

**AN EXPLORATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S VULNERABILITIES TO ONLINE  
GROOMING AND SEXUAL ABUSE**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis aims to explore the vulnerabilities of young people to online grooming and sexual abuse, from the perspectives of young people themselves. The thesis is a collection of peer reviewed papers which are published, in press or in submission. The main finding within this thesis is that young people can become vulnerable to sexual victimisation online through multiple routes. A combination of risk factors across various areas of life can increase vulnerability, either over an extended period of time or temporarily. Such risk factors can include difficulties within the family, unhappiness with aspects of life (including self, school, living environment and friends), risking taking behaviour online, non-productive coping and exhibiting personality characteristics such as impulsivity. Grooming is found to be a cyclical, varied and individualistic process and all young people can be targeted; however young people experiencing the risk factors outlined above are likely to require additional protection. Furthermore, findings indicate that the impact of abuse is likely to be associated with the young person's prior vulnerability, rather than whether the abuse occurred online or offline. This thesis highlights practical ways in which professionals and other adults can protect young people; such collaboration is imperative in order to safeguard young people from online grooming and sexual abuse.

## **Dedication**

To my Mum and Dad, thank you for your unwavering support over the years.

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**CHAPTER 1**  
**INTRODUCTION**

The internet has unequivocally altered various aspects of human interactions and behaviour during the last twenty years. Inevitably, young people have a tendency to be at the forefront of technological change and adolescents demonstrate considerable access and engagement with social media (Haddon & Livingstone, 2012). While the internet continues to provide a range of benefits for humanity, some individuals use the environment for more sinister and illegal purposes. Child sex offenders are known to create child abuse enabling opportunities (Finkelhor, 1984) by deliberately putting themselves in positions which afford access to young people (Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007; Sullivan & Beech, 2002). The online environment affords this access for individuals with a sexual interest in children (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2010), thus the sexual exploitation of children and young people online has become a significant problem across the world (Ospina, Harstall, & Denet, 2010).

It is known that child sex offenders often groom their victims in ‘preparation’ for abuse (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006) and this grooming is mirrored in the online environment (Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014). Despite a dramatic increase in research on this issue however, relatively little is known about the process of online grooming and subsequent sexual abuse. Specifically, there remains a research gap surrounding which circumstances and characteristics may increase a young persons’ vulnerability towards online grooming and sexual abuse (Munro, 2011). The perspective of the young people, in particular victims, remains underrepresented within this research field. Exploring this area of crime through the eyes of young people is central to the research question of this thesis.

## **1.1 Thesis Overview**

Each chapter contributes to the overall aims of the thesis, by addressing the issues from a range of approaches. Chapter 2 contextualises the issues by reviewing the existing literature on vulnerabilities towards online grooming and sexual abuse. In particular, this review identifies gaps within research which led to the development of the thesis aims. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 all address the aims from the perspective of young victims. These chapters depict the journey of the young person, from their lives leading up to grooming and abuse, the experiences of the grooming and then the impact it had upon them. These chapters contribute information surrounding why these young people were vulnerable to online grooming, as interviews cover aspects of their lives leading up to the offences and how offenders' grooming techniques interacted with these vulnerabilities. Throughout the interviews, the victims offer practical advice for professionals, based on their individual experiences. These are highlighted across the three victim chapters, to contribute to the second thesis aim.

To further explore the vulnerability issues noted by the victim interviews, some of the offenders from the same cases were interviewed as part of Chapter 6. This generated a deeper understanding of the dynamics between victims and offenders, as well as enabling a comparison of perspectives of the online grooming process and why these young people were targeted.

In order to contextualise the vulnerability findings within the first few chapters, a wider sample of young people participated in the research as part of Chapter 7. This acted as a base line sample and provided a greater breadth of understanding surrounding young people's general behaviours and experiences both online and offline, and how these

interact with sexual victimisation online. The combination of these six chapters gives a thorough exploration of vulnerability issues surrounding online grooming and, as a result, contributes practical implications for professionals.

## **1.2 Methods**

The thesis utilises a mixed method design by combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to explore vulnerabilities towards online grooming. This design was considered appropriate as rich interview data can provide detailed information about an individual's experiences and a wider sample of numerical data can assist in verifying the applicability of qualitative findings to other populations.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 follow a qualitative methodology as this has the capacity to explore in-depth perspectives and is likely to yield high quality information on this sensitive subject, in comparison to a questionnaire. Furthermore, given the exploratory nature of this thesis, questionnaires and existing psychometric measures may restrict the topics covered by participants, limiting information provision.

Chapter 7 explores young peoples' online behaviour and sexual victimisation experiences using quantitative methodologies. The reason for this was not only the broadening of the subject matter (inherently making this a less sensitive issue on which to be questioned), but also to provide a base comparison for the qualitative findings. The mixed method design seeks to balance the criticism of one methodology, with the benefits of the other, ultimately maximising information elicited from the data.



### **1.3 Samples**

There are various samples within this thesis to explore the issue of online grooming from various angles and perspectives. Central to the thesis however, is the provision of young people's perspectives on this crime type. Eight victims of online grooming and sexual abuse form the sample for Chapters 3, 4, 5 and three are also included in Chapter 6.

These victims were recruited through professionals who have previously worked with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) centre. Chapter 6 also involves a sample of three offenders, who were recruited on the basis of their link to the existing victim sample. This sample enables a comparison of victim and offender perspectives of online grooming.

The sample within Chapter 7 consists of 354 young people aged 13-14 years. This wider sample of young people was identified via contacts within CEOP's Education Team. This sample is included in the thesis to provide further information about vulnerabilities that may contribute to victimisation experiences online, by gaining information from young people who have a range of online experiences, which may or may not include sexual victimisation.

### **1.4 Thesis Aims**

Different aspects of a young person's life online and offline may indicate heightened vulnerability to grooming and sexual abuse online. Knowledge development surrounding the features contributing to vulnerability would enable more individualised prevention efforts specifically targeting the young people most at risk. Through the first aim of this thesis, exploration of these interactions should improve knowledge of these

vulnerability factors. Successful identification and intervention with vulnerable young people could increase the likelihood of safeguarding them from future online grooming and sexual abuse. The thesis aims to contribute knowledge and practitioner recommendations that will reduce the likelihood of young people becoming victims in the first place. The second aim not only endeavours to provide practical recommendations surrounding prevention, but also to identify what factors can lessen the negative impact on the young person, if they have been victimised. The provision of recommendations based on the practical application of knowledge is a key outcome of this thesis. Utilising the experiences of victims who have directly encountered the services is a stance often overlooked. This thesis combines a series of published, in press or in submission journal articles which explore different components of the research question and contribute knowledge to the two aims.

This thesis aims to contribute knowledge and understanding of this issue. Specific aims include to:

1. Identify features of young people's lives offline and online which may contribute to vulnerability towards online sexual victimisation, including grooming and sexual abuse.
2. Outline practical recommendations to assist professionals in better protecting young people from online sexual victimisation, including grooming and sexual abuse.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

## **2.1 Chapter Rationale**

Research surrounding child sexual abuse has been steadily increasing during the past few decades, as the significant contribution research can make towards protecting children and young people is recognized. The advent and uptake of online communication technologies has added a new dimension to many aspects of human interaction and behavior; as a result, young people are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by adults via additional platforms. Accordingly, academics and practitioners have responded with a growth in research studies exploring the online sexual exploitation of children. However, given the relatively short time period within which the online environment has existed and the pace of technological evolution, conclusive findings from research remain at a rudimentary stage. Given the rapid increase in research on this topic, a comprehensive understanding of the current knowledge surrounding young people's vulnerability towards online grooming and abuse can be challenging.

Two literature reviews were conducted. The first identifies research on the topic of online grooming (see Appendix 1), drawing together what is known about definitions, prevalence, characteristics and issues associated with online grooming and sexual abuse. This chapter presents the second literature review which assesses current knowledge of young people's vulnerabilities towards online grooming. The chapter seeks to identify existing research on the issue, evaluate its contribution and summarize key and consistent findings. The review provides the context within which this thesis developed and the review highlights the current gaps in knowledge, to which this research aims to contribute.

**2.2 PUBLISHED PAPER:** Whittle, H., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Beech, A., & Collings, G. (2013). A Review of young people's vulnerabilities towards online grooming.

*Aggression & Violent Behavior, 18*, 135-146.

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## A review of young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming

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### ABSTRACT

This review explores risk factors that may make a young person vulnerable to being groomed online. Even though research in this area is extremely limited, adolescents appear to be the age group most vulnerable to online grooming. Other vulnerabilities appear to be consistent with those associated with offline sexual abuse. The review suggests that behaviors specific to online grooming include: engaging in risk taking behavior online, high levels of internet access, and lack of parental involvement in the young person's internet use. Vulnerabilities to carry out these types of behavior and be more exposed to the risk of online grooming, are set within the context of the Ecological Model of child protection, consisting of: individual, family, community, and cultural risk factors. Patterns of vulnerability regarding living environment, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and personality are tentative, but are often interconnected. The more risk taking behaviors the young person carries out, plus greater levels of vulnerability factors, the less resilient they are likely to be towards protecting themselves against online grooming. A protective factor appears to be parental involvement in their child's use of the internet. Therefore, this, in combination with internet safety education at school, is encouraged.

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**CHAPTER THREE**  
**VICTIM VULNERABILITIES**

### **3.1 Chapter Rationale**

Having reviewed the literature, it was identified that vulnerabilities may relate to the ecological context of the young person, as well as their behavior online. However, the review concluded that findings are sparse and further empirical evidence is required. Therefore, Chapter 3 aimed to contribute to knowledge of why some young people are vulnerable to online grooming and sexual abuse. Identification of risk and protective factors which influence a young person's susceptibility towards online grooming and effect the likelihood of them engaging with an offender is fundamental if preventative strategies are to improve. If ways in which a young person becomes vulnerable can be identified, then assessment of risk levels will be more robust, ensuring those most vulnerable to being groomed are provided with appropriate protection when required.

As identified in the literature review, using information provided by the victims themselves can offer additional insight into their experiences leading up to the abuse. Victims have the capacity to provide an in-depth understanding of the range of significant and more subtle individual ecological circumstances, cognitions and emotions they experienced prior to abuse. Only the individual directly involved can provide this level of detail about such a state and without victim participation, fundamental factors may be missed.



**3.2 PUBLISHED PAPER:** Whittle, H. C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. R., & Beech, A.

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# In their own words: Young peoples' vulnerabilities to being groomed and sexually abused online\*

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## Abstract

Little is known about why some children and young people are vulnerable to being groomed online, yet this has important implications for policy, practice and prevention. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify factors contributing to a young person's vulnerability towards online grooming. Thematic Analysis was conducted on eight interviews with young people (six females and two males) who had experienced online grooming, resulting in sexual abuse online and/or offline. The reasons why participants engaged with the offenders varied on most levels of the Bronfenbrenner, (1979) ecological model (including individual, family, community and society). The loss of family protection was found to be central in contributing to vulnerability, as is online risk taking behavior. Three victim vulnerability scenarios emerged: a) multiple long-term risk factors, b) trigger events and c) online behavioral risks. In each of these scenarios, parental and family factors were very important. It is suggested that further research is needed to investigate the applicability of these scenarios to other samples. Recommendations include parent and carer communication and involvement with their children's internet use, as well as consistent, early onset internet safety education.

## Keywords

Online Grooming; Victims; Child Sexual Abuse; Vulnerabilities

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## 1. Introduction

It is necessary to assess which young people are vulnerable to online grooming in order to ensure that those most at risk are afforded additional protection and preventative education. Whilst a growing body of work considers grooming from the offender perspective (e.g., European Online Grooming project, 2012 [EOGP]), relatively little is known about why some young people are more vulnerable to being groomed and abused online, including the role of parental and familial variables in this vulnerability and/or prevention. However, understanding such issues is vital in ensuring that appropriate preventative approaches are developed, in terms of personal awareness, education and public policy.

### 1.1. Review of the Literature

Since no child exists in isolation, considering the risk and protective factors within the different ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Huebner, 2001) is required when assessing a child's vulnerability for any form of harm (Hamilton-Giachritsis, Peixoto, & Melo, 2011). A recent literature review by Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech and Collings (2013a) reviewed victim risk and protective factors found to be associated with online grooming, considering the various inter-related factors which impact on an individual child, including their family, peers, community and wider society. This highlighted that while a single risk factor may not independently lead to a negative experience, recurring/co-occurring risk factors and their accumulation over time will increase the likelihood of harm to the individual (Masten & Powell, 2003; Rolf, 1999; Sameroff, Gutman, & Peck, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). Risk factors identified in some recent research are briefly outlined below.

Recent research suggests that *offline* vulnerabilities at any ecological level (e.g., problems within the family, social isolation, previous victimization) often extend to *online* risk (Berson, 2003; European Online Grooming Project, 2012; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011; Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Putnam, 2009; Wells & Mitchell, 2008; Whittle et al., 2013a). However, it must also be recognized that some young people who would not be considered vulnerable *offline*, are in fact vulnerable *online* (UK Council for Child Internet Safety [UKCCIS], 2012; Whittle et al., 2013a).

Within their review, Whittle et al. (2013a) found that key risk factors identified to date include being female (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Helweg-Larsen, Schütt, & Larson, 2011; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a) and in adolescence. Although the impact of gender may be over-stated due to lower reporting rates among boys (O'Leary & Barber, 2008), adolescence is a key developmental stage requiring immense biological, personal and social change (Durkin, 1995; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011; Spear, 2010) and the formation of identity (Meeus, 2011). This period of transition is often typified by impulsive and risky behavior in any setting (Pharo, Sim, Graham, Gross, & Hayne, 2011; Romer, 2010), as well as increased awareness of sexuality, experiencing sexual arousal (Choo, 2006; Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007) and, for some, engaging in sexual activity (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). Thus,

Subrahmanyam, Smahel and Greenfield (2006) found sexual chat to be common place in peer relations online. However, the combination of risk taking and sexual curiosity increases the vulnerability of adolescents towards online grooming.

Indeed, engaging in risk-taking behaviors online (e.g., talking to strangers, sexual behavior, sharing personal information with strangers, meeting online contacts offline), does appear to be correlated with online victimization (Mitchell et al., 2007a; Noll et al., 2009; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013b; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Young, Young, & Fullwood, 2007). In addition, Noll, Shenk, Barnes and Haralson (2013) found that young people a) with behavioral problems; b) who had experienced maltreatment or c) had low cognitive abilities were also more likely to engage in high risk behavior online. Thus, adolescents with these additional risk factors might be particularly vulnerable.

The European Online Grooming Project (2012) outlined three varying youth responses to approaches from online groomers: resilient (did not respond to the groomer), risk taking (e.g., sexual chat with strangers), or vulnerable (offline difficulties). However, these findings came from interviews with online *groomers*, rather than the victims themselves. Based on 27 young people, one of the only studies to interview victims themselves (the ROBERT project; Risk-taking Online Behavior Empowerment through Research and Training) noted that a young person feeling something is missing from their life was a key theme (Quayle, Jonsson, & Löf, 2012). Both of these projects (European Online Grooming Project, 2012; ROBERT Project, 2012) and others (O'Connell, 2003; Sullivan, 2009) have suggested the need for research on the vulnerabilities of a young person contributing to why they may be approached by or respond to a groomer. Yet there is still limited knowledge regarding exactly what form these vulnerabilities take and which areas of the young person's life are considered to put them at risk (Berson, 2003; Whittle et al., 2013a). Added to that, little is known about the protective factors that might act as buffers to reduce the likelihood of harm and minimize the negative impact of traumatic events (Shoon, 2006).

Therefore, we would suggest there is a gap in current research providing an understanding of the complexities of victim-offender interactions within the grooming process and victim, family and community characteristics (Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014; Whittle et al., 2013a). This research aims to explore the vulnerabilities associated with the victims.

## **2. Method**

The methodology of this study is outlined more fully in the following open access journal: [www.hrp.org/download/201308/ujp.2013.010206.pdf](http://www.hrp.org/download/201308/ujp.2013.010206.pdf); please refer to this paper for more detailed review of the sample and procedure.

Semi-structured interviews with eight young people who had experienced online grooming leading to online and/or offline sexual abuse took place as part of this research. The sample included six females and two males from across England.

The mean age at the time of the grooming was 12.88 years (SD 0.84) and the mean age at the time of interview was 15.88 years (SD 2.17).

Police and social services contacts known to CEOP provided potential participants who fitted the inclusion and exclusion criteria. If the young person and their parent or guardian was happy to be involved in the research, an interview was scheduled. The same key topics were covered in all interviews, but there was flexibility for the participant to focus on aspects that were important to them. All ethical procedures were followed and the research was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (Reference ERN\_11-0083) and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre (CEOP) Research Panel, ensuring all possible steps were taken to protect the participants. Consent forms were completed by the participant, their parent or carer and a professional associated with the case prior to any involvement in the research. Debrief sheets were provided to give avenues of additional support to the participants as well giving further information on the research (including information on confidentiality and withdrawal). All identifying features relating to the participants (e.g., name, names of friends and family, place names) have been changed for this paper and the participants are therefore anonymous.

The interviews were all recorded by a Dictaphone and then transcribed. Thematic Analysis was conducted on all interview transcripts to identify themes across all eight interviews. During this process it became clear that many thematic nodes fitted into elements of the Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It was therefore decided to use the ecological framework to present the data. Individual journeys of each victim from birth until the end of the abuse were mapped onto paper. Risk and protective factors relating to each individual were then highlighted. Following discussions with the second author, the first author created overview documents for each victim outlining distal and proximal risk and protective factors, as well as distal and proximal consequences of the grooming, all set within the Ecological Model. These documents helped clarify the various factors contributing to each young person's vulnerability prior to the grooming. In some cases 'trigger' events became apparent, while in others, the risk factors (and thus vulnerability) appeared to accumulate over the young person's life.

### **3. Results**

Early analysis clearly revealed that super-ordinate themes could be divided into three timeframes: 'pre-offense', 'during offense' and 'post-offense'. The 'pre-offense' time-frame relates to any aspect of the victim's life prior to contact with the offender. The 'during offense' time-frame relates to events and feelings during their contact with the offender, including all stages of the grooming process and the abuse itself. The 'post-offense' time-frame relates to any events and feelings occurring after the abuse and contact with the offender stopped. The results relating to vulnerabilities (predominantly from the 'pre-offense' analysis) are outlined below. Due to the volume of data, the 'during' and 'post' offense data are reported in additional papers (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, in submission, Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2013).

Thematic nodes emerged as ‘risk factors’, ‘protective factors’, or ‘attributes and experiences’ (which were deemed neutral or could contribute to either risk or protection). The nodes were consistent with the Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the domains within life satisfaction (Huebner, 2001), such as self, family, friends, school, living environment and technology. Thus, they were categorized as such to better understand the themes.

Whilst individual risk factors do not independently lead to vulnerability, accumulation and/or combination of these are considered to increase the young person’s vulnerability towards online grooming. When looking across all eight interviews, the volume of risk factors was substantially larger than the volume of protective factors (65 compared to 28). Despite a range of risk factors, all of the victims had some aspects of their lives which contributed to protecting them from online grooming; however these fluctuated and varied considerably between cases. For many victims, it was only when these protective factors were lost (even temporarily) that the abuse took place. Thus, accumulation and combinations of protective factors contribute to protecting the individual, more than one factor independently influencing vulnerability. The most prominent risk and protective factors found within the data set are outlined in **Table 1. Please note that all identifying features have been changed and that victim ages are given at the time of the offence.**

**Table 1. Summary of risk and protective factors mentioned in two or more interviews.**

Risk Factors Relating to Self	% of Interviews Mentioned
Low self-esteem	75%
Loneliness	63%
Hit a low point in life	50%
Risk Factors Relating to Family	% of Interviews Mentioned
Reconstituted family	75%
Fights at home	75%
Parents separated	75%
Distant from family	63%
Illness within the family	63%
No parent discussion of online safety	63%
Family bereavement	50%
Low income family	38%
No internet restrictions at home	38%
Parents working a lot	38%
Pet death	38%
Unhappy childhood	38%
History of crime in the family	25%
Parents lack internet understanding	25%
Protective Factors Relating to Family	% of Interviews Mentioned
Parents steps toward online protection	63%
Close to wider family	50%
Close to parent	38%
Close to sibling	38%
Happy family	25%
Parents together	25%
Would tell parents about online concerns	25%
Risk Factors Relating to Friends	% of Interviews Mentioned
Victim being bullied	38%
Fights with friends	25%
Protective Factors Relating to Friends	% of Interviews Mentioned

Good close friend(s)	100%
Hobbies & extra curricula activities	100%
Friends are important	88%
No experience of bullying	63%
Consistent friends	25%
Other social support	25%
<b>Risk Factors Relating to School</b>	<b>% of Interviews Mentioned</b>
Little or no internet safety education	88%
Dislikes school	38%
Naughty at school	25%
Stressed by school work	25%
<b>Protective Factors Relating to School</b>	<b>% of Interviews Mentioned</b>
School is good	75%
Had sex education	75%
Supportive school	38%
Some general internet safety education	38%
<b>Risk Factors Relating to Living Area</b>	<b>% of Interviews Mentioned</b>
Bored in living environment	75%
Dislike of and problems with local area	63%
<b>Protective Factors Relating to Living Area</b>	<b>% of Interviews Mentioned</b>
Happy in living environment	50%
Good neighbors	50%
<b>Risk Factors Relating to Internet Use</b>	<b>% of Interviews Mentioned</b>
Spoke to strangers online	100%
Had own internet enabled device	75%
Spent a long time online	75%
Used internet in bedroom	75%
Felt status of more online contacts	63%
Sometimes shared personal information online	38%
Has an open profile	25%
Close online relationship with another (not offender)	25%
<b>Protective Factors Relating to Internet Use</b>	<b>% of Interviews Mentioned</b>
Rarely shared photos or webcam with strangers	88%
Speaking to strangers was rare	75%
Steps to protecting personal information online	63%
Access included a shared family computer	50%
Access included computer in a family room	50%
Used privacy settings	38%

### 3.1. Risk and Protective Factors Relating to Self

Of the young people interviewed, 88% (n=7) demonstrated risk factors relating to themselves as an individual, whether temporarily or over a long period of time. Half of the victims indicated that they had hit a low point in life; 75% (n=7) discussed low self-esteem and 63% (n=5) expressed loneliness at the time of the grooming, which *they* considered contributory factors in their rationale for engaging with the offender. For example, *“I don’t like me bum and that ‘cos it’s big and me legs and that. I’m trying to go on a diet because I’m too fat.”* [Jenna, 12]; *“I was depressed and on my own and just needed anyone to talk to...Not very happy with the way life is but getting on with it. So it was kinda like this big spark that just come firing at me and I took the, I took it.”* [Joanne, 14.]; and *“I was all upset about that as well that’s why I just needed a friend more than anything.”* [Mona, 14].

One victim described having multiple boyfriends prior to meeting the offender and a willingness to engage in impersonal sexual contact. This could potentially have contributed to her comparatively quick engagement in sexual chat with the offender, when compared to the other cases.

### 3.2. Risk and Protective Factors Relating to Family

By far the most risk factors reported by all the victims related to their family situation. The majority of victims (75%; n=6) had separated parents (often acrimoniously) and/or came from a reconstituted family. They described fights at home and difficult family relations, including issues with step families. Some victims had always struggled with problems at home (*"I didn't get my parents being that loving towards me because they were always too busy getting one up on the other one"*; Chloe, 12), whereas for others the family difficulties were temporary and clustered around the time the offender approached them online. Thus, whilst nearly half of the young people (38%; n= 3) reported being close to a parent, all three of these young people indicated that this relationship was temporarily jeopardized prior to the offence (sometimes due to illness, bereavement or work); a situation that was often exacerbated by the grooming:

*"Cos obviously I was vulnerable at the time 'cos my sister had just passed away, so, and he was showing an interest. I was like a different person when my sister died and that influenced it a hell of a lot. Because I spoke to Charlie, I was speaking to him the night my sister went into her one of her funny dos. Cos I was there when my sister basically died, I was at home."* [Shelley, 13]

*"As my mum got ill, it did work out a bit hard. Um, we did have a really bad, rough time."* [Joanne, 14].

Half of the young people described support from a member of their wider family (*"I was dead close to my Nan; she was like the sweetest person you could ever meet."* Jenna, 12) and several of the victims (38%; n=3) were close to siblings. However, this was not sufficient to protect from the abuse.

Over half (63%; n=5) of the victims had never discussed internet safety with their parents, several (37%; n=3) reported that they had no internet restrictions at home and thought their parents lacked understanding of the technology (*"My Mum's clueless about the internet and stuff."* Shelley, 13). However, whilst some parents (63%; n=5) had attempted steps towards online protection, these techniques were largely inconsistent and sporadic. It was mainly Lucas who stated that his parents monitored his internet use (*"I think they gave me the usual lectures...Mum always ask me who I'm talking to."* Lucas, 13) but it was ineffective in preventing his risk taking behavior online. Only 25% of the victims said they would tell their parents if they were worried about something online.

### 3.3. Risk and Protective Factors Relating to Friends

Friendship was the only domain where protective factors out-weighed risk factors, with all victims describing at least one close friend and 88% (n=7) emphasizing the importance of these friendships (*"Claire's [best friend] just everything to me, no one else is anything to me."* Jenna, 12; *"I met them at Primary School so we've been good friends for about eight years."* Jonathan, 13). However, in the two cases where these friendships were jeopardized (such as during fights or when the victim experienced bullying), this was a contributory factor to why the victim engaged with or sought support from the offender (*"I use to hide with the geeks in the library because I used to be scared to walk down the corridor."* Charlotte, 12; *"I tell my best friends everything...I rely on them both so much...[but] at that point I'd*



*fell out with quite a few of my friends at school and stuff and we still hadn't properly made up. The first few days I wouldn't normally have spoken to him, but it was probably just all the situations at the time, I was young, I just wanted friends."* Mona, 14). In the majority of cases (63% n=5) however, the victim received support from at least one friend throughout the grooming.

#### **3.4. Risk and Protective Factors Relating to School**

As is the case with most young people, there were mixed opinions regarding school. Over half of the victims (75%; n=6) in this study discussed enjoying school at times, liking some teachers or generally spoke positively about it (often because they were able to see their friends). For example, *"My teachers are really nice and that, proper nice, help you with loads of stuff."* [Jonathan, 13]; *"I really enjoyed it but I think that's because I'm a bit of a geek!"* [Mona, 14]. However, 38% (n=3) of victims at times described disliking school, this included discussions of being 'naughty' (*"I'm naughty...I'm like the clown of the class...I just get told off and I just blame somebody else."* Jenna, 12), feeling stressed by work or truanting (*"I never liked school, every chance I got I was off!"* Joanne, 14).

A few victims mentioned having received some form of generic internet safety education at school (*"It was mainly the, 'never give out personal details on the internet' sort of thing, it wasn't the, 'what to look out for and why you shouldn't trust people'"*; Chloe, 12). Some had no internet safety lessons (*"I dunno I never really got educated a lot about anything like that [internet safety];"* Jonathan, 13). Only one victim reported having lessons relating specifically to online grooming, but said he did not listen and could not recall what was covered.

