An Analysis of the Copycat Effect in Group Sexual Assaults Perpetrated by Children Under the Age of 14 in Spain

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ABSTRACT:

In Spain, growing institutional and public concern has emerged regarding the increase in group sexual assaults committed by children under the age of 14. By its very nature, this phenomenon challenges not only the criminal justice system but also the educational, cultural, and technological frameworks that shape contemporary socialisation. Far from constituting isolated incidents, these behaviours appear to be embedded in broader dynamics involving the construction of masculinity, early exposure to sexualised content, and the weakening of traditional mechanisms of informal social control. From an analytical perspective, this phenomenon requires moving beyond exclusively quantitative or legal-criminal approaches and adopting a multidimensional interpretation that accounts for structural and contextual factors (Payá & Delgado, 2021). Recent literature has highlighted the ambivalent role of the media and digital platforms in shaping collective perceptions, particularly through the symbolic normalisation of sexual violence and the amplification of certain cases, which may contribute to imitation or "behavioural contagion" (Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015; Madigan et al., 2018). This is compounded by virtually unrestricted access to online pornography, early exposure to which has been associated with distorted sexual expectations, objectification, and desensitisation to violence (Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016). The Spanish legal framework, which places children under the age of 14 below the minimum age of criminal responsibility, introduces an additional variable concerning perceptions of risk and

consequences and may—at least in certain contexts—influence their decision-making (Bottoms, 2019). However, reducing the phenomenon to a logic of "perceived impunity" would be overly simplistic. Deficiencies in relationships and sexuality education, limitations in the development of socio-emotional skills, and group dynamics characteristic of early adolescence—when peer pressure and the search for recognition acquire particular weight—must also be considered (Bandura, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). This article therefore provides a comprehensive analysis integrating legal, psychosocial, and cultural dimensions in order to identify risk factors and the mechanisms through which these behaviours are reproduced (Liz, 2018; Payá & Delgado, 2021). Beyond describing the problem, it seeks to contribute to the development of evidence-based intervention strategies focused on primary prevention, media literacy, and the strengthening of emotional and relational skills from an early age. Ultimately, every statistical observation reflects specific life trajectories, both those of victims and those of the children who perpetrate these acts, whose behaviour must be interpreted within complex socialisation processes (Rodríguez et al., 2023). From this perspective, the societal response cannot be confined to punitive measures; it must incorporate coherent public policies that address the roots of the problem and promote safer, more equitable, and more empathetic developmental environments (Lancharro, 2024). (Rodríguez et al., 2023).

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In recent years, Spain has recorded a sustained increase in group sexual assaults committed by children, particularly cases involving perpetrators under the age of 14. This phenomenon is especially challenging from legal and criminological perspectives because Organic Law 5/2000 on the Criminal Responsibility of Minors places these children below the minimum age of criminal responsibility. This limits the conventional criminal justice response and requires prevention and intervention strategies grounded in alternative approaches.

The increase in these episodes has prompted intense public and media debate regarding the possible existence of a "copycat effect," understood as the reproduction of offending behaviours resulting from their visibility and amplification in the public sphere. This concept, extensively developed in contemporary criminological literature, is supported by social learning theories that emphasise the ability of individuals—especially in early developmental stages—to internalise and replicate behavioural models observed in their environment, including those disseminated through media and digital platforms (Bandura, 2001; Villacampa & Gómez, 2020).

Beyond the quantitative dimension, the analysis of this phenomenon requires a comprehensive approach that incorporates social, psychological, and cultural variables. In this regard, various studies have highlighted the role of the media in the construction of narratives that, at times, can contribute to the trivialisation or sensationalisation of sexual violence. Intensive coverage and, in certain cases, sensationalist reporting, along with the rapid viral dissemination of content on social media, can act as a risk factor by facilitating processes of identification and imitation among minors who have not yet fully developed their socio-emotional skills (Gómez-Lugo et al., 2021; Jewkes et al., 2015).

To this dynamic is added the early and unsupervised exposure to pornographic and violent content in digital environments, a phenomenon that recent literature links to the distortion of expectations concerning sexuality and relationships, the normalisation of coercive practices, and the reduction of empathy towards victims (Wright et al., 2016; Madigan et al., 2018). In parallel, deficiencies in

relationships and sexuality education and in the development of skills for emotional regulation and conflict resolution reinforce the vulnerability of minors to adopting aggressive behaviours as a form of interaction or validation within the peer group (Moreno-Manso et al., 2019).

From a legal perspective, the fact that children under the age of 14 fall below the minimum age of criminal responsibility creates a complex situation. Although this provision protects children's development and prevents early stigmatisation, it may also affect their subjective perception of the consequences of their behaviour, particularly where informal social-control mechanisms—family, school, and community—display structural weaknesses (Bottoms, 2019). Nevertheless, attributing the phenomenon exclusively to an alleged "sense of impunity" would be methodologically reductive; it is more appropriately understood as the result of multiple, cumulative risk factors (Payá & Delgado, 2021).

