



Online Sexual Grooming: Exploratory Comparison of Themes Arising From Male Offenders' Communications with Male Victims Compared to Female Victims

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ABSTRACT

The majority of current grooming research makes no distinctions between male and female targets. This study therefore aims to provide an initial attempt to rectify this. Thematic analysis was used to analyze eight transcripts from the Perverted Justice website, revealing five main themes: positivity, emotional connection, self-protection, sexual content, and arranging to meet offline. Unlike O'Connell (2003), themes were not consecutive. While no thematic differences between target genders were found, it was clear that more sexually related words were used toward male targets. It was concluded further investigation of differences between grooming targeted at male victims, and grooming targeted at female victims was warranted.

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Historically research into online sexual abuse has tended to focus on the sexual exploitation and abuse of female children and adolescents (Kloess, Beech, and Harkins 2014), neglecting the abuse of male children and adolescents. This glaring omission in the literature has been noted by authors such as Williams, Elliot, and Beech (2013) who suggested in their conclusion that research into this area is an omission clearly requiring investigation (Williams, Elliot, and Beech 2013). The investigation of male victims is made even more important due to the extra barriers to reporting abuse faced by male compared to female victims (O'Leary and Barber 2008). This article therefore attempts to address this issue by using thematic analysis to compare the online interactions of male and female victims of male offenders.

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Online sexual content has been present almost from the inception of the World Wide Web (Johnson 1996), online sexual *offending* following shortly after (Esposito 1998). However, it is not the case that all men who access sexual images of children develop into online offenders (Henry et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the ease of use of the internet makes it easy for men with a sexual interest in children to talk with like-minded peers, to expand their knowledge, and to validate deviant behavior (Durkin 1997; Malesky and Ennis 2004). Furthermore, for those who do wish to offend against children, the internet provides a suitable medium to facilitate that desire (Grosskopf 2010). Moreover, there is increasing concern in the media about online grooming, driving public perceptions of a heightened risk (Williams and Hudson 2013), making it ever more important to clarify the relevant issues.

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The previous section has briefly outlined the use of the internet and some of its inherent dangers, particularly as a medium to sexually offend against children and adolescents. In the following section, the paper turns to a review of literature to ascertain if there is a structure to grooming interactions, whether there are specific stages of grooming, and furthermore whether identified stages are sequential or cyclical.

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CONTACT

A conspectus of the literature base indicates that research approaches to grooming interactions has been analyzed in several different ways. For example, some researchers focus mainly on the linguistic characteristics of the interactions, focusing on what linguistic patterns (if any) make grooming a distinctive verbal interaction. Other researchers focus more on the identification of stages in grooming, and whether a superordinate structure can be isolated. Currently, the body of research literature comprises both sequential stage theories, and those which may be labelled as cyclical. In a seminal paper, Rachel O'Connell (2003) outlined five key stages of grooming in the real (offline) world following from initial contact. She established that these stages were sequential, as they occurred in roughly the same order in all the interactions she studied. After opening the interaction, the offender seeks to develop a friendship with the child, by "appearing to like similar things" and being generally supportive, friendly and kind. The second stage involves developing this friendship into something deeper, by making the child feel special and loved. This facilitates the development of trust in the offender and establishes emotional attachment. Once this relationship is solidified, the offender seeks to assess and therefore minimize the risk of discovery, (finding out about the child's relationship with their care givers, whether adults check what they are doing online, when they are alone etc.). Following this, an attempt is made to develop exclusivity in the relationship to reduce the risk of the child talking to others. At this point, sexual contact is usually introduced, and more severe sexual offending ensues. O'Connell (2003) further identified a final stage usually occurring at the end of the interaction, which she classified as "damage limitation." In this stage, the offender attempts to avoid prosecution by preventing the child from revealing the abuse.

While O'Connell's (2003) model stresses the linear nature of progression through her five stages, subsequent studies have not always found this to be the case. Ian Elliott (2017) proposes a cyclical self-regulation model of sexual grooming with two key components, based on the idea that grooming is an example of goal-directed behavior. In phase one the groomer builds up capital in disinhibition, security, incentive and rapport via feedback loops until the desired level is reached (which may be different for each individual). The aim is to increase the potentiality to create an environment in which the goal (sexual gratification) can be achieved. At which point, the groomer goes on to phase two, named as disclosure, this is where sexual themes are introduced. At no point in this process do phase one processes stop, rather they are continually evaluated throughout the interaction. This allows the abuser to identify and repair any damage to the relationship resulting from phase two disclosures.

Recently, Williams, Elliot, and Beech (2013) expanded earlier work into online grooming by analyzing eight transcripts from the Perverted Justice¹ targeting apparent female adolescents (in fact adult decoys). Using thematic analysis, they identified three grooming techniques used by the offenders. These were rapport-building, sexual content and assessment, each comprising several subordinate themes, which broadly overlapped with those suggested by O'Connell (2003). However, their analysis detected a key difference from that of O'Connell (2003), namely that risk assessment was not a transient stage, rather it was ongoing, relating not only to safety or potential detection, but also to the levels of trust the child displays, and the assessment of barriers to sexual activity. Black et al. (2015) also analyzed transcripts from the Perverted Justice¹ to explore the nature of online grooming within the framework of O'Connell's (2003) five stage model (initial friendship, forming a relationship, risk assessment, developing exclusivity and sexual goal). Initially Black et al. (2015) split the transcripts into five equal sections (based on word count), reasoning that if O'Connell's (2003) stages were sequential, then words and phrases relevant to a particular stage should only be found in the appropriate section. So friendship words and phrases should predominately be found in the first section of the transcripts, relationship words and phrases in the second section and sexual goal-related words and phrases should only occur in the final section of the transcripts. In order to test O'Connell's (2003) sequential stage theory, each of the five equal sections of the transcripts were analyzed for the number of stage relevant words/phrases present, using a language analysis program (LIHC). Contrary to what O'Connell (2003) would have predicted, there was no linear progression

through the stages. Stage relevant words/phrases appeared approximately equally in all sections of the divided transcripts rather than being located predominately in one section of the transcript.

