



THE SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIDEO GAMES USED TO SPREAD PORNOGRAPHY:

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Omegle	4
Snapchat	5
TikTok	7
Facebook	8
Instagram	9
YouTube	10
Roblox	11
Fortnite	12
Grand Theft Auto (GTA)	13
Pinterest	14
Discord	15
Summary and Recommendations	16

Introduction

Parents and other caregivers are in a key position to protect young people from hypersexualized media and pornographic images, and to ensure that their children are safe from online predators. Our research team has interviewed 50 front-line health care workers whose jobs bring them in contact with children suspected of being sexually abused. In our interviews, we learned of the many ways the internet in general, and social media and video games in particular, may be vehicles for exposing children to pornographic content and/or to potential child predators. The front-line workers reported that some predators made “friends” with children through these sites and then asked them, -- or lured them with money or gifts -- to submit sexually explicit photographs and/or videos.

Front-line workers also identified the sites as granting too much agency to younger kids and teens when it came to their online presence, especially considering the increase of sexualization within the media. The specific websites the front-line workers mentioned, along with descriptions, policies on privacy, and information about how these policies are being circumvented, are detailed below. We hope that this information will help parents and caregivers better protect children from online adult content.

Omegle



Slogan: Talk to Strangers!

Founded: 2009

Access: The site is available on a computer, tablet, or smartphone

Description on the site: "Omegle (*oh·meg·ull*) is a great way to meet new friends. When you use Omegle, you are paired randomly with another person to talk one-on-one. If you prefer, you can add your interests and you'll be randomly paired with someone who selected some of the same interests."

How it works: Omegle is simple in its design and ability. Users can video or text chat with strangers by clicking the "start chatting" button. There is the option to enter into the "unmoderated section" which is a feature only available if you choose to start a video chat. Users can enter their interests into a search bar or to click the "college student chat" button. Once users click their chat options, they are immediately paired with another user, though they can choose to leave the chat at any time, or click a button that pairs them immediately with a new user. Once users exit the chat or are paired with another user, there is no way to go back into a room or access a user they were previously paired with.

Guidelines and privacy: Omegle "requires" that their users be over the age of 18, though they do not verify a user's age. Chats are anonymous and users are "recommended to not share their personal information." Omegle states that the general video section is moderated, but notes that "no moderation is perfect," and therefore all users are "solely responsible for their behavior while on Omegle." On the webpage, there is a statement in large font that says, "Video is monitored, keep it clean", though they offer an unmonitored video chat option. There is a link to community guidelines as well as a guide to setting up parental controls for the site. There is a clause under the general description of the site that states if users would prefer to use an adult site and are 18 or older, they can visit a third-party site that is linked on their page, though unaffiliated with Omegle. Users must agree to Omegle's terms and conditions, as well as community guidelines before entering any chat rooms. In the community guidelines, there is an email that Omegle encourages users to contact if they feel there is a user that is being inappropriate. However, with the quick pace of switching from chat to chat, this can be difficult for users to track.

Victimization and perpetration: Front-line workers identified multiple young women, who were victims of repeated sexual assault, who used Omegle to chat with older male strangers. The victims continued to use Omegle to not only share pornographic content of themselves but also to make money off that content. **In general, Omegle largely increases the opportunity for strangers to access younger teens and kids, which puts them at risk of being victimized by online predators.**

Snapchat



Slogan: The fastest way to share a moment!

Founded: 2011

Access: Computer, tablet, or smartphone

How it works: Snapchat is more advanced in its abilities than Omegle. Users have the ability to take photos and videos, and even to make movies and send them to friends, or post them on their individual Snapchat “stories” (which are accessible and “up” for 24 hours). Users can save these creations to their own Snapchat camera roll. Users also can chat with other individual users or create Snapchat group chats to send photos, videos, or start chats. More recently, Snapchat has allowed users to video chat or call other friends via Snapchat. Snapchat also has a “My Eyes Only” section of the camera roll, which is locked by a password created by the user. Snapchat also allows users to send and receive payments.

Guidelines and privacy: Snapchat stories are only up for 24 hours, so if a user has not saved the photo or video to their own Snapchat camera roll, it will disappear after 24 hours, though Snapchat has claimed it has the ability to recover photos and chats. Users can choose who views their story from their friend list. There is a public Snapchat story, which users can choose to post to and can be viewed by anyone who chooses to, regardless of “friend” status on Snapchat.

