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COPING WITH ONLINE RISKS: THE EXPERIENCE OF RUSSIAN SCHOOLCHILDREN

Galina Soldatova and Ekaterina Zotova

The rapid spread of information and communication technologies has led to new threats that may have a negative impact on children's social development. This article examines Russian schoolchildren's perceptions of difficult online situations regarding cyberbullying and online sexual content, and their strategies of coping. The empirical base of the research includes data from the EU Kids Online II project. Analysis was conducted according to age, gender, and user activity. A comparative analysis of European and Russian data shows how the current situation of internet development in Russia is affecting the coping behaviour of both children and adolescents.

KEYWORDS online activity; online risks; difficult life situation; cyberbullying; sexual content; coping; passive and active coping strategies; social support; significant others

Introduction

Every country has its own history of internet development, and national peculiarities of its development, spread, and use determine the dynamics of internet use by adults and children. The active development of the internet began in Russia in the second half of the 1990s, about five to six years later than in many European countries, while the huge increase in the number of internet users occurred almost 10 years later than in Europe. The internet only became widely available in Russia at the beginning of the new millennium, when the number of internet users in Europe was more than 100 million. In 2003–04, in almost all European countries, the number of internet users exceeded 30 per cent of the population, although Russia only reached that point five years later (BBC News, 2012).

Russian educational institutions began to use the internet in 2006–07, with more than 52,000 Russian schools gaining internet access as a result of the national project, "Education." Children rushed to the alluring World Wide Web, as revealed by a socio-psychological research study called "My Safe Net," conducted in 2009 by the Foundation for Internet Development among adolescents in 18 regions of Russia (4,336 children aged 14–17). About 90 per cent of the adolescents identified themselves as internet users (Soldatova, Zotova, Chekalina, & Gostimskaya, 2011). At that time only one-third of the adult population used the internet "monthly." However, despite the new requirement for the government and society to consider the problems of internet safety for children, such programmes only began to appear in Russia in 2009, which was announced to be a Year of Safe Internet in Russia by the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media. Meanwhile, the European Commission's Safer Internet Programme, intended to create a safe online space for children, had been launched as long ago as 1999.

The present-day situation in Russia has been shaped by several factors. First, the Russian population is now increasingly exploring the internet, which is turning children and adolescents into mass users very quickly (ahead of being able to implement safety checks to protect young users online), and new risks are appearing that may have a negative impact on children's social development. Second, according to many studies, there is still a digital divide between two generations in Russia (Internet in Russia, 2012; Soldatova & Zotova, 2011; Soldatova et al., 2011). Compared with their parents and teachers, Russian adolescents have a higher level of internet activity and are accumulating user experience faster, leaving adults with little awareness about the risks and threats in internet space. Adults may therefore be prevented from being involved in children's online activity and in being able to influence children's development with regard to internet use. There is one more essential factor: there has, to date, been a lack of government programmes providing security in internet use. Such a chaotic situation has not contributed to the formation of the culture of using new technologies that is necessary for young generations in times of such technological change.

Although, today, the increase in internet users is primarily due to adults going online (Internet in Russia, 2012), with 65 per cent of Russia's urban population over 12 years old (almost 41 million) now online (according to the TNS Web Index, April 2012), these internet users include some 3.5 million adolescents aged 12 to 18, 98 per cent of whom regularly go online. Young people are also active users of the mobile internet: adolescents aged 12–17 constituted almost 15 per cent of such users (TNS Web Index, 2012). What consequences does this have? The internet has become easily accessible via computers and mobile phones and has expanded the ways and means to meet social needs—the needs of belonging (communication, love, recognition) and growth (knowledge, understanding, independence and autonomy, self-actualization) (Maslow, 1999). At around the age of 10–11, communication becomes the child's leading activity in different areas of life (academic, athletic, artistic, etc.). The internet is an essential tool for the child to meet his or her urgent needs for communication. Compared with adults, for children the internet is not primarily an information source, but a communication tool (Livingstone, 2003; Soldatova et al., 2011).

Findings regarding online risks and threats, based on the results of empirical studies (2009–11) and analysis of requests to the helpline "Kids Online" reveals significant communication and content risks for Russian schoolchildren. Two online threats take a special place among the risks: cyberbullying and sexual content. According to the survey, cyberbullying, a problem that is not yet widely discussed in Russia, turned out to be one of the most explicit communication threats, and was one of the top requests for help to the helpline. Sexual content, on the other hand, together with pedophilia, is among one of the most widely discussed worrying topics in Russia, and proved to be a key topic, both in the survey and in the parent and child helpline "voting." These two threats make up the subject matter of our article.