#### **3.5. Risk and Protective Factors Relating to Living Environment**

There were mixed comments regarding living environment, with half of the young people (n=4) reporting they were happy where they lived, but the others indicating various problems with their local area. Half of the victims got on well with their neighbors, which provided them with additional adult support if necessary.

*"There were riots and stuff down the street. Erm, they was like bringing police down all the time from Strude. And it was just really hard 'cos you couldn't hardly go out your door without being started on, you never know if you were gonna get hit with a bat or something like that."* [Joanne, 14].

*"I've got a very large amount of friends where I live, so I'm always out and about. Like when I get home I'll be going out straight away. I love where I live at the minute."* [Jonathan, 13].

*"Yeah the neighbors were absolutely brilliant."* [Shelley, 13].

The majority of victims discussed feeling bored where they lived and this may have contributed to their engaging with the offender online. For example, *"Just nice to talk to, if you're bored someone to talk to."* [Lucas, 13]; *"I hate it; nothing to do, boring. There's nothing at all, it's just houses."* [Shelley, 13].

### 3.6. Risk and Protective Factors Relating to Internet Use

Risk factors regarding technology were prevalent in this study, with all the young people speaking to a stranger online at some stage (although for many of the young people this was not a regular occurrence). These were not perceived as anything to feel concerned about: *"I didn't really get a lot of friend requests like that, but I'd normally just accept them but I didn't really think anything would come of it really."* [Jonathan, 15]; *"I thought I was popular because people wanted to speak to me."* [Lucas, 13].

Basic steps to protection online were taken by all of the victims at some time, including protecting personal information online and rarely sharing photos/videos. However, these safety precautions were inconsistently applied and generally evaporated when the victim began talking to the offender, who was seen as 'different'. For example: *"I had my age and stuff [on the profile], I never had my mobile number on it though."* [Mona, 14]; *"It was only for him that I would go on cam and take photos for."* [Shelley, 13].

Internet access impacted on the vulnerability of the young person and 75% (n=7) of victims reported spending a long time online at the point when they met the offender (usually to compensate for problems in other areas of their lives); for half of the victims this internet use could be considered excessive. Two victims only had access to the internet in a family room on a shared family computer. However, once in contact with the offender, they waited until they were alone or upstairs before speaking to him and often wiped the conversations from the computer. One victim described how she would only talk to the offender when she was at her father's house, because access was in her bedroom (*"At my Dad's my computer was in my bedroom...I had to have the door open but Dad was like rarely in so it didn't make a difference anyway"*; Chloe, 12.) In contrast, at her mother's house, she had to use the computer downstairs where her mum looked over her shoulder and thus did not speak to the offender (nor was abused) in this environment.

At least two victims had Smart phones and used these to contact the offender privately, whilst the remainder of the participants regularly spoke with the offender via text or phone call. For example: *"On an average Saturday I'd probably wake up about 10 o'clock I'd go on my laptop about 10 past 10. I'd wake up probably go to the toilet, go say hello to my Mum if she was up, go back straight upstairs and log on. I'd be there for about, until about 4 o'clock when I got a bit peckish, cos I didn't eat breakfast. I'd be constantly on it until about 4 o'clock...and then I'd probably maybe go downstairs have a bag of crisps, go back up, go on it for another hour, have my tea and then I'd go on it until about 10 o'clock. I'd be, I was constantly logged on."* [Charlotte, 13]. It might be considered that sudden, excessive internet use may be a warning sign.

### 3.7. Development of Victim Vulnerability Scenarios

Despite the diversity of victim experiences prior to abuse, the volume of risk factors identified through Thematic Analysis was extremely prevalent. Comparing and contrasting the overview documents for each victim revealed commonalities regarding how many of the victims were feeling at the point when they began

speaking to the offender. These feelings were a direct result of combinations of risk factors. For some victims the risk factors had been building up over the course of their lives whilst, for others, recent events had triggered new risk factors. One of the male victims did not encounter long-term or temporary risk factors in this way, but perceived minimal harm in speaking with the offender online. Thus, examining the victim's circumstances prior to contact with the offender resulted in the emergence of three scenarios which led to the young people becoming vulnerable:

1. **Multiple long-term risk factors:** Young people who have increasing risk factors in day to day life, with few protective factors and thus take increasing risks online. These young people will be considered vulnerable offline.
2. **Trigger events:** Young people who have some risk factors but are initially protected until a trigger event or events result in the loss of those protective factors. These young people will be considered vulnerable offline, but only at a certain point in time.
3. **Online behavioral risks:** Young people who have few risk factors and many protective factors but engage in risk taking behavior despite warnings. These young people will not be considered vulnerable offline.

Participants who experienced **multiple long-term risk factors** demonstrate consistent and increasing vulnerability throughout childhood on several ecological levels. Of note is the large volume of risk factors relating to the family within this group and it appears that the balance of risk and protective factors acting on the individual gradually tipped in the direction of risk, eroding their resilience. Thus, it would appear that young people with these experiences are potentially vulnerable to numerous negative outcomes and, if approached by an offender online, are less likely to endorse a resilient reaction.

In contrast, participants who experienced **trigger events** demonstrated a childhood that was relatively balanced in terms of risk and protection, which would not indicate specific vulnerability. However, common to young people within this group was an event or combination of events that temporarily left the young person without the protective factors they were accustomed to, leaving them exposed to new risk. Loss of protective factors, particularly regarding the family, appears to be pivotal and, as a result, the young person would temporarily have lower resistance if approached by an offender online.

Finally, one participant who engaged in **online behavioral risks** demonstrated no apparent vulnerabilities in his life. In this scenario, the protective factors outweighed the risk factors and the young person was protected on various ecological levels. However, a combination of curiosity, risk taking behavior online and misunderstanding of perceived consequences, resulted in this individual responding to an offender online. If this finding is confirmed, this is potentially a difficult group with which to intervene due to difficulties in prior identification and the lack of warning signs that will be apparent. However, given the qualitative nature of this study and small sample size (particularly within the third vulnerability scenario), these vulnerability scenarios are tentatively suggested and should be considered a starting point for future research.

#### 4. Discussion

This research offers useful insights into understanding what can make young people vulnerable to online grooming and abuse. One important point to note, though, is that for all of the young people in this study, the grooming process led to them being victims of abuse, either on or offline. These are not the individuals who manage to either avoid or stop the grooming process before it progresses to abuse. Yet acknowledgement of such a development can seem to be lacking in the literature, which consistently refers to young people being groomed with the later abuse only implied. The term ‘grooming’ implies preparing a child or young person to be abused and the authors therefore contend that it is important that when the grooming moves beyond the preparation, the literature reflects this appropriately and names it as such.

The over-representation of girls within this research sample is consistent with existing research identifying girls as being at the most risk of online grooming (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Helweg-Larsen et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2007a). However, the participation of male victims within this study promotes recognition that boys can also be vulnerable to online grooming and abuse. Thus, it is important not to overlook male perspectives and continue to investigate if their vulnerabilities are the same as or differ to those of young girls.

This study supports previous research identifying that risk taking influences a young person’s susceptibility towards online grooming (Mitchell et al., 2007a; Noll et al., 2009; Whittle et al., 2013b; Ybarra et al., 2007; Young et al., 2007). Victims within all of the ‘victim vulnerability scenarios’ took risks online to some extent, but for different reasons. The victim who was vulnerable due to online behavioral risks was specifically targeted by their offender. Such targeted grooming creates a risky circumstance where even a small amount of risk taking behavior by the victim has a detrimental effect. For the young person in this situation, despite being comparatively protected in day to day life, this individual took risks by engaging with the offender out of curiosity and in what he perceived to be a consequence free environment. These impulsive and risky actions are consistent with literature surrounding adolescent developmental trends (Pharo et al., 2011; Romer, 2010) and online disinhibition (Suler, 2004). Given research indicating greater impulsivity among males when compared to females (e.g. Chapple & Johnson, 2007), it is possible that adolescent males may take more risks online and thus be exposed to greater risk of grooming.

Similarly, the victims vulnerable due to multiple long-term risk factors also engaged in risk taking behavior. However, the accumulation of risk factors over time is likely to have influenced how these young people used the internet, increasing their risk taking, as the technology continued to provide comfort. Thus, those who were vulnerable as a result of trigger events are likely to have temporarily increased their use of the internet (usually sub-consciously) to provide comfort from the negative effect of the event or events. They were ‘seeking to fill a void’, which was a precipitating factor to the onset of grooming and subsequent abuse. Interestingly, this mirrors the ‘feeling that something is missing’ theme within Quayle et al.’s (2012) study based on victim interviews. Such a finding is

consistent with Luring Communication Theory (Olson et al., 2007) which explains that perpetrators use deceptive trust development to approach, groom and isolate victims, creating a cycle of entrapment. Vulnerable victims are likely to get caught in the cycle of entrapment as the perpetrator can exploit their need for attention and affection (Olson et al., 2007).

When compared with the typologies outlined by the EOGP (2012) based on offender interviews, it is interesting that this research has identified some similar (but overlapping) themes based on victim interviews. The 'risk taker' category within the EOGP (2012) has some similarities to both those engaging in online behavioral risks and the multiple long-term risk factors. However, the theme from EOGP is more generic, whilst this research has identified the motivations for individuals engaging in such behavior which differs between groups. Furthermore the 'Vulnerable' category in EOGP seems to cover both those who experienced multiple long-term risk factors and trigger events within this research, and there are different processes at work for these two groups, which is important for interventions. Thus, it is important to make this distinction.

#### **4.1. Implications for Professionals – The Importance of Family Protection**

While risks at any ecological level contributed to the vulnerability of these victims, the level with by far the most evidence was risk factors within the family. The majority of young people in this study came from separated families (largely acrimoniously) either occurring during infancy or nearer to the point that they were groomed. Attachment theory suggests that a young person's interaction with their parents/care-givers is fundamental in developing attachment and a consistently supportive relationship from one or more care-givers assists in establishing an individual's self-worth (Bowlby, 1969/82). It is possible that some of the victims in this sample may have developed insecure attachment during family relationship difficulties, which may have increased their vulnerability towards grooming. Family arguments, illness, bereavement and isolation from the family all also contributed to increased vulnerability through loss of family protection. This is consistent with research which identifies dysfunctional family dynamics as a contributory factor that increases the likelihood of a perpetrator selecting a particular victim (Elliott et al., 2007). When these risk factors are combined with issues of adolescence generally (e.g., the development of a sense of self, progression, greater autonomy) the risk intensifies and a young person can be particularly vulnerable. Therefore, teachers, practitioners and other people in positions of responsibility (e.g., sports leaders) should view young people who are experiencing family difficulties (whether temporarily or over time) as particularly vulnerable to online grooming.

#### **4.2. Implications for Parents and Carers**

It is crucial that professionals working in this field promote the importance of parents and carers communicating with their children about what they are doing online and offering internet safety advice. This of course has some limits (e.g., better monitoring within their own home compared to at a friend's house) but the

majority of victims in this study did not discuss internet safety with their parents prior to the abuse and largely kept their online life private from their family. Parental involvement and discussion of internet safety is reported to be a protective factor for young people online (Berson, 2003; Noll et al., 2013; Rogers, Wczasek, & Davies, 2011; Whittle et al., 2013a) and this finding is further supported by the current study. Prior to abuse, only 25% of the victims in this study would have told their parent if they were worried about something online. While some steps were taken by the parents of the victims to help protect their children online, lack of consistent approaches and communication limited their effectiveness. Although using a shared family computer or having internet access in a family room sometimes decreased the ease with which the victims could communicate with the offenders, their access to mobile technology and various internet enabled devices limited the effectiveness of this strategy. Therefore, parental/carer endorsement of multiple protective techniques, including communicating with young people about their online life, monitoring usage and offering supporting internet safety advice, is imperative. Wider societal and Government ratification of key issues relating to internet safety could help facilitate an environment which supports parents and carers in addressing these issues, because given modern technology, parental monitoring is more limited than it might have been in the past.

#### **4.3. Implications for Professionals – The Importance of Internet Safety Education**

A need for internet safety education for young people has been widely recognized by research (e.g., Berson, 2003; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008) and this study further supports this notion. Within this sample, the average age of the victim at the onset of online grooming was 12.8 years. None of the victims had a comprehensive understanding of how to stay safe online prior to the abuse. Of the few who received some degree of internet safety education at school, this was reported to be disparate, rare and uninteresting. While a range of e-safety education campaigns are currently being delivered across the UK (e.g., CEOP's Thinkuknow program), e-safety education is not always rolled out consistently across the country. In the context of existing literature reporting adolescents as the high risk group, these participants are at the lower end of the spectrum. Rather than beginning with education in Secondary School (as is sometimes the case), E-safety resources have been produced for children as young as 4 years old and need to be utilized in Primary Schools. This is not currently consistently established, but is required in order to facilitate effective protection for younger children. However, action should also be taken to establish internet safety as an issue within wider society, not just the classroom. By broadcasting existing or new short films through mainstream routes such as television and advertising campaigns, key messages can be accessed by a wider audience, including parents, grandparents and carers. Furthermore, this will provide consistency and further endorse the internet safety lessons delivered within schools and other structured environments.

#### **4.4. Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study which should be recognized. The length of time between the end of the abuse and when the young person was interviewed varied between one and six years. Some victims are likely to have had weaker memories of events and feelings, given the time that had passed, and this variation in timeframe is likely to have impacted upon their opportunity for reflection. Also, the information given by the two male participants was limited; possibly due to feelings of embarrassment about discussing the experience with a female interviewer or that they did not want to discuss it with any adult. Lucas (behavioral risk participant) in particular reported that he felt minimal impact of the abuse; this may have been the case and a true reflection of those who experienced online behavioral risks or he may have been reluctant to show a more emotional reaction to the interviewer. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the sample size is small. The numbers within each identified category are also therefore small (particularly within the online behavior risks vulnerability scenario) and thus the application of the findings onto a wider population is questionable. To help combat these limitations, further studies would be beneficial in establishing if the reported patterns are identified with other victims.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This research offers useful insights into understanding what can make young people vulnerable to online grooming and abuse. First, the importance of family relationships has been highlighted in contributing towards risk and protection of a young person's vulnerability towards online grooming. Second, the necessity of acknowledging the progression from grooming to abuse has been emphasized, given the implications that has for impact and recovery. Finally, many of the findings are consistent with existing research in this field; however the development of victim vulnerability scenarios offers new contributions to this area. Research surrounding the vulnerabilities of young people to online grooming and abuse is extremely rare and more research is required, particularly from the perspective of those who have experienced the effects of abuse themselves. Young people across all vulnerability scenarios can be better protected through consistent, collaborative approaches by parents, carers and other adults in their lives. For example, assessing the potential risk and protective factors which impact a young person can highlight individuals who are particularly vulnerable, whether over time or temporarily. Awareness of these changing risk and protective factors by adults interacting with the young person can highlight which young people may need extra support or education at certain times. Specifically, parental involvement and communication combined with substantial and engaging internet safety education from a young age should be considered the key to prevention.

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**CHAPTER 4**  
**VICTIM PERSPECTIVES**

#### **4.1 Chapter Rationale**

The previous chapter identified why some young people may be vulnerable to online grooming, as well as noting the individuality of circumstances which may lead a young person to become vulnerable. These individual experiences are important if a greater level of understanding is to be reached. As highlighted in Chapter 2, little is currently known about the mechanisms involved in online grooming, especially from the perspective of the victim. The majority of the research utilizes police case files or involves interviewing adult offenders to enhance knowledge of the process. While this generates considerable and important information about the process of grooming, approaching this issue from a different perspective could contribute new features to current understanding. The victims within the sample in Chapter 3 not only provided information about their own vulnerabilities, but also gave an insight into their experiences during the process of grooming and victimization. This chapter seeks to utilize these victims' perspectives, to gain a deeper understanding of the processes involved in online grooming and how they affect the young person.

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*Article*

## **“Under His Spell”: Victims’ Perspectives of being Groomed Online**

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to highlight key themes within the process of online grooming from the victim’s perspective. Eight adolescents who experienced online grooming were interviewed and data were analysed using Thematic Analysis. It was found that participants, who had been both sexually abused online and/or offline, were subjected to a range of grooming experiences. Consistent grooming themes within this sample included: manipulation; deception; regular/intense contact; secrecy; sexualisation; kindness and flattery; erratic temperament and nastiness; and simultaneous grooming of those close to the victim. These themes are similar to those identified by the literature surrounding grooming offline. Analysis demonstrated that once a participant was ‘enmeshed’ in the relationship with the offender, they were more likely to endure negative feelings associated with the grooming, than if the victim was not ‘enmeshed’. This paper supports the notion that grooming is a varied and non-linear process. Recommendations are made for practitioners, parents and carers, as well as suggestions for primary preventative education.

**Keywords:** online grooming; victims; child sexual abuse; adolescents

## 1. Introduction

Social media and portable technology has contributed to young people becoming accessible to sexual abusers on a scale never known before [1–4]. While child sexual abuse has long existed and still exists offline [5], the Internet has altered the way in which abuse can be carried out. The concept of grooming was first addressed by UK legislation within Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act (2003) and this legislative advancement enabled the prosecution of individuals who take preparatory steps towards abusing a child [6]. Following a review, Craven, Brown and Gilchrist ([7], p. 297) proposed that grooming is: “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. This process serves to strengthen the offender’s abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions.”

The prevalence of online grooming is difficult to gauge particularly given the low reporting rates of sexual abuse [8]. Therefore the true figure will be far greater than prevalence statistics indicate, but 64% of 2391 reports made to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) in the UK by members of the public, in 2009 and 2010 were related to grooming [9]. In prevalence studies, Ospina, Harstall and Dennet’s [10] meta-analysis found most studies report between 13% [11] and 19% [12] of young people aged 10–17 years had received sexual solicitations online. However, in a recent study of adolescent behavior online, Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Bishopp and Beech [13] found 33% of 354 13 and 14 year olds reported having been approached sexually online. However, in most of these studies, the age of the person soliciting was unknown. In contrast, Swedish based research found that 25% of 14–15 year olds had received online sexual solicitations from an adult within the last year [14].

Manipulation techniques utilized during the grooming process can vary considerably [1] and are likely to incorporate both physical and psychological grooming to sexualize the child [7,15]. The process often involves one or several of the following tactics: flattery, blackmail, threats, sexualized games, deception or bribery [4,16–18].

O’Connell [18] was one of the first researchers to identify the process of online grooming, noting the following sequential process: friendship forming, relationship forming, risk assessment (whereby the offender attempts to assess the likelihood of detection), exclusivity (through intensified conversation, a sense of mutual respect is established, with an emphasis on trust and secrecy), and sexual and fantasy enactment. More recently, research has suggested that grooming is more likely to be a cyclical process and offenders do not progress through the stages sequentially [19,20]. In

particular, Williams *et al.* [20] outlined various themes and sub-themes, notably surrounding rapport building, sexual content and assessment of the situation.

However, most research in this area stems from the perspective of the offender (e.g., [19,21,22]), and relies on the honesty of reporting of the perpetrators. However, as part of the Risk-taking Online Behaviour Empowerment through Research and Training (ROBERT) project, Quayle, Jonsson and Lööf [23] conducted research with 27 young victims of online grooming. The research identified five thematic categories within the grooming process: (1) the feeling that something is missing from one's life; (2) the importance of being someone who is connected online; (3) getting caught in a web and making choices; (4) others' involvement; and (5) closing the box and picking up the pieces (whereby victims attempted to make sense of what has happened and move on [23]). Research from the victim's perspective remains scarce, and these themes are yet to be tested and verified by further qualitative research.

Therefore, acquiring knowledge from victims themselves is imperative to better understand the processes involved in online grooming. Thus the purpose of this research was to provide an insight into the experience of the groomed victim, contributing to the limited research base currently available. Specifically, the aim of this research was to explore how the process of grooming takes place online.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Ethics*

Ethical considerations were paramount to this research and the study was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (Reference ERN\_11-0083) and the CEOP Research Panel, ensuring all possible steps were taken to protect the participants. Participants were only interviewed on completion of consent forms from the professional associated with the case, their parent/primary carer and the participant. The professionals were asked to put forward only victims who they believed would have no detrimental effects from involvement. All data was anonymized in that all personal details (including their name, names of others, place names and any other identifying features) were changed before analysis commenced. All references to the interview use the pseudonym and fictional information. Therefore, the only information given about participants is their age and gender. All pre-anonymized transcripts and voice recordings were destroyed.

### *2.2. Sample*

Eight young people were interviewed as part of this research; (see Table 1 for participant details).

**Table 1.** Information about Participants

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Six females and two males</b>
Ethnicity	White British
Geographical Spread	Across England
Mean Age at Time of Interview	15.88 years
Range of Ages at Time of Interview	13–18 years
Standard Deviation of Ages at Time of Interview	2.17
Mean Age at Onset of Grooming	12.88 years
Range of Ages at Onset of Grooming	12–14 years
Standard Deviation of Ages Onset of Grooming	0.84
Range in Grooming Length	10 days–1 ½ years
Contact or Non-Contact Abuse	3 contact abuse 5 non-contact abuse

NB: Onset of grooming refers to the first point of contact with the offender. Grooming length refers to the time from the first point of contact to the last point of contact with the offender.

All the young people in this study experienced online grooming to the point of sexual abuse, whether online or offline. The length of time between the offense and the interview varied between participants, from one to six years ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ). There was a considerable range in the abusive experiences of the participants and the offences committed by the abusers. All of the females ( $n = 6$ ) in this study considered their abusers to be a “boyfriend” at some point during the contact. Both males in this study were groomed by the same offender; the boys knew their male abuser in the offline, but were unaware their online female ‘friend’ was this individual. The abuser targeted the boys specifically because of their offline friendship. Both males were under the impression they were talking to a female and sent ‘her’ several semi-naked photos of themselves. Neither of the males considered the abuser to be a girlfriend.

Three of the young people met with their abusers offline and experienced contact sexual abuse: one participant travelled out of her home town with the abuser, another met the abuser twice during a year and the third participant had sex with her abuser several times a week for three months. Of the young people who did not meet their abusers offline, abusive experiences again varied considerably. One victim’s abuser was 17 years old and thus the case could be interpreted as ‘sexting’ (peers sharing sexually explicit photos via technology); however, the characteristics of this case were similar to the findings from others. This case and one other did not result in a conviction. The age of the offenders spanned from 17 up to approximately 50, all were male and white British. Most of the offenders had no previous convictions. The majority of the victims (including two of those who met their offender offline) were incited to send a range of naked photos to the offenders, and some received similar photos in return. One victim was regularly incited to create images and videos during the course of a year, some of which were of an extreme nature (for example, the use of objects in sexual acts).



### *2.3. Procedure*

The sample of victims was identified via professional contacts at CEOP, including police officers and social services. An email was sent to approximately 2500 professional contacts who had attended the CEOP Academy training courses during the last five years. Furthermore, professionals who had previously worked with CEOP or who were known to have cases of online grooming were approached individually via phone and email. The professionals were given an information sheet with the following inclusion criteria: (1) the young person is between 12 and 18 years old at the time of interview; (2) the young person had been a victim of online grooming in the past; (3) the case relating to the grooming has now been closed; (4) the victim would like to participate in the research; (5) the professional associated with the case agrees that participation will have no detrimental effects for the young person; (6) the parent or guardian of the young person consents for the interview to take place. The following exclusion criteria were also outlined: (a) the young person is known to have mental health difficulties; (b) the young person has severe learning difficulties. These tight inclusion criteria led to a select sample, but ensured that all cases could contribute to the research aims.

The professionals were asked to put forward young people known through their work, who had been victimized through online grooming. The young person was required to fit the inclusion criteria and be deemed psychologically ready by the professional to participate in the research. Due to poor response rates from professionals and tight inclusion criteria, the young people who were identified as potential participants were limited. Depending on the recommendation, the professional would then either approach the victim and their family or give details to the main researcher to approach the family. The parent/primary carer and the victim were each given an information sheet to help them consider the research. If the victim and their family were happy for the young person to participate, a consent form was given to the professional, the parent and the victim to sign. The first author then corresponded with the victim and their parent to arrange a mutually convenient time and place for the interview.

The victims were involved in a semi-structured interview that took between 45 and 120 minutes, depending on the pace of the individual. The young people were given as much information as possible about the research, prior to their involvement. This was provided via the information sheet, the consent form and explained in person immediately prior to interview. Interviews took place in a neutral setting of the victim's choice; this was either a victim suite at police property or an appropriate room in a Children's Services or charity property. It was stipulated that the researcher would not attend the home of the young person, as it was not deemed a neutral space. The young person was given the option of having their parent or Guardian attend the research interview. All

participants declined parental presence. To enhance rapport and informality, only one interviewer was present at and led all interviews (with the exception of the first interview, where a second interviewer was present to assess the quality of the interview structure).

To enable the interviewer to give full attention to the young person, no notes were taken; instead the interview was recorded using a Dictaphone. This was outlined on the information sheet and explained to the young person prior to interview. Before the interview commenced, it was explained that the participant was in control of the interview and could stop or take breaks at any time. Emphasis was placed on the interviewee feeling able to ask for clarification if necessary and informing the interviewer if they would prefer not to answer a question. It was explained that the interview was confidential, with the limits that confidentiality could not be guaranteed if reference was made to a crime that the police are unaware of, which would have to be reported. Information was given regarding withdrawal from the research and that participants could withdraw at any time before a specified date. The interview commenced only after the consent forms had been discussed and any questions had been answered. All interviews followed the same semi-structured format. All interviews began with a free narrative for the participant to summarize what happened. Following this, events were generally discussed chronologically with some questions used to gain information about key themes/issues. During the debriefing, the participant was given a debriefing sheet with further information about the research, a reminder about the process of withdrawing (including the contact details of the interviewer) and details of a range of agencies that could provide additional support if required.

#### *2.4. Data Analysis*

As soon as possible after each interview, the first author did an exact transcription of the Dictaphone recording. Transcribing the interviews enabled the first author to become familiar with the data. Once the interview was transcribed, all personal information mentioned during interview (including individual names, place names, *etc.*) were anonymized. These alterations were recorded in a document and stored on an encrypted computer at CEOP (a secure Government building). Anonymous transcripts were then imported into NVivo9 qualitative analysis software. Qualitative analytic approaches vary significantly [24] and are either entrenched within a theoretical perspective, or independent of theory. Thematic Analysis is often considered the foundational technique for qualitative work and is independent from specific theoretical perspectives [25]. Hence, Thematic Analysis seeks to identify, analyse and report themes within a set of data and has the flexibility to explore rich and detailed data without theoretical constraint

[25]. For these reasons, Thematic Analysis was chosen as an appropriate methodology for this research.

A bottom-up or data driven technique was utilized for this study, whereby no pre-existing theory was overlaid and consequentially themes were identified purely based on the content of the data. The first author coded each interview in turn by generating initial nodes within NVivo9. Initial coding was considered complete when each line of the data set had been allocated to one or more nodes. Following this, each interview was recoded again to ensure that any nodes created by subsequent interviews were connected to data across all interviews where necessary. At this stage, sections of the text were analysed by the second author to provide inter-rater reliability. The codes identified by the second author were very similar to those identified by the first author and dissimilar codes were resolved through discussion.