- Unless a photo or chat is saved to the chat directly by a user, then whatever is sent between users automatically disappears once a person leaves the app. Saving chats and photos is simple -- users simply have to long press the photo or the app and the image or chat message saves. Users can screenshot chats as well, though it notifies the other user if they screenshot a chat between the two users.
- Users can choose what level of privacy they want on their app. There is the ability to only allow users to Snapchat you if you are friends with them (which requires that you add them as a friend on Snapchat). Snapchat automatically syncs to your contacts, so anyone with a Snapchat account that is in your contacts will pop up with the “add” button next to their name. Though users can restrict people who Snapchat them to friends only, “bots” will semi-frequently still send you chats. Like a text message, users have the ability to delete the chat and block users. Users also have the option to turn on their location for all their friends, specific friends, or no one. Those with their location turned on can be found on the Snapchat map, as well as the last time they were active on the app.

- There is an age minimum of 13 for those who wish to sign up for Snapchat, though there is no age verification process so technically anyone with an email or a phone number can sign up. Snapchat does not regulate anything that is posted or shared on the app.

Victimization and perpetration: Many front-line health care workers stated that a large percentage of teens have sent or received nudes on Snapchat due to the 24-hour expiration of images. Additionally, Snapchat was mentioned in conversations on sex trafficking and prostitution. Photos taken and posted on the app were posted on external websites and distributed for money. More commonly, young teens take and distribute their own sexually explicit photos among peers both consensually and nonconsensually. In many of these instances, young teens are not aware that they are creating and distributing child pornography. In less common but still existing cases, teens had secret Snapchat accounts where they were engaging in sexual behavior with strangers and some peers.

TikTok



Slogan: Make Your Day!

Founded: 2016

Access: Tablet, smartphone, computer

How it works: Users can make 15-second to 3-minute-long videos that are posted to the “for you page.” The “for you page” is a general feed of TikTok videos on a variety of topics. Users can send TikToks to friends, like posts, comment on posts, and repost TikToks. There is an additional “following page” which only includes the posts of people that you follow.

Guidelines and privacy: TikTok users are required to be 13 years of age or older and will take down any accounts that are suspected to be run by those younger than 13, but typically the account has gone “viral” or collected enough likes to be on the radar of TikTok. If a TikTok video or account is suspected of violating any of the user guidelines, the video will be taken down and the account will be suspended. Users can make their entire profile private, or they can keep it public. TikToker users also can change their privacy settings to make individual posts visible to their friends, the general public, or private to only themselves.

Victimization and perpetration: In our conversations with front-line health care workers, sites like TikTok were used by perpetrators to start conversations with younger teens and children. Once a relationship was formed, the perpetrator would often ask the victim to send them photos or videos either on the direct message (DM) feature or offline. Due to the increased sexual nature of a lot of media, teens are at risk of being exposed to hypersexualized and pornographic images on sites like TikTok. In some cases, the sexual material on TikTok was the inspiration for teen-on-teen sexual assaults. Health care workers also warned about how much agency was being given to underage teens and children when it came to their safety online, particularly when looking at how many kids have TikTok.

Facebook



Slogan: It's quick and easy.

Founded: 2004

Access: Tablet, smartphone, computer

How it works: Facebook users sign up and have the ability to post on their own page, which is called their "wall." Users can also post on their friend's walls or group page's walls. Posts can include text, photos, videos, and links to other pages/content. Facebook has advanced features such as going "live" which is a live feed that friends and nonfriends have access to joining. Users' profile pages include camera rolls, basic bio information, and lists of their other friends as well as Facebook groups they belong to. Users can repost their friend's content or general content they find on their homepage. Facebook additionally has a marketplace (where users can sell their items or list them for free) and the ability to play Facebook games with friends.

Guidelines and privacy: Users have the option to make their profile private or public. They also have the ability to control who can repost their posts or post on their wall. Essentially everything that is displayed on a user's homepage, they can control who can see what (for example, their list of friends can be set to only visible by other friends).

Users must be 13 years or older to join Facebook, and any user who appears to be younger will be removed from the site. Facebook has the ability to view users' location when they are active on the site, but users can make their location private to other friends.

Victimization and perpetration: In our conversations with front-line health care workers, sites like Facebook were used by older perpetrators to start conversations with younger teens and children. Health care workers discussed how existing pedophile communities will walk groomers/perpetrators through the process of grooming youth by using sites like Facebook to access younger kids. They are likely to start a conversation with a potential victim using direct message (DM) features and make the targeted victim feel as though they are involved in a special relationship. They may ask the victim to send them photos or videos either on the DM feature, or offline by text after they have created a form of trust between themselves and the victim. Younger girls have also been found to meet strangers their age on sites like Facebook, which occasionally led to sexual assault or rape. Health care workers noted that some teens are not aware that the content they are posting on Facebook is considered child pornography creation and distribution.