In summary, overall, while there is broad agreement as to the nature of the individual stages in grooming (Black et al. 2015; O'Connell 2003; Williams, Elliot, and Beech 2013), there are still areas that require further elucidation. For example, the research evidence to date is contradictory in relation to the linearity of stages in online grooming (Black et al. 2015; Elliott 2017; O'Connell 2003; Williams, Elliot, and Beech 2013). While stage theories provide interest, it is clear that there are many more aspects of online grooming which still need to be considered. Recent research for example has focused on a discourse analysis approach to online grooming (Lorenzo-Dus, Izura, and Pérez-Tattam 2016). Other researchers have shown that the nature and behavior of the offender (Malesky 2007) and their victim is also highly relevant (Whittle et al. 2013a). In any grooming interaction, there is a dynamic process of negotiation, driven by the offender's motivation for sexual gratification. There is an interplay of actions and reactions where the offender tries to assert their power in order to control the interaction with the victim. If successful, the offender can direct the conversation toward their ultimate aim of sexual gratification. What determines the outcome is the complex interplay between the victim and offender, thus the next section will consider issues relating to the characteristics of offenders and victims in more detail.

Predators will always seek out the easiest prey (Pinizzotto and Davis 1999). Therefore, vulnerable children can be targeted precisely because of their risky online behaviors (Whittle et al. 2013a). Unfortunately, both Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2003) and Whittle et al. (2013a) identified that vulnerable young people are drawn to the internet due to the affordances it offers for supportive online social interaction and fulfilling relationships. Chat rooms are particularly favored as hunting grounds by online offenders (Malesky 2007), with up to 76% of initial encounters taking place there (Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell 2004). After an initial approach through a chat room, or other social media site, offenders may try to switch to conversing via instant messaging (Leander, Christianson, and Granhag 2008) or phone calls and texts (Whittle et al. 2013a) in order to assure themselves of more privacy (and thus less risk of detection).

While it is apparent that girls make up a larger proportion of victims than boys (Choo 2009; Whittle et al. 2013b), it is incredibly important not to ignore the fact that boys are also at risk of being victimized by online sex offenders. This is particularly important; as pedophilic predilections have been suggested by some to be higher for male children than female children (APA 2013). On the other hand, when examining the reported data for online grooming Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2004) found that only 25% of children targeted online were male. However, it is more than likely that the sexual abuse of boys online is grossly under-reported. In today's society, boys are socialized to be tough and independent. Revealing that they are a victim of abuse contradicts these ideals of masculinity, making it difficult for the individual to report the abuse to the authorities. Moreover, boys may feel discouraged from reporting such online crimes due to the very real threat of social stigma and ostracization (O'Leary and Barber 2008). Factors like these make it vitally important to take the gender of the victim into account when researching grooming, due to the gendered effects of societal pressures.

Research focused on male victims of grooming is scarce. However, the study by Wolak et al. (2004) did look at male victims of grooming. In their study, almost all of the groomed youths met their offenders in chat rooms catering for homosexual males, rather than more general chat room sites. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to surmise that these victims were gay or questioning their sexual orientation, perhaps making them unrepresentative of male targets in general, while at the same time even more vulnerable due to the additional stigma attached to homosexuality (Teliti 2015). Further support for the argument that research into male victims of grooming is needed, comes from work carried out in the late 1970s. Geiser (1979) argues that there are fundamental differences between the dynamics of male:male, and male:female abuse, making a comparison of male and female grooming victims meritorious of further investigation. Additionally, comparing

male:male and male:female online abuse is important as Abel (1989) argues that male focused pedophiles are less likely to be satisfied with online contact, and therefore more likely to commit offline offences. Thus, research into same-sex Internet grooming and comparison with female Internet grooming in online environments is imperative. 145

The review of the literature base indicates that currently there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on male victims of online grooming. This study aims to use thematic analysis to identify any discrepancies or commonalities that may exist within the online grooming process used by male offenders who groom male victims, in comparison to those who groom female victims. This is both an important aim in itself, but also relevant to systems currently being designed to identify grooming situations at an early stage (Hidalgo and Diaz 2012), in order to prevent online abuse. 150

Method

Materials

Prior to data collection ethical approval was obtained from the Liverpool Hope University Psychology Ethics Committee. Transcripts used in this study were downloaded from the Perverted Justice.¹ Perverted Justice Foundation, Inc., also known as Perverted-Justice or PeeJ is an organization based in the United States of America that uses volunteers posing as young people (aged 10–15) in online chat sites. The decoys then wait for adults to initiate contact with them, and then converse with them online, maintaining their child persona to arrange an offline meet. Once this has happened, the volunteers obtain the adult’s contact details and pass these on to the authorities. Many successful convictions have followed. Thus, the organization serves two functions, both to identify potential sex offenders, and by the volunteers’ presence online, to provide a barrier to adults wishing to use chat sites to target children for their offending behavior. All transcripts are made available in the public domain, and consist of adult male:female “child” and adult male:male “child” conversations. There are over 500 in total recorded on the site. For this study four transcripts from the total available male:male conversations and four from the total available male:female conversations were selected at random for analysis. 155 160 165 170

Participants

The characteristics for the individual transcripts is shown in Table 1. The average age of the males using the chat room was 37.25, and all of the users were male. It was made very clear to all of the users early on in the conversation that they were conversing with a young person under the legal age of consent. Participants chose to engage this “young person” (actually an adult decoy), no coercion or entrapment was used. Following the interaction, all participants were convicted under the United States Justice System, and the transcripts of their online conversations were made available online. 175

Table 1. Summary of participant and target/victim characteristics for either male:male or male:female interactions.

Username	Gender of adult using chat room	Age of adult using chat room	Gender of target	Apparent age of target
Dick_hungwell64	Male	41	Female	15
Jon_raven2000	Male	24	Female	13
Shaka_k2000	Male	36	Female	13
Fargo1982	Male	23	Female	13
Baditcapt71	Male	34	Male	14
dckroll	Male	40	Male	14
Jih3120	Male	61	Male	14
Italianlover37	Male	39	Male	14

¹<http://www.perverted-justice.com/>.

Data analysis

An Interpretivist Paradigm was considered appropriate to frame this study. The Interpretivist Paradigm stresses the role of the researcher in the analysis, that reality is constructed: and findings emerge through dialogue and interpretation. Therefore, thematic analysis was chosen, as it is a flexible method for analyzing qualitative data in the form of transcripts. As the analysis progresses, themes, or patterns in the data emerge. It can also be used to highlight similarities and differences across data sets, and is simple enough to be accessible to a non-academic audience (Braun and Clarke 2006). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) identify thematic analysis as a useful technique for looking at the underlying meanings of text-based data. Qualitative methods allow researchers to address the intricacy and fluidity of research participant's subjective meanings, actions and social contexts (Howitt 2010; Wertz 2011, 2014). It is important to note however, that themes do not just "emerge" from the data, rather the researcher plays an active role in identifying and assigning meaning (Taylor and Ussher 2001).