Within this framework, the present work aims to critically analyse the observed trends, as well as the explanatory factors underlying this type of behaviour, integrating perspectives from criminology, developmental psychology, and communication studies. Likewise, it intends to contribute to the identification of intervention lines based on empirical evidence, oriented towards primary and secondary prevention.

Ultimately, addressing this phenomenon requires overcoming reductionist approaches and adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that takes into account early education in values, media literacy, regulation of access to digital content, and the strengthening of family and community environments. Only through a coordinated and structural response will it be possible to mitigate the reproduction of these behaviours and promote healthy psychosocial development in younger generations.

Theoretical framework

In criminological terms, the so-called "copycat effect" may be defined as a process of behavioural diffusion in which extensive exposure to certain offences—particularly through the media and digital environments—encourages imitation among especially susceptible populations, including children. Social learning theory provides a framework for interpreting this phenomenon: individuals acquire behavioural patterns by observing significant models and internalising both their actions and their perceived consequences (Bandura, 2001). In group sexual assaults, the copycat effect does not operate in isolation; rather, it is amplified by structural and contextual factors that facilitate and reinforce such behaviour.

First of all, the normalisation of sexual violence constitutes a central element in the understanding of the phenomenon. Contemporary literature has highlighted how repeated exposure to audiovisual, musical, and digital content with high levels of sexualisation and violence contributes to the construction of cognitive frameworks that trivialise or even legitimise these practices. This process of progressive desensitisation can reduce the perception of the severity of the harm caused and promote the objectification of victims, especially in early stages of psychosocial development (Wright et al., 2016; Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012). In group contexts, moreover, these representations can be integrated into dynamics of identity affirmation, where aggression is perceived as a mechanism of cohesion or a demonstration of status within the peer group (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Second, perceived impunity emerges as a relevant, albeit complex, explanatory factor. Under Spanish law, Organic Law 5/2000 on the Criminal Responsibility of Minors places children under the age of 14 below the minimum age of criminal responsibility and prioritises protective and educational measures over punitive intervention. From a criminological perspective, however, a subjective perception that conduct has no consequences may influence the limited cost-benefit assessments made by children before acting. This factor is connected to rational-choice and social-control theories, which emphasise the role of formal and informal sanctions in inhibiting offending behaviour (Bottoms, 2019). Nevertheless, perceived impunity does not operate independently; it interacts with inadequate family supervision, institutional weaknesses, and shortcomings in the internalisation of social norms.

Finally, the impact of social media and digital environments constitutes a key vector in the amplification of the phenomenon. Digital platforms not only facilitate the massive and immediate dissemination of cases of sexual violence, but also create spaces for interaction where dynamics of social validation, peer pressure, and the search for recognition are reinforced. In this sense, the theory of 'behavioural contagion' and studies on victimisation and online behaviour have evidenced that repeated exposure to certain content can increase the likelihood of replication, especially in adolescents with lower

development of critical and emotional skills (Madigan et al., 2018; Gómez-Lugo et al., 2021). Likewise, the algorithmic logic of these platforms tends to amplify content with high emotional impact, which can contribute to a distorted perception of the frequency and acceptability of these behaviours.

Taken together, these three factors—normalisation, perceived impunity, and digital influence—interact within a social ecosystem characterised by information overload, weakened mechanisms of primary socialisation, and insufficient provision of relationships and sexuality education (Payá & Delgado, 2021). The copycat effect should therefore not be treated as a direct causal relationship, but as a complex feedback process involving individual, group, and structural variables.

Consequently, the theoretical approach to this phenomenon requires integrating contributions from criminology, developmental psychology, and communication studies, in order to construct more robust explanatory models that allow guiding preventive interventions based on empirical evidence.

Methodology

This study is based on a systematic quantitative review of the literature designed to identify, analyse, and synthesise the available empirical evidence concerning the copycat effect in group sexual assaults committed by children. To ensure transparency, traceability, and reproducibility, the review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), which are widely recognised in contemporary scientific research.

The methodological process was structured in several phases. First, a systematic and exhaustive search was carried out in high-impact academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, supplemented by searches of relevant institutional sources such as the Ministry of the Interior and the Spanish Spanish Childhood Observatory. This mixed strategy allowed for the integration of both peer-reviewed scientific literature and official reports, providing a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon analysed.

The search strategy was designed by combining keywords and Boolean operators ("AND", "OR"), with the aim of maximising the sensitivity and specificity of the results. Among the terms used were: "group sexual assaults", "minors and criminal responsibility", "copycat effect" and "social media and youth violence", along with their English equivalents. The time frame was set to the period between 2018 and 2023, in order to capture the most recent evidence in a field characterised by rapid social and technological evolution. Additionally, filters were applied to restrict eligibility to publications in Spanish and English and to peer-reviewed studies.

In a later phase, the selection of studies was carried out through the application of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria considered were: (i) studies focused on children and adolescents, (ii) research with empirical data or systematic analyses, and (iii) studies referring specifically to the context of Spain or with comparable implications. Conversely, documents that were duplicates, without access to the full text, or whose subject matter was not directly related to the research question were excluded.

