Abstract

Transcripts of chat logs of naturally-occurring, sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that took place via Internet communication platforms were analyzed. The aim of the study was to examine the *modus operandi* of offenders in such interactions, with particular focus on the specific strategies they use to engage victims, including discursive tactics. We also aimed to ascertain offenders' underlying motivation and function of engagement in online interactions with children. Five cases, comprising 29 transcripts, were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis with a discursive focus. In addition to this, police reports were reviewed for descriptive and case-specific information. Offenders were men aged between 27 and 52 years ($M = 33.6$, $SD = 5.6$), and the number of children they communicated with ranged from one to twelve ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 4.5$). Victims were aged between 11 and 15 ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 1.2$), and were both female and male. Three offenders committed online sexual offenses, and two offenders committed contact sexual offenses in addition to online sexual offenses. The analysis of transcripts revealed that interactions between offenders and victims were of a highly sexual nature, and that offenders employed a range of manipulative strategies to engage victims and achieve their compliance. It appeared that offenders engaged in such interactions for the purpose of sexual arousal and gratification, as well as fantasy fulfillment.

Keywords: sexual grooming, online sexual exploitation, Internet communication

A Qualitative Analysis of Offenders' Modus Operandi in Sexually Exploitative Interactions

with Children Online

There is growing concern about the use of Internet communication platforms by individuals with a sexual interest in children. While most research conducted into the area of Internet sexual offending explores child pornography offenses, with particular focus on those individuals who access, possess, distribute, or produce sexually explicit visual material of children, relatively little is known about individuals who specifically utilize Internet communication platforms to meet and interact with children for sexual purposes, with the potential to develop into arrangements for a physical meeting (Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012). This group of individuals has commonly been referred to in the literature as "chat room offenders" (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011), "groomers" (Webster et al., 2012) and "solicitation offenders" (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011; Seto et al., 2012).

Solicitation offenders have been reported to access Internet communication platforms (e.g., chat rooms, social networking sites, gaming sites; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010) geared towards and popular among children, specifically young adolescents, and may use deception (i.e., disguising themselves as children) in order to attract potential child victims (Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007). Once contact has been established with a particular child, it is common for such offenders to move the conversation to a private instant messaging provider or e-mail (Leander, Christianson, & Granhag, 2008). More recently, mobile phones have been reported to be frequently used to communicate with children in addition to contact online, mainly in cases where a relationship has been established (Briggs et al., 2011; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014).

In order to further our understanding of this type of offending behavior, a few studies have examined individuals' potential motivation for engaging therein and their associated

modus operandi. Briggs et al. (2011) identified two subtypes in a sample of 51 chat room offenders who had been convicted of an Internet-initiated offense, which consisted of enticing a child into a sexual relationship by using Internet communication platforms: (a) *contact-driven offenders* who were predominantly motivated to arrange a physical meeting for the purpose of sexual activity with a child; and (b) *fantasy-driven offenders* who were predominantly motivated to engage a child in online sexual activity for the purpose of sexual gratification, but who may arrange a physical meeting in order to advance their online experience through providing the child with fantasy-enhancing items (e.g., webcam, clothing).

Webster et al. (2012) further distinguished between "groomers" based on their *modus operandi* as part of online interactions with children, identifying (a) intimacy-seeking offenders, (b) hypersexual offenders, and (c) adaptable offenders. *Intimacy-seeking offenders* were characterized by their belief that they are in a romantic and consenting relationship with the child. They spent considerable time conversing and getting to know the child before making arrangements for a physical meeting. Interactions of *hypersexual offenders* were reported to be highly sexualized. Offenders in this group presented without a particular wish to meet offline. In fact, they demonstrated little interest in the child's life and predominantly discussed sexual themes. *Adaptable offenders* appeared to use several different online identities and adapted their behavior according to the child they communicated with. Some of them possessed and used child pornography as part of the process, but they were not necessarily motivated to arrange a physical meeting (Webster et al., 2012).

While these studies provide an insight into solicitation offenders' motivations, the process their online interactions with children can follow, and some of the behaviors they exhibit, they tell us little about the more specific, manipulative strategies that might be used by solicitation offenders to establish a (sexual) relationship with a potential victim online. For

example, in the physical world, in order to *overcome a child's resistance* (one of the stages in Finkelhor's (1984) Precondition Model), offenders may engage in a process of sexual grooming, whereby they prepare a child for abuse (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Specific goals of this process include "gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure" (Craven et al., 2006, p. 297).