Procedure

Researcher 1 initially coded a sample from the transcripts (following the procedure outlined below). Following this, the second researcher coded a smaller sample of the transcripts (chosen at random) which was compared to Researcher 1's codings to ensure consistency. Any inconsistencies were minor in nature, and consensus was readily reached. Each researcher then began the process of coding full transcripts.

Male:male and male:female transcripts were looked at separately, but as part of the same process of analysis. The transcripts were firstly read through and then re-read to get an idea of the data as a whole, and to become familiar with the content. The transcripts were then read again while noting initial codes in the margins based on what seemed relevant and/or intrinsically interesting. These initial codes were then grouped together and researchers checked back against the transcripts to see if the overall themes provided a good match. Themes were then reviewed and some were merged as the researchers considered there was not enough evidence to support two separate themes. The researchers then looked for patterns amongst the themes, using relevant literature and discussion during the processes. The approach taken was recursive, involving moving back and forth between the data set and the ongoing analysis. A final pattern of superordinate and subordinate themes was produced and defined, and the text was analyzed for representative exemplars of each (Braun and Clarke 2006; Howitt 2010).

Results

Following analysis of the transcripts, it was found that five superordinate themes emerged from the data. These were broadly the same for both male:male and male:female transcripts. This finding demonstrates that the grooming process is roughly similar whether the targeted victim is male or female. This is an important outcome of the research, as no previous research has confirmed that victim gender does not influence the pattern of grooming.

Each theme had a number of subordinate themes, which will be outlined successively. The Themes identified were as follows: (1) Positivity (offender representation and maintenance); (2) Emotional connection (emotional security and warmth); (3) Self-protection (precautionary measures and assessment); (4) Sexual content (introduction of sexual content; maintenance of sexual content and intensification); and (5) Arranging to meet for sexual purposes. Throughout the discussion of themes representative quotes were chosen to illustrate particular aspects of the super, or subordinate themes. Examples were selected from both male:male and male:female transcripts in order to illustrate the similarities or differences between them. In the analysis, the recipients of the grooming

will be termed the victim, although in all cases it refers to the adult pretending to be a child/ 220
adolescent.

Theme (1): positivity

The first main theme identified was labelled “Positivity.” This theme encapsulates the offender’s 225
desire to be perceived positively by the victim in order to make the formation of a relationship more
likely (O’Connell 2003). The offender tries to present themselves in a non-threatening way by
representing themselves in a positive light. In order to do this, they express understanding of the
victim’s situation, such as difficult parents, or school issues; try to establish common interests; use
terms of endearment; emphasize the importance of the relationship; speak positively about them-
selves and try to self-label as the victim’s best friend. This is then maintained over the course of the 230
interaction, and may be escalated to strengthen or re-establish the relationship if at any point the
victim appears to withdraw.

This theme includes two subordinate themes: offender representation and maintenance of
positivity (see Figure 1).

Offender representation

In this subordinate theme, the offender appears especially concerned with their self-representation 235
(how the offender projects himself) (Quayle and Taylor 2001). Offenders were also found to include
behavioral representation, i.e., what they suggest they would do in a particular situation. In the
following male:male quote, the offender self-represents as being “in a similar emotional situation as
the victim.”

Decoy: I don’t have a dad so
Dckroll: I understand that
Dckroll: love to do anything with you
Dckroll: know what its like not having a dad

Another tactic to increase positivity is to try to demonstrate shared interests, i.e., that the offender 245
likes to do the same sorts of things as the victim. In the following male:female quote the offender
represents himself as liking sport.

Decoy: I totally dig sports lol
Shaka_k2000: cool I played football

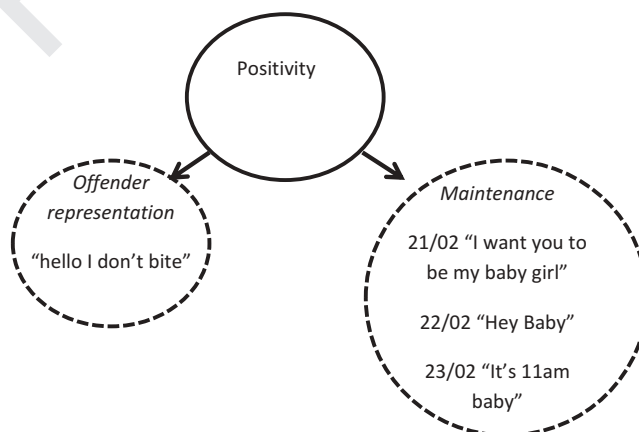


Figure 1. Superordinate theme positivity, with its subordinate themes.

In this male:male example, the offender has clearly read the victim's profile in detail, and talks to him about things they are "apparently" both interested in. 250

Dckroll: u like movies, going to beach camping, fishing

Sometimes shared interests are alluded to by the offender, rather than explicitly spelled out, leaving the victim to draw the conclusion that the offender is "like them." This demonstration of shared interests brings the victim into a kind of alliance with the offender, "we're both misunderstood; we like the same things; you and me against the world. This in-group out-group formation is an especially strong bonding agent between the offender and the victim" (Tajfel and Turner 1979). 255

The offender creates an aura of positivity by using terms of endearment, and by emphasizing how important the relationship is to them. This is apparent in both male:male (Banditcapt71) and male:female Dick_hungwell64 and Fargo1982 transcripts, respectively. 260

Banditcapt71: you're beautiful

Dick_hungwell64: but i honestly do think ur attractive and damn sexy

Fargo1982: I want u to be my babygirl

The offender often describes the relationship as one of friendship, so offenders often reiterate that they are "friends" or "good friends" with the victim. The use of friendship manipulation is present in both male:male transcripts as in the following: 265

Banditcapt71: and it would be an honor to be friends with you.

