucial for any need to ensure the protection of children (Moraes, & Aguado, 2014).

The literature shows that a large number of children have friends that they only know from the virtual world, and most of the participants in this sample mentioned that they never talk to their children about "virtual friendships", a delicate topic that should always be accompanied by adults (Desiderá, & von Zuben, 2014). It was found from the study that what predominates is the feeling of security regarding the use of the Internet by the children, and when parents fear something, they adopt protection strategies. Parents should seek the necessary information to protect their children

so that they can use the Internet with greater security and quality, as highlighted by Ponte and Simões (2012) in their study.

Almost 60% of the participants periodically monitor their children's activities on the Internet and yet, they place specific limits on their use. The control of navigation history is also referred to as an adopted strategy, which reveals that there is supervision. In general, this gives security and support to children and young people. As growing up, that need decreases (Ponte, & Simões, 2012). According to Simões et al. (2014) parenting practices relating Internet use have been increasing in Portugal since 2010. A significant number of conversations about the activities that children develop on the Internet, involving physical monitoring and control (e.g., sitting next to their children), have been reported, even in the case of teenagers.

Most of the participants stated that their main fear was of their children "Meeting people on the Internet and wanting to meet them in the real world without being accompanied by an adult", a result corroborated in other studies, such as the one by Ponte and Batista (2019). Studies show that the transfer of online to offline contact has one of the lowest rates recorded across all Europe and when happening, it does not necessarily tend to be the phenomenon of online grooming (Simões et al., 2014). Although Portugal has low values when it comes to "virtual friends" meetings, every day the rest of Europe registers another case of a young person/child who disappeared from home to meet someone they met online (Simões et al., 2014).

Addressing online grooming, this study allowed to conclude that just over a quarter of the sample did not know about this phenomenon, perhaps due to the reduced sharing of information on the topic, a situation that should be addressed in order to guarantee the safety of young people when using the Internet (Branca et al., 2016). Thus, within the scope of this study, once obtained the information about online grooming, the way it is processed and the perception of the severity of the phenomenon, the participants were stimulated to search for additional information. Initiated through informal control networks, such as family and friends, prevention is absolutely essential. These support networks may sensitize children and young people to particular care in sharing information, defining profiles, exposing personal data (name, address, phone, photos) and other aspects that place young people at risk of victimization (Marques, 2012; Nejm, 2012).

In view of the possibility of confronting a situation of risk, 89.0% of the participants would contact criminal police bodies. However, some parents revealed that they do not know how to proceed or assume to use an ineffective strategy to control the situation, such as denouncing on the website itself. Since many children and young people are Internet users, it is highly convenient

for parents to know how to report a crime in the virtual world (Ponte, & Simões, 2012). Even so, Duarte et al. (2013) states that many parents and guardians do not know how to report these crimes. Children, depending on their age, personality characteristics and interpersonal relationships, also do not know how to react if they are approached, hence the likely resource to parents to file a complaint (Moraes, & Aguado, 2014).

Not all situations of online victimization are of equal severity, but in cases of online grooming, when all conditions are met, i.e., the reason, the opportunity and the lack of parental control, the probability of the crime occurring is greater. Thus, the last question was focused in prevention, with the results pointing out that the participants consider this one of the strategies to better combat the phenomenon. Some of the prevention strategies could involve parental involvement, open communication with children, monitoring their online behaviour or even alerting their children to possible risks. It is essential for the prevention and protection of children that parents are informed and attentive, as highlighted by Montano and Simões (2012). Training actions to combat cyber-crime should also be promoted, aimed at professionals and the general community.

### Conclusions

Empirical studies assessing characteristics associated with the risk of online grooming of children and adolescents are emerging worldwide, but they are scarce in Portugal and Brazil. The lack of any instrument or technique for assessing the risks associated with ICT involving children, adolescents and their caregivers, either by self-report or hetero-report, reinforces our understanding about the importance of studies aimed at risk assessment of online grooming. ICT, the Internet and social networks are part of the daily lives of children and young people, offering them opportunities and benefits from modern societies, but also exposing them to risks that should be considered and analysed to prevent certain situations, particularly in online context.

A structured assessment, e.g., involving scales, checklists, inventories or questionnaires, although not entirely without individualized clinical judgment, can assist in the assessment of the main risk factors involved in online grooming. The materialization of instruments and techniques may not only support the development of empirical studies with children or adolescents and their families, but may in itself contribute to improving the self-perceived knowledge about this phenomenon and the adoption of individual strategies for minimizing the risks involved in ICT use. Thus, it is essential that the research is oriented towards the development of assessment measures that can favour a self-oriented intervention. In this case, particularly when involving younger populations, education and training of parents

and professionals who work with children and youth are considered to be essential for the detection of risk factors, as well as for the mobilization of protective factors that enhance the prevention of phenomena such as on-line grooming.

Some of the items to be considered in the composition of the instruments may allow the assessment of factors such as age, time of ICT use, frequency of use, place of use and mediation of parents associated with the use of the Internet, elements that must be considered as favouring a safe and positive Internet use. If monitoring and learning appropriate behaviours start early, alongside with ICT use, the use of Internet and social networks, also starting at early age, then the risks of attracting minors online, are likely to be minimized. When reinforced by the monitoring of parents, children and young people can more safely enjoy the opportunities that the ICT use and Internet offer, and this process is all the more effective if those who monitor, teach or control, are able to do it with adjusted thought, knowledge and practice, contributing to promote a positive Internet browsing.

There is knowledge on the part of parents and children through the Internet online grooming. In some cases, this knowledge may not result from more theoretical training or research on the subject, but comes from everyday experience and personal sensitivity. The concept could not be known, the process lacked more information, but the knowledge of the existence of this risk, existed. The information, including the one given by this study, also made it possible to raise awareness, inform and mobilize the participants for the identification and preventive action on certain phenomena of distinct risk.

“Virtual friends” exist. Although parents talk about the subject and sometimes ask about them, the most prevalent in the study was the non-reference to these friendships by their children. Communicating is crucial and helps to prevent, along with the attention that can be paid to interactions on social networks, the profiles of children and young people on the Internet, the amount of time children use to browse and the behaviours they have when they are online. All this must be considered with sensitivity and common sense, so that the control and supervision of the children cannot be transformed in an invasion of their privacy.

The present study had a good adherence in terms of participants, but it cannot be said that it covers the majority of the population under 18. It is an exploratory study, centred on the perception of parents or equivalent parental figure, not including a differential analysis based on variables such as age of children, contexts of contact with the Internet, social interactions of young people or other variables that future projects may consider when carrying out empirical studies on the topic. The participation was supported by relevant entities for the prevention of child and

youth victimization situations, through the Internet and the general objective of alerting the participants to the risks of using the Internet by children under 18 and the emergence of criminal phenomena has been fully accomplished.

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### Author contributions

We declare that all authors participated in the preparation of the manuscript. Specifically, the authors Ana Isabel Sani and Ana Paula Vieira participated in the initial writing of the study - conceptualization, investigation, visualization, the authors Ana Isabel Sani and Ana Paula Vieira participated in the data analysis, and the authors Ana Isabel Sani and Maria Alzira Pimenta Dinis participated in the final writing of the work - revision and editing.

### Availability of data and materials

All data and syntax generated and analysed during this research will be treated with complete confidentiality due to the requirements of the Ethics Committee for Research in Human Beings. However, the dataset and syntax that support the conclusions of this article are available upon reasonable request to the main author of the study.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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