Having established a set of single nodes (approximately 800) covering all interviews, themes were searched for across the nodes. Nodes that were very similar or shared meaning were amalgamated into one node (for example, 'family money problems' and 'claimed benefits' were combined to become 'low income family') and nodes that were related to each other were combined to create themes using tree nodes (for example, 'given presents' and 'offered money' were joined under the tree of 'bribery'). Using data from all interviews, tree nodes gradually expanded to connect over-arching, inter-related themes (e.g., offender manipulation techniques). Throughout this process, the first author worked with the second author to discuss emerging themes and analytic progress. Thus, having established a comprehensive set of tree nodes through discussion with the second author, the first author then reviewed, defined and renamed themes until confident that the tree nodes and branches accurately reflected the data.

### **3. Results**

Early analysis of the interviews produced three superordinate themes based on timeframes; pre-offense, during the offense and post-offense. The results of this paper primarily focus on themes identified relating to 'during offense' analysis. There were a range of sub-themes within the 'during offense' superordinate theme, including: (1) the grooming behaviour; (2) victim feelings at the time; (3) protective factors; (4) risk factors; (5) perpetrator characteristics; and (6) relationship status. This range is demonstrative of the variety of victim experiences of grooming. The grooming varied dramatically in duration and over half of the abusers were grooming other victims at the same time. The sub-themes that generated the most information regarding the process of grooming were 'grooming behaviour' and 'victim feelings at the time'. A sub-sub-theme within 'grooming behaviour' was 'offender manipulation techniques'; this identified a

range of grooming techniques with various effects on victims (see Table 2). Please note that all ages given in this paper are the age of the victim during the grooming, not their age at interview.

**Table 2.** Subthemes of offender manipulation techniques and effect on victim.

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Effects reported by the Victims</b>
<b>Conversations</b> (Including normal, mutual interests, victim focused and confiding)	Built familiarity, trust and basis for relationship.
<b>Deception</b> (Including lies about interests, lies about identity and webcam trickery)	Attracted to abuser, fitted ideals, false sense of security.
<b>Regular/intense contact</b> (Including increasing methods of contact, talking through the night)	Enmeshed in relationship, addiction to contact, abuser infiltrated into victim's life, relieves boredom, distancing from family.
<b>Secrecy</b> (Including techniques to keep it secret, encouraging victim secrecy, allowing victim to decide secrecy)	Special and exclusive relationship, distancing from friends and family, lying.
<b>Sexualisation</b> (Including sexual chat, sexual photos and videos, sexual compliments, sexual contact and overemphasis on sexual side of relationship)	Feeling out of control, boosting confidence, wanting sexual experience, excitement, pressurised, enjoys reciprocity, believes will keep abuser interested, hold over victim, love.
<b>Kindness and Flattery</b> (Including generosity, good listener, genuine, fun, helping with homework, supportive, traditional and sexual compliments, promises about the future, personality and physical compliments)	Feeling good, builds trust and basis for a relationship, confiding in abuser, wanting to talk more, receiving gifts, love, feeling special, feeling beautiful, confidence boost, hopeful about future, enmeshed in relationship.
<b>Erratic Temperament &amp; Nastiness</b> (Including blackmail, threats, bribery, possessiveness, anger, encouraging jealousy, fights, being contradictory)	Fear, helplessness, lack of control, irritation, annoyance, worrying about losing abuser, confusion, dependence, desire to please offender, hold over victim.
<b>Grooming others</b> (Including friends and family)	Familiarity, part of victim's wider life, builds trust.

### *3.1. Conversations*

Common to all but one victim was that the abusers initiated contact; in the remaining case, conversation started due to a mutual online friend. In two instances, the first contact from the abusers was sexual; this could be considered atypical to ‘normal’ peer interactions online. One victim reacted negatively to this but agreed to ‘forgive’ the offender because he seemed interesting, the other continued speaking to the abuser sexually and non-sexually, before meeting him later that day.

“One day I just logged on and I got a friend request like so I accepted it. And that’s like how it all started.” [Jonathan, 13]

“Well he offered me first £200 to sleep with him...(laughs). So he offered me [that] first and I was like I’m not a prozy [prostitute] and everything and so then he went, I’ll give you £400 and I went, I told ya I’m not like that, I don’t go around getting money off people for sex.” [Jenna, 12].

All participants described having normal conversations with their abusers (in a similar way to how they talked to their friends), about general things such as discussing mutual interests, music, their day at school, and others known to them. However, this normal conversation was often in the context of intense levels of contact (see below) and thus may be distinct from regular online friendship formation patterns.

“Just like normal really; normal conversation.” [Jonathan, 13].

Six victims articulated how they confided in the offenders about problems within their life, particularly family problems, and found emotional support in the relationship. These conversations resulted in the abusers feeling familiar to the victims and built a level of trust. For 63% ( $n = 5$ ) of the victims in this study, friendship became the basis of a romantic relationship with the abuser. This emotional connecting is likely to have been influenced by the vulnerabilities that the victims were experiencing in their lives and increased their reliance on the offenders. On several occasions, the victims described feeling emotionally attached to their offender relatively quickly; potentially quicker than would be expected with online relationships more generally. Half of the participants mentioned that the conversation generally focused on them (although they did not necessarily notice this at the time). This dimension of the relationship may distinguish these dynamics from age appropriate online friendships, as non-offending friendships are likely to be more balanced and reciprocal.

“I told him everything, he knew just about everything that was going on. Whenever my Mum and me had had a row, the first person I’d tell, I’d start speaking to was him.” [Charlotte, 12].

“If I had a bad day at school, I’d come in and I’d speak to him about it. Erm, or if someone said this about my sister, I’d speak to him about that. So I trusted him a hell of a lot with a lot of my life basically.” [Shelley, 13].

### *3.2. Deception*

Over half of the abusers lied to the victims about their identities; most commonly the abusers implied they were younger than their true age. In half the cases, victims were sent a photo of an attractive teenager of the opposite sex and led to believe this was the identity of the person they were speaking to. One offender used a picture of his teenage son to groom the victim. The lies told by the abusers were generally believed by the victims at the time yet, with hindsight, all but one victim thought that the abuser had frequently lied to them. Of the victims that were deceived, no substantial suspicions were apparent and all were shocked when they found out the truth.

“He’d find things out about me first and then say yeah I like that too and I like this. So it was like, it was almost like he was using my responses to shape who he was, so he could pretend to be this person that I liked in order to get what he wanted from me.” [Chloe, 12].

“He made an account that wasn’t him; he pretended to be someone else.” [Lucas, 13].

On a few occasions the victims would have benefitted from questioning and critically evaluating some of the information given by the offenders, as some aspects of who the offenders were purporting to be were inconsistent with realistic peer relationships online. It is likely that victim vulnerabilities prevented this process.

“He told me he was a model, so all his photos on Tagged are of him modelling. So I found out obviously when it all came about, that the photos were actually a model from London.” [Shelley, 13].

“How he could work two jobs and have loads of stuff at 18? ...The little things that would’ve if I’d had listened to, would have, might have given some of it away.” [Joanne, 14].

Of the three victims who met their abusers, two found he was roughly as expected and one was shocked by how much older the offender was. The fact that this victim stayed despite this shock, indicates the extent to which she had been groomed by this point. In three cases, the abusers told the victims they did not have a working webcam, to avoid sending any videos back. The offender using his son’s identity had pre-recorded video footage on webcam and streamed this so it would play to the victim, as if it were himself.

“I was a bit shocked ‘cos apparently he was meant to be really young and then when I see that he wasn’t, I just like stood there and froze.” [Joanne, 14].

“I’d say well why won’t you go on webcam and he’d always be like oh it’s broken and then this one time, he, I don’t I honestly don’t know how he did this, but there was a video of a person, like the person I thought I was talking to.” [Chloe, 12].

### *3.3. Regular or Intense Contact*

The majority of the victims were in regular and intense contact with their abusers; the prevalence and extent to which this theme was discussed leads this to be noted as a substantial element of the grooming process. The number of methods of contact with the abusers gradually increased in the majority of cases, usually involving instant messaging, texting, webcam use and phone calls. Most victims described talking to their abusers frequently, and often through the night, which appeared to increase the young persons’ dependency on the offender and enmeshed the abusers more centrally within the victims’ day to day life. The word ‘addiction’ was used by two victims when describing their need to contact the abusers; this included the victim from the ‘sexting’ case. The intensity of the contact between victims and offenders is likely to be a distinguishing feature of grooming in comparison to other age appropriate online relationships. Several victims felt that the intense contact was indicative of a loving relationship and regularly spoke of love with the abusers.

“I couldn’t like hardly ever have anytime to myself.” [Jenna, 12].

“It had got to about, probably about for about 4 hours a day and that’s not including texting.” [Mona, 14].

“By the end we were texting all the, like texting through the day, talking online in the evening and then like a phone call at night, so it was quite frequently.” [Chloe, 12].

“I was constantly on the phone. I could be in bed and I could be on the phone all night and I’d actually fall asleep on the phone....And like wake up in the morning and the phone would be still on. So it was like an addiction.” [Joanne, 14].

“I was kind of addicted to talking to him...he’d text me and I’d be online within minutes and then we’d chat, when I had to log off my Facebook, I’d then begin texting him. And that’d probably be about 9 o’clock and I’d text him until 2 o’clock in the morning.” [Charlotte, 13].

Of the two victims (the boys) who were not communicating with the abuser intensively, relief from boredom appeared to be a contributory factor dictating when they would engage in chat with the offender (“Just someone to talk to really.” [Jonathan, 13]). The lack of regular and intense contact is likely to contribute to why the boys did not become enmeshed in their relationship with the offender.

### *3.4. Secrecy*

In all but one instance, the victims’ parents did not know anything about the abusers. In the vast majority of cases, one or more of the victims’ friends knew they were talking to a ‘boyfriend’ or a ‘girl’ online, but details of the relationships were shared to varying extents. A few victims were warned about the relationship by their friends who became uneasy about the extent of contact the victim was having with a stranger. One friend eventually reported the abuser to the victim’s parent because she was aware that the abuser was older and was worried by this.

“I could have told my Dad, but I can’t trust him because I think oh he’s gonna go mad at me, it’s all my fault.” [Jenna, 12].

“The only thing I was worried about was him telling my Dad that I’d said things and sent things to him. But then if I continued doing what he’d ask me, then he wouldn’t tell my Dad so there was nothing to worry about.” [Chloe, 12].

“I told...my Dad’s girlfriends’ son, he’s same age as me... I spoke to him one night, but that was it, I didn’t say anything to anyone else.” [Jonathan, 13].

In some cases the abusers explicitly told the victim not to tell anyone about their relationship, but in the majority of circumstances, the victims described not wanting to tell anyone (particularly their parents) about the offenders. Again, secrecy surrounding contact with the abuser is a unique feature of grooming and is likely to differ from typical peer friendships online, particularly in the cases where the offender insisted that the relationship remain a secret. This could be considered a warning sign for young people. On a couple of occasions one of the reasons for the secrecy was that the victims felt the ‘relationship’ would be perceived by others as wrong, usually due to the sexual elements of the contact and the fact the offender was a stranger. Thus, a variety of techniques were used by the victims to keep the relationships secret, including: (1) lying about where they were; (2) deleting messages; (3) saving conversations under a different name; and (4) terminating the conversation if interrupted by a parent. Secrecy seemed to make the relationship feel more exclusive, special and exciting to the victim. This lack of sharing



information also had the effect of distancing the victim from their family and in some instances, their friends.

“I wanted to keep to myself cos it was cos it was like that nice, you know, the stuff that he was saying, I didn’t like wanna tell everybody. So....deep down, it was like my own little ya know, person that likes me.” [Joanne, 14]

“I usually deleted them (messages) once they were sent.” [Chloe, 12].

“She (Mum) thinks she’s taken my phone but she’s taken my decoy phone. I had a little, rubbish little phone that I used when I was around her.” [Charlotte, 12].

The fact that some of the secrecy tactics employed by the victims were quite extreme highlights the importance of the relationship to the victim and thus how enmeshed they had become.

### *3.5. Sexualisation*

All victims experienced sexualisation to the point of sexual abuse online and in some cases offline sexual abuse. This theme was extremely prevalent in the data and should be considered a dominant component of the grooming process. Sexualisation involved one or several of the following: sexual chat, sexual compliments, creating and receiving sexual photos, creating and receiving sexual videos over webcam, and sex with abuser during a meeting. Sexualisation was apparent in all cases, but the process varied considerably. Most victims talked sexually with their abusers and, in the majority of cases, the offenders initiated this.

Half of the victims felt uneasy and pressured by this aspect of the relationship; despite this, these victims and a couple of others also found the sexual elements exciting, at least initially. The majority of victims described sexualisation as a slow force that emerged and intensified over a long period of time (several months in some cases); however one victim engaged in sexual chat with the abuser immediately (and met him later that day), and another after a few days. A couple of victims were originally excited by the sexual side but became scared as it intensified, whilst others who were initially reluctant began to initiate the sexual elements more often over time. For many female victims, sexuality eventually dominated the relationship and it was described often as the principal time when they felt out of control. In contrast, while sexualisation was a component for the male victims, it did not dominate. However, both males talked less openly in interview about the sexual elements of the grooming and this finding may be a reflection of this.

“It was just started off normal chat for quite a while I think and then a bit more provocative.” [Lucas, 13].

“It went from him saying... you’re pretty, to beautiful, to sexy, to f’ing lush, erm, I’d have you in my bed tonight and it went, just kind of through getting more and more...I would have stopped it because I would’ve realised that we’ve been, we’d known each other two weeks and we’re already doing that. What would we have been like in a month? We’ll be already having sex and stuff.” [Charlotte, 12].

The quote above relates to the ‘sexting’ case and the victim explained that she continued sharing sexual images with the abuser because she enjoyed it, however the speed at which the relationship and content of the images was progressing made her uneasy.

All but one victim created sexual photos and/or videos for the abusers and all said these received positive responses, which made them feel good. Photos and videos often increased in volume and became more extreme over time. In half of the cases the abusers also sent photos and/or videos to the victim in return, these received mixed responses from the victims. In most cases the abusers instigated the idea of sharing photos and videos, but there were mixed responses regarding pressures to do so. Several abusers told victims that other young people commonly send sexual photos thus, several female victims described feelings of obligation, concerned that they may lose the abusers’ interest and/or love if they withdrew participation, others felt they owed the abusers for their emotional support, but others, (including the boys), said they were not pressured. However, most victims of both genders described feelings of excitement at some point.

“I was under his spell so I’d do anything he wanted. Just come home from school, speak to him, do this, do that (sexual activity via webcam), go to bed...He was showing me so much attention in the beginning and talk to me near enough every day about everything and help me with my homework and stuff I thought in return, I’d do what he wants. So he’d request it and I’d do it.” [Shelley, 13].

“There wasn’t really any pressure until after I sent one or two like after, like the first one, that was like that was just fun, you know that was just exciting and I had my underwear on so it wasn’t like massively bad or anything, I thought oh well it’s only like being in a bikini; that was my justification in my head you know....Other stuff happened as well like when he asked me to do things on webcam and you know I did because it was fun and you weren’t supposed to do it, which made it even more fun.”[Chloe, 12].

“I was excited ‘cos it was something different, something new. Um he like he apparently a load of people do it so, it was like that’s what he said. So it was like an exciting feeling.” [Joanne, 14].

“But I was on Facebook at the time so I weren’t really watching it (a video of the offender masturbating), cos it kind of freaked me out in some ways, it was just kind of argh!...For a 12 year old girl I was quite scared!” [Charlotte, 12]

Two victims had been keen to meet up, but were discouraged by the abusers (who had lied about their identity), although one of these victims was planning the meeting with the offender at the point of police involvement. In some cases the abusers were encouraging the victims to meet.

“Oh I was excited; I thought it would be really fun you know. I got to meet my boyfriend, awesome.” [Chloe, 12].

Three female victims met their abusers offline and had been eager to do so. All had sexual intercourse on the first meeting. But while two of these young people often spoke quite positively about sexual intercourse with the abusers, the third victim generally talked more negatively it and fought back when the offender attempted to have sexual intercourse on a second occasion. The first two both had previous sexual experience; the third had no previous sexual experience. Despite, the general reflections noted above, victims sometimes made contradictory statements about the sexually abusive part of the relationship; on occasion describing feelings of excitement and enjoyment and other times describing concerns, discomfort and fear.

“The second time I just wasn’t bothered honestly it’s the only way of putting it!” [Mona, 14].

“In, some ways it wasn’t just all him doing it, it was me too...The police and everything class it as rape and groomed. I don’t class it as that because like, I, I loved him.”[Jenna, 12].

“He was more like shouting and stuff saying like, you should do it and, and stuff like that really, just erm, but I was like standing my ground, I was like I don’t, don’t want to. Not, I cou, I couldn’t do it again. Erm, and I think what was running through my head as I, I was like, it doesn’t matter whether he was to hurt me or anything, I just couldn’t put myself through that again.” [Joanne, 14].

Despite the fact that some online peer relationships may well involve sexual elements, the sexualisation of victim-offender interactions within this sample (often instigated and controlled by the abuser) built over time and in several cases began to dominate the relationship. This is likely to be more exclusive to grooming and therefore could be considered a warning sign.

### *3.6. Kindness and Flattery*

All victims described the abusers with positive adjectives for the majority of the contact, such as lovely, nice and kind; however this was to a lesser extent for the boys. This may also have contributed to why they were less enmeshed in the relationship. Victims often felt the abusers were fun, good at listening to their problems, interesting and supportive and, in one case, regularly helped with homework. Such interactions made them feel good and loved. This was a considerable theme across the interviews. However, given the clear overlap with typical adolescent relationship development it is difficult to draw distinctions between the two behaviours. Two victims who met their abusers, described the abusers paying for food and taxi fares and one of these victims also received money and gifts from the abuser for her birthday, which she explained made her feel special. This kindness, on several occasions, contributed to the victims becoming enmeshed or hooked on contact with the offenders.

“Genuine, as he seemed like the nice person everyone wants ya to go out and be with, he just seemed really nice to me.” [Mona, 14]

“Oh no he was lovely, he was just [like]. another teenager who liked the stuff that I liked and was fun to talk to or whatever.” [Chloe, 12].

“He was really like kind and caring and uh he’s a really nice person to talk to um, like you’d like him if you met him.” [Joanne, 14]

All victims felt familiar with and trusted the abusers, furthermore they all felt unconcerned at the time of the grooming, often describing it as feeling normal. This lack of concern may directly relate to the young people’s vulnerabilities and is likely to have decreased the accuracy of a critical assessment of the risks involved in such an online friendship.

“I trusted him with my whole life and everything like that.” [Jenna, 12].

“I never suspected anything.” [Jonathan, 13].

All but one victim expressed feeling a confidence boost from talking to the abusers, and in all female cases; this flattery was consistent and frequent with most describing feeling special, beautiful, enjoying the attention and becoming ‘enmeshed’ in the relationship. The girls described considerably more flattery than the male victims. Compliments were predominantly (but not exclusively) based on the victims looks, incorporating both traditional and sexual stances. Sexualized compliments, once established, generally became the most consistently used form of flattery. Half of the victims reported that the abusers were promising them a better future and regularly discussed staying together.

“He’d just like tell me I was pretty and beautiful and he’d tell me that he loved me you know; yeah that sort of thing just that I was sort of a good person and that he liked me.” [Chloe, 12].

“It was mainly like everything a girl would like to hear, like you’re beautiful, um you deserve good things and I can do all that for you and stuff like that” [Joanne, 14].

All the female victims in this study felt that the abusers were their boyfriend and half of all participants reported they believed they were in love with the abusers.

“He made me love him well he...yeah he made me love him.” [Jenna, 12].

“He was kind, made you feel special, made you fall in love with him.” [Charlotte, 12].

“He’d say he loved me and I’d say oh yeah I love you too because I was 12 and didn’t know what that was so like yeah I love you too and yeah we’d just be like that.” [Chloe, 12].

In contrast, the two male victims described having a mediocre interest in the girl that the abuser purported to be: “Just nice to talk to, if you’re bored someone to talk to, just catch up and stuff. Nothing really serious going on, but still friends.” [Lucas, 13]. This is likely to have helped them stay more distant from their abuser, potentially restricting the types of manipulation the offender felt able to engage in (e.g., intense contact) and/or the extent of their abusive experiences.

### *3.7. Erratic Temperament and Nastiness*

Some victims referred to occasions when the abusers had been possessive, jealous, controlling, or blowing hot and cold with them. On occasion this resulted in arguments and victims feeling irritated and annoyed, but more commonly, this resulted in the victim feeling confused and out of control. Some victims mentioned disliking the abusers as a result and the only victim who experienced the abuser becoming nasty in person described feeling scared by him. While typical peer relationships may involve arguments, the one-sided nature of the nastiness and erratic temperament experienced by some of the victims indicates a possible distinction for this type of abuse. Most victims who witnessed an erratic or nasty side to the abusers were anxious to please the offenders in attempts to regain their kindness and maintain the relationship. Such offender behaviour appears to highlight the hold they had over the victims and victims who experienced this type of temperament described already feeling enmeshed in the relationship with the abusers. This form of manipulation equated to one of the few times any of victims described feeling concerned by the relationship.

“If I was in an exam or something, erm if I’d turn my phone off and he’d tried ringing, he was like, oh you’re ignoring me even though he knew I was in school. So and then I had to get like, like, loads of messages saying like, “oi bitch, answer your phone” and stuff like that.” [Joanne, 14].

“There was quite a few times when I said something he didn’t like and he’s just like oh go away I wish you were dead, all that type of stuff... he occasionally tried to make me feel really bad about myself like oh you’re so ugly, you’re so fat, I’m surprised more people don’t hate you....It was a bit of a rollercoaster, because there were times when I thought I loved him and then others when I hated him and didn’t want to speak to him ever again and it went on like that for about a year.” [Mona, 14].

“It made me feel like he, like I’m not wanted anymore...and it made me like harder fast, because like losing somebody that you think you love it’s dead hard.” [Jenna, 12].

The victim who travelled out of her home-town with her abuser described him getting progressively nastier while they were away, despite having been kind and loving before they met. This was the victim that spoke negatively about sexual intercourse with the abuser and fought back against the abuser on a second occasion.

“He just started going really mad and getting really angry um cos we was on the park on our own and he was just like had like really evil eyes, I just remember his eyes, erm like he grabbed hold of my wrists and then was like well you’re not going, you’re staying with me.” [Joanne, 14].

Two victims were blackmailed with threats of showing parents if they did not send more sexual photos, and this emphasized their lack of control to these victims. Blackmail might be considered atypical of normal peer interactions online and thus could be a warning sign for grooming. However, young people need to be provided with information about where to seek help if they have reached the point where they are being blackmailed.

“Because you know you’d done it once or twice they just expect it all the time and then if you try and say like oh I don’t want to talk about that or whatever, he’d like threaten or black(mail), like I’ll send your Dad all the chat logs if you don’t.” [Chloe, 12].

### *3.8. Grooming Others*

On several occasions, victims’ friends were also in contact with the abusers, either when with the victim or as a means of the offender getting in contact with the victim if they were not responding. At points, the victims were warned to be careful by a friend,

but more typically, the friend found the relationship exciting, as they too had been groomed. In the one case where the parents did know their daughter was talking to the abuser, they too were regularly speaking on the phone with him and were manipulated by him. This contact with family and friends led the victim to feel increasing familiarity with the abuser and misplaced trust. The two male victims knew their abuser offline, and the families knew and liked this man offline. In the case of Jonathan, his mother trusted the offender to the extent that he regularly babysat for Jonathan and his brother, including an overnight stay on one occasion.

“They knew that we were talking to each other and like he was sending me messages saying like I love you and stuff like that. And my mum knew about that ‘cause my mum had, my mum would speak to him as well, like when he’s speaking to my mum, he’d say like um I really, really like your daughter, I think she’s lovely, I can’t wait to come and meet you all and like um, just stuff that a normal lad would say when they’re seeing your daughter....So it was like nothing out the ordinary to my mum or dad.” [Joanne, 14]

“I knew he was a [person in authoritative role] and I knew him as like well kind of a friend I suppose, cos I know he looked after me a few times when my Mum was working.” [Jonathan, 13]

All of these grooming techniques and subsequent effects on the victims (see Figure 1) increased the chances of the victims becoming enmeshed in the relationship. All female victims in this study implied they were ‘hooked’ on their offenders, for some this even transferred to after the arrest when they still believed it had been a relationship. Such victim beliefs gave the abusers increased control over the relationship and the young person. In contrast, the male victims were subject to fewer grooming techniques or often to a lesser extent, thus neither felt enmeshed; in particular one of the males appeared relatively uninterested in the relationship.

“We were like puppets, once we were under his control, anything he said would make me, would make me do it.” [Shelley, 13].

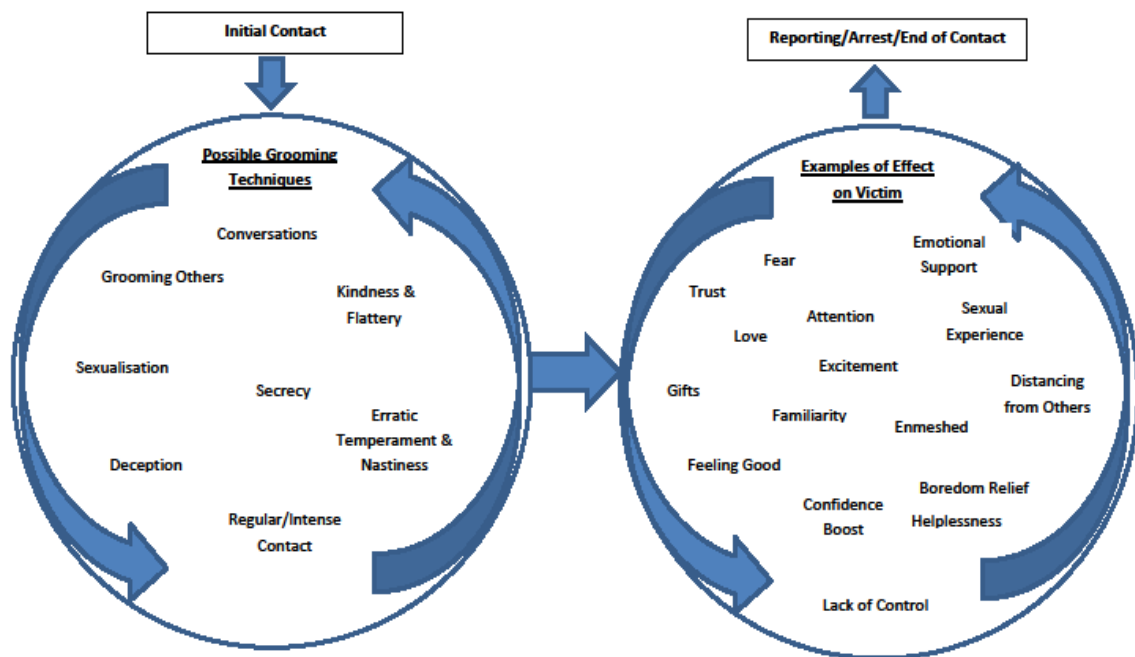
“Once they’ve got you in that certain position they want ya, they can do anything with you because you didn’t know that you loved them and you’d do anything for them.” [Jenna, 12].