Instagram



Slogan: Capture and Share the World's Moments

Founded: 2010

Access: Laptops, tablets, phones

How it works: Users sign up using an email address and can personalize their own profile page. The Instagram app has a “following” home page and a “for you” page where they suggest content posted by people you don’t follow, but that the algorithm thinks you would like. Users can post photos or videos of themselves, as well as stories that last 24 hours. They can DM, as well as send photos or videos to one another. More recently, Instagram has created a “reels” page, which operates similar to TikTok, just on the Instagram app. Users can comment, like, and repost others’ posts. Users can post hashtags, which (if they are public) immediately adds the hashtags to their “feed.” To look at the feed of a hashtag, all you have to do is click on it or search it.

Guidelines and privacy: **Users must be at least 13 years old to sign up for their own Instagram account.** Users have the ability to make their profile private, which means they have to accept someone before that person can follow them. If they are public, then anyone can view their profile at any time and can begin following them without permission. Users can block other users entirely, or “mute” their posts, which means they will still follow them but will not see any of their posted content on their feed. If a user is private, their used hashtags will not add their content to the hashtag’s feed.

- Instagram’s DM feature, even when private, does not exclude users from getting contacted by “Instagram bots,” which are accounts run by robots posing as real people. A lot of their content will include sexually explicit material. Instagram “filters” these bots by creating a “hidden request” inbox within the general DM inbox. To access this inbox, the user has to click through their inbox, as they will not be notified if a robot contacts them. Users have the ability to block these contacts immediately. If you are private and get contacted by anyone who is not following you, robot or not, Instagram will also ask you to confirm whether you want to receive a message from the person.

Victimization and perpetration: Front-line workers identified Instagram as an app where strangers may attempt to form a relationship with younger teens or kids. Additionally, it was identified as an app where peers may distribute their own sexually explicit material to one another.

YouTube



Slogan: Broadcast Yourself

Founded: 2005

Access: Tablet, smartphone, smart TV, computer

How it works: Users sign up using their email and immediately have access to millions of videos and shorts on all topics. Users can make and post their own videos to their YouTube profile. Users can subscribe to other users, which essentially means they follow that user. Users can like, dislike, and comment on other videos, or save them to their watchlist to watch later. YouTube has more recently added a YouTube TV feature which, for a fee, gives users access to cable shows and movies. Users also can pay for movies and certain TV shows on the general YouTube site. In addition, users can go on YouTube Live, where they can stream live content of whatever they choose.

Guidelines and privacy: Users must be at least 13 years old to sign up for their own YouTube account, but YouTube states that users of all ages are welcome to watch videos on the platform without an account. Users can turn on “restricted mode” which hides any inappropriate content, though YouTube states that “no filter is 100% accurate.” Users also can turn their YouTube on “kid mode” for a certain period of time or permanently, where they will only show material appropriate for children. Users also can block words on their YouTube channel, which will prevent any related videos to the word from showing up. Users also can make any video on their page private to only themselves, or they can post it to the general public. Any inappropriate content that violates the YouTube community guidelines will be removed if it is repeatedly flagged. Users can block other users or report individual videos.

Victimization and perpetration: Health care workers identified the dangers of “auto-play” on YouTube, and the general access to sexualized material. Multiple workers recounted how young children had accidentally stumbled upon pornographic content while attempting to watch non-sexually explicit videos. Even older teens noted how their usage of pornography was in part sparked by accidental exposure to sexually explicit material on YouTube.

Roblox



Slogan: Powering Imagination

Founded: 2004

Access: Xbox, smartphone, computer

How it works: Roblox is an online video game platform that allows users to create games as well as play other users' games. All you have to do is sign up and you immediately have access to an "infinite" number of games that have been created. Users can add friends on Roblox as well as chat with them in a video, audio, or text setting. There are all types of games available, from gun-shooting war games to golf to car racing.