Of the 152 records initially identified, 28 studies were ultimately selected for in-depth analysis in accordance with the PRISMA study-selection flow. This screening process ensured the methodological quality and thematic relevance of the final corpus.

Next, a phase of data extraction and systematisation was carried out, in which a purpose-built database was constructed to organise the relevant information from each study. The variables analysed included: (i) prevalence and temporal evolution of group sexual assaults, (ii) associated factors —such as the influence of social media, the perception of impunity, or the normalisation of violence—, and (iii) intervention and prevention proposals formulated by the authors.

The approach adopted not only provides a structured synthesis of the state of knowledge, but also identifies recurring patterns, gaps in the literature, and emerging lines of research. In this sense, the use of a systematic and quantifiable methodology strengthens the internal validity of the study and facilitates its replicability, essential aspects in the context of scientific research in criminology and social sciences (Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

Results

The systematic review identified consistent patterns in the recent literature regarding group sexual assaults committed by minors, as well as a deeper understanding of the so-called 'copycat effect' as a

mechanism for the reproduction of these behaviours. The findings are articulated in three interrelated analytical dimensions: the configuration of group sexual assaults, the profile and characteristics of the minors involved, and the specific dynamics of the copycat effect in this context.

A. Characteristics of group sexual assaults

The studies analysed agree in pointing out a sustained increase in sexual assaults committed in groups by minors, particularly in the context of Spain. This phenomenon cannot be understood solely as the sum of individual behaviours, but as the result of collective dynamics in which sexual violence is embedded within processes of group interaction and identity construction among peers. In this sense, the literature indicates that the involvement of multiple perpetrators not only increases the severity of the act, but also acts as a mechanism of social validation, reinforcing the perception of legitimacy within the group (González & López, 2021; Villacampa & Gómez, 2020).

A recurring element in the reviewed studies is group disinhibition, a phenomenon widely documented in social psychology, according to which the presence of others reduces the perception of individual responsibility and promotes the adoption of behaviours that, in individual contexts, would be less likely. This effect is frequently amplified by situational variables such as the consumption of alcohol and other substances, as well as by nightlife or festive environments, which facilitate the loss of inhibitory control and the dilution of social norms (Pérez et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2022).

Additionally, a technological dimension of the phenomenon emerges strongly: the recording and dissemination of assaults. The literature shows a growing tendency to record these acts and share them on social media, transforming the assault into a symbolic resource of exhibition. This practice not only worsens the harm to the victims but also introduces a performative logic in offending behaviour, where social recognition and digital visibility become additional incentives (Rodríguez & Sánchez, 2019).

B. Profiles and characteristics of the children involved

The analysis of the profile of the minors involved reveals a remarkable heterogeneity, although with recurring patterns that allow for establishing certain regularities. Male perpetrators predominate, which aligns with the literature on sexual violence and the construction of masculinities, but the coexistence of two differentiated profiles is particularly relevant: on one hand, minors with a history of antisocial or violent behaviours; on the other, young people without a significant prior history, whose involvement seems to be mainly mediated by peer pressure and situational dynamics (Fernández & González, 2022).

From a psychological point of view, one of the most consistent findings is the presence of desensitisation processes toward violence, associated with repeated exposure to violent and sexualised content in media and digital environments. This desensitisation results in a lower capacity for empathy towards victims and a distorted perception of the severity of the acts, facilitating the adoption of aggressive behaviours as a form of social interaction (Villacampa & Gómez, 2020).

Likewise, the literature highlights deficits in socio-emotional competencies, particularly in relation to emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution. The weakness of bonds with authority figures—whether family or institutional—and the absence of effective prosocial models contribute to these children resorting to violence as a coping strategy in situations of pressure or conflict (González & López, 2021). This set of factors reinforces the idea that aggressions are not merely individual acts, but manifestations of adverse socialisation trajectories.

C. Dynamics of the copycat effect in group sexual assaults

The analysis of the literature confirms the relevance of the "copycat effect" —or social contagion— as an explanatory mechanism for the spread of these behaviours. This phenomenon is articulated through the interaction between media visibility, social validation, and perception of consequences. Intensive coverage of cases of sexual assault, especially when it adopts a sensationalist tone, contributes to increasing the notoriety of these acts, generating a frame of reference that can be internalised by other minors as a behavioural model (Pérez et al., 2022; Fernández & González, 2022).

In the digital environment, this effect is intensified due to the viral dissemination logic inherent to platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, where content with high emotional impact tends to be amplified quickly. The

dissemination of images or videos of assaults not only acts as a mechanism of revictimisation but also feeds a cycle of behavioural reproduction, in which violence becomes a means of obtaining recognition within the virtual community (Morales & Ruiz, 2021).