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of this study illustrate the range of experiences of victims of online grooming and highlight that grooming within this sample was not a linear or homogeneous process; offenders did not move through the phases of grooming in any particular order. Instead, it may be cyclical by nature and groomers may adopt, relapse

and re-adopt various manipulation strategies as necessary. Despite the heterogeneity of victim experiences, the themes above highlight commonalities in the way that the adolescent victims in this study were groomed and these techniques often had similar effects on the victims. Given the age group of victims within this sample and the potential for offenders to tailor their grooming style to fit what they know of the victims; the results are discussed in the context of grooming adolescents (rather than children).

**Figure 1.** Summary of non-linear grooming techniques and effect on victim.



This study cannot make inferences about the prevalence of online grooming, but while recent US research suggests that online sexual solicitations are in fact decreasing [26] and most forms of harassment online actually come from peers [27], the current study highlights that online grooming by adults remains an issue requiring greater understanding. Existing literature recognizes grooming others can be a phase within the grooming process [7,20,28], and this is apparent through many of the victims' experiences within this study. This study suggests that any phase within grooming (e.g., sexualisation) can occur extremely quickly and is likely to vary. This finding is consistent



with existing literature which recognizes variation in grooming periods [29]. Furthermore, the fact less than half of the victims in this study met with their offenders offline, is supportive of the notion that not all offenders are contact driven [1].

The most commonly utilized online grooming strategies experienced by the victims in this sample were manipulation through conversation, deception, regular/intense contact, secrecy, sexualisation, kindness and flattery, erratic temperament and nastiness, and grooming others. These grooming techniques are similar to those identified by previous research from both an offender perspective [17,18] and a victim perspective [16], although the use of deception was more prevalent within this study than previous [30]. Interestingly, this grooming process and techniques within it are similar to those identified as being used by offenders' offline [7,15]. This study therefore provides support for the notion that grooming behaviour remains constant, irrespective of the environment and that child sexual offenders utilize technology both to facilitate access to victims and facilitate the abuse.

However, one key element of the current research is that different manipulation techniques are utilized by different offenders (sometimes differing by victim) and that, although regularly sharing similar themes, the process of grooming is a unique experience to each victim. Notably, however, the experiences described by the victims in this study appear to be consistent with (but also go beyond) the themes of rapport building and sexual content, as outlined by Williams and colleagues [20]. Furthermore, the findings correlate with the theme of 'caught in a web', as identified by Quayle *et al.* [23], which includes: seeming like a normal relationship, telling lies, being groomed, losing control and betrayal. The current research found that victims experienced these phases in different ways and at different points within the grooming process.

The grooming techniques endorsed by the abusers in this study generated a range of immediate positive and negative effects on the adolescent victims. The victims commonly felt immediate positive effects of the grooming such as trust, love, attention, support, excitement and confidence boosting; these tended to enmesh the victim and establish the abusers hold over them. In some cases, the grooming techniques gradually evoked more overtly negative effects on the victim such as fear, confusion, lack of control, and distancing from family. The victims who were already enmeshed with the abusers endured this and continued contact, despite experiencing more overtly nasty grooming strategies. These victims were focusing on maintaining the relationship and seeking to regain the positive effects of it. Notably, the two males in this study did not report any nastiness or erratic temperament by the abuser. It is likely that the abuser was aware the boys were not yet enmeshed in the relationship and therefore such grooming techniques would not have been tolerated at this stage. Using grooming techniques which

evoked overtly negative effects on victims who were not enmeshed in the relationship could result in the loss of the relationship entirely. This finding contributes to knowledge of grooming as it indicates there is likely to be a ‘tipping point’ at which the offender knows the victim is enmeshed.

#### *4.1. Implications of This Research*

The heterogeneous nature of grooming as reported by this study is a challenge for preventative strategy; however this study generates important implications for prevention. Sexualisation was a key theme within this study, evoking a range of complicated and often contradictory feelings for the victims. The internet gives young people new ways to explore their sexuality and adolescents are known to behave sexually online [31]; thus the findings from this study must be viewed within the context of sexual behaviour between peers. For some young people, however, even relationships with adults who clearly state their sexual intentions can be perceived as a romantic relationship. Some of the young people in this sample believed they were in a relationship with the offender, therefore education messages which distinguish age appropriate relationships from inappropriate sexual relationships could contribute to prevention.

Consistent educational awareness-raising is required to highlight the uncertainty about with whom you are speaking online, as well as the permanent nature and digital footprint of everything posted online (whether via text, apps, photos or images). This will help young people to make more informed decisions about how they interact online and consider the potential consequences more fully. Empowering young people to risk-assess relationships and recognize potentially abusive elements, will enable them to seek help at an earlier stage.

However, it cannot be overlooked that many of the grooming techniques identified and subsequent effects on the victims are typical of adolescent friendship/relationship development. Parallels between grooming behaviour and typical adolescent relationship forming online are problematic for preventative education, as warning signs of grooming may be discreet or in some cases, virtually non-existent. Despite this, some of the themes identified by the analysis in this study are likely to be indicative of the subtle signs of grooming. In particular, intense contact, nastiness and erratic temperament, encouraged secrecy, disproportionate focus on the young person’s life during conversation and sexual elements (especially when instigated, persisted and controlled by another) should be considered warning signs, most notably when a combination of these factors are experienced. Educating young people about these indicators will contribute to protection. Furthermore, extending sex education to incorporate sexuality online and the inherent

risks could further equip young people with the knowledge to assist them in protecting themselves.

A small number of victims discussed that, with hindsight, some of the offenders' lies did not make sense; therefore teaching young people to objectively evaluate online friendships and relationships, regardless of emotional attachment may help them to identify risks which would be otherwise overlooked. If the victims had had a better understanding of the intricacies of online grooming techniques, how quickly it can progress and the consequences, there is a greater possibility they would have been suspicious and better equipped to resist the abusers. Young people learning directly from the experiences of young victims could assist them in understanding these subtleties and being able to recognize the warning signs among their peers. On the occasions when the victims in this sample did feel worried about the relationship (e.g., when Chloe was being blackmailed to send more photos), they were not equipped with the knowledge of how to stop the cycle. Educating young people about how to report concerns about online relationships, at any stage, is imperative.

Within this sample, other than a few concerns regarding specific issues, most victims felt largely unconcerned by their relationship with the offenders, and on occasion this lack of concern extended beyond the point of sexual abuse. Despite current research suggesting that disclosure rates are increasing [27], all cases of grooming in this study only ended due to someone reporting on behalf of the victims or the offender getting caught as part of a wider police investigation. This lack of victim suspicion is likely to be associated with the parallels between the offenders' grooming techniques and typical adolescent peer relationships, but also demonstrates the extent to which victims had been groomed. Similarly, two out of eight victims experiencing blackmail is a relatively small proportion, which further indicates the offenders' confidence and ability to incite sexual acts without the need for blackmail. The emotional hold some offenders had over their victims mirrors aspects of interpersonal violence within relationships. Therefore, it is imperative that young people are educated to also look out for signs of grooming among their peers, who may be too enmeshed within the process to identify the warning signs.

Aftercare of victims of sexual abuse can be enhanced by better understanding the effects of sexualisation on the victims; in particular the confusion victims may feel. All the victims in this study felt an element of attraction to their offenders or who the offenders were purporting to be, and all the girls considered the offenders to be boyfriends at some stage. The emotional connection and sexual relationship (online or offline) that the victims may have with the offenders needs to be recognized and sensitively addressed by professionals who provide after-care and support.

For parents and carers, there are also important lessons to be learnt. The speed with which grooming can occur needs to be emphasized and that, for all of the young people in

this sample, the grooming progressed to experiencing sexual abuse online, sometimes also offline. The additional difficulty for protection is that parents may believe their child is safe upstairs in their own home and, in many cases, may remain naïve to the potential dangers in the online world. This has become more complicated by the rise in smartphones and other technologies allowing young people easy and on-going access to the internet outside of the home (including in friends' homes) and when they are to some degree beyond parental control. Despite being a difficult issue, potential risk could also be identified by encouraging young people to communicate with their parents and carers (or other trusted adults in their lives) about their online activities. If adults can facilitate these open discussions (without insinuating blame), then it is more likely a young person will discuss online relationships, thus giving adults the opportunity assist with risk assessment and intervene if necessary. As was the case for one victim in this study, parents are also at risk of being groomed by offenders and thus awareness raising and education for parents and carers is also imperative.

For child protection professionals, teachers, parents and adolescents themselves, there is a need to balance the huge advantages to be gained through the medium of the internet with the need to keep young people safe and this can only be achieved, in part, through greater awareness of the process of online grooming and abuse.

In light of the fact that this research found that offenders were required to use different strategies with different victims to keep them engaged, additional analysis has considered why some young people are more vulnerable to online victimization. In particular, analysis has considered whether vulnerabilities are the same as or different to those for offline victimization and whether these different vulnerabilities are related to the impact of the grooming and abuse on victims (see Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech [32]).

#### *4.2. Limitations of This Research*

There are several limitations of this study that must be considered when interpreting results. Only one interview session was scheduled with each victim and while all possible attempts to achieve and maintain rapport were made, it is possible that the victims may have held back information on the basis of not knowing the interviewer. This is likely to be particularly relevant with the two male participants, who generally provided less information. It is possible that the male victims felt less comfortable discussing the offense generally or that it was specifically due to having a female interviewer. As a result of this, the finding that they were less enmeshed in the relationship is tentative; as it is possible they did not wish to share the extent of their feelings in interview.

Another limitation is that the length of time between the offense and the interview varied between participants, thus victims are likely to have been in different stages of

recovery. Consequentially, the memories and reflections of each participant are likely to vary in quality. In addition, the participants within this sample were selected by professionals who felt their involvement would have, “no detrimental effects for the young person.” Therefore, this sample is unlikely to be representative of all victims of online grooming and sexual abuse, given that those who were displaying current psychological difficulties would not have been included. Similarly, the victims were aged between 13 and 18 at the time of interview and at different developmental stages. This is likely to impact on the way in which they recall and interpret their experiences.

Finally, perhaps the main limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the sample size of eight victims is small and therefore applicability of findings to wider populations is tentative. The authors sought additional participants but encountered difficulties in recruiting further. The diversity in the experiences of the victims may be a reflection of their individual differences (e.g., gender, perception of the relationship, age of the offender, *etc.*); consequentially research which explores victims who are more similar to one another may offer a more robust contribution for that specific group. Further studies could also incorporate a larger sample of victims and compare the themes with those identified in this research. Additionally, studies comparing victim experiences to a wider sample of non-abused counterparts would help explore the links between grooming behaviours and typical adolescent relationship development online.

## **5. Conclusions**

This research supports the notion that online grooming of adolescents is varied and cyclical, involving the abuser adopting and re-adopting a variety of manipulation techniques throughout the process. These techniques may include manipulation through conversation, deception, sexualisation, regular/intense contact, kindness and flattery, erratic temperament/nastiness, grooming others and secrecy which are notably similar to offline offender grooming strategies. Effects these tactics are likely to have on the victims include feelings of familiarity, love trust, confidence boosting, emotional support, excitement, but also, lack of control, confusion, reliance on the offender and distancing from family. Victims who considered themselves enmeshed in the relationship were more likely to tolerate immediately negative effects of the grooming, in the hope of maintaining the relationship and regaining the positive effects. Further research is required, from the perspective of the victims, to gain a deeper knowledge of grooming, what the impact is on the young person and how professionals can better respond to and prevent this form of abuse in the future.

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## **Author Contributions**

Helen Whittle wrote, conducted and transcribed the research interviews as part of her PhD thesis. Helen was the principal analyst and generated the first draft and subsequent revisions of this paper. Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis is first supervisor of the Ph.D. Catherine assisted in writing the semi-structured interviews and at various stages during analysis, including providing inter-rater reliability. Catherine also significantly contributed to the writing and re-drafting of this paper. Anthony Beech is second supervisor of the Ph.D. Tony provided feedback during the analysis of the interviews and contributed to re-drafting and editing of this paper.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**CHAPTER 5**  
**VICTIM IMPACT**

## **5.1 Chapter Rationale**

The previous chapter highlights the variety of grooming techniques and temporary effects grooming can have on young victims. The victims within this sample discussed the range of ways in which the online grooming and abuse effected their lives, however the potential long-term effects on the victims have not yet been explored. The impact that sexual abuse has on young people has been well researched using a range of methodologies. Considerably less well understood is the impact sexual abuse has when online technologies are integral to the abusive experiences. This chapter aims to enhance current understanding of how online grooming and sexual abuse can impact the victim on any ecological level. While Chapters 3 and 4 have provided some practical recommendations, victim experiences with law enforcement and therapeutic services after abuse, could offer a unique insight and subsequent suggestions. The victims from this sample were motivated to provide feedback based on their experiences and offered a range of recommendations for practitioners. Empowering victims to contribute suggestions to policies and procedures within the services that affect them, is a distinct angle advocated by this research.

**5.2. PUBLISHED PAPER:** Whittle, H. C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. E., & Beech, A. R.

(2013). Victims' voices: The impact of online grooming and abuse. *Universal Journal of Psychology, 1*, 59-71.

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## **CHAPTER 6**

### **A COMPARISON OF VICTIM AND OFFENDER PERSPECTIVES**

## **6.1 Chapter Rationale**

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 have provided the victim perspective before, during and after online grooming and sexual abuse. Findings so far emphasise the range in experiences and there have been a variety of different dynamics between victims and offenders within this sample. There is limited literature on victim and offender dynamics and a thorough exploration of the dynamic requires collecting data from both victim and offender perspectives. This chapter aims to extend knowledge of this area by combining the findings of interviews from both the victims and offenders. This can provide an enhanced understanding of this complex dynamic during the process of online grooming and subsequent offline sexual abuse. Directly comparing the perspectives of both victims and offenders from the same cases is an innovative methodology which adds a new dimension to professional perspective of this crime area. Juxtaposing perspectives from both victims and offenders allows an insight not only into how victims viewed and interpreted the offender, but also how the offenders perceived the victims and why they were targeted in the first place.

**6.1 PAPER IN PRESS:** Whittle, H. C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. E., & Beech, A. R.

(in press). Online grooming: A comparison of victim and offender perspectives.

*Deviant Behavior*

## **Abstract**

This study involved interviews with three victims of online grooming and contact sexual abuse, and the three adults who groomed and abused them. All victims were female and aged between 12 and 14 at the time of the abuse. All offenders were male and aged between 20 and 49 at the time of abuse. Results indicate that victim and offender dyads most commonly disagreed in their accounts of the sexual elements of the relationship, including initiation; stage when sexualization took place; production of photos and videos; and initiation of contact sexual abuse. This high level of disagreement is likely to be a result of both parties (in particular, offenders) attributing the most blame to the sexual elements and thus minimizing the extent of their involvement. All three of the victims perceived that they were in a relationship with the offender (one even after the end of the abuse). One offender persisted in stating that it was a relationship. The study found that the dynamic between offenders and victims of online grooming and child sexual abuse can be varied and complex. The benefit of a methodology that matches and compares cases is that a greater level of insight can be gained into this complexity of offender and victim dynamics. Findings are discussed in the context of implications for practitioners and prevention.

**Keywords:** Child sexual abuse, child sex offenders, child victims, online grooming



## **A comparison of victim and offender perspectives of online grooming and sexual abuse**

It has been found that many child sex offenders use the Internet to access and groom young people (Cohen-Almagor, 2013; Elliott & Beech, 2009; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013). Grooming is the process whereby, “a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child” (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006, p.297). However, offenders who groom children and young people online often have different goals to those who groom offline (Elliott & Beech, 2009; European Online Grooming Project, 2012; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013a) and may either be ‘fantasy driven’ (i.e., their goal is to acquire sexual footage of the victim) or ‘contact driven’ (i.e., their goal is to gain access to the victim offline for the purpose of contact sexual abuse (Briggs, Simon, & Simonson, 2011). Regardless of the offenders’ goal, victims of online grooming can experience a range of manipulation styles during the grooming process, which may include: flattery, trust building, threats, sexualization, and bribery (O’Connell, 2003; Ospina, Harstall, & Denet, 2010; Whittle et al., 2013a). Research also suggests that both online groomers and those who are targeted and victimized are a heterogonous group (Briggs, et al., 2011; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013b) and therefore dynamics within grooming relationships vary considerably. Understanding this dynamic between victim and offender can provide key insights, increasing the likelihood of adults recognizing the discrete signs of abuse. This can improve detection and prevention, which is particularly important given the low disclosure rates among child victims of sexual abuse (Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder, & Landolt, 2013).

While a number of child sex offenders do not feel shame or guilt for their offending, there are many who admit feeling negative emotions as a result of their behavior (Proeve & Howells, 2002). Research indicates that in these cases, offenders often employ techniques that enable the facilitation of a more psychologically comfortable position; giving excuses or justifications for their offending behavior (Navathe, Ward, & Gannon, 2008). Salter (1998) outlines denial in sex offenders as a spectrum rather than a single state. This continuum involves the following elements: 1) denial of the act itself; 2) denial of fantasy and planning; 3) denial of responsibility for the act; 4) denial of the seriousness of the act; 5) denial of internal guilt for the act; 6) denial of the difficulty in changing abusive patterns (Salter 1988). It is understood that child sex offenders often attempt to minimize and justify their offending and will utilize enduring cognitive distortions as a means of doing so (Blake & Gannon, 2006; Blumenthal, Gudjonsson, & Burns, 1999; Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013; Sullivan, 2002). Over time, the term ‘cognitive distortion’ has come to encompass several dimensions including: excuses, minimizations, rationalizations, and denial (Murphy, 1990) as well as justifications (Abel et al., 1989), victim blame (Ward, 2000) and entrenched beliefs (Hall & Hirshman, 1991) which implicate the child (for a review see Navathe et al., 2008). Cognitive distortions not only assist an individual in initiating a sexual offense, but they also encourage the maintenance of this offending behavior (Mann & Beech, 2003; Ward, 1997).

Regardless of the environment in which sexual abuse occurs, increased understanding of the subtleties within the grooming process is imperative in order to improve prevention and intervention techniques. While significant steps have been taken

to understand offenders who groom young people (European Online Grooming Project, 2012; Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012), and initial steps have been taken to understand online grooming from the perspective of the victim (Quayle, Jonsson, & Lööf, 2012; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014a), few studies have compared perspectives of offenders and victims within the same case or dyad, (e.g., a study by Phelan in 1995 compared cases of father – daughter incest by interviewing both offenders and victims), and no research to date has compared these perspectives from the same online grooming case.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the dynamic of the relationship between victims and offenders, to examine similarities and differences in their perspectives of the same events.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

Police and professionals who had previously worked with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre or had attended the CEOP training courses were approached by the researcher to enquire if they knew of young people who would fit the inclusion criteria for this study. CEOP is a UK Government and law enforcement agency established to tackle the sexual exploitation of children, both online and offline. An information sheet was emailed to approximately 2,500 professionals outlining the research. Inclusion criteria were: (1) the young person is between 12 and 18 years old at the time of interview; (2) the young person has been a victim of online grooming in the past; (3) the case relating to the grooming had been closed; (4) the young person would like to participate in research; (5) the professionals associated with the case agree that

participation will have no detrimental effects for the young person; (6) the parent or guardian of the young person consented for the interview to take place. Exclusion criteria were: (a) the young person has mental health difficulties; and/or (b) the young person has an intellectual disability. Young people who were interested in participating were given an information sheet about the research, as were their parent/carer. The participant, their parent/carer and the professionals associated with the case were all required to sign a consent form prior to the young person's involvement. As part of the consent process for the young person, they could opt in or opt out of their offender being approached for interview. None of the victims opted out of this possibility. It was made clear to victim participants that their offenders would not be told that the researcher had interviewed them. In total, eight young people agreed to be interviewed as part of this research, and also agreed for their offender to be approached for interview. A time and place was arranged for the interview, in a neutral setting. The young person was offered the option of having their parent present at the interview (this was not preferred by any of the participants).

Based on the victim sample, the researcher contacted the prison intelligence officer or probation officer associated with the offender. If deemed appropriate by this professional, a letter was given to the offender inviting them to participate in the research. Offenders were informed they had been selected based on the offenses they had committed. Of the seven offenders associated with the eight victims, two offenders were available to be spoken to. The reasons why the other offenders were not available to participate were as follows: one offender was currently being reinvestigated for other crimes, two offenders were not convicted of the associated offense, and one institution

did not wish to be involved in research. The remaining offender had been released and it was not deemed appropriate to contact him, however he had already been video interviewed by CEOP regarding his offenses against the victim, thus this data could be used. The researcher arranged an appropriate time to visit the institution where the offender was incarcerated with a CEOP officer to conduct the interview.

### ***The Interview***

Prior to the interview with all the participants, a verbal explanation of the research was provided as well as a description of the withdrawal process, the confidentiality agreement and consent information. It was highlighted to all participants that involvement in the study was voluntary, thus participants were able to refrain from answering questions, and terminate the interview at any point. It was also emphasized that all participants were able to ask questions at any stage of the interview. All interviews were semi-structured in format, which whilst covering similar themes, allowed flexibility for the interviewer to follow the flow of the participant. All victim interviews were conducted by the first author; in contrast, the offender interviews were conducted by two interviewers, (the first author and/or a CEOP officer). All interviews with the victims were audio recorded, transcribed and deleted. Interviews with the offenders were all video recorded and transcribed for analysis; the videos were retained with consent of the participants for use within law enforcement training. At the end of all interviews, a debriefing sheet was given to the participant, giving further information about the research, outlining the withdrawal process, interviewer contact information, and detailing sources of additional support.

## **Sample**

This study involved semi-structured interviews with three young victims of sexual abuse and the three adult offenders who abused them. All victim participants in this study were female and aged between 12 and 14 years during the grooming and abuse (but between the ages of 13 and 18 years at time of interview). All three victims experienced online grooming leading to sexual abuse both on and offline. The three offenders were male and aged between 20 and 49 when they committed offenses against these victims. They were all interviewed within four years of conviction and subsequent imprisonment. Please note all identifying features relating to participants have been changed throughout this paper.

### **Dyad 1**

Joanne was 14 years old when she started speaking to Sam. Sam was 49 years old but had created an online profile of a teenage boy. During the course of 18 months the pair talked frequently and Joanne was incited to send Sam sexual photos after a few months. Following discussions about meeting, Sam travelled to Joanne's home town. Joanne was shocked to discover Sam's real age; however, this shock was contrasted with Joanne believing she was in love with Sam, resulting in Joanne leaving her hometown with him. They were missing for over a week, during which time Sam sexually abused Joanne on one occasion. Sam attempted sexually abusive contact on a second occasion, but Joanne was able to prevent this. The pair was found and Sam was arrested. Sam has engaged with the Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP) in prison.

## **Dyad 2**

Kelly was 12 years old when she started speaking to 28 year old Pete online. Pete had a previous conviction for unlawful sexual intercourse (the victim was a teenage girl whom he claimed was his girlfriend). Kelly and Pete lived near to one another and met up almost immediately (Kelly states the same day, Pete says it was a few days later). Within a few days, Pete had sexual intercourse with Kelly. The pair met several times a week for approximately two months and engaged in regular sexual activity. Kelly's friend disliked Pete and felt she barely saw Kelly anymore and consequentially informed Kelly's parents, who reported it to the police. Kelly and Pete were found together in a house where Pete often stayed, when Pete was arrested. At the time of interview both Kelly and Pete felt that they had been in a relationship. Pete has participated in sections of the SOTP since being in prison, but is uncomfortable with the process and has not completed the course.

## **Dyad 3**

Mona was 14 years old when she started talking to 20 year old Chris online. They spoke for several weeks before Chris travelled to Mona's home town where they had sexual intercourse. They continued speaking and sharing sexual photos and videos during the course of a year. They met and had sexual intercourse for a second time at the end of the year. Throughout the contact, Chris was inciting numerous other young people (male and female) to create sexual photos and videos online. One of Chris' other victims was discovered to have chat-logs and indecent images relating to Chris on her computer; this initiated a police investigation. Chris was arrested and following analysis of his computer, Mona was identified as a victim. As a result, Mona and her family were

contacted by the police. Due to the ethical terms of the interview, Chris was unaware the researcher had interviewed Mona, but immediately and spontaneously referred to one victim as being different to the others. This transpired to be Mona. He described his relationship with Mona as “special” as he felt emotionally close to her; this was in contrast to all other victims. Chris has engaged with SOTP since being in prison.

## **Ethics**

The study was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (Reference ERN\_11-0083), and the CEOP Research Panel, ensuring all possible steps were taken to protect the participants. All personal details associated with participants were anonymized during transcription. Therefore, all subsequent references to the interviews relate to the pseudonym attributed to the participant and any names of places and people have been changed. Only the interviewer is aware of the participants’ true identity. Voice recordings of the victim participants and pre-anonymized transcripts, were destroyed. One document linked the original information with the anonymized information and this is currently stored on an encrypted computer in CEOP (a secure Government building). The offenders in this study were not informed that their victim had already been interviewed as part of the research. This was to keep the victims’ involvement in the research confidential, and to prevent the offender seeking information from the researcher about victims’ current circumstances.

## **Data Analysis**

All victim interviews and one offender interview was transcribed by the first author, who conducted the interviews. The two remaining offender interviews were transcribed by a secure transcription company routinely used by Government



departments. Thematic Analysis is a qualitative analytical technique which identifies, analyses and report themes from data. It is flexible, enabling the exploration of rich and detailed data without theoretical constraint (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative approaches are subject to at least a small amount of influence by the preconceptions of the researchers. In an effort to minimize this influence, data-driven Thematic Analysis was used as it generates themes based predominantly on information contained within the data, rather than overlaying a theoretical perspective. For these reasons, this study utilized Thematic Analysis across the six interview transcripts.

The interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo (qualitative analysis software) and each section of data was allocated a node depending on its content. This node described the theme of the particular section of text. This process continued until all of the data had been allocated a node. Approximately 1000 individual nodes were identified with some sections of text being allocated to multiple nodes. Following initial coding, nodes which shared meaning were amalgamated to form one unified node (for example, ‘socially isolated’ and ‘felt alone’ were combined to become ‘loneliness’), and nodes that were related to each other were combined to become tree nodes (for example, ‘believed was helping the victim’ and ‘behavior was out of character’ were joined under the tree of ‘offender cognitive distortions’).

Discussion between the researchers during the process of analysis was pivotal to ensure themes evolved fittingly. The second author also analyzed a section of the data to provide inter-rater reliability. The themes identified by the second researcher were extremely similar to those outlined by the first. Nodes and themes were explored and

revised until a comprehensive set of tree nodes existed which the research team felt accurately reflected the content of the data.

For each case study, tables were drawn up which identified different themes of the relationship (e.g., topic of first contact, methods of contact, feelings about sexual chat, secrecy, etc.). The comments of both the victim and offender were inserted into the table under the relevant theme (see Table 1 for an example). A color coding system was used to highlight similarities and differences in perspective for each point of the contact (red signified disagreement, orange signified elements of agreement and disagreement, and green signified agreement between members of the same dyad).

