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CRIMINAL MANIPULATIVE IMPACTS ON MINORS WITH INTERNET TECHNOLOGIES: COUNTERMEASURES

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Abstract

Manipulative thought is an integral characteristic of the human mind, a mandatory attribute of human activity, and interpersonal relationships. The scientists usually consider the prerequisites of manipulation in personal, cultural, managerial, political and legal contexts. It is the legal context, which is associated with the so-called criminal manipulations. Such criminal manipulative impacts and influences contain signs of corpus delicti – legally defined crime (as per the norms and regulations of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). It is the children evincing their illusive independence and freedom of will when committing they are induced socially dangerous actions, who increasingly become the victims of cyber-manipulators. The destructive nature of the criminal manipulative impact on the psyche of a teenager with the view to exploit him or her (in the broader sense of the word), as well as to achieve his or her humility and obedience is beyond any doubt. Such circumstances predetermined the relevance of the issues and the pertinence of the research topic.

1. Introduction

1.1. The manipulative nature of the activity of criminal network organizations aimed at inciting the minor to commit suicide

Our knowledge about the targeted manipulation algorithms for concealed intrusion into human psyche (to make a person take any specific actions) is very essential in various spheres of social life, such data being interesting not only for law-abiding citizens but also for criminals (Dubravina, 2018; Golovatskaya, 2018; Kloess, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2017).

Manipulation is a complex social, psychological and cultural phenomenon, very frequently addressed by psychologists to research issues of interpersonal interactions. The idea of manipulative behavior is very ambiguous and polymorphic; e.g., sometimes, manipulative behavior is a completely natural process (being socially acceptable/unacceptable or reprehensible, etc.), it may also be the result of certain deviant (maladaptive, psycho-anomalous, etc.) relationships; but sometimes it is merely criminal oriented. In the vast majority of cases, the aim of a manipulator is to weaken the addressee's self-control, to achieve the subordination of his or her will, to re-program the motivational activity of a person, and make him do what the manipulator wants him to do (Malygina, 2019; Sokolovskaya, Shcherbakova, & Vasyakin, 2019; Warming, Galloe, Carlsen, & Rasmussen, 2019).

In today's information (knowledge) society, higher manipulation efficiency can be achieved with Internet technologies. According to various scientists, virtual communities, which induce/persuade the minor to commit suicide, have always been (and still are) very dangerous (Fedunina, Vikhristyuk, & Bannikov, 2019; Safuanov & Sekerazh, 2017; Sedgwick, Epstein, Dutta, & Ougrin, 2019).

The cognitive world of a teenager is very plastic and extremely susceptible to undifferentiated information flows (Polyanina & Andreeva, 2019). The minor feels very comfortable and self-assured in the virtual world. Relatively speaking, a modern teenager can satisfy many of his or her needs without much effort; with just one click, he or she can create any emotional background, feeling at one with popular bloggers and local groups/communities; being able to distribute news, and edit personal pages of the social networks at his or her discretion (Kolesnikov, Melnik, & Teplova, 2019). Unfortunately, the network activity of most so-called clip-perception teenagers is not in line with their urge to self-education. School and college pupils tend to position themselves as gamers, online reporters, initiators of flash-mobs, or just network pranksters. Street children spend all their leisure time watching some negative content inappropriate for their age, which abounds with scenes of cruelty, violence, pornography, and gambling (Domoff et al., 2019; Catone et al., 2019; Christakis, 2019; Strigunenco, 2018). With time, they stop questioning information obtained from the Internet, which makes them intellectually disoriented; they have neither life experience, nor skills of critical thinking, having no experienced mentors around with any competence in digital technologies, law, or information security (Sokolova & Dozortseva, 2019; Khlomov, Davydov, & Bochaver, 2019). We can consider such Internet escapism, aggression and auto-aggression as a kind of compensatory response to a disharmony in family, cyber-bullying and ostracism from the children of the same age (John et al., 2018; Gaffney & Farrington, 2018; Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2018; Poon & Teng, 2017).

The specific style of behavior that expressly extolls death aestheticism is particularly popular among the deviant, non-formal representatives of the juvenile strata. Such a phenomenon is well known to scientists; social and biological factors, which cause such activity, were described in the literature in sufficient detail. Eventually, most young people showing such deviant, non-formal behavior (so-called non-formals) assume more life-asserting (optimistic) positions and get successfully adapted to every-day life. However, some of them do commit suicide or make numerous suicidal attempts. In case information that someone persuaded (or is persuading) a young person to commit suicide is proved, the authorities institute a criminal proceeding.

In late 2015, early 2016 so-called Death groups (i.e. Blue Whale suicidal online game) became popular with Russian teenagers. A certain criminal community coordinated over 17,000 death sites. Over 700 teenagers, who had entered such destructive network structures committed suicide within two years (Zamakhina, 2017; Falaleev, 2017).