Similarly, in the online world, in order to achieve these goals, solicitation offenders may employ a range of manipulative strategies in their interactions with children, from compliments, flattery and making a child feel special to supplication, intimidation, threats and blackmail (Campbell, 2009; Sullivan & Quayle, 2012). Methods of engagement can entail introducing sexual themes, showing sexually explicit material, and using manipulation in the form of bribes, gifts, seduction, competition and peer pressure. Such methods serve to desensitize children, stimulate their natural sexual curiosity, lower their inhibitions, normalize the behavior depicted in the material, as well as validate sexual relationships between adults and children (Berson, 2003; Grosskopf, 2010; O'Connell, 2003; Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007; Singer, Hussey, & Strom, 1992). Offenders may further seek information about victims' sexual interests and experiences (Grosskopf, 2010), which in combination with the use of secrecy, establishes a sense of mutuality and relationship (Campbell, 2009).

Commonly noted behaviors that occur in such interactions involve exposure of body parts via webcam and performance of masturbatory sexual acts, with the latter entailing sexually explicit chat (Briggs et al., 2011; Grosskopf, 2010; Krone, 2005; Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2007; O'Connell, 2003). Pictures of genitalia may be exchanged, and webcam footage of sexual activity recorded and retained as sexually explicit material (Briggs et al., 2011; Grosskopf, 2010; Krone, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2007). Some

offenders may then use this material to blackmail and threaten a child in order to ensure their continued engagement and compliance (O'Connell, 2003).

Of particular interest is the way offenders employ and construct these manipulative strategies linguistically, given that their online interactions with victims are based on written text. Olson et al. (2007) proposed a theory of luring communication (LCT), which describes the communicative process of "entrapment" engaged in by offenders to "lure" children into an ongoing sexual relationship. Offenders frequently used "communicative reframing," whereby sexuality is presented as being beneficial to the child and a by-product of adult curiosity (Olson et al., 2007), as well as implicit sexually suggestive and coercive communication in order to gain children's compliance. More generally, discursive psychology is concerned with the detailed examination of the use of one's language in terms of its construction and function (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012). Here, language is considered a means of constructing reality and "a form of social action, whereby people use language to achieve certain interpersonal goals in specific interactional contexts" (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012, p. 147).

The aim of the present study is therefore to further our understanding of sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that took place via Internet communication platforms using real-world data. These constitute naturally-occurring conversations between an adult and a child under the age of 16 years, who is not posed by an adult in the form of undercover police officers (e.g., Briggs et al., 2011; Grosskopf, 2010; Krone, 2005; Malesky, 2007) or private volunteers (e.g., Marcum, 2007; O'Connell, 2003; Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013). Those interactions will not only be examined thematically to capture and represent important, patterned aspects within them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; e.g., Williams et al., 2013), but also by specifically focusing on the design of offenders' communicative contributions to explicate discursive tactics employed by offenders as part

thereof, and thereby deconstructing what actually underlies potentially previously identified themes and patterns through highlighting and differentiating between subtleties. This methodology provides new insight into offenders' *modus operandi* and this type of offending behavior, both in terms of its construction and function (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Method

Context

The data used in the present study consisted of transcripts of chat logs and police reports, and were provided by three UK police forces. All case material was anonymized by designated officers at each police force prior to it being made available to the principal researcher. The study was granted full ethical approval by the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham, UK. Additionally, the principal researcher received vetting clearance to undertake research activities as part of the Child Exploitation Investigation Team at a UK police force.

Sample and Data

A total of five cases were identified and selected by officers from three police forces through their intelligence systems, based on meeting the criteria of the offender having committed (a) an offense of sexual grooming under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003), or (b) any other offense under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that involved sexual grooming. Furthermore, offenders had to have been convicted of these offenses, and their victims identified as children respectively, in order to be included in the sample. The offenses were committed between end of year 2009 and beginning of year 2012.

Cases comprised of a total of 29 transcripts of chat logs between an adult and a child under the age of 16 years[1]. In such interactions posts are necessarily short due to the nature of

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[1] The total of 29 transcripts of chat logs is the result of interactions between five offenders and 23 victims, for some of which more than one transcript was available. This is due to the way in which Internet communication platforms process chat logs.

the mode of communication, yet each message is studied in depth. The number and length of available transcripts per case varied and ranged from two to twelve ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 3.6$), and one to 75 pages ($M = 14.4$, $SD = 15.7$) respectively, resulting in a total of 415 pages (single-spaced format, font size 10). In addition to the transcripts, contextual information in the form of police reports was provided for each case.

