Online Grooming: an analysis of the phenomenon

C.E. GANDOLFI, M. MOSILLO, G. DEL CASTILLO, G. FORNI, A. PIETRONIGRO, N. TIWANA, A. PELLAI
Dipartimento di Scienze Biomediche per la Salute, Università degli Studi di Milano

Introduction
Since its diffusion in the 1990s, the Internet has developed into a fully integrated component of the lives of teenagers across the globe. The continual growth in internet users, particularly among minors, reflects the increasingly mobile nature of the online environment which has revolutionized the ease with which one can go online. As the use of Internet and portable technologies by underage youth has evolved and increased over the past decades, concerns about how technology may contribute to minors becoming victims of online sex crimes, including online grooming, have also heightened. The purpose of the present literature review is to contribute to the existing knowledge base regarding the epidemiology of the online grooming process, exploring key themes and issues arising in this area.

Materials and methods
We conducted a review of the current literature by an initial database research of papers published since 1990. Three independent reviewers selected relevant articles, initially based on title and abstract analysis, then by full text in order to make a final determination. After the final selection, a total of 38 articles were reviewed.

Results
The articles reviewed report highly heterogeneous results with regards to epidemiological data, estimating a prevalence of the online grooming phenomenon between 9% and 19%. Factors influencing adolescents’ risk of being solicited, victimized or abused online included increasing age, gender, sexual minority orientation, diagnosis of mental disease, conflictual relationships with parents and risk-taking behaviors (eg. chat room and social networking site use).

Conclusions
Although the true prevalence of online grooming is not available, and data specifically regarding our country are scarce, this phenomenon, together with other forms of sexual victimization, is a significant issue among teens, particularly due to the diffusion of internet among families at global level. Thus, it is important to educate youth on responsible internet use, raising awareness on the manipulative techniques used by online predators. Seeing as the prevalence of online grooming and other forms of sexual victimization are worrisome also among the youngest minors, the above-mentioned prevention efforts should start at the earliest age and continue during adolescence.