On the other hand, the reviewed literature suggests that the copycat effect is reinforced by the perception of impunity, especially in relation to children under the age of 14 being below the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Spain. Although this factor does not act in isolation, it does seem to contribute to reducing the perception of risk associated with the behaviour, favouring its repetition in certain contexts (Rodríguez & Sánchez, 2019). In this sense, the copycat effect should be understood as a feedback process in which media visibility, group dynamics, and normative structure interact in a complex way.

The results highlight that group sexual assaults among minors do not respond to a single cause, but to the convergence of multiple individual, social, and technological factors. This complexity requires analytical and intervention approaches that go beyond linear explanations and allow addressing the phenomenon from a systemic perspective.

The expanded table below presents the 28 studies selected for the final analysis, organised by title, author(s), year of publication, principal findings, and publication outlet.

Name	Author(s)	Date	Main results	Publication
Increase in sexual assaults on minors	Ministry of the Interior	2023	23% increase in group sexual assaults between 2018 and 2023. 65% of the cases occurred in school or public settings.	Official report, Spain
Sexual violence in adolescents and social media	Childhood Observatory	2023	70% of young offenders are exposed to explicit sexual content and have little adult supervision.	Institutional report, Spain
Group dynamics and sexual assaults	Villacampa & Gómez	2020	Social media play a key role in the planning of 80% of the analysed events.	Spanish Journal of Criminology
Culture of violence and affective education	Martínez & López	2021	The lack of relationships and sexuality education is a recurring factor in young offenders.	Educational Psychology
Social media and peer pressure	Gómez-Lugo et al.	2021	The perception of impunity and the normalisation of sexual violence directly influence imitative behaviours.	Journal of Social Psychology
Digital content and sexual behaviours	Hernández et al.	2020	Increase in the consumption of violent and sexualized content on digital platforms by children aged 10 to 14.	International Journal of Communication
Influence of music and cinema on sexualization	Rodríguez & Sánchez	2019	Music and cinema reinforce sexual stereotypes and downplay the seriousness of sexual assault.	Cultural Psychology
Youth justice in Spain	López-Fernández	2019	The exemption from criminal responsibility of children under 14 reinforces the perception of impunity in group sexual offences.	Comparative Criminal Law
Risk factors in youth violence	García-Muñoz	2020	Factors such as exposure to violence at home and the socioeconomic environment influence the violent behaviour of minors.	Youth Sociology
Viralization of offending behaviours	Pérez et al.	2022	90% of the cases of group assaults analysed went viral on social media.	Digital Criminology Magazine

Role of technologies in relationships and sexuality education	Morales & Ruiz	2021	Technologies are replacing traditional sex education, which fosters distorted ideas about consent.	Educational Psychology
Impact of the press on offences committed by children	Fernández & González	2022	Sensationalist media coverage contributes to the copycat effect in group sexual assaults.	Journalism and Society
Toxic masculinity in adolescents	Navarro et al.	2021	Stereotypes of aggressive masculinity foster domination behaviours in sexual assaults.	Gender Psychology
The role of parents in offending prevention	Sánchez-Ruiz	2022	The lack of parental supervision is correlated with the increase of sexual offences among minors.	Social Work Magazine
Psychosocial factors in sexual crimes	Gómez et al.	2020	Factors such as low self-esteem and peer influence are predominant in young offenders.	Clinical and Social Psychology
Gender stereotypes in basic education	Morales & Pérez	2019	The persistence of traditional gender roles hinders the prevention of violent behaviours in adolescents.	Education and Society
Inequality and juvenile delinquency	López-Martínez	2020	Socioeconomic inequalities increase the risk of violent and offending behaviour in minors.	Journal of Social Sciences
Prevention of sexual violence in Europe	García et al.	2021	Prevention programmes in other European countries have shown effectiveness in reducing group sexual assaults.	European Youth Prevention Report
Public perception of juvenile crime	Fernández & López	2020	Society perceives that juvenile delinquency is on the rise, which creates pressure for legislative changes.	Public Opinion and Criminology
Influence of the school environment	Rodríguez & Martínez	2021	School environments without prevention programmes are a breeding ground for group sexual assaults.	Education Magazine
Adolescence and social pressure	Sánchez & Morales	2022	Social pressure is a determining factor in the delinquent behaviour of groups of adolescents.	Adolescent Psychology
Social dynamics in offences committed by children	Pérez et al.	2020	The imitation of offending behaviours increases with exposure to media-covered cases.	Comparative Youth Sociology
Relationships and sexuality education and public policies	Fernández & Gómez	2021	Insufficient public policies hinder the implementation of comprehensive relationships and sexuality education in Spain.	Journal of Social Policies
Social media and their impact on minors	Navarro et al.	2022	Social media encourage dynamics of group validation that can lead to violent behaviour.	Digital Social Psychology
Masculinity and youth violence	González & López	2021	Traditional gender roles perpetuate violence as an expression of power in youth groups.	Gender and Society
Evaluation of preventive measures in Spain	Morales et al.	2020	The current preventive measures in Spain are insufficient to address the root of the problem of juvenile sexual violence.	National Prevention Report

Restorative justice in offences committed by children	Ruiz & García	2021	Restorative justice can be an effective tool to address sexual assaults committed by minors.	Restorative and Juvenile Justice

The systematisation of the 28 selected studies allows progress from a descriptive reading to a structured interpretation of the phenomenon, identifying convergent patterns and plausible causal relationships between variables. Far from constituting isolated findings, the collected evidence shapes a coherent explanatory framework in which social, cultural, technological, and regulatory dimensions interact.

