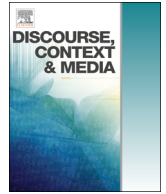




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Understanding grooming discourse in computer-mediated environments



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ABSTRACT

Online grooming affects a significant number of children and teenagers. Yet research into its characteristics is scarce. This study uses a Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis approach (Herring, 2004, 2013) in order to examine a corpus of online grooming chat logs (c. 75,000 words) from Perverted-Justice.com. Results reveal the following idiosyncratic features: (1) a marked used of explicit and direct sexual solicitation; (2) a wide range of deceptive trust development strategies; and (3) an emphasis on testing the victim's compliance levels throughout the entire chat log and beyond groomers' secrecy and exclusivity establishing concerns. Online grooming is found to operate as a complex interactional network and to encompass different groomer profiles. To accommodate these findings, a new model of online grooming discourse is proposed.

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1. Introduction

Online grooming (OG) is broadly understood as the process whereby an adult seeks to arrange a sexually abusive situation with a minor through the use of cyber-technology, such as mobile telephones, internet games and chat rooms. OG affects a significant proportion of children and teenagers. A recent National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) survey completed by 1024 11–16 year old holders of social network profiles reveals that 12% of them received unwanted sexual messages whilst online (Lilley et al., 2014). The most recent OFCOM *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*¹ concludes that, although 8% of children aged 8–11 and 18% of those aged 12–15 who go online and acknowledge exposure to sexually offensive content report that they “know the sorts of actions they should avoid online, they do not necessarily act accordingly” (2014, p. 10). Similarly, the UK-based *Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre* (2012) reports a significant rise in the illegal online distribution and trade of indecent images of children, and that

these images have become “more extreme, sadistic and violent” (2012, p. 4).

Despite the increase in OG, research into its many aspects is scant. For instance, whereas for offline grooming different vulnerability and risk-taking levels in relation to victims' age, gender, and psychological traits have been identified (e.g., Vizard, 2013), research into OG has yet to generate robust socio-demographic victim and groomer profiles. Similarly, research into the exact scale of OG is underdeveloped, since the nature of the problem and the vulnerability of victims mean that many cases go unreported (Davidson and Gottschalk, 2011).

The scarcity of research into OG is also reflected in a certain over-reliance within OG research on what we know about grooming in offline settings. A number of OG definitions, for example, simply refer to it as grooming that happens online.² Also, a number of software products claim to be able to catch paedophiles online. Yet, the researchers behind the development of preventive technology are rightly cautious, for their research has tended to adopt theoretical models of offline grooming rather than test and adapt them to online contexts (see Gupta et al., 2012). Kontostathis et al. (2009) claim to base their technological outputs

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¹ OFCOM is the Independent Regulator and Competition Authority for the UK Communications Industries (<http://www.ofcom.org.uk/>).

² See, for example, <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/grooming/what-is-grooming/>.

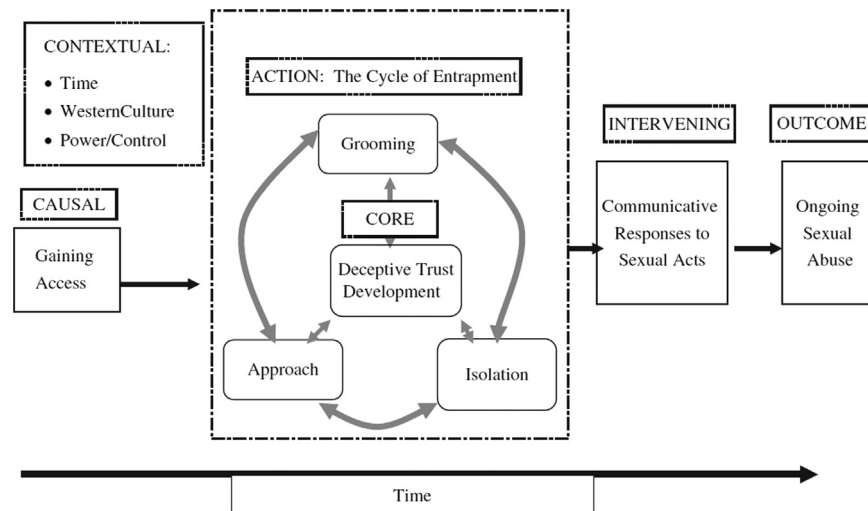


Fig. 1. Olson et al.'s (2007) Model of luring communication.

