

Intelligence Notification

The Hague, January 2025

Ref. No.: 06/2025

Europol Operations Directorate
Operational and Analysis Centre

The rise of online cult communities dedicated to extremely violent child abuse

What is happening?

The phenomenon of violent online exploitation, specifically pressuring young people to join cult communities, has grown significantly in recent years. The emergence of a variety of groups leveraging digital platforms which normalise acts of extreme cruelty, extort victims and radicalise individuals into performing acts of violent extremism, poses a serious threat to public safety.

These online groups are interconnected, forming a network that recruits offenders and victims on a global scale. The content shared by individuals belonging to these groups is extremely violent, ranging from gore¹ and animal cruelty, to child sexual exploitation material (CSAM) and depictions of murder. The dissemination of extreme content serves as a vessel to desensitise vulnerable people, with the purpose of breaking societal norms and normalising violence to corrupt minors and groom them towards future violence. These criminal or violent extremist groups compete against each other to share the most violent content. They operate similarly to certain cults in which charismatic leaders use deception and manipulation to render their followers obedient and dependent on the cult.

Their main targets are minors and vulnerable youth, who are identified and groomed on mainstream online platforms, and manipulated through psychological coercion. Through this coercion, the perpetrators enforce compliance and maintain control over the victims. Online extortion group members employ a range of tactics to perpetrate their criminal activities.

How do these networks operate?

The network of perpetrators actively seeks vulnerable individuals on widely accessible platforms where young people frequently interact. Gaming platforms, streaming services and even popular social media are leveraged to identify and recruit potential victims and induce them into more private communication spaces.

¹ Gore refers to graphic and explicit depictions of extreme violence, bloodshed and bodily harm.

On social media, perpetrators analyse social media behaviour and deliberately target minors who already show some indication of vulnerability, and as they would be easier targets to groom and manipulate. The most preferred targets are particularly vulnerable minors between 8 and 17 years old - especially LGBTQ+, racial minorities and those struggling with mental health issues, such as depression and suicidal ideation. Online communities for self-help or support dedicated to individuals impacted by those issues have also been identified as fertile ground for the identification of new victims. In some cases, perpetrators infiltrate these online mental health support communities to identify and recruit vulnerable young people.

Online contact with the victims typically starts with innocent interactions before escalating to predatory behaviour. Grooming activities are often characterised by the use of the love bombing technique, which entails treating the victim with extreme care, kindness and understanding to gain their full trust. In this phase, offenders also collect personal information of their victims (identity, phone number, home address, relatives' names, etc.). This information is either shared by the individual or collected via open sources. Once the perpetrators have acquired this information, they leverage it in the exploitation phase of the grooming process.

Once trust is gained, communication moves to more private online spaces, like end-to-end encrypted communication platforms, where the exploitation then takes place. Here, victims are coerced into sharing explicit content or performing harmful acts, usually under the threat of blackmail. Typical extortion tactics include threatening to share the victim's explicit content with their family, friends, or online communities unless they comply with further demands.

These extortion demands are acts that contribute to shaming and isolating victims, with the aim to prolong the cycle of exploitation overtime. These demands include the production of sexually explicit imagery, the commission of acts of violence against other individuals and animals, self-harm, and even suicide attempts and suicide. Common self-harm acts demanded are cuts, burns and the carving of names or symbols on the victims' skin with blades, as a sign of loyalty to the offender and the group.

In some groups affiliated to this network, violence enticement leads to demands impacting victims who are not directly related to the group. EU law enforcement authorities have identified several cases where members caused serious injuries and perpetrated murders, targeting family members as well as passers-by. Such extremely violent acts are often linked to communities with violent right-wing extremist ideological connections. Their leaders advocate for the collapse of modern society through acts of terror, chaos, and violence, spreading ideologies that inspire mass shootings, bombings and other acts of terrorism.

Detection

The detection of such criminal activities is paramount, not only to deter violence and harm against the targets - at-risk young people - but also to avert the risk of victims being manipulated into becoming offenders and damaging more individuals.

Identification of at-risk youth

Recognising at an early stage that a young person may be influenced by such violent online groups is essential to ensuring timely intervention by care takers and law enforcement. This early intervention is key to safeguarding victims and tackling the networks behind these online communities.

A series of indicators can help identify early signs of affiliation:

Behavioural indicators

- Secrecy about online activities - hiding screens when approached, using multiple or anonymous accounts.
- Withdrawal and isolation - spending excessive time alone, distancing from family and friends.
- Emotional distress - sudden mood swings, signs of anxiety or depression.
- Interest in harmful content - fascination with extremist ideologies, symbols, dark themes and/or violent or graphic material.
- Changes in language or symbols used - using slang, codes, or symbols associated with the group.
- Concealing physical signs of harm - wearing long sleeves or trousers in unusual circumstances to hide signs of self-harm, injuries or coercion-related markings.

Online behavioural indicators

- Unusual activity on platforms - excessive use of specific apps known to be associated with the group.
- Interacting with unknown contacts - engaging in conversations with strangers who encourage secrecy.
- Encrypted communications - using messaging apps that provide anonymity without a clear reason.
- Exposure to disturbing content - accessing or sharing violent or graphic material.

Parents, caregivers and educators must be properly informed, and encouraged to be vigilant, look out for the signs, and inform law enforcement authorities if they believe someone they know could be a victim of this abuse.



Your feedback matters.

By clicking on the following link or scanning the embedded QR code you can fill in a short user survey on the received strategic report. Your input will help us further improve our products.

https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/eus_strategic_reports