The research literature suggests that solving specific tasks given to children by the information and communication environment has an impact on their psychological development: on forms and ways of development, types of activities, in acquiring new psychological qualities and skills (see, for example, Gackebach, 2006; Li, Polat, Scalzo, & Bavelier, 2010; Sparrow, Liu, & Wegner, 2011; Tapscott, 2009), their self-consciousness (see, for example, Buckingham, 2008; Mazalin & Moore, 2004), self-organization, and their self-regulation, including ways of coping with difficult life situations. Significantly, the systematic interaction of a schoolchild internet user with threats from the online environment may therefore lead to difficult life situations. Lazarus and Folkman defined "difficult" situations as

those that were appraised as a threat, loss, or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These require a coping strategy to deal with emotional anxiety and stress, and such new situations cannot be overcome through the usual way of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zhuravlev, Kryukova, & Sergienko, 2008).

Like many researchers who have followed Lazarus and Folkman, we interpret "coping" as an individual way of interaction with a difficult (external or internal) situation, which is determined by its subjective significance to a person and the person's own psychological resources (Antsiferova, 1994; Belinskaya, 2009; Zhuravlev et al., 2008; Kryukova, 2005). Coping strategies are then formed by means of activity mechanisms in the context of the interaction of the personality and the situation. This may lead to awareness, arbitrariness, indirectness, and motivation of the person's efforts guided by a certain goal. During child development, coping behaviour is formed along with the psychological neoformations of the respective age level (qualitative changes of a cognitive sphere, transformations in social relationships, formation of a new subjective reality, changing self-perception, etc.), comprising a personality resource base that serves as a basis for coping (Zhuravlev et al., 2008; Nikolskaya & Granovskaya, 2001). In their interpretation of "difficult" situations, researchers emphasize, first, their significance for the person, and, second, the perceived difficulty (Marriage & Cummins, 2004; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schultz, 2003). Due to the high intensity and frequency of Russian schoolchildren user activity, along with the level of risks apparent on the Russian internet, getting into difficult life situations online seems a part of a range of everyday stress situations. Online problems have become, it seems, daily events that can cause negative emotions and difficulties.

The abundance of such threats concerning the internet in Russia has drawn attention and now requires respective action from teachers, school psychologists, and parents. In this article, we address the following pressing questions. How do Russian schoolchildren perceive cyberbullying and sexual content? Which strategies of coping are they acquiring? Which child internet users are the most sensitive to the difficult online situations posed by cyberbullying and sexual content? How do gender and age, as well as the type of difficult online situation determine the choice of coping strategies? In what way does the digital generation divide impede the capabilities of Russian adults as "significant others" to provide social support for children in difficult online situations? Finding answers to these questions compared with the European findings of the EU Kids Online research (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011) helps us to understand the experience of self-regulation of Russian schoolchildren in the internet environment. In this article, however, we focus on the overall national comparison of European and Russian schoolchildren, recognising that this is shaped by the reaction of both the society and state policy to the development and spread of the internet. For reasons of space, we do not here address regional, cultural, ethnic, subcultural, or other social differences within Europe and Russia.

Methods and Data Analysis

The research was designed according to the EU Kids Online II methodology. We used multistage stratified random sampling. The strata were formed within the seven federal districts of Russia. In each strata, one administrative region was selected—a total of eleven regions. The total size of the sample was divided among all strata in proportion to the child population of each strata (using data from Goskomstat [Russian Federal State Statistics Service], 2009).

TABLE 1
Distribution of the sample by age and gender (percentages)

Age (years)	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	All	N
Boys	5	6.5	3	4	5	10	7	4	44.5	468
Girls	4.5	9.5	4.5	5	5	8	11	9	55.5	557
Total	9.5	16	7.5	9	10	18	18	13	100	1025
N	107	154	79	110	108	170	175	122	1025	

Base: 9–16-year-old internet using children in Russia (N = 1025).

Internet-using 9- to 16-year-olds and their parents were interviewed face-to-face in their homes. A total of 1,025 pairs of parent–child participants were interviewed. Although the sample was randomly drawn, it was representative of different gender and age groups (see Table 1).