on an OG model that expands and/or modifies the offline grooming model developed by Olson et al. (2007). However, this amounts to their making two small changes: (1) including within the category of gaining access to victims “the initial entrance into the online environment and initial greeting exchange by offenders and victims”, and (2) adding the “use of slang, abbreviations, net speak, and emoticons in online conversations” to one of the previously identified offline grooming stages (Kontostathis et al., 2009, p. 2). The features referred to in both changes are far from idiosyncratic: gaining access to an online environment necessarily requires entering it; greetings are commonplace interactional openings across many contexts, both on- and off- line; and slang, net speak and so forth pervade across many Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environments. It is thus unsurprising that a missing element in the development of OG detection software seems to be “clarification within the [discourse] categories” (Kontostathis et al., 2009, p. 11).

Future detection software development, therefore, should be grounded on a better understanding of the discourse of OG, which is the principal aim of the present study. In doing so, we endorse Walther's (2010) call for CMC research to pursue a comparative, online-offline agenda without which the analysis of online behaviour may “lead to artificial conclusions” (p. 471). This seems especially relevant to grooming, where claims that online and offline grooming differ in a number of crucial respects (O'Connell, 2003) have only begun to be investigated (see e.g., Webster et al., 2014; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2015; Black et al., 2015).

2. (Online) grooming and discourse

Although there is no universally-accepted definition of grooming (see McAlinden, 2012), it is generally understood as a “process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure” (Craven et al., 2006, p. 292). The most comprehensive theoretical model of off-line grooming to date was developed by Olson et al (2007). This is based on an extensive review of multi-discipline literature and

characterises grooming as a process of communicative deviance (see Fig. 1).

As shown in Fig. 1, this communicative process, which Olson et al (2007) label ‘luring’, commences with groomers gaining access to their victims and communicating their desire for sexual acts. The intended outcome is always the sexual abuse of minors. Deceptive trust development constitutes the core phase within the luring cycle of entrapment and entails a series of moves through which groomers cultivate their victims' trust for deceiving purposes. Once the victims' trust has been gained, the next phase of the luring process begins, which Olson et al (2007) call grooming. This sets the stage for future sexual contact via a number of strategies that fall into two categories: desensitization and reframing. Desensitization entails verbally and physically desensitizing the children to sexual contact; reframing consists of presenting sexual activity between children and adults as if it were of benefit to the child later in life. The cycle of entrapment is also developed through two other phases: isolation and approach. Isolation consists of two, non-mutually exclusive forms: physical and mental. Approach constitutes the final phase of the cycle of entrapment and refers to groomers' attempts to meet their victims in order to abuse them sexually. It requires deceptive trust to have been established and isolation to be quite pronounced.

Although Olson et al.'s (2007) work has arguably had the highest uptake in subsequent research into OG, there are other OG models. One of them, by O'Connell (2003), is based on observation of approximately 50 h of online grooming interactions with its author posing as an 8, 10 or 12 year old child, typically female, in chat rooms or online channels intended for child or teenage users. O'Connell's (2003) model includes six sequential phases: (1) Friendship forming: the online groomer gets to know the child; (2) Relationship forming: the online groomer seeks to create the illusion of being the child's best friend; (3) Risk assessment: the online groomer assesses the likelihood of his activities being detected by the child's parent(s), guardian, or older siblings; (4) Exclusivity: the online groomer seeks to introduce “a mutual respect club”, comprised of him and the child, which must remain a secret from all others; (5) Sexual: the online groomer introduces sexual topics; and (6) Concluding: the online groomer seeks to strengthen his relationship with the child to reduce the child's fear and the possibility of his (the groomer) being caught.

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