First of all, the data consistently points to a significant quantitative increase in group sexual assaults among minors, especially in the recent period. Institutional reports such as those from the Ministry of the Interior show an increase of 23% between 2018 and 2023, which not only confirms the relevance of the phenomenon but also suggests the existence of structural factors that are favouring its expansion. This growth is not distributed randomly, but rather is concentrated in specific environments — mainly schools and public spaces — where group dynamics gain greater prominence.

In this sense, one of the most robust findings is the centrality of group dynamics as a catalyst for violent behaviour. Various studies agree that sexual assault, in these contexts, functions as a mechanism of cohesion and validation among peers, reinforced by processes of social pressure and collective identity construction. The evidence suggests that, in many cases, the behaviour does not respond to prior planning, but to situational processes of disinhibition, in which factors such as alcohol consumption or group interaction reduce the perception of individual responsibility.

At the same time, the study matrix reveals the determining role of digital environments and social media as spaces for amplifying the phenomenon. The analysed literature shows that a high percentage of juvenile offenders have been exposed early to sexualised or violent content, with reduced levels of adult supervision, as highlighted by the Childhood Observatory. This consumption not only contributes to desensitisation to violence but also shapes distorted interpretive frameworks about consent and interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, the digital dimension introduces a distinguishing element: the performativity of violence. The recording and dissemination of assaults, documented in multiple studies, transforms the criminal act into a resource for social display, where obtaining recognition on digital platforms becomes an additional incentive. This finding connects directly with contemporary theories on the attention economy and the search for validation in virtual environments, reinforcing the hypothesis that violence can be instrumentalised as a mechanism of social capital among adolescents.

Another central axis identified is the progressive normalisation of sexual violence, linked both to media exposure and the persistence of gender stereotypes. The included studies show that audiovisual culture — including music, cinema, and digital content— contributes to reinforcing narratives that trivialise or minimise the severity of these behaviours. This process is reinforced by deficits in relationships and sexuality education, which limit minors' ability to adequately interpret concepts such as consent, respect, and reciprocity in relationships.

In relation to the profiles of the perpetrators, the results confirm significant heterogeneity, although with a predominance of males and a frequent presence of cumulative risk factors, such as exposure to violence in the family environment, unfavourable socioeconomic contexts, or deficits in socioemotional skills. However, the identification of cases in which minors without previous records participate in assaults is particularly relevant, which reinforces the hypothesis of the weight of peer pressure and situational factors compared to purely individualistic explanations.

Finally, the analysed evidence assigns a relevant role to the perception of impunity associated with the current legal framework in Spain. The fact that children under the age of 14 fall below the minimum age of criminal responsibility, although based on principles of child protection, can influence the subjective perception of risk, reducing the deterrent effect of formal sanctions. This element, combined with the media visibility of cases and social validation in digital environments, creates a context conducive to the reproduction of the phenomenon through the so-called copycat effect.

Overall, the results matrix allows us to conclude that group sexual assaults among minors do not respond

to a single explanatory variable, but to the convergence of multiple interdependent factors. The interaction between group dynamics, media exposure, digital environments, educational deficits and the regulatory framework generates a complex ecosystem that favours the emergence and consolidation of these behaviours. This finding reinforces the need to address the phenomenon from comprehensive and multidisciplinary approaches, aimed at both prevention and early intervention.

Discussion

The systematic review of 28 studies made it possible to identify key patterns in the increase in group sexual assaults committed by children under the age of 14 in Spain. This phenomenon, of a multifactorial nature, requires a detailed analysis from different perspectives. In this discussion, the main findings are expanded and deepened regarding group dynamics, psychosocial factors, the impact of social media, gender stereotypes, deficiencies in relationships and sexuality education, and the copycat effect.

A. Increase in the prevalence of group assaults

The available empirical evidence, especially that from the Ministry of the Interior and the Childhood Observatory, highlights a significant increase —around 23%— in group sexual assaults committed by minors since 2018. This increase should not only be interpreted in quantitative terms, but also as an indication of deeper transformations in the ways adolescents interact socially. The concentration of these episodes in school environments and public spaces suggests the existence of contexts where adult supervision is limited or insufficient, which facilitates the emergence of collective risk dynamics.

From a theoretical perspective, these results are supported by the postulates of deindividuation, which explain how acting in a group reduces individual self-awareness and dilutes the perception of personal responsibility. As Villacampa and Gómez (2020) point out, this loss of normative control favours the adoption of antisocial behaviours that, under individual conditions, would be less likely. In this sense, group sexual assault cannot be understood solely as the sum of individual decisions, but as an emerging practice in which the group acts as a facilitating and legitimizing agent of the behaviour.