In this regard, the study aimed to investigate gender and age differences in children’s experience of encountering cyberbullying and sexual content, stress caused by those situations, and preferred coping strategies. Primary data processing was carried out using the basic methods of descriptive statistics. Comparison of the groups and relationships between variables were conducted according to the nature of the variables with the help of the chi-square Pearson test.

An indicator of stress caused by facing online threats was based on the subjective evaluation of these situations as “upsetting.” This indicator was mainly revealed through asking such questions as, “How upset were you about it?” and “How long did you feel like that for?”

Schoolchildren’s preferred strategies of coping with online threats were evaluated with two fixed-choice questions—introducing general strategies and strategies that assumed specific actions taken on the internet. The children, as well as answering the second question, were asked to assess the effectiveness of their decisions. Special questions (“Did you talk to anyone?,” “Who did you talk to?”) were aimed at revealing social support call-outs.

Findings and Discussion

Facing Cyberbullying and Sexual Content as Difficult Life Situations

European and Russian schoolchildren are aware of the insecurity of the online environment. According to the EU Kids Online II study, every second child aged 9–16, including in Russia, agreed that “there are things online that can bother children of my age.” It should be noted that European children slightly more often responded that the internet had something that could bother their peers (55 per cent in Europe against 53 per cent in Russia). Meanwhile, twice as many Russian as European children reported being bothered by something on the internet (24 per cent in Russia against 12 per cent in Europe).

In Russia every fifth child on average (23 per cent) reported being bullied online or offline. In St Petersburg the number reached 35 per cent, and was significantly above the average across Russia. In Europe children admitted to having been bullied almost as much—in 19 per cent of cases (Livingstone et al., 2011). One-fifth of bullied children in Russia were harassed or humiliated every day or one to two times a week (6 per cent of the overall sample). The problem seemed to be increasingly pressing among 11- to 12-year-olds: every

tenth child from this age group had been bullied more frequently than once a week, which critically exceeded the average in other age groups.

Aggression in Russia is now moving to the internet space. Offensive behaviour in chatrooms, on forums and blogs, in the comments, fake pages and videos showing someone being psychologically or physically harassed, have become common on the Russian internet. The survey found that every tenth schoolchild in Russia has been bullied on the internet. With age, cyberbullying experience tended to happen more often: children aged 9–10 were bullied twice as seldom as 11- to 16-year-olds. In European countries, children were bullied online half as often. Moreover, schoolchildren themselves often act as bullies. In Russia, 28 per cent of children admitted to having offended or harassed other people in real life and online; this figure, again, shows that in Russia the amount of bullies is twice as high as in Europe.

If we compare results across Russia to certain countries in Europe, at the same level with Russia in terms of online and offline bullying were Denmark (25 per cent bullied online or offline, 12 per cent bullied online) and Sweden (28 per cent bullied online or offline, 11 per cent bullied online). Estonia and Romania showed a much higher level of online and offline bullying overall (43 per cent and 41 per cent respectively). The frequency of facing cyberbullying in those countries was also slightly higher (14 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively) (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Turning to exposure to pornography, the survey found that half of Russian children have seen sexual images online or offline (49 per cent). These results significantly exceeded numbers in Europe (at 23 per cent). Every fifth child in Russia out of those who had seen sexual images had seen them more than once a week (21 per cent). In the European countries the relevant numbers were almost four times lower. Furthermore, countries had not found ways to limit access to sexual content for the under-aged. For example, in Norway and the Czech Republic, according to the EU Kids Online survey, numbers for the above categories were as high as in Russia (Livingstone et al., 2011). It seems that the internet now plays a leading role in the sexual education of younger generations in Russia, leaving behind television, books and magazines—41 per cent of schoolchildren had seen sexual images online. This was higher than in all European countries (the most in European countries was in Norway, at 34 per cent). Russian schoolchildren said that they more often saw such images accidentally, for example, in pop-up windows. With age, children were more likely to see sexual content on the internet as well as in other media.

How do Russian schoolchildren perceive this? In answering this question, we will try to identify different categories of children that are the most sensitive to difficult life situations. One indicator of the perceived difficulty of the situation can be considered as assessing the situation as “upsetting.” Assessment of cyberbullying as “upsetting” conveys only one aspect of concern. According to the studies, victims of cyberbullying took this situation hard, even in the case of offline bullying: they were upset, angry, felt powerless, which could further result in a decrease in self-esteem, developing anxiety, and more severe psychological consequences (Beran & Li, 2005; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). The problem of stress caused by encountering sexual content by children has not been studied for ethical reasons, although sexual content is often at the centre of media attention, and this is particularly the case in Russia.