## **Results**

The numerous themes of each dyad amalgamated into four super-ordinate themes within the grooming process and 14 sub-themes across the super-ordinate themes were identified. The super-ordinate and sub-themes were as follows: 1) initial contact-including subthemes of initiation and nature; 2) grooming techniques-including subthemes of regular/intense contact, deception, kindness and flattery, erratic temperament and nastiness, secrecy and grooming others; 3) sexualization-including subthemes of initiation, stage when sexualization took place, photos/videos, contact abuse initiation; and 4) perception of relationship-including subthemes of relationship status and longevity. For each sub-theme, it was noted whether the victim and offender gave similar versions of events or different versions of events. This was recorded as either an agreement or a disagreement. For example, within the theme relationship, there are two sub-themes; status and future. If the victim and offender from dyad 1 gave similar versions of events about the relationship status (sub-theme 1), but gave differing opinions

about their expectations of the relationship (sub-theme 2), then dyad 1 would have a score of 1 out of 2 (1/2) for disagreement in the super-ordinate theme of relationship. However, if they disagreed about both sub-themes, they would be attributed 2 out of 2 (2/2) for level of disagreement. Proportions of disagreement were recorded for all dyads across all super-ordinate themes and sub-themes (see Tables 1, 2 and 3).

Dyad 1 had the most disagreements; 3/4 (9 of the 12 [75%] sub-themes mentioned in Sam's interview). The remaining two dyads had similar levels of disagreement. Dyad 3 disagreed across seven of 14 sub-themes (50%). The least disagreements were dyad 2, who disagreed about only six of the 14 sub-themes (43%). Interestingly, despite all three victims perceiving themselves to be in a relationship with the offender, there are still many disagreements between dyads. Patterns emerged regarding which super-ordinate themes were most likely to induce agreements and which super-ordinate themes evoked disagreements. These are outlined below. Please note that ages given are at the time of the offence.

## **1. Initial Contact**

The super-ordinate theme of initial contact involved two sub-themes; (1.1) contact initiation and (1.2) nature of early contact. Disagreements were more common than agreements between pairs within this theme.

**1.1 Contact initiation.** Mona and Chris (dyad 3) were the only pair that agreed about contact initiation, with both participants describing Chris as the instigator of contact. In contrast, members of both other dyads placed responsibility on the other individual for starting contact.

### Dyad 1.

*“He just started talking to me... asking me like my age and stuff like that....he seemed normal cos like obviously I hadn’t seen him. So he added me and I accepted.” [Joanne, 14]*

*“Joanne was part of the chatroom she was part of all these many people... I started talking to Joanne, and Joanne added me to her MSN and we just started talking through there. [Sam, 48]*

### Dyad 2.

*“I was just on my phone and got an inbox; someone added me on Facebook. And they started talking to me and was like... ‘hi babe and everything’.” [Kelly, 13]*

*“She joined one day [a Facebook group] and anyway, she sent me a friend request, er, I accepted it... I sent the first message, she sent the friend request.” [Pete, 28]*

### Dyad 3.

*“He started speaking to me on this website which I only joined because my mates made me.” [Mona, 14]*

*“I was looking through my profile and saw her; thought she seemed quite interesting and said hello.” [Chris, 20]*

All three offenders attempted to justify their initial contact with the victims, detaching this from the likely motivation that they engaged with the girls because of their age. Minimizations also featured in the offenders’ accounts; in particular Sam and Pete highlighted the victims’ role in contact initiation.

**1.2 Nature of early contact.** Joanne and Sam (dyad 1) were the only dyad who agreed about the nature of their early contact, both indicating that they spoke about mutual

interests. The other two pairs disagreed, with both offenders claiming that the early contacts were “normal” (non-sexual) conversations. However, both Kelly and Mona reported immediate sexual references initiated by the offenders, although Mona described Chris (dyad 3) apologizing for this following her negative reaction, and then commencing non-sexual conversation.

#### Dyad 1.

*“For the first month we were just general chat like friends” [Joanne, 14]*

*“Because of the range of topics that we talked about, there wasn’t anything sexual talked about, because that’s not me. We talked about 50’s and 60’s music” [Sam, 48]*

#### Dyad 2.

*“He said, “hi babe, you’re fit” and everything...Well he offered me first 200 pounds to sleep with him.” [Kelly, 13]*

*“I tried to see if we knew anybody, you know that she knew anybody I knew. Um, that was, that was about it for, probably the first couple of days.” [Pete, 28]*

#### Dyad 3.

*“One of the first messages he sent me was asking for my underwear!...And then I got one a few days after that I got one saying oh that was just a joke I’m sorry if you took it seriously. I was like yeah sure whatever...we just started having normal conversations about like my school life and stuff, how life was going for me, how it was going for him, just typical conversation.” [Mona, 14]*

*“Oh no, as I said there was nothing sexual about that for maybe the first 5 or 6 months.” [Chris, 20]*

Chris minimizes his grooming of Mona (dyad 3) by ignoring the initial sexual contact, however given the number of victims that Chris was abusing; it is possible that his memory of the first contact with Mona is weak. Pete and Sam both deny sexual first contact, and although this is consistent with the victim perspective in dyad 1, Sam denies that this is even something he would be interested in.

## **2. Grooming Techniques**

The super-ordinate theme of grooming techniques included the following sub-themes; (2.1) regular/intense contact, (2.2) deception, (2.3) kindness and flattery, (2.4) erratic temperament and nastiness, (2.5) secrecy and (2.6) grooming others. This was the super-ordinate theme that included the highest level of agreement between pairs.

**2.1 Regular and intense contact.** All six participants agreed that, within their pairs, they had regular and intense contact with one another; however disagreements arose regarding who was responsible for the high levels of contact.

### Dyad 1.

*“It was just constant talking everyday all day...every time I looked at my phone there was a message or a missed call.” [Joanne, 14]*

*“She had my mobile phone number she used to text me quite a lot” [Sam, 49]*

### Dyad 2.

*“I couldn’t like hardly ever have any time to myself.” [Kelly, 13]*

*“I’ll come back and there’ll be missed phone calls, text messages, “Why aren’t you answering...your phone? Why haven’t you been on Facebook?” And it was just getting a bit all too much at first...she was constantly on the phone.” [Pete, 28]*

### Dyad 3.

*“It had got to about, probably about four hours a day and that’s not including texting.”*

*[Mona, 14]*

*“I would phone and text, but that was very much the minority [of victims] that tended to be the ones that I spoke to for longer periods of time.” [Chris, 20]*

There were high levels of agreement about the fact that contact was intense; however, dyads typically attributed responsibility for this to the other person. The way contact is described by the offenders is consistent with victim blaming techniques; the focus tends to be on the victim contacting the offender, which assists the offenders with justifying the abuse. However, given the victims’ descriptions of loving feelings towards the offender and the vulnerabilities experienced by the victims at the time, it is possible that the victims did pursue contact with the offenders. Furthermore, when put in the context of early adolescent behavior and sexual development (for example, intense feelings of ‘love’ for pop stars), the prospect of an older boyfriend may have been appealing and exciting to the victims. Given that each participant is retrospectively recalling events, it must be considered that each is more likely to attribute greater blame to the other party, as part of reframing.

**2.2 Deception.** Most dyads agreed about the levels of deception used during the grooming process. Kelly and Pete (dyad 2) agreed that deception was not used. Mona and Chris (dyad 3) also agreed that deception about identity was not used, however Mona suggested that Chris is likely to have lied about who else he was seeing; this is consistent with the fact that Chris had multiple victims. Joanne and Sam (dyad 1) agreed to a point that Sam deceived Joanne about his identity (including age and appearance), but Sam

contradicted himself and changed his mind during interview.

Dyad 1.

*“I don’t think there’s one thing that he said back then that I know now, that was actually the truth...When I first met him, he did look a bit different...he just said oh, obviously I’m not 18 and I was like, I can see that.” [Joanne, 14]*

*“I did set up another account because I’m very wary of something I don’t know nothing or very little about so I set up another account, I didn’t put an age down there, but I did tell her I was 19...No I actually created the account beforehand erm and then I found out how old she was and within just under 9 weeks, 10 weeks I had actually told her what my real age was, my real name.” [Sam, 49]*

Sam’s contradictions surrounding deception are likely to be demonstrative of his attempts to cognitively distort his grooming behavior and the reasons behind this. His story evolved due to interviewer probing, which required him to re-evaluate and regenerate these distortions.

**2.3 Kindness and Flattery.** The pairs generally agreed that the offenders treated the victims kindly and flattered them; although Joanne and Sam (dyad 1) disagreed about the extent to which this was used.

Dyad 1.

*“Felt like I could tell him anything like, really trusted him...It was mainly like everything a girl would like to hear, like you’re beautiful, um you deserve good things and I can do all that for you.” [Joanne, 14]*

*“I used to quite happily talk to her, help her with her homework, help her with her problems and she used to listen to me when I was really down...I told her I liked her as a*



*very, very good friend, for her taste in music, for her taste in literature erm for the way we both could help each other, we could both understand and talk to each other.” [Sam, 49]*

#### Dyad 2.

*“He was nice and nice how he’s treating me... I just felt loved and it’s things like, I felt happy.” [Kelly, 13]*

*“Compliments all the time really... She’d say things like, “I don’t deserve you, you’re every girl’s dream.” Half, half the time it just, it made me feel sick to be honest. I thought, ‘No, this isn’t, this isn’t the way.’ But it wouldn’t make me feel good about myself.” [Pete, 28]*

#### Dyad 3.

*“He was being really nice to me afterwards and stuff; he said really sweet things to keep me happy... He kept going oh you’re the prettiest girl ever; I’d love to be with you all the time all that type of stuff really.” [Mona, 14]*

*“Be nice to her, comfort her when she’s upset, make her laugh, make her feel good about herself, flirt with her...I made her feel special” [Chris, 20]*

During interview, Sam and Chris described emotional identification and emotional congruence with the victim. Chris admitted to exploiting this and using flattery techniques to do this, in contrast Sam denied conscious flattery of Joanne (dyad 1) and focused on their emotional congruence. Pete displayed feelings of guilt and shame during interview when he discussed the impact his flattery had on Kelly (dyad 2). It is possible that increasing victim empathy may have been part of his SOTP, thus this may have contributed to his overt guilt and shame during interview.

**2.4 Erratic Temperament and Nastiness.** All victims within this sample felt the offender was nasty towards them on occasion and, when combined with the kindness they had already experienced, this resulted in a push and pull on the victims' emotions. Pete and Chris both acknowledged that they were doing this. However, Pete described that some of the time this was intentionally to play with her emotions, but at other times this was a direct result of the fact he knew what he was doing was wrong and his attempts to pull away from the relationship. Sam did not acknowledge ever being nasty to Joanne (dyad 1) or displaying erratic temperament; this conflicts with Joanne's perspective and indicates that Sam is likely to deny this aspect of his grooming.

Dyad 1.

*"He just started going really mad and getting really angry um cos we was on the park on our own and he was just like had like really evil eyes, I just remember his eyes, erm like he grabbed hold of my wrists and then was like well you're not going, you're staying with me." [Joanne, 14]*

Dyad 2.

*"Well it made me feel like he, like I'm not wanted anymore...and it made me like harder fast, because like losing somebody that you think you love it's dead hard... He would sometimes be nice; sometimes he'd be in a mood." [Kelly, 13]*

*"I turned round and said something along the lines of, "If you loved me you wouldn't say that, you wouldn't do that," I think I said, or used something along them lines, one time. And she bent over backwards to make sure she was there." [Pete, 28]*

*"I'm feeling an attraction and I'm falling for the girl. But I've still got this at the back of the head, "This is wrong, this is wrong," but nine times out of ten it's when I've sobered up. But I just carried on going."* [Pete, 28]

### Dyad 3.

*"It was a bit of a rollercoaster, because there were times when I thought I loved him and then others when I hated him and didn't want to speak to him ever again and it went on like that for about a year."* [Mona, 14]

*"I knew that she had feelings for me that were stronger than the feelings I had for her and I played on them."* [Chris, 20]

Pete and Chris to varying extents admit emotional blackmail of the victims and displayed guilt during interview when they recognized this. Chris informed the interviewer that he did not feel similar guilt with any other of his victims.

**2.5 Secrecy.** Kelly and Pete (dyad 2) agreed that they regularly discussed the need to keep the relationship secret and Pete regularly told Kelly that if they got caught he would be sent to prison. Mona stipulated that Chris (dyad 3) encouraged her not to tell anyone and other than talking to her best friend about him, she preferred it this way. In contrast, Chris said they did not discuss secrecy, but he was aware that some of her friends knew. Joanne described not wanting to talk to others much about the relationship, while Sam (dyad 1) did not comment on the secrecy of the relationship.

### Dyad 1.

*"I wanted to keep to myself 'cos it was 'cos it was like that nice, you know, the stuff that he was saying, I didn't like wanna tell everybody."* [Joanne, 14]

## Dyad 2.

*“Don’t say a word,” basically. “When you send messages or whatever, make sure everything’s deleted...90% me, trying to put safe measures up to make sure, um, that if it ever did blow up, minimal damage, to be honest” [Pete, 28]*

Pete used the victims’ emotional dependence on him to afford them secrecy and thus his protection from the police. During interview he acknowledged that this was to prevent him going back to prison, but minimized the fact it also enabled him to continue meeting up with and abusing Kelly regularly.

**2.6 Grooming others.** Both Kelly and Pete (dyad 2), and Mona and Chris (dyad 3) agreed that the offender did not groom others close to them. However, Joanne said that both her mother and her friend were also in contact with Sam (dyad 1).

*“I did get like my mum to speak to him and she, it was like he even said stuff to her that made it seem as if it were just a normal 18 year old.” [Joanne, 14]*

*“Charlene, she’d been my friend for at least like 2 years before I started speaking to him, erm she wasn’t too, too keen I mean she had him on MSN as well cos he erm, added her. Erm, and he used to send her messages trying to say like, oh why isn’t Joanne answering me and stuff, cos I used to stay at hers sometimes.” [Joanne, 14]*

Sam was not directly asked about contact with Joanne’s (dyad 1) family during interview, nor did he volunteer this information. It is possible therefore that he may be in denial of this grooming technique.

## **3. Sexualization**

The super-ordinate theme of sexualization included the following sub-themes:

(3.1) initiation, (3.2) stage when sexualization took place, (3.3) photos/videos and (3.4)

contact abuse. This was the super-ordinate theme that included the highest level of disagreement between pairs.

**3.1 Initiation.** All pairs disagreed to some extent about who initiated the sexual elements of the relationship. Joanne (dyad 1) described the offender initiating this aspect, but in contrast, Sam stated that Joanne started sexual interactions and he was reluctant to engage with her in this way. Kelly (dyad 2) discussed Pete introducing sex into the conversation and explained this was based on their first contact. Pete felt that sexualization of the relationship occurred mutually. Chris (dyad 3) also felt this was a mutual progression with Mona; however Mona described Chris initiating this.

#### Dyad 1.

*“I wasn’t like into all that kind of stuff or talk or anything, so it was like all new to me when he did start talking like that.” [Joanne, 14]*

*“She used to sort of play with herself quite a lot and she told me she wanted me to listen but I refused, when I first, when she first started masturbating over the phone I used to hang up.” [Sam, 49]*

#### Dyad 2.

*“We started getting more, a bit more personal with each other. Um, I suppose you could say it was more of like a fantasy role I suppose, you could say that in a way”. [Pete, 28]*

#### Dyad 3.

*“That was him... in the days after my break up he was being quite flirty with me, telling me all the things he’d like to do to me and stuff. And it was like yeah, I’m still a bit upset here so it’s not really the most appropriate time to be talking about this stuff.” [Mona, 14]*

*“She’d broken up with her boyfriend and was quite upset and I think looking for someone to make her feel special and I was there. And she phoned me, she was quite upset, I think she just wanted to feel better about herself so the conversation turned quite sexual.”*

*[Chris, 20]*

Sam demonstrated denial of any responsibility in sexualizing the relationship, pretending that he did not like it, and attributed blame towards the victim as a means of justifying his behavior. When compared to the way in which the victims discussed sexualization of the relationship, Pete and Chris minimized the extent of these interactions and particularly their initiation of such interactions.

**3.2 Stage when sexualization took place.** There were minimal discrepancies surrounding at what stage in the relationship sexualization began. Joanne and Sam (dyad 1) generally agreed that sexual chat began after quite a while, Mona and Chris (dyad 2) also agreed that this occurred several months into the conversations. Kelly (dyad 3) maintains that conversation of a sexual nature occurred immediately, whereas Pete states this was not the case until over a week into the contact.

#### Dyad 1.

*“At least like four or five months.” [Joanne, 14]*

#### Dyad2.

*“So he offered me [money] first and I was like I’m not a prozy and everything and so then he went, I’ll give you £400 and I went, I told ya I’m not like that, I don’t go around getting money off people for sex. And then he didn’t say anything after that.” [Kelly, 13].*

*“No, it wasn’t. No, I’d say it was after about a week and a half it started getting sexual, yeah.” [Pete, 28]*

While Sam and Joanne (dyad 1) were in agreement about the amount of time it took for the relationship to become sexualized, Sam denies expecting this development and responsibility for it. Pete (dyad 2) is likely to have distorted his account of when sexualization occurred to minimize the notion that sex was the dominant feature in his interactions with Kelly.

**3.3 Photos and videos.** All pairs disagreed about what occurred regarding the solicitation of sexual photos and videos. Joanne (dyad 1) stated that she sent sexual photos of herself to Sam because he asked for them. However, Sam stated that he received no sexual photographs. Pete (dyad 2) also contends that no sexual photos or videos were exchanged; however Kelly says they were and she initiated this. Finally, Mona and Chris (dyad) agree that sexual photos and videos were mutually exchanged; however Mona explains that Chris initiated this, while Chris believes this was mutually established.

#### Dyad 1.

*“Yeah he did ask for some photos...Cos it was like, for some reason it felt like I had to take them, for him to still talk to me and like me” [Joanne, 14]*

*Sam: “No there was never any sexual activity online”*

*Interviewer: “Any sexual photographs of her?”*

*Sam: “No” [Sam, 29]*

#### Dyad 2.

*“I think I sent him pictures” [Kelly, 13]*

*“We sent pictures of each other, but nothing, er, nothing sexual or anything like that....No, I’ve never been interested in photos or things like that, to be honest.” [Pete, 28]*

### Dyad 3.

*“He asked me what he wanted me to be doing and what he wanted me to be wearing and stuff” [Mona, 14]*

*“Masturbating on the phone with each other or on the webcam or sending pictures... Both of us [instigated] at sort of varying times. [Chris, 20]*

Sam and Pete appear to be in denial that they incited their victims to create and distribute sexual photos and at various points during interview confirmed this is not something that appeals to them. While Chris does accept this offence, he minimizes his dominant role in the activity when compared to Mona’s perspective.

**3.4 Contact sexual abuse initiation.** Levels of agreement regarding the initiation of contact sexual abuse differed between pairs. Joanne described Sam (dyad 1) initiating, whereas Sam explained that it was mutual initiation, but he stopped it prematurely. Joanne reported that Sam attempted contact sexual abuse a second time, which she was able to resist; he denies this. Kelly and Pete (dyad 2) agreed that the contact sexual abuse was mutually initiated. Chris (dyad 3) also stipulated that the abuse was mutual; however despite agreeing that it was mutual during the second meeting, Mona contended that Chris instigated this contact on their first meeting.

### Dyad 1.

*“He just started like hugging me and then he started undressing me...he wanted to, so he was trying to.” [Joanne, 14]*



*"I was aroused enough to have sex but I realized what I was doing was wrong, I shouldn't have been having sex so I stopped, I made an excuse, I had cramp, I had a headache, I stopped, I got up and she wasn't happy, she wasn't pleased about it, she didn't want me to stop, she wanted me to continue, but I didn't." [Sam, 49]*

Dyad 2.

*"In some ways it wasn't just all him doing it, it was me too...it is classed as raped, but where I'm coming from I don't class it as that because with me, I thought I loved him."*  
*[Kelly, 13]*

*"I didn't have to raise the subject or nothing, it was, it just happened. So yeah I knew, I knew it was going to happen, but I didn't want to sort of force her into it or talk her into anything like that, you know...it just happened."* *[Pete, 28]*

Dyad 1.

*"It kind of took me by surprise really 'cause I thought we'd just start off as friends, if not, you know just a little bit of kissing. I didn't expect it to go as far as it did...it was more him the first time....the second time I just wasn't bothered, honestly, it's the only way of putting it!"* *[Mona, 14]*

*"It just felt sort of natural."* *[Chris, 20].*

All offenders minimized their involvement in the initiation of contact sexual abuse and made various attempts to attribute at least some of the blame towards the victim. The most extreme example of this was Sam's account, which incorporated features of denial and rationalization.

#### 4. Perception of Relationship

The super-ordinate theme of ‘perception of relationship’ was divided into two subthemes, (4.1) ‘relationship status’ and (4.2) ‘longevity’. This super-ordinate theme generally reflected disagreements between pairs.

**4.1 Relationship Status.** Both Joanne and Kelly described feeling ‘in love’ and being in a ‘relationship’ with their offender. Pete agreed that he was in a relationship with Kelly (dyad 2), however Sam stated that he was just good friends with Joanne (dyad 1). The relationship status between Mona and Chris (dyad 3) fluctuated and perceptions changed at various intervals, however Mona explained that she felt Chris was her boyfriend at certain points and loved him for a time. Comparatively Chris contended that they were not in a relationship, he attributed this to the long distance between their home towns, rather than the age difference.

##### Dyad 1.

*“He wanted to become more than just friends...I started having feelings that didn’t make sense; I thought I was like falling, that I had a crush on him...he was sending me messages saying like I love you and stuff like that.” [Joanne, 14]*

*Interviewer to Sam: “Did you ever declare your love for her?”*

*Sam: “No.”*

*Interviewer: “No?”*

*Sam: “No.” [Sam, 49]*

##### Dyad 2.

*“He made me love him.” [Kelly, 13]*

*Interviewer to Pete: “Did you use the term love at all?”*

*Pete: "Yes we did. Yes, that was used many times."*

*Interviewer: "And did you love her?"*

*Pete: "Yeah I did, I think I fell for her hook, line and sinker to be honest yeah. There was a big attraction there, yeah. I think that's the difficulty of trying to, well that was one of the main difficulties trying to walk away." [Pete, 28]*

### Dyad 3.

*"We ended up going out until about May when he broke up with me...he made out like he loved me or something." [Mona, 14]*

*"I hadn't been sort of declaring my love for her...the whole distance thing...it was too far away...If I was talking to her, I'd sort of sign off 'love you, talk to you later' which I meant as in kind of the way you'd say to one of your friends, but it's possible she took to mean that I was in love with her." [Chris, 20]*

It can be considered that Chris' description deliberately minimizes his role in romanticizing the relationship and he attributes blame towards Mona (dyad 3) and her misinterpretation. Similarly, Sam is likely to be minimizing what he said to Joanne (dyad 1) as a means of avoiding responsibility and blame, although his denial is more acute than Chris'. Pete's description of his feelings for Kelly (dyad 2) highlights his cognitive dissonance and shame surrounding his offences.

**4.2 Longevity.** Joanne described her expectations of a future with Sam (dyad 1), but Sam said this was not discussed however he could understand why Joanne may have felt this way. Kelly and Pete (dyad 2) both agreed they discussed a future together, although Pete knew this was unrealistic as he expected to get caught. Mona described her

feelings about the future fluctuating during the course of the relationship, but at points she felt there could be longevity with Chris (dyad 3).

Dyad 1.

*“He wanted to marry me and then start a new life...he promised me a different life to what I was already living” [Joanne, 14]*

*“Indirectly I was probably telling her that there would be a better life elsewhere.” [Sam, 49]*

Dyad 2.

*“He was like, we’d stay together til I was 16 and all that.... he wanted to get me pregnant and everything, like he wanted to have a baby with me and I didn’t want to...I was scared in case the police found out...to Pete I was like, I know they’re gonna get you and I was worried.”[Kelly, 13]*

*“She’d say ‘will we get married in the future?’ this, that and the other, “are we still going to be together in ten years time?’. I says, ‘I don’t know’, I said ‘I really don’t know’. And sometimes I’d bring it to an abrupt end and say, ‘I can’t see that happening to be honest, because this is going to blow up one day’.” [Pete, 28]*

Dyad 3.

*“It was making me feel like ah this is someone I could probably speak to for the rest of my life, he makes me happy, maybe I could have a future with him; all that gunk.”*

*[Mona, 14]*

Both Sam and Pete partially accept their role in manipulating the victim to believe they could have a future together; however this is rationalized and minimized considerably. Pete’s concerns about getting caught increased his influence over Kelly as it increased her

concern and dependency. Chris did not specifically discuss this in his interview although the fact that he did not view this as a relationship indicates he would not anticipate a future with Mona.

### **Discussion**

This study explores and compares the perspectives of victims and their offenders at various stages of the grooming process, yielding some interesting results which can be utilized by policy and prevention efforts. The finding that grooming techniques utilized by offenders yielded the most agreements between pairs is not surprising; however some of the findings within the sub-themes were unexpected. The erratic temperament that Kelly experienced, resulting in a push and pull of her emotions, correlates with the psychological highs and lows that Pete describes in his attempts to stop the relationship. Comparatively, Chris describes this push and pulling of Mona's emotions as intentional manipulation. This play on victim emotions is pivotal to the grooming process and the victims within this sample felt enmeshed in the relationship with their offenders. The offenders were able to exploit this dynamic by exercising control over the victims, whether overtly or subconsciously (e.g. "for some reason it felt like I had to take the photos," Joanne).

It is worth noting that both Sam and Pete indicated that the intense contact was attributed to the victim, rather than themselves. Whilst this could be related to offender denial, consideration should also be paid to the possibility that the victims did pursue continued engagement with the offender. Indeed, Kelly, in particular, describes instigating much of the contact. The victims within this sample were displaying vulnerabilities (either temporarily or over a long period time) at the point when they

engaged with the offender (see Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014b) and, as a result, this is likely to have motivated them to engage with the offender and increased the likelihood of becoming enmeshed. Attachment behavior can bring about intense emotions (Bowlby, 1988), which may have contributed to the victims' intense feelings and desire for contact with the offender, as well as why the victims sustained contact with their offenders, particularly if they have insecure attachment styles. It is also possible however, that the offenders have over-emphasized the victim's contact, as this forms part of offender cognitive distortions, enabling their role in the abuse to be more 'psychologically comfortable'. One way to ascertain this would be to undertake a further study looking at chat log records of conversations.

It is widely accepted within the literature that sex offenders use cognitive distortions and features of denial to assist in justifying their offending and reduce the guilt and fear they are likely to feel as a result of offending (Blake & Gannon, 2006; Navathe et al., 2008; Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013). When applied to Salter's (1984) spectrum of denial, the extent of Sam's denial becomes clear. On occasion during interview, he demonstrated denial of the acts themselves (sharing of sexual photos), denial of fantasy and planning (claiming that he did not intend to sexualize the friendship), denial of responsibility for the acts (blaming the victim for much of the contact and sexualization) and denial of internal guilt for the behavior (did not mention feeling bad about the abuse during interview) however it is unclear whether this was a denial of guilt or whether the guilt did not exist in the first place. Pete and Chris also demonstrated features of denial, but to a lesser extent.