And male:female transcripts as exemplified by Dickhungwell64:

Dick_hungwell64: and to be as good a friend as I can

Moreover, offenders also explicitly self-represent as inoffensive and harmless, and this is the case for both male:male: 270

Banditcapt71: hello i dont bite, really

And male:female transcripts:

Fargo1982: Im the sweetest guy you could ever meet

Another aspect of self-representation often used by offenders includes descriptions of favorable physicality, such as muscularity, body shape, height, facial attractiveness, and athleticism and fitness. In the following male:female examples, muscularity, fitness and height are stressed: 275

Shaka_k2000: 5'11 tall work out so kinda muscular

Dick_hungwell64: every year when I have my annual physical my doctor says I'm in better shape than a lot of guys half my age 280

Fargo1982: 6ft1

While in the following male:male example, the offender concentrates on muscularity and facial attractiveness:

Italianlover37: im typical Italian stocky muscular cute face nice

One tactic used by offenders is to imply (or indeed explicitly state) that they will behave in a way that is pleasurable to the victim. The promised pleasure may be of a non-sexual or sexual nature. This self-presentation by the offender is a form of behavioral representation, indicating to the victim that they will enjoy the relationship with the offender. This focus on the victim further strengthens the positivity surrounding the apparent relationship. Offenders sometimes go to great lengths to introduce the behaviors they want to carry out, while emphasizing the supposed 290

(actually illusory) control by the victim, notice the if allowed comment in the following male:female example:

Dick_hungwell64: and dont take this the wrong way, but when i'm with a female i like to make them feel specail and i spoil them while were togather for the time we are and i'd spoil u if allowed, and well i dont mean for that to sound degrading

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Additionally they attempt to; forestall any negative reactions/responses from the victim *I don't mean for that to sound degrading*. This emphasis on future sexual behavior, coupled with apparent control by the victim is also evident in this male:male extract:

Jlh3120: i want you to feel comfortable about and with me before we meet. . .and look forward to getting together

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Maintenance

Offenders maintain the relationship using terms of endearment throughout the conversation, and with temporary increased frequency if they feel the victim is pulling away. The ultimate aim is to build a rapport with the victim, making them feel secure and comfortable with the online relationship, so that when sexual topics are introduced the victim is not frightened away. In the following (male:female transcript) Fargo1982 repeatedly uses the word "babygirl" or "baby" throughout the conversation. This subliminally suggests to the victim that they will be looked after and cared for.

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Fargo1982: I want u to be my babygirl

Fargo1982 stresses how much they care for the victim, more than anyone else could possibly do.

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Fargo1982: I wanna care about u more then anybody

In the following male:male excerpt, the victim had not responded to the last question banditcapt71 asked ("can i ask you something?"), and when they are next in contact banditcapt71 reassures the victim that they were constantly thinking about them.

banditcapt71: Hey Luke whats doing

Decoy: nothing sorry i took off

banditcapt71: its ok I kept gazing at your pictures the whole time you were gone

Decoy: your just saying that

banditcapt71: no Im not

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Theme (2) emotional connection

This theme relates to the offender building an emotional rather than a sexual connection. In fact, the offender often stresses that sex is not the reason they are interested in the victim. Rather they seek to cement their relationship with the victim through fostering a close emotional bond. There are two subordinate themes subsumed within the theme of emotional connection: emotional security and warmth (see graphical representation in Figure 2).

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Emotional security

This subordinate theme relates to ways the offender communicates which makes the victim feel safe and secure. The offender is attentive and responsive to the victim, radiating sincerity and honesty in his approach, firstly to a female victim:

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Dick_hungwell64: i will be ur friend regardless and knowing u some and getting to know u more i will be as good to u as i know how to be

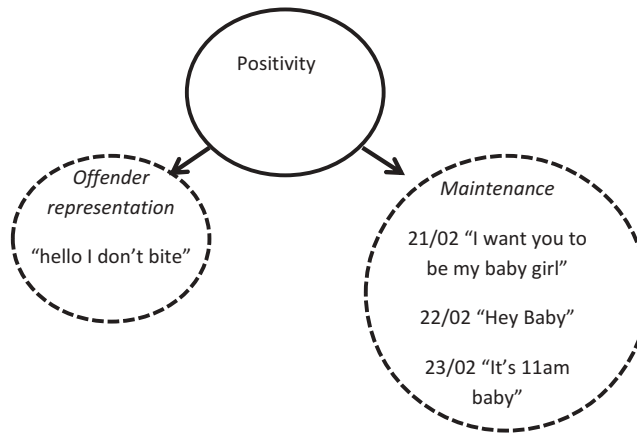


Figure 2. Superordinate theme emotional connection with its subordinate themes.

And secondly in an example from a male:male transcript.

Banditcapt71: if you and I dated I'd take good care of you and I'd let you be the judge to see for yourself weather Im for real or weather im no different than all the other guys that messed with you in the past 335

Warmth

The subordinate theme of warmth emphasizes that the offender seizes every opportunity to display warmth to the victim, creating the impression that the victim is safe and cared for. The following example is from a male:female transcript. 340

Dick_hungwell64: i think i'm lucky and blessed to have met you and will do what it takes to make it work as long as ur happy with it and are wanting me..

Another example this time from a male:male transcript shows an escalation of intensely affectionate feelings for the victim, whereby the offender incessantly declares his fondness and love for the victim. The offender personally addresses the victim, conveying that he views the victim to be the only person, who he is intimately connected to, further radiating warmth. 345

Banditcapt71: well Id love the oppotunity to call you my boyfriend
 Banditcapt71: I want to be in love with you luke
 Banditcapt71: will you be my boy now and forever?
 Banditcapt71: no I dont like you luke I love you
 Banditcapt71: I just want to be loved by you 350

Through strengthening the emotional connection and cementing their relationship with the victim, the victim will feel that they possess a special bond with the offender, a bond that is exclusive to them and excludes all others. Indeed, the male:female example below shows how an offender seeks to make his relationship with the victim exclusive and stresses the "special" nature of their relationship. 355

Fargo1982: I want something special between us
 Decoy: wha u mean
 Fargo1982: I dont want u doing other guys
 Fargo1982: I want to make this a fantasy
 Fargo1982: just me and you 360

The special bond will likely influence the victim to view the offender in an increasingly favorable light, further associating him with feelings of comfort and safety. Thus, it is likely that the victim will

want to continue their interaction with the offender and may potentially become more responsive to increasingly adult themes.

Theme (3) self-protection

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The third theme which emerged from the analysis was self-protection. Self-protection relates to how the offender protects himself online, while engaged in conversation with the victim, in order to prevent exposure of his involvement with the victim. This theme consists of two subordinate themes, that of risk assessment and precautionary measures (see Figure 3).