More than two-thirds of the interviewed victims of cyberbullying considered this as stress of varying severity. Every third child reported being “very upset” or “fairly upset.” One in four, in contrast, did not perceive the situation as upsetting. Among European

TABLE 2

Perception by Russian schoolchildren of exposure to cyberbullying and sexual content (percentages)

	Cyberbullying				Sexual content online			
	Victim of cyber-bullying (%)		"Very" or "fairly upset" (%)		Exposure to sexual content that bothered child (%)		"Very" or "fairly upset" (%)	
	Russia	Europe	Russia	Europe	Russia	Europe	Russia	Europe
All	10	6	34	55	13	4	28	44
Boys	11	4	26	46	12	4	24	43
Girls	9	6	40	61	14	5	32	45
9–10 years	7	3	50*	47	10	3	48*	50
11–12 years	10	5	35	54	14	3	30	54
13–14 years	12	6	23	57	13	5	18	44
15–16 years	10	8	34	55	15	6	23	36
N	1,025		100		1,025		133	

Base (victim/exposure): 9–16-year-old internet-using children in Russia; base (upset): 9–16-year-olds who had been a victim of bullying or bothered by sexual content online. For European figures, see Livingstone et al., (2011).

Note: χ^2 is significant at the levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

schoolchildren only one in seven was not upset in the situation of cyberbullying. Although more than half of the victims of cyberbullying noted that they "got over it straight away," practically every third child, whatever their age, remained distressed for several days or more (see Table 2).

Almost every third child perceived exposure to sexual content as stressful (being "very upset" or "fairly upset"). Notwithstanding the gender and age, every fifth child remembered it for several days or more. European schoolchildren were generally more sensitive to sexual content: 44 per cent answered they were "fairly upset" and even "very upset."

Cyberbullying, although less common, was experienced as more intense: among those children who were "very upset" and "fairly upset," twice as few children said that they had coped with cyberbullying than with sexual content. The number of those who felt upset for several weeks or more after being bullied online was much greater than encountering sexual content.

Russian schoolchildren faced sexual content that bothered them two times as often as cyberbullying. The prevalence of sexual content encountered could be considered as one of the reasons that children were less upset in that situation as when they were bullied. The difference in the perception of these difficult online situations can be related to the character of the risks. Cyberbullying affects interpersonal relations and communication, which become significant as children grow older. Researchers say that today, cyberbullying often accompanies traditional offline bullying (Li, 2007; Smith et al., 2008), that is, the problem is not limited to the online environment, so it can be more stressful for children.

The older the children are, the more often they face sexual content or cyberbullying, but as they get older, the less they claim to find this upsetting. European children were more upset when being bullied online, as well as when facing sexual content. However, in Europe and Russia, victims of cyberbullying experienced the situation more deeply and for longer.

Assessing the situation of those who encountered online risks as difficult enabled us to identify groups of the most sensitive to considered risks. At the risk of facing sexual content online in Russia as well as in Europe are younger children (aged 9–10) and girls. These children are not only more likely to see sexual content online, which bothers them in some way, but they also perceive it as more upsetting. Girls are at risk of being bullied both in Russia and in Europe. Results differed with regard to age. In European countries older children appear more likely to be bullied and to be more upset by this. The sensitivity peak of cyberbullying defined among Russian schoolchildren was 9–12 years. The frequency of cyberbullying increases with age, but older children are less upset. This may be due to the fact that Russian children are bullied online as often as offline. In adolescence children are more likely to be bullied, especially among peers. Perhaps the frequency of encounters with online risks reduces the level of emotional response to such situations.