Likewise, the need for belonging and recognition within the peer group becomes a determining factor during early adolescence. This process of identity seeking can lead minors to engage in violent behaviours as a mechanism of social integration, even in the absence of previous individual predispositions. Validation by the group operates, in these cases, as an immediate reinforcement that compensates for—or even eclipses—the perception of possible negative consequences.

The influence of cultural factors is added to this framework, particularly the normalisation of sexual violence in certain media products. As Rodríguez and Sánchez (2019) argue, repeated exposure to narratives that trivialise or aestheticise sexual coercion contributes to the construction of distorted cognitive frameworks, in which these behaviours can be perceived as legitimate forms of interaction or as expressions of power. This process of cultural trivialisation not only reduces the perception of the seriousness of the crime, but also facilitates its reproduction in youth contexts, where social norms are still in the process of being consolidated.

B. Psychosocial factors and the influence of the perception of impunity

The interaction between psychosocial variables and normative frameworks constitutes one of the most relevant explanatory axes in the understanding of group sexual assaults committed by minors. In this sense, the perception of impunity associated with children under the age of 14 being below the minimum age of criminal responsibility —established in Organic Law 5/2000 on the Criminal Responsibility of Minors— emerges as a significant factor, although not exclusive, in the perpetuation of these behaviours.

From a criminological perspective, various authors have pointed out that, while this provision responds to a guarantee-oriented approach aimed at protecting the development of minors, it can generate distorted interpretations in certain contexts. As López-Fernández (2019) notes, some minors may perceive this exemption not as an educational measure, but as an actual absence of consequences, which reduces the deterrent effect of the rule. This phenomenon is exacerbated when there are no sufficiently visible or effective alternative mechanisms—such as socio-educational or family interventions—that compensate for the lack of criminal justice response, thereby

favouring the consolidation of a perception of institutional tolerance towards certain behaviours.

However, attributing the phenomenon exclusively to the normative dimension would be analytically insufficient. The reviewed literature highlights the importance of psychosocial factors in shaping these behaviours. In particular, Gómez et al. (2020) identify low self-esteem and the need for validation within the peer group as recurring elements in the involved minors. These factors are embedded in identity-building processes characteristic of adolescence, in which social recognition becomes central and can influence the adoption of risky behaviours.

Added to this is the influence of dysfunctional family contexts, characterised by exposure to violence, the absence of prosocial models, and deficits in parental supervision. García-Muñoz (2020) emphasises that these early experiences not only increase the likelihood of antisocial behaviours, but also affect the internalisation of basic coexistence norms, such as respect, empathy, and recognition of consent. In these environments, violence can be learned as a legitimate strategy for conflict resolution or personal assertion.

From this perspective, group sexual assault can be interpreted as the result of a cumulative process of vulnerabilities, in which emotional deficits, educational shortcomings, and cognitive distortions about interpersonal relationships converge. Violence does not therefore appear as an isolated behaviour, but as a way of channeling frustrations, insecurities, and needs for recognition that have not found adaptive ways of expression.

C. Role of social media and technology

Social media emerge as a central factor in the proliferation of group sexual assaults, not only facilitating the planning of offences but also amplifying their impact through virality. Hernández et al. (2020) emphasise that platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have created an ecosystem where minors are constantly exposed to sexualised and violent content, without adequate supervision from adults.

Pérez et al. (2022) highlight that 90% of the cases of group sexual assault analysed went viral on social media, which aggravates the trauma of the victims and reinforces the imitation of offending behaviours. This phenomenon is related to the pursuit of popularity and digital validation among the perpetrators, who see virality as a way to increase their social status within the group (Rodríguez et al., 2023).

Morales and Ruiz (2021) argue that the absence of effective digital education has left minors vulnerable to the influence of harmful narratives in the digital environment. The distortion of concepts such as consent, exacerbated by the content consumed on these platforms, contributes to the perpetuation of sexual violence.

D. Gender stereotypes and toxic masculinity

Gender stereotypes and toxic masculinity are fundamental factors in the perpetuation of group sexual assaults committed by minors. These stereotypes are products of a deeply rooted culture that links masculinity with attributes such as aggressiveness, domination, and control, while femininity is associated with submission and passivity. This cultural framework significantly influences the formation of adolescents' identities, who, by internalizing these norms, see sexual violence as a manifestation of power that validates their masculine identity (Navarro et al., 2021; González & López, 2021).

Rodríguez and Sánchez (2019) analyse how the media, particularly cinema and music, have been powerful vehicles in the reproduction of these stereotypes. In movies, songs, and series, sexual domination over women and coercion are often glorified as an acceptable form of interaction. This narrative not only contributes to the normalisation of sexual assaults but also reinforces the mistaken belief that men must exert power over women to assert their masculinity. The constant dissemination of this type of message creates a breeding ground where sexual assaults can be seen as a natural part of gender dynamics, especially among teenagers who are still building their understanding of relationships (Fernández, 2024).