The impact of offenders' cognitive distortions, is evident throughout the interviews, most notably within the super-ordinate theme of sexualization, which is the theme yielding the highest level of disagreements between pairs. It is likely that the offenders perceive this aspect of their offending as being seen as most important to blame allocation and therefore, this theme would be more likely to evoke cognitive distortions (resulting in disagreements) as a minimization technique. In particular, Sam's suggestion that Joanne pursued him sexually may well assist him in dealing with the reality of his offending.

In a similar vein, the victims may also attribute blame to the sexualization of the relationship and it should not be overlooked that they may also have minimized the extent of their role within this dynamic, most likely, as a means of coping. It is also possible they may have minimized as a result of shame, embarrassment or fear of judgment or getting into trouble.

A surprising finding about the theme of sexualization is that many of the descriptions from the victims included positive feelings, and some beliefs that sexual behavior was not always initiated by the offenders. During a review of the literature surrounding statutory rape and statutory relationships, Hines and Finkelhor (2007) reported that many of the young people involved describe the experience in positive terms. In fact, studies have found victims (particularly of statutory rape) who report feeling a romantic and/or sexual bond with their offender (Wolak & Finkelhor; 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). This is consistent with some of the victims' statements within this study, particularly Kelly and, to a lesser extent, Mona.

The victims in this study did not report viewing sex with the offender as abusive at the time of the offense and, even with hindsight, not all of them consider it to be abuse. This not only could be considered typical of adolescent behavior (Quayle, Jonsson, & Lööf, 2012), but is indicative of the extent to which the girls had been groomed and their expectations about the relationship (reiterated by the super-ordinate theme of ‘relationship’). Within their review, Hine and Finkelhor (2007) reported that research has found three reasons for victims’ positive reflection: 1) the young people are unable to perceive or admit the harm; 2) there may be a delayed reaction to realizing the negative impact of the events; 3) the harm is intrinsic and, in effect, a moral harm. It has also been hypothesized that if the offender ends the relationship, they are more likely to be perceived as an offender by the victim due to the feelings of rejection (Lanning, 2002). In the case of Kelly and Pete, Pete’s overt efforts to avoid law enforcement and continue contact may have contributed to hindering Kelly’s ability to visualize Pete as an offender. It is also possible that this perspective was used as a coping mechanism by Kelly, protecting her from potential harms associated with the realization that she was abused. This combined with the relatively short amount of time that had passed between the end of the offense and the research interview could form part of the explanation why she reported still being in love with Pete and not interpreting it as rape. Although very preliminary findings due to the sample size, these victim reports do emphasize that it is important for professionals working with young people, not to underestimate the feelings of love victims may have towards their offender and the extent to which they are enmeshed in the relationship.



All offenders within this sample would be considered ‘contact driven’ (Briggs et al., 2011) and the extent to which victims felt they were in a relationship and expressed feelings of love towards their offender, cannot be taken out of the context that they had met their offenders. While this finding is largely unsurprising, it is more unusual that one of the offenders (Pete) also perceives himself to be in a loving relationship or at least this is how he presented during interview. Additionally, despite indicating that he was not in a relationship with Mona, Chris reiterated that she was different from all his other victims because he genuinely liked her. Chris did not know that the interviewer had previously spoken to Mona, but immediately singled her out as unique in his offending. Such an offender perspective makes this sample quite unusual. However, what is more typical is that the three dyads in this sample fit the common form of unlawful sexual intercourse cases, as they involve adult males and adolescent females (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Furthermore, the literature more commonly reports offenders to be young (rather than older) male in these types of cases (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007), as was the case with Chris and Pete.

### **Implications of this research**

This research gives a greater understanding of the dynamics between victims and offenders. The disagreements regarding the sexualization of the relationship are demonstrative of the challenges faced by both offenders and victims in treatment as both parties (for different reasons) may be uncomfortable with ‘owning’ aspects of the behavior and as a result may seek to reframe it. Emphasis on this process within SOTP’s is pivotal in reducing denial and cognitive distortions, thus facilitating acceptance of responsibility of their offending. Conversely, within a therapeutic framework, victims can

be reassured that they should not feel guilt or responsibility if they enjoyed or even contributed to the sexualization of the relationship, as this can be a result of the grooming dynamic. In addition, both boys and girls in early adolescence are looking for ways to develop and explore their sexuality, which makes them particularly vulnerable to some forms of grooming. Findings from this study support the recommendations of Wolak and Finkelhor (2013) whereby young people should be educated to the facts that they are likely to become sexually aroused when they speak about sex, watch sexual footage or are touched intimately, but offenders will exploit this natural arousal. Educating young people about healthy, age appropriate relationships and assisting them in being able to identify exploitative and abusive situations should assist prevention efforts.

The deeper understanding of the victim and offender dynamics provided by this study further informs prevention efforts of both practitioners and parents/carers. Awareness of subtle changes in the behavior of adolescents is necessary if online grooming is to be detected, particularly given the secrecy frequently afforded to such relationships and the young person's potential reluctance to envisage the relationship as abusive. Increased technological use, increased secrecy surrounding its use, increasingly sexualized behavior or an increased range or extremity of emotions, should be considered potential behavioral indicators of online grooming, particularly if already uncharacteristic to the individual adolescent. While any of these indicators should evoke immediate discussions between an adult and a young person about the dangers of online grooming, open discussions and education surrounding this should be accessed by all young people, regardless of whether they are displaying behavioral indicators or not.

### **Limitations of this research**

There are several limitations to this research. This research is based on interviews with offenders and victims and therefore is subject to each individual's recollection and interpretation of events. It should be assumed that from this sample, the offenders have a greater motivation to change details than the victims; most likely due to denial, cognitive distortion or a desire to be seen more positively by the interviewer. Furthermore, the offenders were at varying stages of SOTP's at the time of interview and this is likely to have a direct influence on their levels of acceptance. It is also possible that the victims may have provided incorrect information, most likely due to reframing events as part of coping, forgetting details or a desire to be seen more positively by the interviewer. Police files were not accessed during analysis and therefore this analysis is based purely on the opinions of those involved, rather than the evidence of the case. This study is based on a small sample of case studies and thus it is unlikely to be representative of all types of grooming behavior and relationships between victims and offenders.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Given the small sample size, patterns in behavior reported by this study should be interpreted as a basis for further exploratory research. Objectivity can be increased in future research if evidence obtained within police case files (including chat logs) is also included in analysis, in addition to interviews with those involved. This would enable verification of some of the information provided during interview and provide a deeper understanding of the process of grooming.

## **Conclusion**

Better understanding the dynamics between victims and offenders not only contributes knowledge regarding the subtler aspects of the grooming process, but also informs professional practice within SOTP's and victim therapeutic work and prevention. Further research utilizing a similar and enhanced methodology will add value to this area of research and ultimately contribute to the protection of young people from online grooming and sexual abuse in the future.

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Table 1,  
*Section of the table outlying key themes within Dyad 3, used during early analysis. A traffic light color code system was used to highlight agreements and disagreements.*

<b>Event</b>	<b>Mona's Perspective</b>	<b>Chris' Perspective</b>
<b>Victim Life Before</b>	Long term, generally happy, a few family fights (reconstituted family). Trigger events – fight with friends, break up with boyfriend, wanted someone to speak to, granddad died, dog died.	Knew about family fights, fight with friends, low self-esteem. Split with boyfriend while already in contact.
<b>Offender Life Before</b>	Bit geeky, a big drinker.	Unhappy with living situation, became recluse in bedroom on the computer, using prescription drugs and alcohol, unhappy and lonely.
<b>Initiation of Contact</b>	Offender initiated	Offender initiated
<b>Place of Initial Contact</b>	Social networking site – Netlog	Social networking site (possibly MySpace or Facebook, not sure)
<b>Topic of First Contact</b>	Offender offered a gift in exchange for her underwear. Victim said no, go away. A few days later offender apologised and started normal conversations.	Normal conversation (nothing sexual for 5/6 months).
<b>Conversation Topics</b>	Normal topics, school, relationships (he'd just broken up with someone), confided in him about friends, family fights, being upset, break up with boyfriend (2/3 months into contact),	Normal topics, confided in her and she confided in him.
<b>Deception</b>	No deception. But thinks he may have lied on occasion about what he was doing sometimes and suspects he may have been seeing other people.	No
<b>Offender Manipulation Techniques</b>	Blowing hot and cold (broke up half way through & lots of fights), flattery (both traditional and sexual), sexual flattery increased after break up/just before meeting, slow replies to texts. Offender in control of sexual elements. Offender was nasty sometimes.	Played on her emotions, flattered her, flirted. A lot of the nice things he said were true, but he knew they'd draw her closer to him. Sub-conscious manipulation at first, but as he got more depressed and got more victims, he became more consciously aware of how he was manipulating her. He was nasty to her when they had fights and he was very stubborn after fights sometimes, so he only got in contact first and apologized if thought he was in the wrong.
<b>Methods of Contact</b>	Multiple: Texting, MSN, Netlog, 6 or 7 phone calls	Multiple: Social networking site, MSN,

Table 2,  
*Summary of Disagreements between Sam and Joanne (dyad 1) within each super-ordinate theme.*

	Sam's Perspective	Joanne's Perspective	Agreement?
<b>Initial Contact</b>			
Initiation	Group chat, then victim requested him as a friend, he accepted.	Offender requested her as a friend and she accepted.	<b>No</b>
Nature	Normal conversation, getting know each other, discussed similar interests.	Normal conversation, getting to know each other, discussed similar interests.	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Grooming Techniques</b>			
Regular/Intense Contact	Yes	Yes	<b>Yes</b>
Deception	At times yes, but then told the truth. Unsure.	Yes	<b>No</b>
Kindness & Flattery	No	Yes	<b>No</b>
Erratic Temperament & Nastiness	No	Yes	<b>No</b>
Secrecy	Not discussed	No	<b>N/A</b>
Grooming Others	Not discussed	Yes	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Sexualisation</b>			
Initiation	Victim initiated	Offender initiated	<b>No</b>
When?	After a while	4/5 months	<b>Yes</b>
Photos and/or Videos	No	Yes, offender initiated	<b>No</b>
Contact Sexual Abuse	Mutual but offender stopped it	Offender initiated	<b>No</b>
<b>Relationship</b>			
Status	Good friends but not in a relationship.	In love with one another and in a relationship.	<b>No</b>
Future	Did not discuss it, but may have given victim the impression of future together.	Planned to runaway together and get married.	<b>No</b>
<b>Total Disagreements</b>			<b>9/12</b>

Table 3,  
*Summary of Disagreements between Pete and Kelly (dyad 2) within each super-ordinate theme.*

	Pete's Perspective	Kelly's Perspective	Agreement?
<b>Initial Contact</b>			
Initiation	Victim joined group and she requested friendship, he accepted.	Offender requested friendship, she accepted.	<b>No</b>
Nature	Normal conversation, getting to know each other	Sexual; he offered her money to sleep with him.	<b>No</b>
<b>Grooming Techniques</b>			
Regular/Intense Contact	Yes	Yes	<b>Yes</b>
Deception	No	No	<b>Yes</b>
Kindness & Flattery	Yes	Yes	<b>Yes</b>
Erratic Temperament & Nastiness	Yes	Yes	<b>Yes</b>
Secrecy	Yes	Yes	<b>Yes</b>
Grooming Others	No	No	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Sexualisation</b>			
Initiation	Mutual	Offender	<b>No</b>
When?	After ten days	Immediately	<b>No</b>
Photos and/or Videos	No	Yes, victim initiated	<b>No</b>
Contact Sexual Abuse	Mutual	Mutual	<b>Yes</b>
Initiation			
<b>Relationship</b>			
Status	They were in a relationship and fell for each other.	They were in a relationship and in love.	<b>Yes</b>
Future	Wanted to stay together but knew it was unrealistic as he would get caught.	Would stay together and have a family.	<b>No</b>
<b>Total Disagreements</b>			<b>6/14</b>

Table 4,  
*Summary of Disagreements between Chris and Mona (dyad 3) within each super-ordinate theme.*

	Chris' Perspective	Mona's Perspective	Agreement?
Initial Contact			
Initiation	Offender initiated	Offender initiated	Yes
Nature	Normal conversation, getting to know each other	Bribed her for her underwear, she refused, he apologised and then had normal conversations	No
Grooming Techniques			
Regular/Intense Contact	Y	Y	Yes
Deception	N	N	Yes
Kindness & Flattery	Y	Y	Yes
Erratic Temperament & Nastiness	Y	Y	Yes
Secrecy	N	Y	No
Grooming Others	N	N	Yes
Sexualisation			
Initiation	Mutual	Offender initiated	No
When?	A few months	5/6 months	Yes
Photos and/or Videos	Yes mutual initiation	Yes he initiated	No
Contact Sexual Abuse Initiation	Mutual initiation	Offender initiated the first time, mutual the second time.	No
Relationship			
Status	Not a girlfriend due to the distance, did not love her.	Up and down relationship; at times were in love and in a relationship.	No
Future	Indicates no future as were not together.	May stay together.	No
Total Disagreements			7/14

**CHAPTER 7**  
**A WIDER SAMPLE OF ADOLESCENTS ONLINE**

## **7.1 Chapter Rationale**

The previous chapters have contributed in-depth knowledge about individual experiences of online grooming and sexual abuse, but as identified within the limitation sections of these chapters, the applicability of the results to wider populations is uncertain.

Furthermore, Chapter 2 concluded that risk taking behavior is a key trend associated with victimization, however this has yet to be explored thoroughly within this thesis. The review, as well as Chapter 3 also suggested that interpersonal features, satisfaction across various areas of a young person's life and coping, may also contribute to vulnerability towards victimization online. This chapter extends the existing findings of the thesis and can act as a reference base for findings within the victim sample, identifying if the preliminary qualitative findings are applicable to wider populations. In addition, this chapter also aims to enhance knowledge of circumstances which influence young people's behavior online and identify features which may contribute to vulnerability towards sexual victimization. While a substantial body of research now exists surrounding young people's use of technology (including frequency and nature), there remains a knowledge gap surrounding how aspects of a young person's life offline may influence their behavior and experiences online. Of particular interest is risk taking behavior online which is reported to be associated with increased risk of sexual victimization. Building upon the findings of Chapters 2 and 3, this study focuses on adolescent internet use and the associations with personality, coping and life satisfaction. A greater depth of understanding regarding which factors may increase risk taking and vulnerability online may assist in identifying individuals most likely to engage in this behaviour, thus increasing the opportunity to safeguard these potential victims.

**7.2 PAPER:** Whittle, H. C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. E., Bishopp, D., & Beech, A. R.

Young people's behavior and sexual victimization experiences online.



## **Young People's Behavior and Sexual Victimization Experiences Online**

### **Abstract**

This study aimed to explore how elements of adolescents' lives affect their behavior online and risk of sexual victimization. A sample of 354 school children (aged 13 and 14 years old) completed an Internet Use questionnaire, the NEO-PI3 Five Factor Model personality test, the Multi-dimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale, and the Adolescent Coping Scale. Results suggest that a combination of offline risk factors contribute to vulnerability online, including low levels of life satisfaction, non-productive coping strategies, and impulsivity. It was found that these sets of risk factors may lead adolescents to take risks online, which increases the likelihood of victimization. Alternatively, these risk factors may increase the likelihood of online victimization, even in the absence of risk taking. The findings from this study infer it is too simplistic to suggest that aspects of personality alone make young people vulnerable online. Instead, routes into online vulnerability are likely to be complex and individualistic depending on various risk factors within a young persons' life. This study supports the notion that there are likely to be multiple routes into interpersonal sexual victimization online, both directly and indirectly.

**Keywords:** Internet, adolescents, life satisfaction, personality, coping

Young people across Europe and the United States go online at school, at home and on the move (Haddon & Livingstone, 2012; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Thus, in many Western societies, adolescent behavior is intertwined with technology and there is an emerging literature supporting this convergence (Baumgartner Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg 2012; Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013).

Globally, research has recently begun to focus on the identification of factors which may contribute to a young person's vulnerability towards sexual victimization online (e.g., European Online Grooming Project 2012; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014). Findings indicate that young people who are female (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2011) and experiencing difficulties or low satisfaction across various areas of their life (Brå, 2007; Quayle, Jonsson, & Lööf, 2012; Suseg, Skevik Grødem, Valset, & Mossige, 2008; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2003), have an increased likelihood of online victimization, including sexual victimization.

Social isolation is also associated with vulnerability towards sexual victimization (Olson, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007). This has been explored through social compensation theory (Sheldon, 2008), which suggests that individuals go online to compensate for areas of life with which they are unhappy, as those less comfortable with face to face interactions are likely to prefer this form of social contact (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This trend has been mirrored within adolescent samples (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005; Stamoulis & Farley, 2010). There is also a reported link between risk taking behavior online and individuals who are unhappy with life or have lower life satisfaction

(Baumgartner et al., 2012; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). This link warrants further exploration of the impact of risk taking on adolescent experiences online.

### **Risk taking**

Risk taking behavior online is associated with negative outcomes, such as victimization (De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008), yet some young people take risks online (Whittle et al., 2013; Wolak et al., 2008). For some, there is a lack of awareness that their behavior could be considered ‘risky’, whilst others knowingly choose to take the risks either for ‘amusement’ or because they perceive the risk to be low. Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2007) identified nine online behaviors considered to be risky for young people; 1) posting personal information online; 2) sending personal information online; 3) making a rude or nasty comment; 4) harassing or embarrassing someone; 5) meeting someone online; 6) people in a buddy list known only online; 7) visiting an x-rated website on purpose; 8) talking about sex with someone known only online; 9) downloading images from file sharing programs. Within this US sample of 1500 adolescents, 75% had engaged in at least one of the nine behaviors and 28% had engaged in four or more. The authors concluded that the tipping point for increased risk appears to be when four or more of the risky behaviors are exhibited. Based upon a sample of 1762 Dutch adolescents, Baumgartner, et al., (2012) found that 24% exhibited moderate risk taking and 6% displayed high levels of risk taking online. Within a UK sample, Haddon and Livingstone (2012) found that 11% of 9-16 year olds have seen sexual images online, while 29% have communicated online with a person they do not know offline. Beyond

risk taking, additional interpersonal features are likely to influence victimization experiences online, in particular an individual's personality.

## **Personality**

Research has previously demonstrated that elements of young people's lives offline (for example, peer norms), can influence their risk taking behavior online (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011). The European Online Grooming Project (2012) found evidence to suggest that young people who were vulnerable through risk taking displayed behaviors characteristic of extraversion (involving sociability, talkativeness and a preference for stimulation). This is consistent with existing research linking risk taking to extraversion (e.g., McGhee, Ehrler, Buckhalt, & Phillips, 2012), where it was hypothesized that extraverts are more likely to engage with strangers. However, extraversion has a complex association with impulsivity, which resulted in Eysenck (1967) identifying it as a distinct trait.

Further research in the 1990's (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1990; Goldberg, 1990) led to the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) that measures facets of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. There have been criticisms of the NEO (Bishopp, unpublished) (for example, Neuroticism is generally described in terms of anxiety or nervousness, but the FFM facet of Neuroticism also includes impulsivity, depression, vulnerability to stress and anger). Similarly, impulsivity is often considered to exist within extraversion or as a trait in itself, but the FFM's inclusion of impulsivity within Neuroticism complicates associations to the higher order

traits (Bishopp, unpublished). This may lead to ambiguous interpretations, however, with limited measures for young people, this is the most appropriate measure available.

Regardless of the complexities of this relationship, there is an established literature to link impulsivity and risk (for a meta-analysis see Lauriola, Panno, Levin, & Lejuez, 2014), which could arguably be extended to the online environment. Evidence suggests that young people who are emotionally insecure or needy are at greater risk of sexual exploitation (Finkelhor, 1984); these characteristics are associated with neuroticism and anxiety (Eysenck, 1967; McCrae & Costa, 2010). Despite considerable research surrounding personality, the associations of traits with child sexual victimization (offline or online) are limited and inconclusive (Whittle et al., 2013). One issue has been how to define and measure personality. The Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1992) has become a dominant model in personality psychology and has reasonable psychometric properties (Piedmont, McCrae, & Costa, 1992).

### **Coping**

The way in which young people cope with problems both online and offline, is likely to be influenced by their individual characteristics, including personality (Gumbiner, 2003). Evidence suggests that elements of neuroticism (associated with anxiety) are linked to non-productive coping styles (such as worry, self-blame and keeping it to self) while conscientiousness and extraversion may be linked to problem focused coping and seeking social support (Glidden, Billings, & Jobe, 2006; Shewchuk et al., 1999; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). It is possible that there may be associations between coping styles and online behaviour; for example an individual who has a non-productive coping style may

be more likely to engage in risk taking behaviour online. Additionally, some of the features associated with non-productive coping (such as distancing from family and friends), mirror some of the vulnerabilities associated with online sexual victimization (Whittle et al., 2013). Therefore there is reason to consider the links between coping and online behaviour and victimization experiences. However, there is very little literature exploring this relationship.

The aim of this research is to identify features of a young person's life which may impact their behavior and experiences online. Specifically, it was hypothesized that:

1. Non-productive coping will be associated with low life satisfaction and anxiety.
2. Online sexual victimization will be associated with low life satisfaction and anxiety.
3. Risk taking behavior online will be associated with low life satisfaction and impulsivity.
4. Non-productive coping styles, risk taking online, low life satisfaction, anxiety and impulsiveness will contribute to online vulnerability.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

This study involved young people in Year 9 at Secondary School (aged 13-14 years) from 14 locations across England and Wales, where teachers had had some contact with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) centre education team. Power analysis was conducted to determine the sample size while avoiding the risk of making a type 2 error. An effect size of at least of  $d = 0.5$  was expected, with a power of 80%. Results of

the analysis indicated that the sample should be a minimum of 102 participants. The sample for this study was 354. The participants came from a range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and had mixed academic abilities, but a reading age of at least 11 years was required for the psychometrics. Although initially, 54 schools expressed an interest, from both the State and private sectors, the 14 were all either Local Authority or Academy schools. The demographic distribution of the sample is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Descriptive statistics for the adolescent sample (N=354)*

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	163	46.4
Female	188	53.6
Total	354	100
<b>*Extent of E-Safety Education</b>		
Considerable	211	59.6
Some/Limited	143	40.4
Total	354	100
<b>Geographic Region</b>		
South West	55	15.5
South Central	16	4.5
London	63	17.8
East Midlands	68	19.2
Yorkshire and Humber	39	11.1
North West	55	15.5
Wales	58	16.4
Total	354	100
<b>Area</b>		
Urban	201	56.8
Rural	153	43.2
	354	100
<b>School Type</b>		
State	247	69.8
Academy	107	30.2

Total	354	100
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## Procedure

CEOP's Education Team regularly sends out emails to professionals registered to the Thinkuknow education website. The professionals work directly with young people and the majority of users are teachers. To recruit for this study, an email was sent to over 100,000 Thinkuknow registrants offering participation in the research. They were told participation would involve the researcher visiting their school for a 1.5 hour session in which pupils would complete four questionnaires. The inclusion criteria given for participants were: 1) young people in Year 9 (13-14 years old); 2) young people who have returned a completed parent or guardian consent form. The exclusion criteria were: 1) young people with severe learning difficulties; 2) young people whom the teacher believed may not be able to fully read and understand the questionnaires.

The secondary school teachers were asked to register their interest via an online survey system. Within the online survey, they were asked several questions aiming to collect demographic information about the school (e.g., location, type of school, etc.). They were also asked to indicate the extent to which they felt their Year 9 pupils had received internet safety education. Overall, 54 schools expressed an interest. Of these, 16 were selected for initial inclusion in the study. These 16 schools were selected by the researchers based on achieving a range of demographics among participants in the sample (i.e., urban vs. rural; state vs. private; mixed vs. single sex; geographical location), as well as variation in the extent of internet safety education (i.e., low, medium and high). Information sheets were sent to the selected schools, which included more detailed



information of the research purpose, an outline of the questionnaires (including example questions) and information on the consent process. Six schools that were able to participate in the required time frames were given parental consent forms to distribute to the pupils and collate, and a mutually convenient time was arranged for the session. Given that some schools were unable to facilitate the research; additional schools from the original list of interested schools were approached. Again, these were selected on the basis of aiming for a demographically diverse group of participants. In total, 27 schools were approached and 14 schools participated in the research.

### ***Data collection***

The lead author attended all the schools in person to collect the data. Each class of students was given the same introduction by the researcher and the same instructions on how to complete the questionnaires. Each pupil was given a booklet of four questionnaires with an information sheet. The information sheet was explained verbally as part of the introduction by the researcher and they were also advised to read it before starting the first questionnaire. The information sheet gave a brief outline of the purpose of the research, identified how their identity would be protected and outlined the process of withdrawal.

Participants were given between 1.25 and 2 hours to complete the questionnaires, depending on the school timetable. They were told to go at their own pace and to ask the researcher questions if they did not understand. The researcher was present throughout the process. The majority of participants finished all four questionnaires; however there were a few occasions where a participant was unable to finish all questionnaires before

the end of the session. In this instance their questionnaires were included in the data set providing they had completed enough of that particular questionnaire to reach the validity threshold. Approximately five questionnaires were also discounted where it appeared that the young person had not taken the participation seriously and consequentially their answers were likely to be invalid. When participants finished, they brought their papers to the researcher and were given a debrief sheet. On receipt of the completed questionnaires, participants were allocated a participant number that was used in all subsequent analysis to ensure confidentiality.

### ***Measures***

***Internet Use Questionnaire.*** This internet use questionnaire was devised by the first and second authors with the CEOP Education Team. There was not an existing psychometric available which covered the features of adolescent behavior online, that the authors aimed to measure, hence the development of a new questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to elicit information regarding young people's perceptions of the Internet, online disinhibition and their typical behavior online. Of particular interest was risk taking behavior. This questionnaire comprised of 30 questions which were generally answered on a Likert Scale. There were a few multiple choice answers and one free text. Missing answers were identified by entering '99' in the SPSS datasheet.

***Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993).*** The Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS) was selected for this research as it has been widely used with adolescent populations and provides a reliable index of coping. The short version was used due to the fact that participants were also completing other psychometrics and, much like the

long version, it has demonstrated reliability (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1996). The ACS involves 18 questions which measure an individual's use of different coping mechanisms; these are grouped into three coping styles: 1) solving the problem; 2) referencing others and 3) non-productive coping. Items relating to each of the three coping styles are interspersed within the measure. The responses are indicated on a Likert Scale relating to how often these ways of coping are used. This scale ranges from, 'doesn't apply or don't do it' to 'used a great deal'. Missing answers were represented by '99' on the SPSS spreadsheet. If a participant did not respond to an item, this resulted in the total score for the coping style associated with that item, being less than it would have been, had the item not been missed. Therefore, in instances where an item had been missed, the participant's total coping style score, was not calculated and was excluded from the analysis. This was to avoid skewed total scores as a result of missing values. Participants are able to complete the questions either with a specific problem in mind or regarding how they cope with problems on a general basis. For the purpose of this research they were asked to consider how they deal with problems generally.