Risk assessment

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Throughout the conversation, the offender takes measures in order to assess his risk of exposure. This takes many forms, for example checking the victim’s experience; location; accessibility and veracity. Initially for example offenders check whether the victim is okay talking to an older person, with the implication that they will not therefore report them to the authorities. This quote is from a male:female transcript:

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Dick_hungwell64: so can I ask, am I to old for you to talk to and all?

Age concerns also arise in male:male transcripts, as in the following quote:

Banditcapt71: don’t worry Im not 71 years old

Decoy: ha ha

Banditcapt71: but im not 14 either

380

Banditcapt71: Im 34, (this is the part where people tell me Im too old for them and bail on me)

Offenders may then move on to check the victim’s sexual experience, and to assess how comfortable they are talking about sexual behavior. This is preliminary to introducing sexual topics to the conversation. The following examples are from male:female transcripts.

Fargo1982: are u a virgin

Shaka_k2000: have you had sex

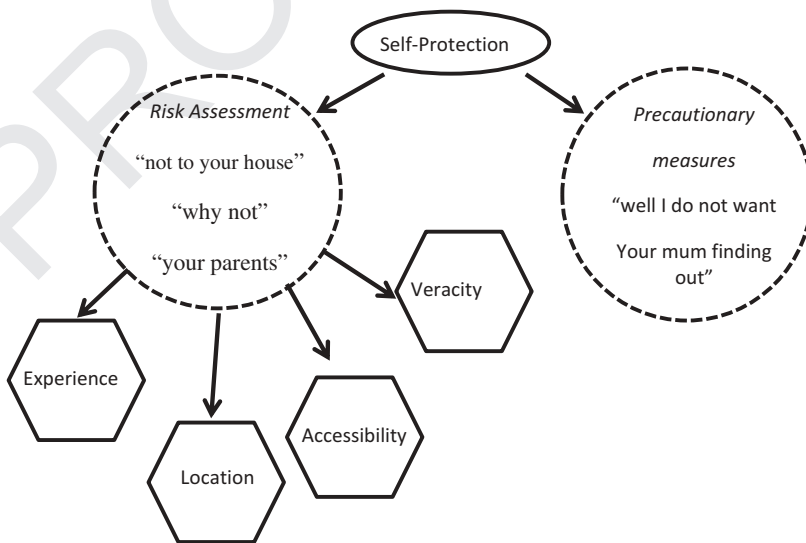


Figure 3. Superordinate theme emotional self-protection with its subordinate themes.

Dick_hungwell64: well i do think your damn sexy and was wanting to know if your have had sex and if it bother's you I'm being forward

But the same things appear in the male:male transcripts. 390

Banditcapt71: are you bi gay or straight?

Banditcapt71: have you done it with anyone before?

If an offender is seeking an actual sexual encounter with a victim, it is important for them to find out where the victim lives. One consistent aspect of the majority of transcripts was the offender trying to pin down the location of the victim early on, often ignoring the flow of the conversation. The following is a quote from a male:female transcript: 395

Decoy: take me lol (Shaka_k2000 was going to a bbq)

Shaka_k2000: um did u tell which part of cali u were from

An interesting aspect of this theme that arose during coding was the offender asking for the victim's address quite early on in the conversation, and then later on asking for it again, often claiming to have lost the original. This could be to check whether the victim gives the same address both times (although they may of course have genuinely lost the original). 400

Dick_hungwell64: I map quest that addy u gave me but now I cant find the direction, I hope u come on this morning so I can get the addy again

Decoy: u lost my addy? That makes no sense:(405

Dick_hungwell64: I did map quest and got directions, but now I cant find them. I just need the addy again so I can map quest again is all

Shaka_k2000: give me ur address so I can look it up on line

Shaka_k2000: I got booted and lost ur address

fargo1982: whats your full address babe 410

Decoy: i told u didnt u get it?

The previous examples were all from male:female transcripts. But, locating the victim was also important in the male:male transcripts: although interestingly, none of the offenders targeting male victims claimed to have lost the address. Rather, the exact location was confirmed early on in the conversation. 415

Jlh3120: where are you?

Decoy: ft myers

Jlh3120: near where in ft myers?

Italian lover: where are u exactly?

It is important for the offender to find out who the victim lives with, and the movements of other people in the house, with a view to getting the victim on their own. Offenders therefore ask about the number and routines of other members of the family, both initially and more particularly if they have arranged a meet-up, this holds true for both male:female conversations: 420

Shaka_k2000: so you live with just ur mom

Shaka_k2000: when is she comein bak 425

Fargo1982: when does she (the mother) go to work

Fargo1982: is it just u and your mom in the house

And male:male conversations:

Italian lover: are u home alone now?

In fact Fargo1982 (male:female) asks over and over if the victim's mother is going to work and at what time, the frequency increases as the time arranged to meet up approaches. 430

In preparation for the offline meeting the offender in the following male:female transcript assesses the victim's environmental circumstances for barriers that could impede the grooming procedure.

Jon_raven2000: how u going to meet me
 Decoy: u can jst come heer 435
 Jon_raven2000: not to your house
 Decoy: y not
 Jon_raven2000: your parents

In the Jon_raven2000 example, the offender wants to meet the victim offline, but presents as cautious and untrusting of the victim. The offender is assessing the victim's environment, specifically whether or not the victim will be at home alone. Meeting in person is the riskiest time for the offender, so it is not surprising that they check whether the victim is alone in the house. Sometimes the offender wants to arrange a more spontaneous meeting, but again in this male:female extract, needs to assess the victim's environment. 440

Italianlover37: hot are you home alone now

Italianlover37 then goes on to ask explicitly if the decoy is a cop: 445

Italianlover37: how do I know youre not cop lol

Clearly, Italianlover37 is concerned about being caught in a police sting, suggesting that they know that their behavior is unlawful. Offenders obviously do not want to end up in prison, for a number of reasons, not least because their offending behavior would be terminated for the duration. Therefore, reassurance about their safety is often sought from the victim, as in the following male:female extract: 450

Jon_raven2000: they don't want to get in trouble...lol
 Decoy: I aint gonna get n1 in truble gee wut u thnk I gooan get u in truble 2
 Decoy: I ianta cop I aint with that stupid datelibe show n I aint a baby(

None of which was true of course!

Precautionary measures 455

Offenders also encourage secrecy in the victim, both to protect themselves by reiterating to the victim to keep their online involvement private, and to strengthen the bond with the victim by involving them in the deception. The following is a male:female example that clearly illustrates both the fear of discovery by the offender, and the drawing of the victim into a co-conspiracy.