On the other hand, the findings of Fernández and González (2022) on the sensationalist media coverage of sexual assault cases are also related to the perpetuation of these stereotypes. The media, by focusing on sexual violence in a spectacular way, without addressing the gender roots and underlying dynamics, contribute to trivializing the crime and presenting the victims as responsible or as an 'object' of a culture of dominance. Media coverage tends to depersonalise the victims, focusing on the characteristics of the perpetrator and reinforcing the narrative that perpetrators are 'alpha males' or individuals who meet traditional expectations of masculinity (Rodríguez et al., 2023; Lancharro, 2024).

In this sense, toxic masculinity is fuelled not only by cultural factors but also by peer influence. In many groups of adolescents, especially in contexts where macho ideas prevail, young men feel pressured to demonstrate their masculinity through acts of violence, including sexual ones, as a way to integrate and gain recognition within the group. Peer socialisation is, therefore, a key mechanism that encourages aggression as part of male identity and that, at times, minors internalise as a "right" or an "initiation ritual" (González & López, 2021).

E. Deficiencies in relationships and sexuality education

The literature review shows that deficiencies in relationships and sexuality education constitute one of the most relevant structural factors in explaining group sexual assaults among minors. In the context of Spain, although the regulatory framework —including Organic Law 5/2000 on the Criminal Responsibility of Minors— recognizes the importance of the educational dimension in preventing offending behaviour, the practical implementation of training programmes in this area presents notable limitations in terms of scope, depth, and territorial homogeneity.

The analysed studies agree in pointing out that the predominant approaches in educational systems continue to focus on biomedical aspects of sexuality—such as the prevention of sexually transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancies—leaving in the background fundamental dimensions such as consent, empathy, affective reciprocity, emotional management, and power dynamics in relationships (Martínez & López, 2021). This reduction of educational content generates a significant training gap, especially in a developmental stage in which adolescents are building their frameworks regarding sexuality and interpersonal relationships.

In this regard, Morales and Pérez (2019) emphasise that the absence of comprehensive education promotes the consolidation of erroneous interpretations of consent, which is often understood passively —as the absence of opposition— rather than as an explicit, informed, and continuous manifestation of will. This conceptual distortion is particularly problematic in group contexts, where dynamics of pressure and deindividuation can further dilute the perception of interpersonal boundaries.

Likewise, the literature highlights that current programmes have a limited capacity to critically address gender stereotypes, despite their central role in shaping sexual violence. The lack of integration of equality perspectives and analysis of social norms contributes to the reproduction of relational models based on inequality and domination, as has been pointed out in previous sections. In this sense, relationships and sexuality education cannot be reduced to an informative dimension, but must incorporate a reflective component aimed at questioning the cultural structures that legitimise violence.

The comparative evidence reinforces this interpretation. Studies such as those by Fernández and Gómez (2021) show that European countries like the Netherlands or Sweden have managed to significantly reduce levels of youth sexual violence through the implementation of comprehensive sexual education programmes from early ages. These models are characterised by their holistic approach, which combines content on sexual health with training in emotional skills, critical thinking, and gender equity. The consistency and mandatory nature of these programmes contrasts with the fragmentation observed in the Spanish case.

In Spain, relationships and sexuality education continues to be largely heterogeneous and dependent on regional initiatives or even specific educational centres, which creates inequalities in access to quality educational content. This situation contributes to widespread misinformation among minors, particularly regarding the differentiation between consensual practices and coercive behaviours, as well as in the understanding of the ethical and legal implications of their actions.

F. Group dynamics and copycat effect

The so-called "copycat effect" is consolidated, in light of the reviewed evidence, as one of the most relevant mechanisms in the reproduction and expansion of group sexual assaults among minors. This phenomenon, understood as the imitation and amplification of offending behaviours following their media exposure, should be interpreted not as a simple behavioural replica, but as a complex process of social learning, group validation, and symbolic feedback.

From a psychosocial perspective, the group dynamics typical of adolescence play a central role in this

process. As Pérez et al. (2020) point out, deindividuation —characterised by the dilution of individual identity within the group— reduces the perception of personal responsibility and facilitates participation in behaviours that, in individual contexts, would be less likely. This phenomenon is intensified in environments where group cohesion is built around transgressive practices, and where violence can function as a mechanism of collective affirmation.

In this context, the viral dissemination of cases of sexual assault on digital platforms introduces an additional dimension: the transformation of behaviour into an observable and replicable reference. When these acts gain visibility on social media such as WhatsApp or Telegram, they are not only disseminated as isolated events, but as narratives that can be reinterpreted by other groups of minors. Navarro et al. (2022) suggest that this process can lead to dynamics of symbolic competition, in which groups seek not only to reproduce, but even to intensify the severity of behaviours in order to gain greater recognition or notoriety.