***Multi-dimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 2001).*** The Multi-dimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) enables life satisfaction to be measured across five domains: family, friends, school, living environment, and self, and is specifically designed for adolescent participants. The authors selected this measure as it is one of the few readily available psychometrics that measures adolescent satisfaction across multiple areas of life. The scale includes 40 statements which relate to one of five domains. For each statement the participant indicates how often the statement is true in their life; this is measured on a four point Likert scale. Reverse items are utilized to

enhance response validity. Individual missing values within a domain (e.g. family) were replaced by a mean score based on the other scores within that domain. If more than one score was missing within a single domain, a value of 99 was entered into dataset and that domain for that particular individual was not used in the analysis. Totals scores for each domain are given, as well as a total life satisfaction score which is the sum of the five domain scores. High scores on the MSLSS indicate high satisfaction.

***NEO-PI3 Personality Test (McCrae & Costa, 2010.)*** There are a range of psychometric measures to measure personality, each stemming from various theoretical stances, thus each is subject to conceptual criticism. However, there are considerably fewer measures which demonstrate reliability among adolescent samples. While there are known to be some criticisms of the FFM of personality (as outlined in the introduction), the NEO-PI3 (Costa & McCrae, 2010) was developed from more than 30 years of research and has produced valid and reliable results within adolescent samples (McCrae, Costa, & Martin, 2005). The test contains 240 statements, to which participants indicate their level of agreement on a five point Likert scale. Questions relating to each of the five personality traits and 30 facets are mixed within the questionnaire and reversed scored items are used to increase validity. Individuals are scored on a sliding scale of high to low on each trait and sub-facet. The measure states that if 200 or more of the 240 items are answered, the measure is still valid, therefore only questionnaires where 200 or more questions were answered were used in the analysis. To lessen the impact of missing scores on total trait and trait facet scores, means were calculated on the basis of the questions that had been answered relating to that trait or trait facet. For example, if seven out of eight questions on assertiveness had been answered, the mean of the seven scores

would be used to populate the missing eighth score. This eighth score could then contribute to the total scores across both trait facets and traits. The means were based on the participant's existing answers to questions associated with the trait or trait facet.

Although there are five higher order traits of Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness, which were used in some aspects of analysis, in order to counteract some of the FFM criticisms, analysis of the NEO-PI3 focused on the thirty sub-facets. Analyzing online behavior in the context of facets reduces the likelihood of attributing behavior to traits which have been criticized on the basis of their component parts. Instead, the origins of the behavior can be more explicitly recognized.

## **Ethics**

Ethical considerations were important within this research and the project was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (Reference ERN\_11-0083) and the CEOP centre research panel. Only young people who had completed and returned a consent form signed by their parent or guardian were able to participate in the research. Pupils who did not have written parental consent were unable to participate. The information sheet for both parents and teachers included example questions from the questionnaires, in particular, it highlighted questions from the Internet use questionnaire that could be considered sensitive (e.g., "Have you ever been approached sexually online?"). The young people were also given an information sheet which gave them additional information about the research. It was highlighted that their participation was

voluntary and they could stop and withdraw at any time before handing the completed questionnaires to the researcher.

To protect identity, all participants were anonymized. Each young person was allocated a participant number and the only information retained by the researcher was the completed consent forms and a spreadsheet documenting which school was associated with which participant numbers. It was not possible for a participant to withdraw following completion due to the anonymization process; this was emphasized to all participants prior to completion. Debriefing sheets were given to participants on completion of the questionnaires, including details of organizations that can provide further support (e.g., CEOP and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC]) and the first and second authors' contact details.

### **Data Analysis**

The data met the assumptions of normality and thus parametric tests were used for analysis. Pearson correlations were calculated for the Internet use questionnaire with each domain within life satisfaction, life satisfaction total scores, personality and coping styles. Correlations were also calculated between life satisfaction, personality and coping styles. Given the number of correlations, the authors considered using a Bonferroni adjustment or more precisely a Holm-Bonferroni or Sidak-Bonferroni adjustment, but while this might correct for possible Type I errors (identifying relationships that may not exist), it often leads to increased Type II errors (missing relationships that do exist) (Field, 2013). As such it is not always helpful to apply it and the general assumption that there will be an increase in the number of significant findings which occur by chance, does not mean

that they will occur. In order to err on the side of caution, results are reported where the significance level is 1 % or lower ( $p \leq .01$ ). In addition to correlations; crosstabs, independent samples t-tests, factor analysis and multi-dimensional scaling were used.

## Results

### Frequencies

The responses from the Internet use questionnaire indicated a high prevalence of online risk taking behavior including speaking to strangers online, posting something online that they later regret, meeting up with a stranger offline and high numbers of strangers in online contact lists. Furthermore 24% of the boys and 41% of the girls reported having been approached sexually online. Key frequencies are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

*Most widely reported internet use behaviors (N=354)*

<b>Internet Use Frequencies (in descending order)</b>
74% of parents put no restrictions on their child's computer or mobile
72% of young people act differently online to at least some extent.
66% of young people had spoken to strangers online
63% of young people have at some point posted something online that they later regret.
57% of young people have talked online about things they would be too embarrassed to say face to face.
57% of young people have at times felt anonymous online.
54% of young people have been made uncomfortable by someone online.
54% of young people use their privacy settings frequently or extremely frequently.
51% would tell a parent if they were worried.
49% of young people would be embarrassed to at least some extent if their parent saw their profile.
35% of young people had seen a sexual photo of someone they know.
33% of young people had been approached sexually online.
28% of young people had received a sexual photo or video from someone else. Of these, 53% worried to at least some extent by this. 52% were not at all worried.

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Paedophiles were the number one worry online for 26% of young people.  
 25% of young people have more than 550 friends online. 11% have more than 1000.  
 23% of parents frequently speak to their children about internet safety  
 22% of young people have met a stranger offline.  
 19% of young people with parental restrictions override them.  
 17% of young people had more than 50 strangers on their contact list.  
 11% of young people had sent a sexual photo or video of themselves. Out of these, 9% did it because they were asked.  
 9% of those with parental restrictions know how to override them but choose not to.

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Looking at coping styles, the highest scores on the ACS related to a problem solving style of coping ( $M=61.6$ ,  $SD=12.6$ ). Non-productive coping styles were also used by many within the sample ( $M=48$ ,  $SD=12.3$ ). Both of these coping styles carry a maximum possible score of 90. Reference to others was also used by participants ( $M=44.3$ ,  $SD=13.5$ ), carrying a maximum score of 100.

The life satisfaction frequencies for young people in this sample were friends ( $M=31.8$ ;  $SD=4.1$ ) scored out of 36, living environment ( $M=26.3$ ;  $SD=5.5$ ) scored out of 36, school ( $M=20.9$ ;  $SD=4.8$ ) scored out of 32, family ( $M=20.7$ ;  $SD=4.5$ ) scored out of 28 and self ( $M=19.2$ ;  $SD=4.3$ ) scored out of 28. Total scores for life satisfaction varied considerably between students ( $M=117.9$ ;  $SD=15.3$ ; range=68-155) and was marked out of a maximum score of 160.

In terms of personality, the descriptive statistics for each personality sub-scale and how these compare to normative adolescent samples are presented in Table 3. In summary, the highest mean scores were found for warmth (20.55), excitement seeking (20.35), altruism (20.30) and tender mindedness (20.15). In contrast, the lowest mean scores were for compliance (14.52) and vulnerability (14.76).



**Table 3.**

*Descriptive statistics of sub-facets within personality traits for this sample compared to means of normative data from other adolescent samples.*

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Means for this Sample</b>	<b>Normative Means</b>	<b>Standard Deviations for this Sample</b>
<b>Extraversion</b>			
Warmth	20.55	22.3	4.61
Gregariousness	18.20	19.4	5.05
Assertiveness	15.44	17.1	4.70
Activity	17.40	18.4	3.78
Excitement Seeking	20.36	22.7	5.00
Positive Emotions	19.00	21.2	5.04
<b>Neuroticism</b>			
Anxiety	17.24	17.0	4.69
Angry Hostility	16.41	15.6	5.00
Depression	17.76	15.1	5.12
Self-Consciousness	16.13	14.3	4.83
Impulsiveness	16.31	17.3	4.25
Vulnerability	14.76	13.0	5.05
<b>Openness</b>			
Fantasy	19.40	20.2	4.83
Aesthetics	16.13	19.0	5.24
Feelings	18.78	21.5	4.08
Actions	15.49	16.8	3.32
Ideas	17.29	19.4	5.30
Values	18.55	20.7	3.69
<b>Agreeableness</b>			
Trust	15.56	17.2	4.28
Straight Forwardness	17.92	17.1	4.92
Altruism	20.30	22.3	4.13
Compliance	14.52	14.5	4.60
Modesty	18.69	17.1	4.90
Tender Mindedness	20.15	20.3	4.42
<b>Conscientiousness</b>			
Competence	17.79	19.5	4.20
Order	15.69	16.9	5.11
Dutifulness	17.75	19.8	4.12
Achievement Striving	19.00	19.7	4.52
Self-Discipline	16.60	18.0	4.83
<b>Deliberation</b>	15.38	15.5	4.71

***Hypothesis 1: Non-productive coping will be associated with low life satisfaction and anxiety.***

Non-productive coping was significantly correlated with anxiety ( $r=.41, p<.01$ ). Other sub facets strongly associated with non-productive coping were vulnerability ( $r=.49, p<.01$ ), self-consciousness ( $r=.44, p<.01$ ) and depression ( $r=.43, p<.01$ ). However, problem solving was associated with all but two sub-facets, specifically anxiety and feelings (see Table 4.)

**Table 4.** *R values and effect sizes for trait facets significantly associated with coping styles ( $p<.01$ ;  $N=354$ ).*

Personality Sub-Facet	Coping Style		
	Non-Productive	Problem Solving	Reference to Others
Anxiety	.41 ( $d=.90$ )		.16 ( $d=.32$ )
Angry Hostility	.28 ( $d=.58$ )	-.29 ( $d=.61$ )	
Depression	.43 ( $d=.95$ )	-.27 ( $d=.56$ )	
Self-Consciousness	.44 ( $d=.98$ )	-.23 ( $d=.47$ )	
Impulsiveness	.32 ( $d=.68$ )	-.18 ( $d=.37$ )	
Vulnerability	.49 ( $d=1.12$ )	-.29 ( $d=.61$ )	
Warmth		-.36 ( $d=.77$ )	
Gregariousness		-.16 ( $d=.32$ )	
Activity		.31 ( $d=.65$ )	
Excitement Seeking		.16 ( $d=.32$ )	
Positive Emotions		.33 ( $d=.70$ )	
Aesthetics	.19 ( $d=.39$ )	.18 ( $d=.37$ )	.20 ( $d=.41$ )
Feelings	.23 ( $d=.47$ )		.16 ( $d=.32$ )
Actions		.18 ( $d=.37$ )	
Ideas		.15 ( $d=.30$ )	
Trust	-.21 ( $d=.43$ )	.32 ( $d=.68$ )	
Altruism		.34 ( $d=.72$ )	
Compliance		.15 ( $d=.30$ )	
Modesty		-.24 ( $d=.49$ )	
Tender-Mindedness		.18 ( $d=.37$ )	.22 ( $d=.45$ )
Competence	-.26 ( $d=.54$ )	.36 ( $d=.77$ )	
Order		.16 ( $d=.32$ )	

<b>Dutifulness</b>		.20 ( <i>d</i> =.41)
<b>Achievement Striving</b>	-.16 ( <i>d</i> =.32)	.39 ( <i>d</i> =.85)
<b>Self-Discipline</b>	-.28 ( <i>d</i> =.58)	.36 ( <i>d</i> =.77)
<b>Deliberation</b>		.26 ( <i>d</i> =.54)

Non-productive coping was significantly correlated with low satisfaction with various domains of life, including low family satisfaction ( $r=-.20, p<.01$ ), low friend satisfaction ( $r=-.18, p<.01$ ), low school satisfaction ( $r=-.24, p<.01$ ), low living environment satisfaction ( $r=-.27, p<.01$ ), low self-satisfaction ( $r=-.22, p<.01$ ) and low total life satisfaction ( $r=-.34, p<.01$ ). In contrast, problem solving coping was associated with high satisfaction across different areas of life, including high family satisfaction ( $r=.33, p<.01$ ), high school satisfaction ( $r=.42, p<.01$ ), high living environment satisfaction ( $r=.28, p<.01$ ), high self-satisfaction ( $r=.41, p<.01$ ) and high total life satisfaction ( $r=.48, p<.01$ ). The data met the assumptions of simple regression and therefore enter method simple regression was carried out. The analysis indicated that family satisfaction was the biggest predictor of total life satisfaction ( $R^2 = 50.9$ ) thus accounting for 50% of the variance.

***Hypothesis 2: Online sexual victimization will be associated with low life satisfaction and anxiety.***

Having been approached sexually online was associated with lower family satisfaction ( $r=-.167, p<.01$ ), lower school satisfaction ( $r=-.16, p<.01$ ) and lower total overall life satisfaction ( $r=-.15, p<.01$ ). Having been sexually approached online was not significantly correlated with anxiety.

Thirteen trait facets were associated with having been sexually approached online, including impulsiveness ( $r=.29, p<.01$ ), low compliance, ( $r=-.23, p<.01$ ), angry hostility ( $r=.21, p<.01$ ), low straight-forwardness ( $r=-.21, p<.01$ ), low self-discipline ( $r=-.19, p<.01$ ) and excitement seeking ( $r=.16, p<.01$ ). All correlations between trait facets and having been sexually approached are reported in Table 5. In addition, having been sexually approached online was associated with non-productive coping strategies ( $r=.26, p<.01$ ).

**Table 5.**

*Trait facets significantly ( $p<.01$ ) associated with having been sexually approached online ( $N=354$ ).*

Personality Sub-Facet	r Value
Impulsiveness	.29
Compliance	-.23
Angry Hostility	.21
Straight-Forwardness	-.21
Self-Discipline	-.19
Excitement Seeking	.16
Feelings	.16
Aesthetics	.15
Depression	.15
Competence	-.15
Vulnerability	.15

Dutifulness	-.15
Trust	-.15

***Hypothesis 3: Risk taking behavior online will be associated with low life satisfaction and impulsivity.***

The Internet use questionnaire contained numerous questions which could be deemed to represent different types of behavior online, including risk taking behavior. Identifying how the items within this questionnaire cluster and group with one another, was beneficial in exploring hypothesis three. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was chosen as it groups the variables by transforming the data into a set of linear components, but without estimating unmeasured variables (unlike Factor Analysis). PCA was conducted on items within the Internet use questionnaire to explore any potential latent traits. Only items that were available for all cases, used a Likert Scale and were not contingent on other questions were appropriate to be incorporated in the analysis. The analysis was run on a Spearman's rho correlation matrix using an oblique rotation (direct oblimin). Oblique rotation was used as it allows factors to correlate and it was expected that the factors may indeed correlate, hence the selection of direct oblimin. The authors explored two, three, four and five factor solutions. The data did not group within the four or five factor solutions, and the three factor solution involved splitting what appeared to be one category where Eigen values were similar. The two factor solution was the most parsimonious, as the Eigen values were grouped, the scree plot demonstrated a point of inflection after two factors and the two factors were logically grouped. The 11 items in factor 1 were all associated with risk taking behavior online (e.g., chatting to strangers

online, posting things online which they later regret). Three of the four variables in factor 2 were associated with protective behavior (i.e., setting privacy settings, spoken to parents about internet safety and extent of internet safety education). The fourth variable in factor 2 was feeling anonymous online; however, this variable also loaded on factor 1 and, theoretically, could therefore be related to either risk (as a disinhibitory function) or safety (as a personal security function). The variables for Factor 1 and 2 are provided in Table 6.

**Table 6.**

*Pattern matrix for the two factor principal component analysis conducted on the internet use questionnaire*

Internet Use Item	Component	
	1	2
Talked about things online too embarrassed to say face to face	<b>.72</b>	.02
Extent you act like a different person online	<b>.67</b>	.24
Extent you feel like a different person online	<b>.67</b>	.31
Someone online made you feel uncomfortable	<b>.66</b>	-.05
Extent you exaggerate or lie online	<b>.63</b>	.62
Others post something online that you wish they hadn't	<b>.60</b>	-.19
Chatted online to strangers	<b>.60</b>	-.01
Embarrassed if parent saw your profile	<b>.56</b>	-.23
Post online and later regret it	<b>.54</b>	-.36
Difference of life without the internet	<b>.51</b>	-.07
Importance of internet	<b>.50</b>	.09
Set privacy settings of online profiles	-.09	<b>.59</b>
Feel anonymous online	.39	<b>.49</b>
Extent of internet safety education	-.05	<b>.48</b>
Parent spoken to you about internet safety	.02	<b>.47</b>

Reliability Analysis was conducted on both factors within the PCA. Factor 1 produced high reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ), however, Factor 2 generated low reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .32$ ). Thus a reliable scale of online risk taking can be elicited.

While the items in Factor 2 appear to link with protective behavior, there is not yet enough information or reliability to explore this factor further, within the current study.

### **Risk Propensity Group**

Given the findings above, a risk propensity score for each participant was generated from their answers to the items in Factor 1 ( $M=27.7$ ,  $SD=7.6$ ). The online risk propensity scale (ORPS) was then used to explore potential associations to other items within the questionnaires. Correlations were then calculated to assess interactions between a young person's risk propensity score and the personality sub-facets. There was a significant correlation between risk propensity and impulsiveness ( $r=.33$ ,  $p<.01$ ). All significant correlations with personality facets are displayed in Table 7.

**Table 7.**

*Trait sub-facets which are significantly correlated ( $p<.01$ ) with risk propensity.*

<b>Trait Facet</b>	<b>r Value</b>
Straight-Forwardness	-.37
Angry Hostility	.35
Depression	.35
Impulsiveness	.33
Self-Discipline	-.32
Self-Consciousness	.30
Trust	-.30
Competence	-.28

Vulnerability	.27
Deliberation	-.26
Dutifulness	-.25
Compliance	-.25
Altruism	-.25
Achievement Striving	-.20
Positive Emotions	-.18
Anxiety	.17
Values	-.16
Actions	-.16
Excitement Seeking	.15

To further explore the risk propensity group, a ‘high risk propensity’ group was formed from participants who scored one standard deviation above the mean (i.e., scored above 35 on the risk propensity scale); 63 individuals fell within this high risk group. Power analysis revealed that at least 51 participants were needed in each group for 80% power where  $d = 0.5$ . Pearson’s chi square test was used to calculate the association between the high risk group and having been sexually approached online. There was a significant association between being in the high risk group and being sexual approached online ( $\chi^2 (1) = 54.85, p < .01$ ): 73% of the high risk group had been sexually approached online compared to 24% of those in the lower risk taking group.

The data was suitable for parametric testing and met the assumptions for an independent samples t-test. The results of the independent samples t-test demonstrated



that high risk individuals were significantly more likely to use non-productive coping strategies  $t(313) = 4.65, p < .01$ , have low family satisfaction  $t(326) = 4.84, p < .01$ , low school satisfaction  $t(325) = 3.07, p = 0.002$ , and low total life satisfaction  $t(323) = 3.86, p < .01$ . When compared with total means for personality sub-facets, those in the high risk group were more likely to exhibit angry hostility  $t(295) = -3.31, p < .01$ , depression  $t(292) = 3.11, p < .01$ , self-consciousness  $t(294) = 2.86, p < .01$  and impulsiveness  $t(294) = 3.18, p < .01$ . They were also more likely to exhibit low levels of trust  $t(296) = 4.29, p < .01$ , straight forwardness  $t(294) = 4.89, p < .01$ , compliance  $t(294) = 2.78, p < .01$ , dutifulness  $t(295) = 2.94, p < .01$  and self-discipline  $t(110.7) = 3.30, p < .01$ . There were no significant differences between genders regarding risk propensity.

***Hypothesis 4: Non-productive coping styles, risk taking online, low life satisfaction, anxiety and impulsiveness will contribute to online vulnerability.***

Having met the test assumptions, another independent samples t-test found that participants scoring highly on risk propensity were more likely to have been sexually approached online ( $M = 32.55, SE = 0.69$ ) than those who scored low on the risk propensity scale ( $M = 25.28, SE = 0.44$ ). This difference was significant  $t(327) = 9.19, p < .01$ . The results above report that there are commonalities between having been sexually approached online and risk taking behavior online. Both items are associated with low total life satisfaction, non-productive coping styles and impulsivity (as identified by the findings relating to hypotheses 2 and 3).

## **Discussion**

### **Hypothesis 1: Non-productive coping will be associated with low life satisfaction and anxiety.**

Hypothesis 1 was supported as the correlation results indicated that non-productive coping styles were associated with low satisfaction with family, friends, school, living environment, self and overall life. Non-productive coping can reduce resilience (O'leary, & Gould, 2010), exposing the individual to greater negative impact from potentially harmful experiences. The correlation between non-productive coping and low satisfaction across different areas of life raises the question of whether if an area was improved (e.g. total life satisfaction), the individual's use of productive coping would increase.

Alternatively, the correlation could indicate that productive coping is related to positive parental relationships, given the finding that life satisfaction is highly related to family satisfaction.

The correlations also supported hypothesis 1 as non-productive coping was associated with anxiety. This may hinder productive coping, pushing the individual towards maladaptive coping styles. The relationship between anxiety and maladaptive coping found in this study is supported by previous research (Glidden et al., 2006; Shewchuk et al., 1999; Watson & Hubbard, 1996).

### **Hypothesis 2: Online sexual victimization will be associated with low life satisfaction and anxiety.**

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported by the correlation analysis: having been sexually approached online was associated with low levels of satisfaction with family, school and

low total life offline. This mirrors previous research whereby young people who are unhappy with their life have increased vulnerability towards sexual victimization online (Quayle et al., 2012; Suseg et al., 2008). Specifically, the findings from the current study are consistent with existing research that has found young people with problems at home or in school are more likely to experience sexual contact from adults online and offline (Brå, 2007). Similarly, problematic family situations are pivotal in contributing to vulnerabilities online, increasing the likelihood of sexual victimization (Whittle et al., 2014). Although the sexual approach question in this study does not distinguish between adult or peer instigation, these findings clearly depict a relationship between young people's life satisfaction offline and their sexual victimization experiences online.

The correlations within this study did not find a significant association between sexual victimization online and anxiety, thus the second part of hypothesis 2 was unsupported. However, the sub-facet of impulsivity had the largest association with sexual victimization online. Within the FFM, impulsivity involves the inability to control cravings and desires, despite a tendency to regret this later (McCrae & Costa, 2010); these behavioral features could arguably increase a young person's vulnerability.

**Hypothesis 3: Risk taking behavior online will be associated with low life satisfaction and impulsivity.**

The PCA lent support to hypothesis 3, as the correlations showed an association between the ORPS and low life satisfaction. This mirrors emerging trends in research suggesting links between young people's dissatisfaction with life and risk taking online (Baumgartner et al., 2012; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). A proportion of adolescents in

this sample engaged in risk taking behaviors online (e.g., speaking to strangers online) and combinations of risk taking behaviors, which is consistent with existing literature (Livingstone & Haddon, 2012; Whittle et al., 2013; Wolak et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2007). Previous research has highlighted the impact that combination risk behaviors have on victimization (Stamoulis & Farley, 2010; Ybarra et al., 2007), hence the development of the ORPS within this research. The frequencies within the current study also provide supporting evidence that many young people do not engage in risk taking online (Baumgartner et al., 2012) and endorse safety precautions. For example, 9% of the adolescents in this sample know how to override parental restrictions online, but chose not to, thus demonstrate particularly protective behavior.

The ORPS within this study was generated by the PCA, correlations using this scale highlighted associations between online risk propensity and impulsivity, which further supports hypothesis 3 and existing literature (Lauriola et al., 2014). This study shows that the concept that an individual's inability to control their desires is related to their risk taking behavior, extends to the online environment. While findings are largely correlational, given the stability of personality traits over time (Pervin, Cervone, & John, 2005) causal inferences can be made between traits and behavior.

**Hypothesis 4: Non-productive coping styles, risk taking online, low life satisfaction, anxiety and impulsiveness will contribute to online vulnerability.**

The PCA led to the development of a high risk propensity group within this study. The Pearson's chi square test confirmed the association between the high risk group and having been sexually approached online. This supports hypothesis 4 and existing research

suggesting combinations of risky behaviors online increase the risk of sexual victimization (Ybarra et al., 2007). Hypothesis 4 was also supported by the results of the independent samples t-tests, as high risk individuals were significantly more likely to use non-productive coping strategies, have low total life satisfaction and score highly on impulsiveness.

Results suggest there are a number of features associated with both risk taking behaviors online (increasing vulnerability to sexual victimization) and sexual approaches online (also likely to lead to sexual victimization). Given that these features can lead to vulnerability online via two routes, they could be considered the highest contributing risk factors for online victimization. The features from this study which are associated with both risk taking behavior and sexual approaches online are: low family satisfaction; low school satisfaction; low total life satisfaction; non-productive coping; and from within the FFM: angry hostility; depression; impulsivity; vulnerability; excitement seeking; low trust; low straight forwardness; low compliance; low competence; low dutifulness; and low self-discipline. These features could therefore be considered high risk factors which, in combination, may increase a young person's vulnerability towards victimization online. In relation to hypothesis 4, analysis within this study suggests that non-productive coping, taking risks online, low life satisfaction and impulsiveness may increase vulnerability online. Analysis within this study does not provide support for the notion that anxiety is directly related to increased vulnerability online.

The risk factors identified may lead a young person to engage in risk taking behavior online, which in turn, increases their vulnerability to victimization. Alternatively, given that these same risk factors are also independently associated with

sexual victimization; these risk factors may directly lead a young person to be vulnerable online, even without their engagement in risk taking behavior. This hypothesized relationship is illustrated in Figure 2, but requires further analysis to evidence this relationship.

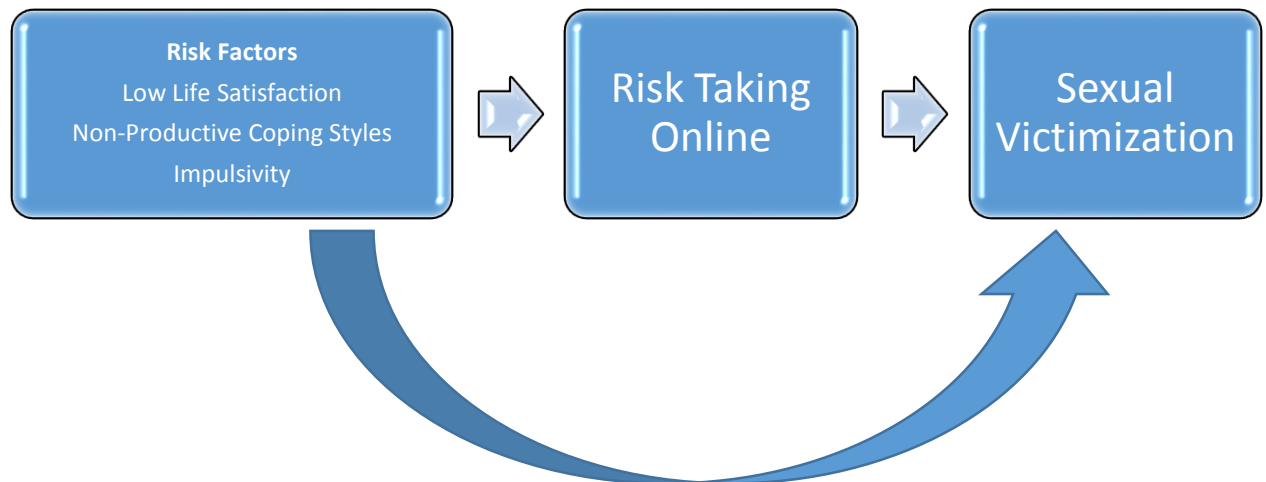


Figure 2: Hypothesized routes through which high risk factors directly and indirectly contributing to sexual victimization online.