Dick_hungwell64: it's cool i asked only because if it were to happen and we were gonna hook up i dont want you to get in trouble and well i just say what we say and talk about is our business

Dick_hungwell64: i do think we are smart enough to keep us prvt tho.

Other examples show how the offender moves from encouraging secrecy in the conversation to suggesting tangible methods which serve to safeguard the offender, minimizing the offender's risk of detection, first in the male:female offender Dick_hungwell64 and then in the male:female offender Dckroll. 465

Dick_hungwell64: well i do not want ur mom finding out because it'd mess up a good thing we have goin so u call when u can, let it ring once and I'll call u back and make the number show up as a priv. number 470

Dckroll: u have cell

Decoy: its my momz cell ya

Dckroll: going to have to get u ur own cell

Buying the victim a mobile phone allows the offender to maintain contact with the victim while reducing the risk of discovery. Moreover, if the offender buys the phone and gives it to the victim as 475

a gift, it results in a sense of obligation in the victim through the Reciprocity Effect (Fehr and Gächter 2000), which further strengthens the offender’s hold over the victim.

An additional precaution noted by the researchers is the eagerness of one male:male offender to view the person they are talking to via a video link. This may be for their sexual pleasure, but an additional advantage would be to confirm that they are talking to an actual victim, and not a law enforcement agent. 480

banditcapt71: I can see your webcam let me see your face
 banditcapt71: can I see your webcam real quick?
 banditcapt71: Id love to see your face
 Decoy: its broken 485

Theme (4) sexual content

The fourth theme identified by the researchers is Sexual Content. This superordinate theme has three subordinate themes: introduction, maintenance, and intensification (leading to an arranged meeting) (see Figure 4). At some point in the conversation (sometimes almost as soon as the conversation starts), but also much later on in the conversation, the offender will introduce sexual content. Once introduced, the offender returns to sexual content repeatedly, and as the conversation continues, intensifies the level of explicitness. This intensification is often mediated by comments emphasizing that the activity will be pleasurable for the victim, will educate the victim in sexual matters, and that it is under the victim’s control. 490

Introduction of sexual content 495

After a period of general conversation, the offender directs the conversation toward matters of a sexual nature, while (in most cases) maintaining self-protection by assessing risk (checking the victim is okay with the topic), and strengthening the emotional connection (by exuding warmth and understanding). For the most part the offender seeks affirmation that the victim is okay talking about

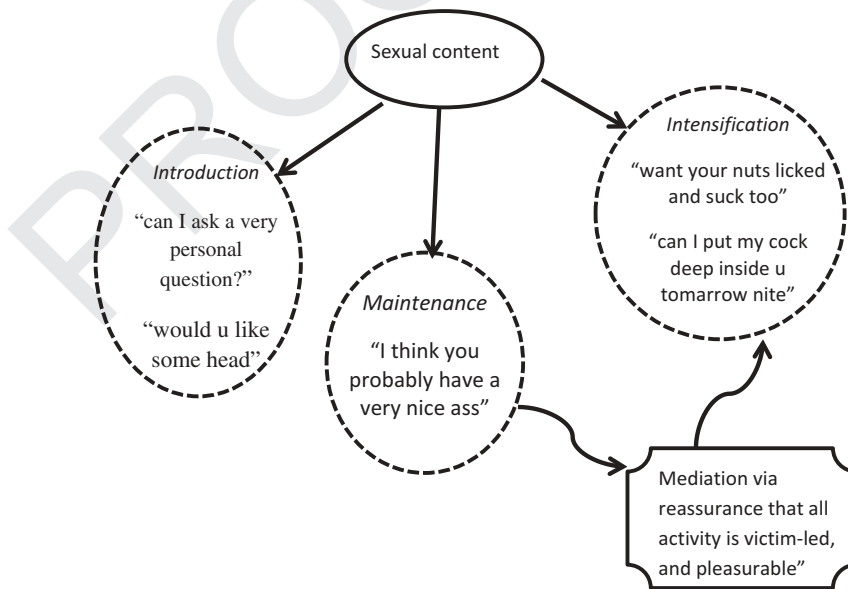


Figure 4. Superordinate theme sexual content with its subordinate themes.

sexual content, before involving the victim in any sexually related discussion or escalating the intensity and explicitness of sexual content. In the following male:female quote the topic is introduced gently, through asking if it is okay to ask a personal question: 500

Dick_hungwell64: can i ask a very personal question?

Decoy: sure ask anythin i aint scared

Dick_hungwell64: well i do think your damn sexy and was wanting to know if your have had sex and if it bother's you i'm being forward. 505

Eliciting the victim's previous sexual experience also happens in male:male conversations such as this one with Jlh3120:

Jlh3120: what do you like to do with guys?

Decoy: I jo with a guy and we kiss too

510

Through requesting permission from the victim and treading carefully before sexualizing the conversation, it seems that the offender is transferring control of the content to the victim. Although, this is essentially illusory due to the naivety of the victim, and the manipulative tactics used by the offender, the victim is likely to be deceived into thinking they have control. In this male:female extract the offender is deliberately obtuse in their meaning. 515

Jon_raven2000: u cant do what I want lol

Decoy: and wut is that

Jon_raven2000: your to young to imagine

In the case of jon_raven2000, the offender is fishing for the level of sexual awareness in the victim, and for the victim to initiate the sexual content. When the decoy does not take the bait, the offender returns to the topic later on. 520

Jon_raven2000: did you figure out what I want

This again places the onus on the victim to initiate the sexual content. Following some general conversation, the following quote shows that the offender is obviously getting tired of waiting for the victim to initiate sexual content, and therefore asks them directly: 525

Jon_raven2000: u ever did anything with a guy

A tactic also used more directly by Jlh3120 (male:male).

Jlh3120: what do you like to do with guys?

