



Research article

A linguistic analysis of grooming strategies of online child sex offenders: Implications for our understanding of predatory sexual behavior in an increasingly computer-mediated world[☆]



Pamela J. Black^a, Melissa Wollis^b, Michael Woodworth^{a,*}, Jeffrey T. Hancock^b

^a University of British Columbia, Centre for the Advancement of Psychological Science and Law, ASC II 205, 3187 University Way, Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7, Canada

^b Cornell University, 320 Kennedy Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA

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ABSTRACT

There is a large body of evidence to suggest that child sex offenders engage in grooming to facilitate victimization. It has been speculated that this step-by-step grooming process is also used by offenders who access their underage victims online; however, little research has been done to examine whether there are unique aspects of computer-mediated communication that impact the traditional face-to-face grooming process. This study considered the similarities and differences in the grooming process in online environments by analyzing the language used by online offenders when communicating with their victims. The transcripts of 44 convicted online offenders were analyzed to assess a proposed theory of the online grooming process (O'Connell, 2003). Using a stage-based approach, computerized text analysis examined the types of language used in each stage of the offender–victim interaction. The transcripts also were content analyzed to examine the frequency of specific techniques known to be employed by both face-to-face and online offenders, such as flattery. Results reveal that while some evidence of the strategies used by offenders throughout the grooming process are present in online environments, the order and timing of these stages appear to be different. The types (and potential underlying pattern) of strategies used in online grooming support the development of a revised model for grooming in online environments.

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With the continued growth and use of the Internet as a tool for communication worldwide, the manner in which people interact with one another is in a state of constant evolution. Although individuals from every generation are spending a substantial amount of time online, it has become particularly socially acceptable for younger individuals to form friendly and intimate relationships with strangers online (Visser, Antheunis, & Schouten, 2013; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). A critical and very real concern with this, still relatively new, manner of forming relationships is that youth may be unknowingly forming bonds and sharing personal information with individuals with devious intentions, such as those hoping to identify potential victims for sexual assault (e.g., Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). Approximately 80% of Canadian households have Internet access and 95% of American teens are using the Internet

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* Corresponding author address: University of British Columbia, Centre for the Advancement of Psychological Science and Law, ASC II 205, 3187 University Way, Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7, Canada.

(PewInternet, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2011), creating a large population of youth who are at risk of becoming victims of online crimes, including those that are sexual in nature.

The issue of online sexual predation has increasingly become the focus of research over the past decade (Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2013; Wright, 2009). A survey conducted in the United States revealed that as far back as 2001 (relatively early in the use of widespread online communication) approximately one in five youth were already being solicited for sex online annually (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001). Further, 3% reported receiving messages requesting offline contact and 5% had received a solicitation that made them feel very afraid or upset. A follow-up study five years later revealed that since the initial assessment, there was a 21% increase in the number of offenders arrested for soliciting sex from youth online (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010). These concerning numbers appear to be getting progressively worse, with more than 700,000 registered online sex offenders in the United States as of June 2010 (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2010).

The most common victims of online sexual solicitation (and subsequent offline offending) are adolescents aged 13–17 years (Katz, 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004). Although only a small percentage of these teens will ultimately be physically sexually assaulted, the consequences of both sexual abuse and forming a relationship with an offender online can be severe. Not only does such sexual abuse incur physical harm, it also can adversely impact a child's cognitive, emotional, academic, and psychological development (Dombrowski, Ahia, & McQuillan, 2003; Young & Widom, 2014). For these reasons, among others, it is crucial to understand the manner in which offenders target and pursue their victims to ensure that offenders are identified and intercepted as quickly as possible, before any abuse can occur.

Considering face-to-face predation, the process employed by many offenders to target and entrap victims is most commonly referred to as "grooming" (Finkelhor, 1984; Knoll, 2010; Lang & Frenzel, 1988; Sullivan, 2009). Grooming involves a specific set of steps that an offender employs with the intention of committing a sexual offence against a child, with specific goals including secrecy, compliance and ultimately gaining access to the child (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Offenders use specific strategies (such as flattery) to coerce their victim into a sexual relationship and then use different strategies (such as threats or intimidation) to ensure that their victim remains complicit and keeps the nature of their relationship a secret (Craven et al., 2006; Knoll, 2010; Lang & Frenzel, 1988).

Although these particular tactics are used to lure victims in face-to-face offending, less is known about their use and effectiveness in computer-mediated offending. Of the early attempts to study this process in online settings, the most frequently cited model of grooming was proposed by O'Connell (2003) who posited a five-stage process that includes (1) friendship forming, (2) relationship forming, (3) risk assessment, (4) exclusivity, and (5) sexual stages. In the *Friendship Forming Stage*, the offender makes contact with, and gets to know, the target. They use small talk to subtly gather information about the target's life such as their age, gender, and interests. This stage may be re-visited numerous times depending on the level of contact the offender maintains with the victim. In the *Relationship Forming Stage*, the offender forms a bond with the target by discussing his/her friends, family, school and social life. The offender acts compassionate and understanding to attempt to gain the trust of the target. The *Risk Assessment Stage* is when the offender begins to inquire about the target's location, schedule, and the target's parent's schedule, using this information to determine the likelihood of being caught. The offender may begin to introduce sexual topics in this stage to assess whether the target will be likely to engage in sexual activity (Harms, 2007). In the *Exclusivity Stage* the offender attempts to establish a trusting but exclusive relationship with the target. They encourage the target to not disclose the nature of their relationship to others, and ensure the target's silence with various techniques such as playing on the target's guilt. Finally, in the *Sexual Stage*, when it is clear to the offender that the victim trusts them, they become more explicit about their intentions with the target. The offender may send the target pornography, ask about the target's past sexual experiences, and detail the sexual acts that he wishes to perform on him/her (e.g., McFarlane, Bull, & Reitmeijer, 2000). It is in this final stage that they will begin to discuss traveling to meet the target.

This theory of online grooming, developed using subjective and qualitative data collection methods, has not yet been empirically tested. However, there have been a number of attempts to differentiate online from offline offenders, including a comparison of their demographic and clinical characteristics (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010; Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012; Walsh & Wolak, 2005). For example, Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann (2011) found online offenders to be younger, more likely to be single, and to feel greater empathy for their victims than their offline counterparts. Further, compared to face-to-face offenders there are arguably a wider variety of "types" of online offenders, including child pornographers, contact-driven offenders (offenders who groom for the purpose of offline sexual contact) and fantasy-driven offenders (offenders that are satisfied with keeping the relationship online; Seto et al., 2012). The needs and motivations of each of these offenders are diverse in ways that may be facilitated through online communication, from the profit driven offender who sells child pornography to online customers, to the fantasy-driven offender who is satiated by simply discussing taboo sexual topics with a minor online (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011; Marcum, 2007). The current study focuses on the behavior of contact-driven offenders whose goal is to meet a target online with the intent to ultimately offend against the child in an offline setting. Despite identifying some potential similarities and differences between online and offline offenders, the previously discussed research does not speak directly to the manner in which offenders identify and groom potential victims.

Other studies have more specifically attempted to determine the manner in which online and offline offenders target their victims (e.g., see Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013). However, these studies have had a number of limitations including relying on the self-report of both the offenders (e.g., Leclerc, Wortley, & Smallbone, 2011) and the adolescent victims (e.g., Katz, 2013), and the vast majority have also had to rely on small sample sizes (e.g., Katz, 2013;

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