The results indicate that the way young people become vulnerable online may be complex, reflecting the heterogeneity of adolescents. While the analysis within this chapter is rudimentary, there does not appear to be only one route into online sexual victimization. Further research is needed to support this notion (for example using pathway analysis), however the findings suggest there may be multiple ways in which a young person becomes vulnerable towards online sexual victimization. This notion is consistent with recent research (European Online Grooming Project, 2012; Whittle et al., 2014). This study suggests that there might be different routes into online vulnerability and if

these routes exist, they are likely to be complex, individualistic and depend on various risk factors within a young person's life. These risk factors may include personality facets, life satisfaction, risk taking behavior and coping styles.

Indeed, reducing internet vulnerability to personality alone is likely to be over simplistic. Perhaps more realistically, the Internet provides a variety of resources which appeal to different people in different ways. It is not so much that the Internet is a blessing or a curse, but rather it fulfils different needs that may be linked to underlying personality dispositions and how an individual feels about areas of their life.

### **Implications**

The identification of young people most at risk of sexual victimization online offers important contributions to prevention. Knowledge that a young person is unhappy with aspects of their life, does not cope well with adversity, exhibits impulsive tendencies and engages in risk taking online can highlight a specific need for the young person to be provided with extra protection. Additional protection may be in the form of support from known adults or additional Internet safety education. Given the significant correlation between risk taking behavior and sexual victimization, this study supports others (e.g., Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak; Wolak et al., 2008) in highlighting that online safety education is likely to be beneficial in protection. The authors suggest that strategies to combat interpersonal features that inherently hinder the uptake of safe behaviors online should be endorsed. For example, education which reinforces the negative consequences of risk taking and the positive consequences of safety behaviors could assist in lessening

the risk posed to adolescents who have increased vulnerability through impulsive tendencies.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations of this study which should be addressed. On occasion, some adolescents appeared to lack concentration during participation. This was particularly apparent during NEO PI-3 administration, mostly likely explained by the large volume of questions. To combat this, the researcher attempted to encourage motivation and concentration by emphasizing the importance of participation. The sample size for the NEO PI-3 is slightly reduced partly due to occasions where time ran out and partly due to the exclusion of improperly completed questionnaires. Given the debate among personality psychologists and the criticisms of the FFM, the application of these findings onto wider personality traits is currently limited.

### **Future Research**

This research provides a series of foundational associations which can form the basis of further research. The ORPS (i.e. the 11 variables within component one) has much scope for exploration, specifically surrounding the inclusion of other risky behaviors. Furthermore, the PCA revealed the potential for a protective propensity scale, which is an area that can be developed. Exploring these findings within the context of wider personality traits is suggested as a route for further research, while there is likely to be relationships between other features of personality (in addition to impulsivity) and risk to



sexual victimization online. Finally, the features which lead directly and indirectly to victimization online require further exploration and verification.

### **Conclusion**

This research offers a valuable contribution to assessing young people's vulnerabilities to online victimization. While this is a preliminary study which requires further exploration (for example using pathways analysis), findings suggest there may be multiple routes into online sexual victimization, both directly and indirectly. Early analysis indicates a set of risk factors may lead young people to take risks online through a combination of behaviors, which in turn, may increase the likelihood of victimization. Alternatively, many of the same risk factors may increase the likelihood of victimization, even in the absence of risk taking behavior online. The following individual features could be considered high risk factors, particularly when in combination with one another: low life satisfaction; non-productive coping; risk taking behavior and impulsivity; further research into potential links between these features and online victimization would be beneficial. Identifying young people with increased vulnerability towards sexual victimization online gives the capacity for adults to increase protective strategies surrounding these individuals. This in turn will assist in preventing these young people from having to experience the potentially corrosive impact of interpersonal sexual victimization online.

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**CHAPTER 8**  
**DISCUSSION**

## **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to assemble and summarise the main findings across all chapters of this thesis. The chapter will report the findings within the context of the thesis aims, in particular highlighting the knowledge contributions made by each research study. Each thesis aim will be addressed in turn and the main findings relating to this aim will be outlined. Limitations will also be addressed, as well the specification of potential directions for future research. The final conclusion will draw together the significant findings of the thesis, highlighting why this research was an important contribution to this field of study.

## **8.2 Findings Related to Thesis Aim 1**

Thesis Aim 1: *Identify features of young people's lives offline and online which may contribute to vulnerability towards online sexual victimisation, including grooming and sexual abuse.*

The issue of young people's vulnerability is central within this thesis and has been addressed in various ways. The key findings relating to the first research aim are outlined below.

### **8.2.1 Demographics**

The literature review within Chapter 2 identified adolescence as the age when young people are most at risk of online grooming and sexual abuse. The mean age at the time of grooming for the victims within the sample for Chapters 3, 4 and 5 was 12.8 years. This indicates that either this sample represents the lower end of the high-risk age group, or

that the high risk age for online grooming is potentially slightly lower than currently indicated by research. Students in Year 9 (age 13 and 14 years) at school were recruited as participants for the sample within Chapter 7 and a substantial number reported having experienced sexual victimisation online. This further supports the notion that adolescents are at risk of online grooming and sexual abuse.

Based on current research, Chapter 2 concluded that while both males and females are at risk of online grooming, being female increases the vulnerability. This was also represented by the qualitative sample of victims within this thesis, comprising of six females and two males and further supported by the sample in Chapter 7, whereby 41% of girls had been sexually approached online, in comparison to 24% of boys.

### **8.2.2 Risk Taking Behaviour**

This thesis reports that risk taking behaviour online is a key risk factor for online grooming and sexual abuse. Much of the literature reviewed as part of Chapter 2 suggested that risky internet behaviours contribute to a young person's vulnerability. The development of the risk propensity scale and high risk group within Chapter 7 supports previous studies, finding that 73% of those categorised as exhibiting high risk behaviours online, reported to have experienced sexual approaches online. The chapter concludes that risk taking online increases the likelihood of victimisation.

Furthermore, the findings reported within Chapter 3 highlight how risk taking can increase vulnerability towards online grooming, even if other aspects of a young person's life indicate they are protected and resilient. All victims engaged in one, if not several risky behaviours online leading up to the point of first contact with the offender. Within

this sample, once contact with the offender had been established, the grooming often exacerbated risk taking. This is also supported by both victim and offender perspectives within chapters 4 and 6, whereby risk taking increased as the victims became further enmeshed in the contact with the offenders. The findings within this thesis do not suggest significant gender differences between risk taking behaviour online, with both males and females having the propensity to demonstrate both risky and safe behaviours online.

### **8.2.3 Unhappiness**

Findings within this thesis support the notion that some young people become vulnerable to online grooming as a result of unhappiness and dissatisfaction across various aspects of their lives. Chapter 2 highlighted existing literature which provided evidence that low self-esteem, emotional difficulties, social isolation, loneliness, social problems and dissatisfaction with school can be risk factors towards online grooming. Certainly, within the victim sample of Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, the majority of the young people discussed multiple aspects of their lives with which they were unhappy at the time when they engaged with the offender. Within this context, it is possible to imagine the appeal of some of the offender grooming strategies highlighted in Chapter 4 (especially kindness, flattery and regular contact), for young people who are experiencing difficulties in their lives. While some of the grooming strategies reflect aspects of interactions that may be expected within the context of a 'one night stand' or 'online dating', the unhappiness of the young people at this point is likely to have influenced the way in which these interactions were interpreted. This in combination with the age difference between the victims and offenders, with the young people falling under the legal age of consent,

differentiate these situations, despite some similarities in behaviours. The young peoples' existing unhappiness is likely to also contribute to the fact that many of the victims often experienced positive emotions in the short term, as a result of the grooming, as this helped compensate for dissatisfaction across other areas of life. Inevitably, this unhappiness was used as a hook by offenders, who then had leverage to enmesh themselves in the victim's life to a greater extent. This enmeshment is particularly apparent through the victims' comments in Chapter 6, whereby all three of these young females perceived themselves to be in a relationship with the offender at some stage.

The findings from Chapter 7 further support previous chapters, as low levels of life satisfaction were found to contribute to vulnerability online, within the wider sample of school children. Specifically, low life satisfaction and low school satisfaction were associated with risk taking behaviours (which as, discussed above, increase the likelihood of victimisation) and were also associated with having been sexually approached online. Results across multiple chapters of this thesis therefore consistently find links between unhappiness across domains within a young person's life, and increased vulnerability online.

#### **8.2.4 Importance of Family**

The importance of family situation and relationships was consistently found to play a role in vulnerability within all chapters of this thesis. Current research reported in Chapter 2 found family difficulties, conflict with parents, low satisfaction with family and reconstituted families to be risk factors for online grooming, which may in turn lead to a need for attention and validation from others (including adults). This was mirrored by the

findings within Chapter 3, whereby loss of family protection was found to be a key risk factor for online grooming. Indeed, within this sample of victims, by far the most risk factors were identified within the domain of family situation. Not only did some of the victims discuss the need to compensate for negative family experiences, as a factor contributing to their engagement with the offender, but the offender's comments in chapter 6 also indicate their recognition of this. Offenders often noted a young person's problems at home and used this as a means of getting close to the victims, appearing supportive and comforting during a time of increased vulnerability. Chapter 7 further supports the importance of family, as having been sexually approached online was found to be associated with low levels of satisfaction with family. Risk taking behaviour (increasing a young person's online vulnerability) was also associated with low levels of family satisfaction.

Not only was family situation pivotal in contributing to a young person's vulnerability prior to abuse, but it was also found to be fundamental in lessening the negative impact of abuse. Chapter 5 reported that supportive family relations following abuse can reduce the negative impact on the victim. In cases involving the temporary loss of family protection leading up to online grooming, a reinstatement of family support after the discovery of abuse generally assisted in buffering the victim from additional negative effects.

In addition to the above, existing studies identified in Chapter 2, found that lack of parental involvement in a young person's internet use is a risk factor for online grooming. Findings within Chapter 3 further support this and conversely support the protective nature of parental engagement in their child's online safety. Similarly, within

the Chapter 7 sample, young people who are likely to discuss internet safety with their parents, were found to also have higher life satisfaction, demonstrating the additional resilience potentially provided by this family dynamic.

### **8.2.5 Personality**

While Chapter 2 highlights the lack of consistent findings surrounding personality traits and sexual victimisation online, some research was identified to suggest that personality traits evoking low self-esteem may increase vulnerability towards online grooming. In addition, there have been findings to suggest that Extraversion is associated with risk taking.

The findings within Chapter 7 contribute to this limited research base and suggest that among other risk factors, impulsiveness may contribute to vulnerability. Impulsivity is a characteristic associated with risk taking online, thus young people exhibiting this trait may be more vulnerable to grooming. Low straight-forwardness, angry hostility, low self-discipline, excitement seeking and low compliance were sub-facets within personality which also demonstrated associations with sexual victimisation online.

### **8.2.6 Coping**

The interaction coping strategies may have with vulnerabilities was a consideration within this thesis. Coping was apparent across victim interviews, as several young people indicated that at the time when they engaged with the offender, they were not coping with the negative impact of life events. This is demonstrative of the influence coping can have on vulnerability. For some victims, the emotional support they perceived to be receiving



from the offender, aided their coping with risk factors within their lives. As highlighted in Chapter 4, whether the victim is enmeshed in the rapport with the offender or not, differentiates whether they are likely to tolerate negative feelings associated with the grooming and abuse. Several of the victims who were enmeshed in the relationship, generally considered the offender to be aiding their coping. This increased dependence which, over time increased their vulnerability; such dependence on the offender would be considered maladaptive coping.

Coping styles can be considered a key component in a victim's interpretation of grooming and abuse, having the propensity to buffer or provoke negative impact. The fact that most disagreements between victims and offenders in Chapter 6 focus on the sexual elements, suggests how both victims and offenders were endorsing post offence coping styles. Victims are likely to perceive any excitement relating to sexual activity with the offender to be interpreted negatively by others and this may contribute to feelings of self-blame. Therefore, it is possible they have reframed any positive feelings associated with this aspect of their dynamic with the offender as a means of coping with the abuse.

It could be argued that certain personality traits predispose individuals to particular coping styles, which in turn contribute to vulnerability. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 found evidence to suggest that conscientiousness is related to problem focused coping, while neuroticism is related to maladaptive coping. Chapter 7 of this thesis found evidence to support this literature as anxiety (a feature of neuroticism) was found to be associated with non-productive coping styles. Other features associated with non-productive coping within this sample were vulnerability, self-consciousness, angry hostility and depression. In contrast, problem solving coping was associated with low

vulnerability, low self-consciousness, low angry hostility and low depression. Non-productive coping was also associated with low levels of satisfaction across several domains within life. In fact, the results of Chapter 7 suggest that non-productive coping is one of a combination of factors which increases vulnerability to sexual victimization online.

### **8.2.7 Multiple Routes to Online Victimization**

Evidence throughout this thesis suggests that there may be multiple routes towards sexual victimisation online. Chapter 2 identified that current research has found two groups of young people who appear to be particularly vulnerable to online grooming: 1) those who are vulnerable offline; and also 2) some young people who are not vulnerable offline, but appear to be vulnerable online. Chapter 3 expanded upon this through the development of victim vulnerability scenarios. This chapter reported that young people within this sample were vulnerable in one of three ways: 1) multiple long term risk factors; 2) trigger events; and 3) online behavioural risks. This concept was expanded in Chapter 5 when it emerged that the impact of abuse on the victim appeared to be correlated with their vulnerability scenario prior to grooming. For example, those who were vulnerable due to multiple long term risk factors experienced greater negative impact following abuse, particularly on a psychological level. This is likely to be linked to the fact that those experiencing this vulnerability route are also less likely to have supportive relationships to assist after abuse.

The preliminary findings from Chapter 7 also support the possibility that a combination of risk factors contribute to young peoples' vulnerability online and there is

not a single route into victimisation. Consistent with previous chapters, this study suggests that sets of risk factors may lead adolescents to take risks online, which increases the likelihood of victimisation. However, as indicated by the preliminary findings within this chapter, not all adolescents take risks online, yet some appear to still be vulnerable.

### **8.2.8 Summary**

Evidence within this thesis suggests that the process of online grooming shares similarities to the grooming process offline and each study supports the notion that online grooming is complex and often cyclical in nature. Furthermore, there was no evidence to suggest that abuse online is less harmful than contact abuse. This thesis consistently demonstrates how varied the grooming process can be, most likely given the unique experiences and characteristics of the individual victims, the individual offenders and the subsequent dynamic between the two.

Despite variations, there are commonalities within experiences, most notably regarding risk factors. As detailed above, this thesis has identified a range of risk factors, both online and offline, which are likely to contribute to a young person's vulnerability towards experiencing online grooming and sexual abuse. The findings support existing research in that risk factors are interconnected and the cumulative effect can increase risk to the young person. Risk factors substantially outweighed protective factors for the victim sample within this thesis and those who were sexually approached within the wider school sample were also found to be experiencing a range of risk factors. Risk factors reported within this thesis include being female, in adolescence, engaging in

combinations of risk taking behaviour online, being unhappy across various domains within life, experiencing problems with the family, utilising non-productive coping strategies and exhibiting characteristics such as impulsivity. Consistent with existing research is the finding that the risk taking behaviours online, combined with other risk factors, can lead a young person to be less resilient if approached by an online groomer. This thesis extends this concept through the finding that online behavioural risks and combinations of risk factors offline, both over a long period of time or at a certain point in time, can increase vulnerability in conjunction, but also independently. Thus, young people can be vulnerable to online grooming through multiple vulnerability scenarios.

### **8.3 Findings Related to Thesis Aim 2**

Thesis Aim 2: *Outline practical recommendations to assist professionals in better protecting young people from online sexual victimisation, including grooming and sexual abuse.*

The practical application of results for the professional community was a fundamental aspect of the research question for this thesis. Key implications and recommendations for a range of practitioners and other adults are identified below.

#### **8.3.1 Implications and Recommendations for Police**

Chapter 5 highlighted the importance of victims' interactions with police immediately after the detection of abuse; in particular, a supportive rapport between an officer and the young person is likely to assist in minimising the negative impact of abuse. Chapter 5 outlined various recommendations for law enforcement officers including providing few

and consistent officers who directly engage with the victim, managing the victims' expectations regarding timeframes and keeping the victim informed as the case progresses. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 highlight that the victim may still love the offender at the point when law enforcement becomes involved. Victim engagement that is open to this possibility and free of judgement is likely to assist establishment and maintenance of rapport. This thesis also provides recommendations for ABE interviewing officers. These include speaking slowly and giving the victim sufficient thinking time, where possible, accommodating victim preferences regarding the identity of interviewing officers, and include breaks when possible.

### **8.3.2 Implications and Recommendations for Education**

Throughout this thesis, recommendations are provided for education within schools or youth services. The majority of the victims discussed minimal education at school surrounding online grooming; this may have increased their vulnerability when approached by an offender online. A significant body of research suggests that internet safety education is likely to increase young people's resilience to risks online (e.g. Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Chapters 3 and 5 argue that consistent, early onset internet safety education is likely to be a preventative strategy. In theory, clear and reliable messages surrounding online safety, which evolve as children progress through developmental stages should empower them to assist in their own protection online. However, more recently academics are warning that empirical evidence linking online protection to internet safety education is sparse (e.g. Finkelhor, 2014). Given the convergence of the online and offline environments, this thesis supports the argument that

existing evidence-based safety programmes can be adapted to include specific online elements (Finkelhor, 2014). Internet safety messages which are embedded within the wider curriculum and relate to other safety behaviours, may enable young people to more effectively adopt safety behaviours. It should however be noted, that empirical research surrounding internet safety education and behavioural change is currently lacking.

Chapter 7 highlights the likely importance of educating young people about safety behaviours online, given the links between risk taking and victimisation. Emphasising the negative consequences of risk taking may assist in combating the appeal for some young people to take risks online.

The findings of this thesis, particularly within Chapter 4, indicate that education which assists young people in distinguishing between age appropriate peer relationships online and inappropriate sexual relationships online may be beneficial. Evaluation and risk assessment strategies of potential online relationships could aid protection, particularly the ability to recognise unhealthy or abusive elements. Intense contact, nastiness and erratic temperament, encouraged secrecy, disproportionate focus on the young person's life during conversation and sexual elements (especially when instigated, persisted and controlled by another) could be warning signs of these inappropriate interactions. When several of these behaviours are experienced in combination findings suggest this may be a cause for concern. Conversely, the findings from Chapter 6 imply that endorsement of positive messages about healthy age appropriate relationships could be beneficial. Furthermore, educational messages urging young people to tell an adult if they are worried or worried about a friend are particularly important, especially if their friend is too enmeshed to recognise an abusive relationship.

### **8.3.3 Implications and Recommendations for Counselling and Support**

#### **Services**

This thesis provides several recommendations for aftercare and support services working with young victims of online grooming and sexual abuse. Chapters 5 and 6 emphasise the possibility of the victim perceiving the offender as a boyfriend; victims indicated the barrier to intervention if this perception is not recognised by counsellors. Allowing the victim to express this opinion and others, which may be controversial, was highlighted by young people as a key component of rapport building. The victims within this sample often described therapeutic intervention as essential in facilitating an objective environment, when compared to emotionally charged responses at home. Therefore, a key finding within this thesis is the provision of therapeutic support for victims and for this to be consistently offered over time, even if initially declined by the victim. This additional support is likely to be especially helpful if the young person is experiencing negative reactions among family and friends or is subject to ongoing risk factors (i.e., was originally vulnerable due to multiple long term risk factors).

There is no evidence in this thesis to suggest that abuse online is less harmful than contact abuse, in fact victims of online abuse may encounter additional consequences such as re-victimisation (Leonard, 2010). This further supports the notion that young people may benefit from the availability of support services for a considerable period of time after sexual abuse.

#### **8.3.4 Implications and Recommendations for Parents and Carers**

This thesis began by summarising initial research which identifies parental involvement in internet use as a protective factor. This was supported by the findings in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 as victims suggested parent communication and involvement with internet safety can assist in young people's protection online. Open channels of communication between parents or carers and their children can not only provide a platform for endorsement of safe behaviours online, but is also likely to increase the likelihood of a young person informing their parent if they become concerned about an aspect of their life online. Increased internet connectivity across society continues to immerse young people in a technological environment; this trend is likely to continue. Therefore raising parental awareness of new technologies and safety behaviours is necessary and likely to increase adult confidence in offering advice, as well as increasing young people's confidence in asking their parents for help online. Increased internet use is found to be associated with increased risk, but also increased opportunity (Livingstone & Bober, 2005) and therefore considerable use of the internet alone, is unlikely to warrant cause for parental concern. Given the potential indicators of grooming identified in Chapter 6 (including changing patterns of internet use leading to intense use, secrecy around its use, increased sexualised behaviour, and extreme emotions), parental knowledge and confidence surrounding this issue is likely to increase protection.

#### **8.3.5 Summary**

The implications of this thesis for police, education, support services and parents and carers are extensive and while recommendations differ according to the adults' role in a



young persons' life, the advice shares key themes. These include communicating information effectively (free from judgement), and putting the protection of the young person first. While many of the recommendations above are consistent with existing research findings, the fact that these recommendations are based on victim experiences and the perspectives of other young people, make this contribution unique. The resounding finding relating to aim two of this thesis is that protecting young people from online grooming and supporting them after sexual abuse should not, and cannot, be the role of one adult in isolation. Instead, there is a need for adults across all areas of a young person's life to work together to protect children and young people.

#### **8.4 Limitations**

There are several limitations to the findings of this thesis, which must be taken into consideration when interpreting results. Firstly, the sample size of the qualitative studies is small and consequentially, the findings from Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 may not necessarily be applicable to wider populations. The sample is also heterogeneous, which may further limit the findings, as behavioural patterns may be associated with gender, age, time since offence or experiences during offence. Secondly, the data within this thesis, whether obtained from victims, offenders or a wider population of young people, are all self-reported. Therefore, information provided is likely to be influenced by individual subjectivity and may be produced in the context of individual minimisations or maximisations in attempt to justify their actions. There may also have been individual motivations for participant dishonesty in their accounts. For example, participants (whether victims, offenders or young people more generally) may have been concerned

about being seen less favourably by the interviewer or negative repercussions of admitting certain actions.

Within the qualitative chapters of this thesis, it is likely that the author's viewpoint and professional experiences impacted the semi-structured interview structure and the subsequent analysis. In particular, the interview was written in a format which addressed each stage of the abuse in sequence and then different areas of the young person's life at the time. This structure is likely to have been a result of the author's reading around phases of grooming and sexual abuse, as well as knowledge of the domains within the ecological model. Similarly, the author is likely to have drawn upon professional opinion while interpreting the data. For example, the categorisation of text into risk and protective factors would have been influenced by the author's prior knowledge of this terminology within child maltreatment literature. It is also possible, that the author's previous work with adult sex offenders, led to the offender interviews being interpreted through the prism of cognitive distortions and half-truths. While steps were taken to ensure all stages and processes within this thesis were as objective as possible (for example, inter-rater reliability), the individual perspective of the author will inevitably impact some of the conclusions drawn.

Another limitation within this thesis is that due to some of the theoretical and participant administration complexities within the NEO-PI3 (as identified in Chapter 7); the findings surrounding vulnerability and wider personality traits are tentative, therefore focus has remained on sub-facets within traits. Further investigation into the interaction between personality traits and vulnerabilities would assist in clarifying these relationships.

## **8.5 Recommendations for Future Research**

The literature review in Chapter 2 of this thesis identified that there is a need for further research in this field and while this thesis offers contributions to knowledge, there is much potential for research expansion. The multiple routes into sexual victimisation online, including the victim vulnerability scenarios, are in the early stages of development and therefore further research is required to investigate the validity and reliability of these findings. In particular, further research with victim populations is likely to indicate the applicability of the victim vulnerability scenarios with other samples.

While the comparative methodology within Chapter 6 is unique, this could be extended to provide greater contributions to this field of research. Cross referencing victim and offender perspectives with case files could add value to this methodology by providing objective information, in addition to victim and offender accounts (which are subject to individual interpretations of events).

Future research could also utilise some of the foundational findings within Chapter 7, such as Principal Component Analysis resulting in a risk propensity group, as well as the potential for a protective behaviours group, as identified by factor 2. Additionally, the hypothesised model of multiple routes into online victimisation could be tested and extended using pathways analysis. Given the limitations, interactions between personality traits and online behaviour and sexual victimisation remain rudimentary and further research is required to explore these associations.

## **8.6 Conclusions**

This thesis set out to explore the vulnerabilities of young people to online grooming and sexual abuse, from the perspective of young people themselves. One of the most significant contributions within this thesis is the finding that young people can become vulnerable to sexual victimisation online through multiple routes. Contributory risk factors to online grooming span all ecological levels and can include, difficulties within the family, unhappiness with aspects of life (including self, school, living environment and friends), risking taking behaviour online, non-productive coping and exhibiting personality characteristics such as impulsivity. When a young person experiences a combination of these risk factors, either over a long period of time or temporarily, their vulnerability to online grooming may be increased. Therefore, young people known to be subject to these risk factors are likely to require additional protection from adults in their lives. These adults may include parents, carers, teachers, youth workers, police and support workers. Working together to reduce the risk and minimise the harm of online grooming to young people, is imperative and adults should share the responsibility to provide consistent and engaging support for young people.

The online grooming and sexual abuse of young people is a significant concern within society which requires exploration and action. Despite recent attention, research on this issue remains in its infancy and much work is required to protect vulnerable children and young people. This thesis however offers important knowledge contributions to the field of study. Such knowledge can be explored and expanded upon within future research, ensuring that the vulnerable are afforded protection and support, enabling young

people to enjoy the benefits of the internet, free from the fear of online grooming and sexual abuse.

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## Appendix 1

**Published Paper: A review of online grooming: Characteristics and concerns.**

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## A review of online grooming: Characteristics and concerns

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Sexual abuse

### ABSTRACT

The process of online grooming facilitates child abuse and is a threat to young people across the world. This literature review explores the research surrounding how young people are targeted by offenders on the internet. Definitions, prevalence, and characteristics of online grooming are addressed in addition to consideration of child sexual abuse theories and internet behaviors. There are a variety of techniques used by internet groomers to manipulate young people (e.g., flattery, bribes, and threats) and different ways that young people engage in risk taking behavior on the internet (e.g., communicating with strangers online and sharing personal information). While models and typologies can aid professionals in understanding the crime, it is important to acknowledge that internet offenders, victims, and the dynamics between the two are often unique and varied. This is fundamental to the development of effective preventative education for online grooming and abuse. The review concludes that research concerning the online grooming of young people is limited, and calls for further study in this field.

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### 1. Introduction

The internet has revolutionized many aspects of human behavior, including the way individuals communicate and interact with one another. While it could be argued that the online environment is just