Any mention of a boyfriend or previous sexual experience from the victim is taken as an opportunity to introduce sexual content into the conversation or escalate existing sexual content, quite gently in the first transcript extract, which is male:female, and more abruptly in the second, which is male:male. 530

Decoy: I had a bf b 4

Jon_raven2000: what did u do

Decoy: we did bf gf stuff u know

535

Jon-raven2000: did u suck him

Decoy: I jo with a guy and we kiss too

Jh3120: I understand

Jhl3120: I love to suck a young man, deepthroat and drain him dry

On the other hand, some offenders just jump right in, first in a male:female extract, then a male:male one: 540

fargo1982: i am very good with my toungue and fingers baby

Italian lover37: what you looking for

Decoy: I duno u

Italianlover37: well hot sex what else

545

Maintenance of sexual content

After introducing sexual content, the offender continues to approach communication in a way that encourages the maintenance of sexually related conversation. There is a recurrence of sexual content throughout the conversation, whereby the offender chooses to intermittently direct the conversation toward sexual topics, within the environment they have created. Offenders can turn almost any comment toward sexual content, as can be seen in the following male:female example: 550

Fargo1982: can I e-mail u

Decoy: yea

Fargo1982: I am very good with my toungue and fingers baby

555

And this male:male example:

Dckroll: whats the lates u can be out

Decoy: lol I can sta out however late I want cuz my ma n gramma gone lol

Dckroll: cool maybe suck u a few times

A key aspect of this stage can be reassurance by the offender to ensure the victim is comfortable with the sexual content as a prelude to escalating the explicitness of the conversation. The offender presents themselves as considerate when approaching topics of an adult kind, appearing to transfer responsibility to the victim by leading them to make decisions for themselves. In doing this, the offender gives the victim the impression that they are in control of the conversation and have consented to their involvement becoming increasingly sexualized with the offender. This is true for both male:female (Dick_hungwell64) and male:male (Jlh3120) transcripts. 560 565

Dick_hungwell64: I would like to hook up, but not unless ur ok with it and want to .. if not we can sure be friends

Jlh3120: would be glad to let you form your own opinion

Decoy: Rlly? wow that's nice of u

570

And then later on:

Jlh3120: I'd love to show you how good it feels sometime... as long as you're completely comfortable with it

In the following male:male extract, the offender stresses the victim's pleasure, over and above their own, while emphasizing how good they are at giving pleasure: 575

Jlh3120: I'd love to show you how good it feels sometime. . .

Jlh3120: yep and from what most say... It's the best they've had

A similar scenario is played out in this example from a male:female transcript:

Dick-hungwell64: you'll love the oral tho

Dick_hungwell64: I can say I do, I've allways been told that I am damn near perfect at oral, and that been my favourite thing to do to get u worked up and hot 580

Intensification of sexual content

Once the offender is sure of the victim's complicity, they intensify the sexual nature of the conversation. This appears to be one of the key goals of the offender, namely to engage in sexually explicit conversation with a victim for their own sexual gratification. In the following quotes between male offenders and female victims, explicit language is used: 585

Shaka_k2000: um to kiss yeah then lick ur breasts lik u between ur thighs

Fargo1982: I will pound your pussy for hours

Explicit sexual content is also included by male offenders when talking with male victims:

Dckroll: how many times can u cum

The offender generally then moves the conversation to whether the victim would engage in sexual activity with them, as an initial exploration to find out whether the victim will meet them for sex, sometimes quite directly as in this male:female extract:

Fargo1982: can I put my cock deep inside u tomarrow nite

And again in this male:male extract:

Dckroll: want ur nuts licked and suck too

Decoy: ya kewl ☺r

Dckroll: u want to be drain dry

600

Theme (5) arranging a meeting for the purposes of sex

The final theme identified by the researchers is when the offender tries to arrange with the victim to meet up for the purposes of sexual activity between them. This may take considerable negotiation, offenders repeatedly checking factors such as whether the victim will be alone, and what their exact address is. Offenders do this for their own self-protection (theme 3), and is the case for both male: female offenders and male:male offenders. Examples of male to female discussion are detailed in the following quotes: 605

Fargo1982: is your mom going to be home tonite

Fargo1982: does your mom come home for lunch

Jon_raven2000: you r alone

610

The same follows for approaches to male victims:

Italianlover37: hot are youi home alone now

Decoy: yeaaa my pops is at work for a while longer still

Italianlover37: so what youi want to come over and have hot sex lol

The following is an especially cautious male:male extract.

615

Jlh3120: what time do they get back Sunday? (the victim's parents)

Decoy: what time? I dunno in the afternoon I think

Jlh3120: any idea when they get in. . .afternoon means anytime after 12 noon. . .

Decoy: like 5 or 6 later

Jlh3120: ok. . .you might want to check the airlines and see what time the flight from vegas gets here..just to be sure 620

Decoy: k

In both male:female and male:male transcripts, the offenders also continue to maintain emotional security even this late in the conversation, making the victim feel special and in control. This also acts to over-ride any concerns they may have about potential sexual activity. However, they do not always get it right. In the following male:male extract, the offender makes a mistake by using a more commanding tone. 625

Banditcapt71: my only order is just show me love and a lot of it

They then back track quickly to recover their mistake by reassuring the victim. This acts to restore potentially lost emotional connectedness by re-iterating the exclusive and special relationship, and by stressing the happiness of the victim. 630

Banditcapt71: I just want to be loved by you

Banditcapt71: everything else will fall into place I promise you and you will be happy

In the following male:female extract, the offender becomes more sexual, and then when they do not get much of a response from the victim they immediately talk about commitment. 635

Dick_hungwell64: i like ur breast and can only think all of u is just as nice,even better

Decoy: :)

Dick_hungwell64: and as i said, knowing more about the person u are and learning ur attitude has shown me that u are with out a doubt 100% real on the level u say u are. ... And that counts for a lot 640

When examining the analysis as a whole, it was noted that all emergent themes and subthemes appeared in both male:male and male:female transcripts, there were few if any differences. However, unexpectedly the order was not sequential as might have been expected from O'Connell's (2003) analysis. Offenders repeatedly returned to emotional security and warmth, even at the end of the interaction, when the offenders believed sexual activity was inevitable. The self-protection theme, and risk assessment questions were also repeatedly re-visited, suggesting a cyclical nature of grooming, rather than a linear one. 645

Discussion

Five main themes relating to offender grooming and the solicitation of children for sexual purposes were identified from the transcripts, four of them containing subordinate themes. These themes were as follows: Positivity (Theme 1); Emotional Connection (Theme 2); Self-protection (Theme 3); and Sexual content (Theme 4). The final theme identified (Theme 5) was "Arranging to meet." In this theme, offenders made arrangements to meet the victim in the real world with a view to sexual interaction. This latter theme agrees with the observation of Carr (2003) that communication via the internet can lead to real-world sexual offending. Furthermore, the themes identified here broadly corresponded to those identified by O'Connell (2003), although not in a sequential order. The main aim of this research was however to investigate Geiser's (1979) suggestion that there are fundamental differences in the dynamics of males grooming males, and males grooming females. This is of particular relevance as male focused pedophiles are thought to be less likely to be satisfied with online contact alone (Abel 1989), meaning identifying differences would have practical applications in harm reduction if male on male grooming could be identified earlier than currently. 650 655 660