Coping with Online Risks

Based on substantial analysis of the selected actions, four methods of coping with cyberbullying and sexual content were singled out. Active strategies designed for problem solutions included: “tried to fix the problem,” “blocked the person who had sent it to me,” “changed filter/contact settings” (Livingstone, Haddon, & Görzig, 2012), and also additional strategies for coping with cyberbullying, “tried to get the other person to leave me alone,” “tried to get back at the other person,” which were, according to our data, quite popular among Russian schoolchildren. Passive strategies were associated with the choice of inaction, avoidance (“hoped that the problem would go away by itself”), concentration on emotions (“felt a bit guilty”), and distancing (“stopped using the internet for a while,” “deleted any message”). As types of coping, searching for social support and the variant “none of these things,” assuming “other” coping strategies, were also distinguished. These strategies of coping with cyberbullying and sexual content are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Active and Passive Coping Strategies

Active strategies. More than two-thirds of schoolchildren preferred active coping strategies (at least one relevant answer) in difficult life situations connected with cyberbullying (see Table 3). Active strategies were chosen twice as rarely when facing sexual content (see Table 4). However, more than one third of schoolchildren chose at least one of the active strategies. Popular active strategies of coping with cyberbullying and sexual content referred to coping of a “planning” type. In the case of cyberbullying, a third each “tried to fix the problem,” “tried to get the aggressor to leave him or her alone,” or blocked the possibility of communication. In the case of facing sexual content, the preference among active strategies was given to “changing filter/contact settings.” When coping with cyberbullying, each sixth selected an active confrontation strategy, “trying to get back at the aggressor.”

In the case of cyberbullying, girls preferred general strategies, and boys, specific actions on the internet. When facing sexual content boys more often than girls selected an active strategy, and preferred “to fix the problem.”

When facing cyberbullying, each third child in all age groups “tried to fix the problem.” When facing sexual content among children aged 9–12, only a few selected this active strategy. As the schoolchildren grew up they used internet-specific active strategies

TABLE 3
Coping strategies when being bullied online (N = 100)

Risk	Strategy type	Coping strategy	All	Boys	Girls	9–12 years	13–16 years	Very upset	Not/a bit upset
Cyberbullying	Active (%)	Average number of strategies (of 11)	2.8	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.8	3.3	2.6
		Try to fix the problem	33	30	36	35	33	32	33
		Try to get the other person to leave him/her alone	29	28	30	35	27	29	28
		Try to get back at the other person	23	23	22	17	25	12	26
		Block the person who sent the message	34	40	29	38	33	29	40
	Passive (%)	Change filter/contact settings	19	25	13	16	20	26	13
		Hope the problem would go away	13	15	11	14	13	19*	7
		Feel guilty	11	9	13	4	13	26*	3
		Stop using the internet for a while	17	23	10	28*	11	33**	7
		Delete the message	26	19	33	47**	16	30	23
Social support (%)		Online sources	68	64	71	68	67	73	64
		Offline sources	40	37	42	60*	30	43	34
		Undefined sources	14	14	14	16	13	24	9
		"Other strategies" ("None of these")	46	46	46	30	52	25*	54

Note: χ^2 is significant at the levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Percentages of children, among those who encountered cyberbullying.

TABLE 4
Types of coping strategies when seeing sexual content (N = 133)

Risk	Strategy type	Coping strategy	All	Boys	Girls	9–12 years	13–16 years	Very upset	Not/a bit upset
Sexual content online	Active (%)	Average number of strategies (of nine)	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.5	2.3	1.4
		Try to fix the problem	12	20*	6	4	14	9	14
		Block the person who sent the message	15	14	16	13	17	27*	10
	Passive (%)	Change filter/contact settings	18	16	20	9	25	20	18
		Hope the problem would go away	25	22	27	35	22	36	23
		Feel guilty	5	9	3	4	6	4	6
		Stop using the internet for a while	19	21	18	30**	11	47**	10
	Social support (%)	Delete the message	10	12	8	7	11	17	8
		Online sources	64	64	64	66	63	63	73
		Offline sources	34	34	33	41	28	59**	27
		"Undefined" sources	11	16	8	3	17	5	18
		"Other strategies" ("None of these")	63	60	66	51	72	29**	70

Note: χ^2 is significant at the levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Percentages of children, among those bothered by sexual content online.

for coping with all types of risks more often. In the case of cyberbullying, as children grew up they started to use a confrontation strategy of coping. Schoolchildren of different ages equally actively and effectively “blocked the person” who was a source of such types of risks. Apparently, such specific action on the internet does not cause difficulties for young schoolchildren as opposed to skills of changing security settings that are mostly used by older children. Older schoolchildren marked the effectiveness of this strategy, while less than half of the children aged 9–12 could effectively change security settings in the case of cyberbullying.

