



Rapid skill acquisition and online sexual grooming of children



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ABSTRACT

The limited research on online sexual grooming has largely focused on the stages of grooming, typologies of offenders, or comparisons with people who download abusive sexual images of children. Little attention has been paid to Internet affordances and the role these might play in the offending behavior, the development of expertise and the avoidance of detection. This exploratory, qualitative grounded theory study involved interviews with 14 men convicted of online grooming. The analysis indicated that the Internet was used to create a private space within which to engage in purposive, sexual behavior with young people. This engagement was for all an aid to fantasy, and for some was a precursor to an offline sexual assault. The opportunities afforded by Internet platforms not only allowed access to young people but facilitated the rapid acquisition of expertise.

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1. Introduction

Internet solicitation, or grooming of children for sexual purposes, has received less attention than the production, distribution or downloading of abusive sexual images (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013). Grooming has been described as a process by which an individual prepares a child and their environment for sexual abuse to take place, including gaining access to the child, creating compliance and trust, and ensuring secrecy to avoid detection (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006).

Accounts of sexual grooming pre-date the Internet (e.g. Lang & Frenzel, 1988), but in Lanning (2001) described grooming activities in relation to the Internet, where individuals attempted to sexually exploit children by gradually seducing their targets through the use of attention, affection, kindness, and gifts. A comparison of survey data obtained from United States' law enforcement agencies in 2000 and 2006 showed a 21% increase in online predators, (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009). In 2006, of those who were arrested for online solicitation 87% had actually targeted online undercover

investigators. As yet there is little consensus about whether there are inherent properties of the Internet that encourage the commission of these offences or whether the use of technology has simply made them easier to detect (Jewkes, 2010; Jung, Ennis, & Malesky, 2012).

Earlier work in this area described a process model of online grooming, where the offender, in looking for a potential target, focuses on accessibility, opportunity and vulnerability (O'Connell, 2003). This online observation data, using the researcher as a 'decoy', suggested seven stages that form the grooming process. These stages were sequential and included: friendship and relationship forming; risk assessment; exclusivity; sexual; fantasy re-enactment, and damage limitation. Two studies have examined this process model of grooming using open-source data from the Perverted Justice Website (Gupta, Kumaraguru, & Sureka, 2012; Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013). The latter study identified three 'themes' which reflected rapport-building, sexual content and assessment. However, across the transcripts analyzed these did not appear in any consistent order. This research does suggest that there are discrete stages in relation to online grooming but that they do not conform to any one sequence nor are all of these stages evident across all offenders.

A qualitative study by Malesky (2007) of 31 male inmates, convicted of sexual offences against minors met and communicated with online, analyzed questionnaire data to examine comments on what attracted them to a child. Nearly half of these offenders viewed online profiles of potential victims. Three central themes

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were identified: a minor mentioning sex in any fashion online; targeting a child who appeared 'needy' or 'submissive', and using information from screen names, especially if they indicated youth. It might be argued that the Internet provides a platform supporting the rationalization of such activities. Malesky and Ennis (2004), using data from an Internet message board for men with a sexual interest in children, created a checklist of distorted cognitions. They found that cognitive distortions were relatively uncommon, but respondents did romanticize their relationships with children and romanticized minors. In another qualitative analysis of web forums Holt, Blevins, and Berkert (2010) found that pedophile subcultures place significant value on sexuality "through the lens of love and care for children" (p. 19). This view sits in opposition to others, such as law enforcement, who do not accept that children and adults can share in sexual or romantic relationships. Such online forums appear to offer important support for like-minded individuals that may promote pro-offending beliefs in people who might otherwise feel marginalized (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010).

Following from research by Krone (2004) there have been attempts to develop typologies of grooming offenders. Webster, Davidson, Bifulco, Gottschalk, Caretti, Pham, T., et al. (2012), from a qualitative analysis of interviews with 36 men convicted of offences in the UK, identified 3 types of offenders: Intimacy Seeking, Adaptable, and Hyper-Sexual. These were differentiated by their motivation to offend, their use of deception and indecent images of children, and their bid to meet their victim offline. An exploratory study by Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011) of 51 people convicted of an Internet sex offence in the United States suggested two subgroups of offenders: a contact driven group who were motivated to engage in offline sexual behavior, and a fantasy driven group motivated to engage in cybersex, but without an express wish to meet young people offline. The study's clinical and behavioral data were taken from the offender's offense-specific evaluation and from chat-room transcripts, and 90% of participants were apprehended through proactive police operations.