Guidelines and privacy: Because Roblox has millions of games, with new ones being created daily, it is impossible to ensure that every game is safe. Role-playing games are a common form of game found on Roblox, which can include sexually explicit actions or images. Inappropriate material or users can and have been reported to Roblox, in which case they are often removed from the gaming platform. In "settings", users can filter chat options as well as flag any inappropriate material. Chat or video settings can be turned off entirely if a user chooses. **Roblox does not have a minimum age to join the platform.**

Victimization and perpetration: Older teens and adults will chat with kids, particularly younger kids, and initiate friendships with them, eventually asking them for explicit photos. While none of the health care workers identified the content of Roblox as dangerous to kids, due to the immense number of games created it is likely that sexually explicit material exists on Roblox. Roblox's chat function was identified as something that can put kids at risk of victimization.

Fortnite



Slogan: More Fun, Less Grind

Founded: 2017

Access: smartphone, Xbox

How it works: Users create a profile and are put in a collaborative game setting with other users (up to 100) where they essentially fight in a Hunger Games-like style until there is one final winner. Fortnite also has a team setting, where players can form teams of up to four and play against other teams until there is one final team remaining. Users can friend other users. Fortnite also gives users the ability to video or audio chat with other users. There is a creative mode on Fortnite where users can build structures (a major part of the fighting portion of the game) or roam around the different Fortnite maps.

Regulations and privacy: Fortnite recommends that users be aged 13 or up, though they also state that “every child is different” and do not actively restrict users by age. Users can join by signing up with an email address. The video and audio chat are unmoderated on Fortnite, meaning a user must be directly and repeatedly flagged to Fortnite in order to get removed. Fortnite has three levels of privacy settings: public, friends, or private, which dictates who is allowed to join Fortnite teams or chat with the user.

Victimization and perpetration: Older teens and adults will chat with kids, particularly younger kids, on Fortnite and initiate friendships with them, eventually asking them for explicit photos. The content of Fortnite’s gameplay was not noted by the front-line health care workers interviewed as sexually explicit, but the chat ability was identified as something that may put younger teens and kids at risk.

Grand Theft Auto (GTA)

*This was referenced for having sexually explicit media in it

Slogan: Whatever it takes, kid, survive!

Founded: 1997

Access: PlayStation 5 (PS5) and Xbox



How it works: GTA is an action-based adventure game that can be played either in first-person or third-person. Players must complete missions to progress through the story.

Explicit material: Nudity is present on two separate occasions in GTA. The first occasion is a strip club where a topless woman is shown dancing and the second is a location that includes a male cult member with exposed genitalia (in a non-sexual context). There also is the implication of a sexual encounter with a prostitute in some storylines of GTA, where the user can enter a car with the prostitute and the car jumps/jerks up and down to imply they are having sex, though nothing is explicitly shown or heard. Players can do this to "get ahead" in the game if the prostitute game player has access to information that can help the player complete their mission. There are, however, ways around this where the user can still complete their mission without the prostitute.

Restrictions: GTA has no built-in parental controls and there is no way to restrict any material in the game. GTA offers voice or text chat, and there are ways to control the chat settings. Users can restrict their chats to friends, the public, or no one. **The age restriction for GTA is 18+, but there is no active restriction from the company so technically anyone can play it if they get a copy or download it directly to Xbox or PS5.**

Victimization and perpetration: While health care workers did not note GTA usage as a way that victims were found by perpetrators, they have noted that there is explicit material in the game that may not be healthy for kids to access.

Pinterest



Slogan: Wholly. Forever and always.

Founded: 2010

Access: Computers, tablets, smartphones

How it works: Pinterest is a social network site where people can find inspiration for their hobbies, recipes, clothes, makeup, DIY crafts, etc. in photo and video form. Users create their own profiles and can create Pinterest boards, which they can organize by theme and keep the pins they like organized and easily accessible. Pinterest boards can be shared with friends or with the public. Like many social media sites there is a home page that shows “pins,” or photos/videos, of people or topics they follow. There is an additional “today” page that shows general pins that were popular at the time. Users have the ability to DM friends or other Pinterest members.

Guidelines and privacy: Unlike many social media sites, Pinterest is one of the only ones that is not blocked on school laptops, which can be problematic given the DM feature and access to the general public. **Pinterest requires that users be over the age of 13, through a third-party age-verification process.** Pinterest allows users to control who mentions them in posts and who can DM them. Users can turn on filtered comments and block other users.

Victimization and perpetration: Though Pinterest was not directly mentioned by any health care workers, they did mention that students’ access to social media sites through school laptops or computers puts them at risk of either accessing pornography or potentially offending against a peer or relative.