Investigation showed that not every teenager had been able to join such a closed Suicide Club. The organizers picked up only those prone to being manipulated. The selected ones were asked to complete a number of tasks, after that the anonymous administrator evaluated the abilities of the new follower (in terms of his or her readiness to committing suicide) and assigned a specific rating to him or her. The goal the organizers pursued was to achieve total control over a teenager. Every day a teenager was forced to follow strictly defined and hard rules (rituals) that actually deprived him or her of their personality, killed their will and placed them in a dependent, slavish position.

Several times a day on a regular basis, the ordinary members of such Death groups were to send detailed reports to their curators to describe what they did, whom they communicated with, and how strictly and thoroughly they completed the tasks. The tasks given by the curators became more stringent and hard with time, causing higher psycho-emotional stress (at some point the curators allowed a teenager to sleep for a few hours a day only). The victims of manipulation, however, continued to trust the criminals; they perceived it as a thrilling and exciting game with the aim to have their rating increased. Only a few found the strength to break with the manipulators, and turn to their parents for help (Algavi, Kadyrova, & Rastorgueva, 2017; Kleyberg, 2017).

Reports on deaths of children caused a serious public outcry throughout the country. In 2017, the State Duma adopted in the third reading the Law on criminal liability for inducing or facilitating suicide (Article 110.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) as well as for any activity aimed at encouraging suicide (Article 110.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation).

Addressing Article 110.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, we have to note that the word inducing, by etymology, stands for persuasion, or psychological impact. A person can be induced to committing suicide by persuasion, offers, bribery, deceit or by any other means in absence of any signs of proper incitement to commit suicide (i.e., without violence). This means that all above-mentioned methods under certain conditions can undoubtedly be considered as criminal manipulative effects. We have to clarify that the materials of some criminal cases together with the testimonies of the victims/former members of the Death groups contain information on a massive, imperative impact of criminals on psyche of the minor; in other words manipulation was often accompanied by outright threats

(however, there were also cases of pure manipulative, concealed effects (influences), with no threats or intimidation involved) (Eriashvili & Dzhafarov, 2019).

Analysis of the negative trends (both external and internal) associated with the uncontrolled social networking of the minor, reveals that school-age children show a high degree of victimhood, being unable to withstand criminal manipulative effects by themselves. The measures taken by the government (including those related to toughening the criminal law) to ensure cybersecurity of the minor and counteract the suicidal subculture can hardly be considered optimal or adequate in the light of rapidly changing realities.

2. Problem Statement

Facing such severe criminal attacks against the minor with Internet technologies, we realize the explicit threat to the national security of Russia, especially when it comes to the life and health of the entire age population, and ultimately to the future of the Country. Under the given conditions, the priority of the in-depth socio-psychological and legal study of such insufficiently explored phenomenon as criminal manipulative effects on the minor (with due account of all suicidal risks) together with the development of valid preventive approaches (recommendations) is quite obvious.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Investigation of features of the criminal manipulation effects/traumatic after-effect on the minor

The research topic designated above is the least defined in terms of signification (concepts), and insufficiently studied in the substantive aspect. To address the said gaps, we have to define the term of the criminal manipulative effects (influences), to identify and describe the after-effects of the traumatic impact of destructive manipulation on a minor Internet user (showing examples of the Death groups victims), and to formulate the principle measures to counter manipulative cyber-crimes, with minors as victims.

4. Purpose of the Study

We consider the investigation of the socio-psychological and legal aspects of criminal manipulations (influences), with a minor Internet user as a victim, as well as the replenishment of our criminological data about underage victims of cyber-criminal manipulations to be the principal purpose of this study.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Methodological settings for this study

The materialist theory of knowledge in combination with general scientific and special scientific methods form the methodological setting of this study. Among the special scientific techniques, we found that the most relevant were as follows: the comparative legal method, the socio-psychological approach,

experimental-psychological procedures, and the methodological principles of psychodiagnostic and victimological prevention

5.2. Materials and methods of experimental psychological research

Having obtained the required consents from legal representatives of the minors and the victims of criminal manipulative impacts, we formed a representative (sample) group of 50 students from secondary schools and colleges of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region who had been recognized as the victims in criminal cases related to the activities of destructive online communities - so-called Death groups (in particular, Blue Whale). The age of the teenagers ranged from 13.5 to 18 years. Contacts between the schoolchildren and so-called administrators lasted for a month and a half, maximum (it was the activity of law enforcement officers, or - less frequently - the interference of parents, or - still less frequently - the initiative of the minor affected, which caused the break between criminals and their victims). The psychologists from a few Centers of Public Assistance to Families and Children of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region together with those from some socially oriented non-profit organizations involved in the rehabilitation of crime victims conducted this study within the period from November 2016 to November 2017.

Psychologists used the following psychological tools - 1) Coping Strategy Indicator, (CSI) to evaluate basic coping strategies, 2) the multidimensional Zimet scale to assess the subjective perception of social support, 3) Mehrabyan's method of communicative resources assessment to reveal the state of communication environment, 4) The scale of Self-efficacy (Self-rating) - an instrument to focus the researcher on achievements and blunders of a teenager.