However, contrary to Geiser (1979), the findings of this study did not demonstrate obvious differences between male:male and male:female transcripts. Rather, for all themes and subthemes identified, examples could be found from both male:male and male:female transcripts. Moreover, offenders seemed to cycle through themes/subthemes in similar ways. If differences exist, they are not with the fundamental progression through grooming stages. The only informal difference noted by the researchers was that there seemed to be increased use of explicit sexual content by male offenders when conversing with male victims, compared to female victims. 665

Although the looked for differences were not found, there were several useful confirmatory aspects of this research. Taken as a whole, the findings support Elliott's (2017) proposal that an ongoing cyclical self-regulation model of grooming is used by offenders. The initial phase comprises the build-up of social capital in the form of the desired base-line relationship with the child; followed by movement toward the goal of sexual gratification, with continued return to Phase one as required, rather than the linear progression suggested by O'Connell (2003). The findings of this study support the idea that the cycle is ongoing, as offenders in this study consistently returned to their initial Themes of Positivity; Emotional Security; Risk Assessment, and Sexual Content.

One particularly interesting observation was that (possibly) resulting from their sexual desires, and their motivation to move on to sexual content, offenders occasionally made mistakes, in that they become overtly sexual too early in the conversation. This resulted in potential harm to the developing relationship between offender and victim. Analyses of the transcripts indicated that offenders were aware of their faux pas because an examination of the transcripts demonstrated that they took swift measures to re-establish the relationship. They achieved this by using flattery and excessive terms of endearment.

In contrast to Egan, Hoskinson, and Shewan (2011), this study found that offenders continued to assess risks related to detection, even while in the process of arranging an offline meeting. Moreover, as suggested by Williams, Elliot, and Beech (2013) the analysis of risk appeared to be an ongoing process, with offenders repeatedly returning to self-protecting behaviors (such as checking parental movements) and increasing the bond with the child through using supportive and relationship orientated language. While the predominant interactions were self-protective, the researchers identified one behavior from the transcripts carrying a clear risk to the offender. This was the point where they chose to give out their actual telephone number, most often as the process of arranging a meeting intensified. Having said this, it could be argued that this is a necessary risk as it facilitates the likelihood of successfully arranging an offline meeting. And, as Egan, Hoskinson, and Shewan (2011) note, the compulsion to offend is likely to over-ride fears of detection, particularly as the moment of potential sexual gratification approaches (Egan and Cordan 2009; Egan, Kavanagh, and Blair 2005).

Contrary to O'Connell's (2003) findings that within the early stages of the process offenders represent themselves as being either of a similar age to the victim or of a younger age than the victim, this was not found in the current analysis. Offenders appeared for the most part to give their real ages, and where deceit was employed, they merely represented themselves as younger than their actual age, rather than a similar or younger age than the victim. It was found in this study that offenders portrayed themselves as adults, often highlighting the age differences rather than minimizing them. Offenders used their apparent sexual experience to suggest that they could give pleasure to the victim.

One obvious aspect that emerged during analysis was the use of online identities by offenders to ensure their anonymity (Webster et al. 2012). None of the transcripts analyzed included the offenders' real name as their username, e.g., Fargo1982. And, even when specifically asked for their real name, offenders often did not reveal it, at least not until they were more sure of their victim. Moreover, the pseudonyms used often appeared to reflect the offender's sexual identity, e.g., Dick_hungwell64 and Italianlover37.

This study has the usual limitations inherent in using data from the Perverted Justice¹, namely that the responses of an adult pretending to be a child, no matter how much training they have received, is unlikely to 100% accurately reflect actual adult:child conversations in this context. Thus, the Themes identified could be different to those that would emerge from a genuine adult: child conversation in a grooming context. Although, having said this, in none of the transcripts analyzed was there a suggestion from the offender that they suspected they were conversing with an adult, suggesting that at least in some respect the conversations reflected real interactions. One other issue with adults pretending to be children is that they may have unduly encouraged the offender in their desire to identify and ensure conviction of potential pedophile offenders. Again reducing the validity

of the Themes identified. Furthermore, this study is also comparatively small, and increasing the number of transcripts analyzed would considerably improve the validity of the findings. 720

Conclusion 730

In conclusion, this study has added to the body of literature by directly comparing male:male and male:female transcripts to explore Geiser's (1979) suggestion that there are fundamental differences between males grooming males, and males grooming females. Contrary to this expectation, the themes and processes identified were similar in male:male and male:female transcripts. However, there was an intuitive feeling flowing from deep immersion in the data that the number of sexually explicit words used differed when the target was male, compared to when they were female. Far more sexually related words were used by males grooming males, compared to males grooming females, and the difference was quite marked. This difference would not show up in a thematic analysis, but recent research has employed linguistic analysis techniques to explore the language used by online offenders in more detail. For example, Black et al. (2015) explored the frequency of specific techniques used by offenders in each stage of the offender-child interaction, based on O'Connell's (2003) stage theory. Their focus was to confirm whether or not O'Connell's (2003) stages proceeded sequentially (they did not), but more importantly in relation to this study, their method used a content analysis of words and phrases used by offenders. This technique could be extremely useful in exploring the differences (if any) between male:male and male:female grooming interactions, as a quantity element can be examined. And indeed the authors are currently using a linguistic analysis program to explore quantitative differences in word use between male victim and female victim transcripts. 735 740

In conclusion, this study is the first direct comparison using thematic analysis of the differences in grooming when the intended victim is either male or female. While this study found no specific theme or subtheme differences, it did highlight something worthy of further investigation, namely obvious differences in number of words used within themes/subthemes in male:male compared to male:female interactions, and in particular sexually related content. The current state of the internet has parallels with the Wild West in that it is a dangerous place lacking law and order. Linguistic identifiers of grooming intent are therefore vitally important to elucidate, as this type of information is increasingly being used in automatic detection (and therefore policing) of grooming attempts in the seething cauldron of vice and depravity,² that is the online world. 745

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²The New York Tribune, describing Abilene, Kansas in the 1860s.

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