Passive Strategies

When schoolchildren cope with cyberbullying they tend to use active strategies and not passive ones, while in the case of seeing sexual content, the latter are used more often than the former. Therefore, when seeing sexual content, “avoiding” and “distancing” were the most frequent coping strategies. Furthermore, in the case of exposure to sexual content children were likely either “to hope that the problem would go away by itself,” or “stopped using the internet for a while”; in the case of cyberbullying they preferred “deleting any message.” The percentage of such children who felt guilty in the case of cyberbullying was twice that of exposure to sexual content (see Tables 3 and 4).

Comparisons by gender revealed that girls exposed to cyberbullying feel guilty and delete messages more often than boys, while boys in such cases tend to stop using the internet for a while more often than girls. Boys facing sexual content felt guilty and used internet-specific passive strategies more often.

As schoolchildren grew older they seemed less likely to choose passive strategies. Not being ready to face such risks on the internet, younger children at the age of 9–12 preferred to stop using the internet for a while or, in the case of cyberbullying, “to delete any message,” and they considered such a strategy effective enough. The older children grew, the more they felt guilty for what happened.

The more upset schoolchildren were the more coping strategies they used. A high subjective importance of difficult situations inhibited children’s activity and determined their choice of passive strategies (especially for cyberbullying), and also specific internet-related strategies. Similar results were obtained for European children (Livingstone et al., 2012).

In general, the findings suggest that active strategies are generally chosen by schoolchildren twice as often in the case of cyberbullying than in case of exposure to sexual content. Such choice in favour of active strategies in the case of cyberbullying may be explained by the peculiarities of this difficult online situation: decrease of vulnerability and responsibility, anonymity, invisibility of emotional reaction, and speed of information distribution (see, for example, Joinson, 1998; Keith & Martin, 2005; Sparling, 2004). In the case of traditional bullying, active confrontation is generally used to face the situation. Among Russian schoolchildren such a strategy is also popular on the internet. But the online environment provides a wider range of technical options and expands the arsenal of strategies for active reaction, thereby reducing the level of direct confrontation as a coping strategy.

Active strategies in both cases appear to be formed according to a “planning” type of coping, while passive strategies could be attributed to “avoiding” and “distancing” types. Furthermore, in the case of cyberbullying, children tend to use the strategy of “avoiding,”

while in the case of exposure to sexual content, they prefer to choose the “distancing” strategy. Type of risk may explain the choice of strategy. Cyberbullying is a risk connected with communication and interpersonal relations on the internet that are often crossed over with real-life relations; thus this problem cannot be solved by the strategy of “not using the internet.” This is different from the situation of exposure to sexual content, which rarely occurs in the offline environment. The older children grow, the more often they apply active coping strategies in both cases, and the less often they use passive strategies of distancing or avoiding.

To cope with cyberbullying, children used both general and specific active strategies, as mentioned above, but in the case of sexual content, they prefer to use internet-specific actions. This seems especially characteristic for girls and children who are “very upset.” Gender differences in the choice of active coping strategies are related to the type of risk. In the case of cyberbullying, boys chose internet-specific strategies more often than girls, and in the case of sexual content, on the contrary, boys used a general active strategy. As children grow older, internet-specific coping strategies seem to become more preferable. This means that they become more competent internet users and start creating their online environment to function and interact with other users (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). Younger children who faced something unpleasant on the internet preferred to unplug their computer and thus escape from the problem; older children in such a situation tried to cope with the problem in their online environment. This was possible with the strategy of changing security settings with which children become more familiar as they grew older. This strategy allows them to change their online environment and to make it more secure, not only for coping with difficult online situations, but also for preventing new ones. Such a strategy is formed during the process of the development of internet user skills and can only be exploited in terms of such a cultural environment. Thus, internet-specific active strategies could be used as a new cultural means of coping.

In the case of cyberbullying, which is related to interpersonal relationships and is experienced as more difficult, children preferred active coping strategies. The type of difficult online situation was also affected by the gender preferences of general or internet-specific active strategies. With age, children, regardless of the type of risk, chose passive strategies less often, and more often preferred internet-specific active strategies, such as “changing filter/contact settings.”