5.3. Results and discussion

The analysis of the experimental psychological study results revealed quite low social sensitivity of the victims, which is not typical of this age group (at the general-population level). Such traits as a decreased empathy, a desire for loneliness, a fear of the team, and an inability to interact with other team members to perform a task with joint efforts were evident. Subjective assessment of self-concept (i.e., self-rating) was extremely low. The study revealed some volitional disorders associated with the disturbance of intentional regulation, with a specific nature of motivation, and with phenomena of the obstacle-overcoming category. We have to note that in conversation with psychologists, all 50 people said that they had not been able to get rid of anxious, obsessive thoughts associated with their participation in the Death group; moreover, the respondents reported that they could well face such collisions and conflicts that would lead to suicide.

The medical data (the teenagers had turned to psychiatrists for advice before the study) showed, that all teenagers had been afflicted with neurotic disorders of varying severity.

All respondents confirmed that over the years they had been experiencing some psychophysiological ergasthenia (overstrain) caused by Internet communication; (the teenagers spent at least four hours a day on-line). Still, (according to the teenagers) the traumatic situation caused by the manipulative techniques of the Death Group Administrators lead to mental health disorders they had never experienced before.

The data obtained suggest that there was a deliberate, criminal psychological manipulative impact on the teenagers, which had an extremely destructive effect on their psyche. We have to recognize that criminals had chosen their victims quite deliberately – for making their choice they considered such victimhood qualities as an awkward age, lack of criticality, increased suggestibility, signs of Internet addiction, parental (or, in some cases, pedagogical) neglect, and family disharmony.

In view of the above, we can define criminal manipulative impact as the selective, concealed psychological pressure on the addressee with exclusively criminal intentions, the manipulator being solving two problems, i.e. to subordinate a person to his will and to make him take very extraneous, unusual for such person, actions.

So, what are the most promising directions of work to counter criminal manipulative effect on the minor? First, it is required to boost the function of government in the Internet space, as well as to stir up the activity of public organizations, teachers, parents, and the so-called cyber volunteers, who monitor the negative content online. Secondly, it would be reasonable to introduce virtual training technologies into the general process of education, which would contribute to the development of self-regulation, and self-control of the schoolchildren, and make them more responsible with respect to their lives. With the help of educational institutions, we have to implement awareness-raising programs as soon as possible; such programs would result in higher digital competence and cybersecurity of both high school students and their parents.

6. Findings

Information and psychological manipulation is always concealed (i.e., being performed in a hidden way); it is almost imperceptible by an addressee with no threats or other elements of mental violence. The person (the addressee) does not recognize himself as a victim, nor does he resist the imposed influence, following willingly the instructions of the manipulator (the dominating subject). Such criminal manipulative influence contains the signs of various crimes.

Negative content (of a manipulative orientation) can significantly distort the person's idea of the surrounding world, and upset the spiritual/psychological balance of a teenager.

When organizing and conducting individual victimological preventive measures among the minor Internet users, we have to consider such socio-psychological characteristics of the potential cybercrime victims as low-stress resistance, inability to resolve existing problems independently, lack of skills for seeking social support, susceptibility to suggestive influences, frivolity, disposition to subordination, tendency to perform self-destructive activity, as well as tendency to Internet addiction. In other words, the category considered appears to be quite dysfunctional; its social maladaptation could well be caused by the family and/or school neglect.

Counteraction to criminal Internet manipulation impacts technologies must be regular, systemic, comprehensive, legitimate by nature, and based on scientific principles. It is the constructive dialogue between law enforcement officers and representatives of public organizations, teachers, parents, and minors, which is of the prime importance for the efficiency of such counteraction.

7.   Conclusion

Both social needs and the needs of the state urge the need to study the ways of manipulating the collective or individual consciousness. In the digital era, mass communications can be as constructive (boosting civilized development of our society), as extremely dangerous (with destructive information that threatens our lives, health, and well-being).

This study reveals significant problems associated with the inadequate safety of the minor in social networks. All relevant authorities together with scientific organizations, and institutions of civil society must consolidate their efforts to neutralize and eliminate all sorts of such destructive influences and effects (including those of criminal and manipulative nature), since any local or sporadic (i.e., unsystematic) technical or law enforcement measures proved to be inefficient.

The results and findings of this study, by which we can attribute harmful manipulative influences and effects to the category of a juvenile abuse, form an important and promising step towards further development of knowledge about cyber-crimes and cyber-criminal activity. The revealed victimological characteristics of affected teenagers (who became victims of cyber-manipulators), are very important to implement adequate preventive measures. Data on the psychological mechanisms of criminal, destructive Internet manipulation, which affects the minor, is of practical interest to psychologists, teachers and law enforcement officers.

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