******It is important to note that as of March 2023, Pinterest added new safety features as a result of an NBC investigation that found adult men were creating “sex-themed” Pinterest boards of images of younger girls. Pinterest boards can now be reported for “nudity, explicit content, or pornography” that “leads to the abuse of minors.” Pinterest plans to hire human reviewers to monitor Pinterest boards, as well as an age verification feature that strictly blocks underage users from joining Pinterest.

Discord



Slogan: Create Space for Everyone to Find Belonging

Founded: 2015

Access: Computers, tablets, smartphones

How it works: Discord is a platform where users can chat with friends or strangers. There are apps for Discord, or it can be accessed through a website link in any browser. The Discord platform consists of different servers created by other users, and each server acts as its own Discord platform with separate rules and purposes. Some servers, also referred to as forums, are private, while others are public. People create servers based on their likes and dislikes or create online groups based on offline organizations/groups/clubs. For example, someone can create a group for users who enjoy watching Survivor, live in a certain area, or enjoy live jazz music. Servers are visible to all Discord users, but some may require passwords or permission from whoever owns that particular server to join the group and see/post content on the forum. Once on a server, users have the option to text or audio chat.

Guidelines and privacy: Every Discord server has its own rules and guidelines that are determined by the creator of that particular server. **Discord says that every user must be at least 13 years old, but there are no age-verification procedures in place.** In terms of individual profiles, users can control how much information they display about themselves. Discord itself has the option to hide any inappropriate/NSFW servers. It also allows you to block unknown users from messaging you. Because Discord shows the users on a server, your activity is, by default, shown to other users. However, Discord allows users to adjust their activity settings and can choose to keep their status as "Idle" or "Offline" if they prefer for users to not see what they are doing.

Victimization and perpetration: Because every server creates its own rules, it is impossible to ensure safety when using Discord. Like many platforms, Discord allows users to submit reports if they believe something unsafe or inappropriate is happening on a server. However, whoever created the server is ultimately in control of creating the rules. Because servers are generally created based on the likes and interests of users, perpetrators may be able to intentionally reach young people by strategically joining servers that target younger age groups. The rules and guidelines are left up to the users, which can be unsafe.

Summary and Recommendations

In brief, social media websites and video games can serve as vehicles for exposing children to sexual victimization. The three most common themes front-line health care workers identified were:

1. Content from these websites, platforms, and games may be suggestive or explicit; auto-play features mean that even if youth are not seeking sexually explicit content, they may be exposed to it.
2. Direct message (DM) features built into games and social media sites may be used by potential predators to initiate “friendships” with youth, which are then used to request explicit photographs. Occasionally DMs may be used to arrange in-person meetings, with sexual assault being one terrible outcome of such meetings.
3. Youth may be engaging with peers on apps such as Snapchat, sending suggestive photos of themselves with the expectation that these will not be shared with others (or with the understanding that these photos or videos will be automatically deleted or can only be accessed by select people). But the ability to screen capture and share these, without the person’s permission, remains a risk. Furthermore, youth often do not realize they are violating federal laws about the production and distribution of child pornography when they create and share this content.

What Can Parents/Caregivers Do?

Front-line health care workers often discussed the importance of limiting children’s unsupervised access to social media and internet-connected devices.

Front-line health care workers also encouraged parents to create an environment where children feel open to discussing what they encounter online, intentionally or unintentionally. Often, young people are not aware of the consequences of certain activities online. Creating an open line of communication between parents and young people may help decrease the harms when encountering sexually explicit material and/or prevent the legal consequences of self-production and distribution on social media apps.

Many front-line health care workers are seeing an increase in the harms of young people being exposed to hypersexualized and pornographic content within media. They stressed the need to help young people understand the consequences of posting on a public platform. Educating parents and young people on the consequences of a digital footprint may help prevent future victimization.

Beyond an increase in parental supervision and awareness of youth activity online, front-line health care workers emphasized that schools' sex education programs need to explain the potential dangers of online activity for youth. According to front-line workers, schools should be educating young people on the dangers of grooming and online predators in a manner that builds resilience and resistance to hypersexualized media and pornography.

Authors of this Guide:

Callen Leahy, M.S., Virginia Tech; calleahy@vt.edu

Sarah Aadahl, M.A., Virginia Tech; seaadahl@vt.edu

Jennifer A. Johnson, Ph.D., Virginia Tech; jajohnson@vt.edu

Matthew Ezzell Ph.D., James Madison University; ezzellmb@jmu.edu

Chyng-Feng Sun, Ph.D., New York University; cfs1@nyu.edu

Ana Bridges, Ph.D., University of Arkansas; abridges@uark.edu