Social Support and Significant Others

Coping based on social support was ranked second in relation to both cyberbullying and sexual content. More than two-thirds of children faced with cyberbullying and almost half exposed to sexual content sought social support. Where did they manage to find the support—within an online or offline environment? To answer this question we divided sources of social support into three categories:

- *Offline*: parents, siblings, teachers, and any professionals whose job is to help children, i.e., those who a child deals with offline.
- *Online*: this could be either (a) a direct technical support team such as consultants and providers or (b) friends who are online— 69 per cent of 9- to 10-year-olds had more than 10 friends on social networking sites and 28 per cent more than 50 friends. Children aged 15–16 increased their communication circle to 100 friends and more, with almost half of

Russian schoolchildren communicating online with those they had never met in real life. The older children were, the more such friends they had.

- *"Undefined"*: "other adults" whom a child trusts or "someone else"—people a child could contact, both online and offline.

The findings suggested that online sources are considered preferable. Among online sources, children tended to resort mostly to their friends—every second child told a friend about a difficult online situation. Consultant or provider assistance was requested in the case of exposure to sexual content more often than in the situation of cyberbullying, with still less than friends' support. Every fourth child shared their problem with parents, and every tenth with their siblings, but nobody resorted to their teachers or specialists working with children in the case of exposure to sexual content; only a minority of children asked their teachers or specialists working with children for assistance in the case of cyberbullying. The statistics on "undefined" sources were nearly the same—every tenth schoolchild for both situations.

Girls generally tended to ask for social support more often than boys. In the case of exposure to sexual content, boys resorted to "undefined" sources more often than girls. On growing older, children appear more likely to search for social support in the case of cyberbullying, peaking at the age of 13–14. Quite the opposite trend was observed in seeking social support in the case of exposure to sexual content, which became less common as children became older. Regardless of the type of risk, younger children more often looked for offline support than 13- to 16-year-olds.

Thus, resorting to informational, emotional, and effective support was the second important strategy for coping with difficult online situations, and was more popular in the case of cyberbullying among Russian schoolchildren. The analysis showed that friends turned out to be the main trusted people; parents served this purpose twice less frequently and siblings four times less frequently. Compared to Europe, Russian children were half as likely to seek support from parents. And approximately a fifth of the respondents talked to someone else. Teachers were ranked as last in this list.

In both situations, seeking online social support was observed twice as often as offline. Friends asked for support were the most frequent online source observed. Parents represented the offline source that prevailed. Thus, "significant others" proved an essential resource for coping strategy development, but in the online environment, "significant others" were represented not by parents but by online sources—predominantly friends. Let us assume that when friends were related to the category of online contacts, in spite of the above statistics for online communication, we deviated from the truth and the respondents communicated with some of their friends both online and offline, and with others only offline. Even when such inaccuracy is accepted, the data we obtained for all three categories of social support distinctly showed that the search for "significant others" as the most important resource of coping with difficult online situations shifted to the information and communication internet space. This confirms our assumption that, given the situation of a digital generation divide, adults, and parents in particular, are less likely to act as "significant others" for social support in difficult online situations.

Nearly half of the schoolchildren responded having their own ways of solving problems in the case of cyberbullying when selecting the answer "none of these." In the case of exposure to sexual content, that answer was even more popular. More than

two-thirds of respondents selected this answer at least once, twice as many as chose other types of coping strategies.

Russian schoolchildren revealed their own solutions to the problems of difficult online situations, selecting the answer “none of these” far more often than in the European results (Livingstone et al., 2012). This suggests that faced with the digital generation gap, Russian schoolchildren have been forced to create their own coping strategies in difficult online situations. Special educational programmes for children on safe internet use and coping with difficult situations have recently begun, which is in contrast to European countries that have had such strategies in place for some time. At present, however, Russian children might not know how to act in situations of encountering online risks, and try to do anything to cope.

Conclusion

The EU Kids Online II research revealed the modern online threats typical for European schoolchildren (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011). Russian research under this methodology has shown that the level of such threats regarding the Russian internet is significantly higher than the average European indices (Soldatova, 2011; Soldatova & Zotova, 2011). This can be explained by the high internet activity together with the younger age of users, the broad range of information and communication activities available, and the lack of control from adults as well as low parental awareness about internet threats (Soldatova & Zotova, 2011). According to the statistics, high levels of internet use by children and adolescents place Russia close to other Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic and Estonia, as well as the Nordic countries—Norway, Denmark, and Sweden (labelled “high use, high risk” countries by the EU Kids Online project). Our findings suggest that Russia is similar to (or exceeds) these countries also in the level of risk encountered by children (for Eastern European countries that have rapidly gained exposure to both the internet and to online risk, EU Kids Online has called these “new use, new risk” countries). Certainly Russia differs from the Southern European countries (such as Italy, Portugal, and Turkey) that tend to have moderate internet use and a low-to-medium level of online risk (Livingstone et al., 2011).