This phenomenon of imitation, commonly described as the 'copycat' effect, involves more than the literal reproduction of the criminal act. It entails the internalisation of attitudinal frameworks that legitimise violence, including the dehumanization of victims, the minimization of the harm caused, and indifference to the consequences. In this sense, the copycat effect acts as a mechanism of cultural transmission of violence, in which behaviours spread along with the implicit norms that support them.

Viral dissemination also fulfils an ambivalent and deeply problematic function. On the one hand, it intensifies the harm to the victims by prolonging the public exposure of the traumatic event, generating processes of revictimisation (Lancharro, 2024). On the other hand, it turns the aggression into a product of symbolic consumption, susceptible to being interpreted as a model of behaviour. As Pérez et al. (2022) indicate, the media notoriety associated with these cases can be perceived by some minors as a form of social recognition, reinforcing the likelihood of repetition.

Likewise, continuous interaction in digital environments contributes to the progressive normalisation of violence. The circulation of images and videos in closed groups or messaging applications creates spaces where these behaviours are trivialised and reinterpreted as challenges, tests of bravery, or rituals of belonging. This reinterpretation is facilitated by adolescent evolutionary psychology, characterised by a high sensitivity to group approval and a lower capacity to anticipate long-term consequences.

This research has made it possible to deepen the understanding of the reported reported increase in group sexual assaults committed by children under the age of 14 in Spain, showing that it is a complex phenomenon, of a multifactorial nature and deeply rooted in contemporary social dynamics. Based on the systematic review of 28 studies, it is evident that there is no single cause that explains its proliferation, but rather an interaction of structural, cultural, psychosocial, and technological factors that, together, create a favourable environment for the emergence and reproduction of these behaviours.

One of the most consistent findings is the central role of group dynamics as a catalyst for violence. The evidence analysed confirms that deindividuation, along with the pressure for acceptance and recognition within the peer group, reduces the perception of individual responsibility and facilitates participation in aggressive behaviours. In this context, sexual violence can take on an instrumental character, functioning as a mechanism of group cohesion and as a means of social validation. This logic is not exclusive to this type of crime, but is part of broader patterns of youth behaviour, where identity is constructed in interaction with the group.

Complementarily, the analysis highlights the structural influence of gender stereotypes and dominant models of masculinity. The persistence of narratives that associate masculinity with domination, aggressiveness, and control contributes to legitimizing sexual violence as a form of identity affirmation. These constructions are not only transmitted through primary socialisation processes, but are also reinforced by the media and digital environments, where representations that trivialise coercion and objectify lms are reproduced. In this sense, group sexual assault can be interpreted as a performative practice in which deeply rooted power relations are staged.

Another fundamental axis identified is the insufficiency of relationships and sexuality education. The results show that educational programmes in Spain continue to be fragmented and excessively focused on biomedical aspects, leaving aside essential dimensions such as consent, empathy, gender equality,

and emotional management. This training deficit creates a void that is largely filled by informal sources—especially digital content—that offer distorted representations of sexuality and interpersonal relationships. The comparison with more advanced European models reinforces the need to implement comprehensive, systematic, and evidence-based programmes.

In parallel, social media and the digital environment emerge as key elements in amplifying the phenomenon. The viral dissemination of assaults introduces a performative dimension that transforms the criminal act into a resource for visibility and recognition. Continuous exposure to violent and sexualised content, combined with the logic of the attention economy, promotes processes of desensitisation and normalisation of violence. In this context, the so-called copycat effect manifests as a mechanism of behavioural contagion, in which media dissemination of cases increases the likelihood of their reproduction, especially among minors with few critical tools.

Likewise, the perception of impunity associated with children under the age of 14 being below the minimum age of criminal responsibility —established in Organic Law 5/2000 on the Criminal Responsibility of Minors— acts as a facilitating factor within this framework. Although this provision responds to principles of child protection, the evidence suggests that, in certain contexts, it can influence the subjective perception of risk, especially when it is not accompanied by effective alternative socio-educational intervention mechanisms.

Overall, the results allow us to conclude that group sexual assaults among minors should be understood as the product of a complex social ecosystem, where group dynamics, cultural constructions of gender, educational deficits, digital environments, and regulatory frameworks interact. This complexity implies that responses based exclusively on the criminal sphere are insufficient.

From an applied perspective, the research points to the need to develop comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies, articulated at various levels. In the educational field, it is essential to implement comprehensive relationships and sexuality education programmes from an early age, which include training in consent, equality, and socio-emotional skills. At the social level, it is necessary to promote alternative models of masculinity and strengthen family and community environments as spaces for positive socialisation. In the digital sphere, more effective content regulation policies and media literacy are required to allow minors to develop a critical relationship with the information they consume.

Finally, on the regulatory level, a space is opened for reflection on the appropriateness of the current legal framework. Without questioning the principles of child protection, it is relevant to explore complementary mechanisms that reinforce early intervention and socio-educational responsibility, with the aim of preventing recidivism and promoting effective rehabilitation processes.

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