A further Canadian study (Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012) compared 38 contact offenders, 38 child pornography offenders, and 70 online solicitation offenders. When compared to child pornography offenders, online solicitation offenders had lower capacity for relationship stability and lower levels of sex drive or preoccupation and deviant sexual preference. Compared to contact offenders they were more likely to have viewed child pornography, to report hebephilic sexual interests, to have problems in their capacity for relationship stability, to be better educated, and to be more likely to have unrelated and stranger victims.

Parallel research has focused on victim surveys (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006), which would indicate that the stereotype of the Internet child molester who uses trickery and violence to assault children is largely inaccurate (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008) and suggests that most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce underage adolescents into sexual encounters and that in the majority of cases victims are aware that they are conversing online with adults. In the first N-JOV study the authors found that only 5% pretended to be teens when they met potential victims online, and that offenders rarely deceived young people about their sexual interests (Wolak et al., 2008). The deceptions that did occur related to offers of love and romance, where clearly the motive was sexual.

What does seem apparent is that technology affords opportunities to offend (Taylor & Quayle, 2006), and for adolescents to take sexual risks (Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone, 2012), and that engagement with technology impacts on the individual's behavior, mood and ways of thinking (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Guitton, 2013). Affordance in the sense used here refers to the quality of an environment (in this case that provided by both the physical and

software platform) that enables, facilitates or makes possible an action (Gibson, 1979). For example, there is concern that the use of social networking sites (SNS) in particular may be associated with increasing risk of harm (Staksrud et al., 2012) and with children placing themselves at risk (Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011; Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Putnam, 2009). From an offender perspective, Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones & Wolak's (2010) survey of law enforcement indicated that SNSs were used to initiate sexual relationships, to provide a means of communication between victim and offender, to access information about the victim, to disseminate information or pictures about the victim, and to get in touch with the victim's friends; SNS's might be said to 'afford' opportunities for offending. Saksrud et al. (2013) have considered these affordances in the context of an interaction between design and usage. They give, as an example of this, privacy settings, where affordances shape practice in that privacy settings distinguish between public, private, or partially private communications. However, users also shape affordances, for example young people setting up multiple profiles on SNSs to project different selves to different audiences.

This lends itself to a consideration of the affordances inherent in technology. As noted earlier, an affordance is a quality of an object, or an environment, which facilitates performance of an action. In terms of software related actions for example, it is an element of usability, leading people to 'naturally' act. It is a term originally coined by Gibson (1979) "to refer to the actionable properties between the world and an actor." Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, Chen, Hampton, Ila de Diaz et al., (2003) noted that in terms of Internet use, we can identify 'social affordances' which extends the notion of affordance to include social action. Most commonly, social affordance is used to refer to interactions between users responses, social context and social networks. Following from Gibson (1979), Kaufmann and Clément (2007) suggest that the richest and most significant environmental affordances are those provided by other people, which they term 'social affordances'. "Sexual behavior, nurturing behavior, fighting behavior, cooperative behavior, economic behavior, political behavior – all depend on the perceiving of what another person or other persons afford, or sometimes on the misperceiving of it" (Gibson, 1979, p. 135).

Sutcliffe, Gonzalez, Binder, and Nevarez (2011) have examined social mediating technologies in relation to social affordances and functionalities. One finding of this study, which is of interest in relation to online grooming, is that technology affordances are related to motivations for use. It is not only important to think about what these 'action possibilities are', but when and for whom they might happen.

A final, related issue is the notion of sexual offending and expertise. Bourke, Ward, and Rose (2012) investigated areas of competences and skills that facilitate deviant sexual activities and demonstrate expertise in the commission of offences. In their analysis of interviews with 47 incarcerated child sexual offenders they looked to identify salient features of offenders' offence related knowledge and acquisition and to determine whether these features were a function of experience. Importantly for this study, they examined the role of affect regulation and self-monitoring skills in the maintenance of offending in order to understand how child sexual offenders control emotional arousal during the offence process while, for some, continuing to lead seemingly normal lives. This is of relevance to online grooming offenders for as with Briggs et al.'s (2011) study, 94% of their sample was facing their first felony arrest and experience with the criminal justice system. This is congruent with the aims of the current research, which were to explore the ways in which people convicted of online grooming identified the young people they targeted and the strategies that they used to engage them in both online and offline sexual behavior, while avoiding detection.

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