The national peculiarities of the spread and development of the internet in Russia have had an impact on the processes of the formation of children and adolescents’ coping online behaviour. As a result of the rapid entry of children into the chaotic and intensive development of the internet in Russia, and a significant digital generation divide, regarding opportunities and internet risks, Russian children are much more vulnerable and lonely than European children. Russian schoolchildren were more likely to encounter cyberbullying and sexual online content, which became new difficult life situations for them. Exposure to risk could lead to serious harm. Nevertheless, Russian schoolchildren, as well as European schoolchildren, tried to solve difficult life situations by means of a combination of common coping strategies and adopting new cultural techniques whereby the internet became the tool for solving problems that arose. The analysis of results has shown that in the course of intense interaction with the new environment and the use thereof, children formed skills to use such a new environment, and therefore became capable of active, not passive, actions, including in such difficult online situations as cyberbullying, for example. As the children grew older, those who used the internet learned how to use it as a tool for solving problems, and this was shown by their use of specific

internet safety skills, for example, “changing filter/contact settings.” Such new cultural means of coping with difficult online situations have become common skills for many schoolchildren using the internet.

A significant digital divide has reduced the ability of Russian adults to support children in difficult online situations. Russian parents were less aware of online risks and threats and were less confident in security issues than European parents (Soldatova et al., 2011; Soldatova & Rasskazova, 2012). Accordingly, Russian children were half as likely to turn to their parents for support than their European peers. “Significant other,” which is an important element of the process of passing through a difficult life situation and choosing a strategy of coping with it in a new social situation of development, began to transfer from offline to online. Data on difficult online situations related to cyberbullying and seeing sexual content clearly showed that in these particular situations, solving problems and the potential of social support resources was concentrated on the other side of the monitor—online. It seems that this was one of the reasons why, for Russian schoolchildren, a very important place among coping strategies was occupied by so-called “other strategies,” by which they could carry out personal development, self-realization, and self-regulation online independently of adults. The internet and the global network further strengthened the strong position of peers and friends as opposed to parents and other grown-ups. The online environment started to aggressively compete with the offline environment, as related to significant social relations currently considered by many researchers as the context for the development of coping behaviour. Parents and close grown-ups obtained serious online competitors in the rating of “significant others” for their children, which may become a source of failure in overcoming difficulties and the negative psychological consequences related therewith, as well as unconstructive and deviant methods of coping with difficult online and offline situations.

A comparative analysis of the experience of European and Russian schoolchildren in difficult online situations showed that at the present time, Russian children are forming coping strategies without the active and competent support of adults. In this regard, programmes of awareness-raising about child safety on the internet are particularly important in Russia. However, Russia is developing internet safety initiatives for children. In autumn 2012, two federal laws began to operate in Russia: “On the protection of children from information that causes harm to their health and development” and the law devoted to the creation of the registry of prohibited sites (the creation of “black lists”) to filter negative content in three areas: child pornography; methods of manufacturing, use and distribution of narcotic drugs; and information and incitement to commit suicide. The laws received a wide response and the support of the Russian population (73 per cent of Russians, according to VTsIOM [All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion]), but split the internet community in two. Among the most discussed disadvantages was the development of law without regard to the technological peculiarities of the functioning of the internet and, therefore, the difficulties in implementing the laws. One of the obvious advantages of the appearance and wide public discussion of the laws is the awareness-raising of adults about the existence of online risks. But the difficult here lies in raising false hopes about the effectiveness of technical solutions, an illusory sense of security for children in connection with the adoption of these laws. In parallel with the introduction of these laws in Russia new federal government standards for general education have come into force. They (in particular the standard for primary schools) also focus on issues of digital literacy. Education rather than regulation is the basis of child safety on the internet. With the existing digital divide between generations it also means special attention to the issue

of the increasing digital literacy of adult Russians. We hope that the results obtained in Europe and in Russia in the EU Kids Online project will be useful in creating educational programmes on digital literacy. The results of this research have already been used in practical recommendations for parents and teachers, and in safe internet courses for children and adolescents.

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