



Invited Review

A systematic review of fantasy driven vs. contact driven internet-initiated sexual offences: Discrete or overlapping typologies?

Laura Jayne Broome^{a,*}, Cristina Izura^a, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus^b^a Psychology Department, College of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University, SA2 8PP, United Kingdom^b English Department, College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, SA2 8PP, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Within the literature individuals who use the internet to facilitate the sexual abuse of a minor are generally classified as being fantasy or contact driven. Classification is based upon the intended location for sexual climax: fantasy driven individuals aim to reach sexual climax online, whereas contact driven individuals target minors to achieve physical sex offline. This review systematically investigates whether there is an empirical basis for the distinction between these two proposed discrete types. Comparison of tactics and behaviour are considered to examine whether the contact vs. fantasy distinction is useful. A two-stage literature selection process, considered against pre-determined inclusion criteria, identified a total of twenty-two studies. As methodological heterogeneity limited the ability to conduct pooled analysis, a narrative synthesis of data employing an interpretive approach was conducted. This showed that the contact and fantasy distinction is ambiguous, given that both groups engage in online behaviours that provide them with online sexual gratification that can also lead to offline contact. Furthermore, no clear pattern of behaviour was found to define contact and fantasy individuals idiosyncratically. The European Online Grooming Project typology is thus proposed as a better representation of this behaviour; *intimacy seeking*, *adaptable* and *hypersexualized* groups. The distinction between these groups focuses primarily on the intensity of the relationship, acknowledging that sexual abuse can occur with or without offline contact. This review also highlights the need for larger, methodologically robust studies that examine the behaviour of online child sexual offenders.

1. Introduction

The later part of the 20th century was marked by the emergence of the digital age, a time when cyber technology rapidly grew to prevail as an integral part of life. Those that were children in the mid to late 1990s grew up with communications technology and became a generation of *digital natives*, whose way of socialising, learning, communicating and thinking was mediated by digital technology (Prensky, 2001). Within this technological advancement new threats to interpersonal and intergroup communications rose, including internet-initiated sexual offences against minors. An example of this is online grooming, understood as the process in which cyber technology is utilised by an adult to persuade a minor to engage in sexual activities (Lorenzo-Dus, Izura, & Pérez-Tattam, 2016). Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2016) identified online grooming as a communicative entrapment network, whereby groomers attempt to build an interpersonal relationship with the victim with the intent to lure them into online and/or offline sexual behaviour. Current definitions of online grooming focus on the way individuals develop an emotional connection with victims to prepare them for sexual abuse (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; O'Connell, 2003). Yet there are documented cases in which requests for

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: laura.broome@hotmail.co.uk (L.J. Broome), c.izura@swansea.ac.uk (C. Izura), n.lorenzo-dus@swansea.ac.uk (N. Lorenzo-Dus).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.021>

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sexual behaviour are made within minutes (for example, DeHart et al., 2017; O'Connell, 2003; Webster et al., 2012), possibly preceding the development of a relationship. The term 'online solicitation offenders' is also used to define those who use the internet to communicate with victims for sexual purposes (i.e. Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012; Schulz, Bergen, Schuhmann, Hoyer, & Santtila, 2015; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2018). Online solicitation focuses on the sexual nature of the interaction rather than the relationship. However, determining how to best categorise those individuals who use the internet to sexually exploit minors is still open to interpretation.

Determining with accuracy the frequency with which internet-initiated sexual offences occur against minors is unfeasible. Maalla (2009) reported the results of an international study, indicating that about 750,000 sexual predators are connected to the Internet at any one time. This figure is likely to have increased as online engagement has become an established childhood behaviour (Office of Communications (Ofcom) (2017)). Annual occurrences of youth reported online sexual solicitations have been estimated to range from 5% to 34% across America and Europe (Gamez-Guadix, Santisteban, & Alcazar, 2017; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). Yet the illegal and taboo nature of child sexual abuse, as well as the young age and vulnerability of the victims, prevents many children from reporting the abuse (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). This, coupled with the common *scatter-gun* approach of selecting multiple victims at the same time, means online predators' chances of success are high (Child Online Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (2013)).

Most of the research into internet related sex crimes focuses on the creation, use and distribution of child pornography (Faust, Bickart, Renaud, & Camp, 2015; Long, Alison, & Mcmanus, 2013; Ray, Kimonis, & Seto, 2014). Whilst we have recently seen a shift in research priorities to include that of online grooming and online solicitation, research in this area is still scarce and often relies on knowledge of offline abuse (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). However, online and offline abuse are distinct. For example, there are evidenced differences in the speed of grooming. Whereas grooming in offline settings is known to occur over a long time (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; McAlinden, 2013), the time between the initial contact and the offending outcome in an online setting is often brief (Child Online Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (2013); Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; Webster et al., 2012). Another crucial distinction is that individuals who exploit the internet for the sexual abuse of children do not always intend to have physical contact with their victims. This leads Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen (2011) to classify the chat room offender as either fantasy driven or contact driven, considering them as two distinct types.

1.1. A typology of fantasy and contact driven behaviour

Aspects of fantasy and contact driven behaviour have been well documented in the literature. McLaughlin (1998), one of the first authors to offer a typology of cybersex offenders, coined the term *chatters* for those who groom their victims, engage in cybersex and often, but not always, try to contact them in person. The term *traveller* was used to describe those who use online chats as a tool to have face to face encounters with their victims for sexual gratification (McLaughlin, 1998). In an empirical study of online grooming chat logs, O'Connell (2003) described the online enactment of a sexual fantasy for gratification purposes. O'Connell (2003) introduced the concept of *cybersexexploitation*, whereby adults induce children in sexually explicit talks which could lead, or not, to the enactment of a sexual fantasy.

Briggs et al. (2011) conducted an exploratory study on 51 participants convicted of an internet related sexual offence, and found that not all offenders were motivated by offline contact. Rather they identified a distinct subgroup of *fantasy driven* individuals who aimed to reach sexual climax online through behaviours such as cybersex, voyeurism and exhibitionism. In contrast to the fantasy driven subgroup, Briggs et al. (2011) described *contact driven individuals* as those who do not aim to reach sexual climax online. They engage victims in online sexual talk as a way of desensitising them to sexual material in preparation for their priority of an offline sexual encounter.

Briggs et al.'s (2011) typology has been empirically supported by DeHart et al. (2017), who analysed chat logs, social media posts and emails from 200 offenders. Their analysis supported a distinction between contact driven and fantasy driven individuals, but included four subgroups; *cyber-sex only offenders*, *cybersex/schedulers*, *schedulers* and *buyers*. *Cyber-sex only offenders* can be likened to Briggs et al.'s (2011) fantasy driven group, in that they engage in sexual chat, expose themselves online and encourage reciprocal behaviour from victims. Discussions of offline contact may take place but with no specific plans to meet. *Cybersex/schedulers* also engage in online sexual behaviour, including explicit chat and exchanging explicit images/videos, but make specific plans to meet victims offline. *Schedulers* may be considered similar to Briggs et al.'s (2011) contact group, with offenders seeking what is described as a 'hook-up'. Fewer offenders in this group engage in online sexual behaviour or attempt to develop a relationship with their victims. Finally, *buyers* are a similar group to *schedulers* in that their primary intention is offline contact, but also involve elements of negotiation in terms of sexual favours and money. Offenders in this group also include those who respond to presumed adverts from pimps or family members featuring minors.

Briggs et al.'s (2011) typology is widely mentioned in online child sexual exploitation literature. However, to our knowledge no review has systematically evaluated whether an empirical distinction exists between *fantasy driven* and *contact driven* individuals. This is an important gap in knowledge. Whilst non-contact child sexual offending is an established concept in child sexual exploitation, we must consider how the internet has impacted the way in which "non-contact" is defined. Non-contact child sexual abuse can include viewing, generating, sharing and trading child pornographic images or videos, online grooming and any other forms of sexual exploitation not involving physical contact between perpetrators and their victims (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). Furthermore, the internet is an additional platform in which contact child sexual offenders, i.e. those who physically abuse children (Elliot, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2013), contact, access and abuse their victims. Examination of whether the fantasy vs. contact distinction is useful is therefore warranted.

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