Participants

The five offenders were men aged between 27 and 52 ($M = 33.6$, $SD = 5.6$). Four were of Caucasian and one of Asian ethnicity. Their professional backgrounds varied, although two offenders worked in direct contact with children (i.e., a children's home and a school). Three offenders appeared to have access to a computer as part of their work. The offenders either lived alone, with parents, or in shared accommodation. Victims were aged between 11 and 15 years ($M = 13.0$, $SD = 1.2$). Of the five offenders, three targeted young females, and two young males. Case-specific information, including descriptive statistics of the identified victims, is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

The study employed a qualitative design by using thematic analysis which is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) across a data set. It allows for meaningful elements or codes to be combined to generate themes and explanatory models (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The steps undertaken to ensure a rigorous thematic analysis of the study's data set are outlined here, and follow recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006), Guest et al. (2012), and Robson (2011). Using insights from discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992;

Hepburn & Willig, 2007), we specifically focused on offenders' use of language within the identified themes to explore how their communicative contributions perform the "action" (i.e., the "doing") of sexual grooming.

Prior to the commencement of coding, the principal researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading the transcripts in detail. Transcripts were then formatted to be imported into MAXQDA11, a professional software package with the purpose of facilitating the process of qualitative data analysis. When re-reading the transcripts in MAXQDA11, an inductive, content-driven approach was adopted to allow for the identification of any key information, trends, themes, or ideas, apparent in the data (Guest et al., 2012). Initial codes and themes were identified and recorded in the coding scheme by assigning them a descriptive label. This was achieved by highlighting the relevant textual data and linking it to the corresponding codes or subcodes. Additional codes were developed as new features were identified, while reappearing elements were assigned codes that already existed within the coding scheme. Themes were then formed by collating relevant codes, and through the identification and understanding of key concepts.

In accordance with the research questions of the present study, a variety of additional content was coded, generating codes pertaining to: (a) characteristics of offenders and victims (e.g., age, living conditions, sexual orientation, relationship status, sexual preferences, and motivation); (b) conversational topics; (c) types of sexual behaviors performed and engaged in; (d) certain actions (e.g., sending personal details, pictures, pornographic material); (e) specific strategies used by offenders and victims, as well as their responses/reactions to particular occurrences; and (f) features of the dynamic process (e.g., approach, conversation initiation, closing). Codes and subcodes were categorized based on their primary association with the offender, the victim, and the process respectively, in order to distinguish content specific to each of the three concepts. A hierarchical grouping style facilitated the

organization of themes, codes, and subcodes according to their similarity and relationship with each other within the three categories.

Ideally, the full analysis incorporating both offender and victim contributions would be presented. However, in order to protect the identity of the victims, the present paper solely focuses on and illustrates the contributions made by offenders.

Throughout the analysis, the principal researcher employed an iterative approach by revisiting and adjusting existing codes and subcodes, as well as revising themes, where appropriate. Additionally, textual data within codes and subcodes were re-examined to ensure that codes described the information within them accurately. Transcripts were re-read and segments of text recoded, where necessary. If new information or insight was gained, the principal researcher modified the coding scheme to further develop and refine it. The descriptions of themes, codes and subcodes were developed throughout, as well as verified and revised through discussions with the research team. Interpretation and refinement of identified themes were conducted through a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts, referring to relevant literature, and consulting with colleagues and experts in the field.

Finally, an inter-rater reliability check was performed on 10% of the analyzed data set (i.e., approximately 40 pages), totaling 55 randomly selected extracts, in order to ensure that these were reliably interpreted by a second rater as representing the themes identified by the principal researcher. The proportion of agreement was calculated as a percentage of overlap, which was revealed to be 85 percent ($\kappa = 0.34$[2]) and is above the minimum acceptable inter-rater agreement of 80 percent (McHugh, 2012). Any disagreements were mainly of a semantic nature, and agreement was reached through revisiting the relevant extracts and discussing their contexts.

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[2] While the Kappa value is considered to be fair, it constitutes a conservative estimate of agreement that is heavily skewed by the high level of chance agreement that occurred as a result of the second rater essentially agreeing or disagreeing with the first rater.

Following the analysis of the transcripts, police reports were consulted for descriptive information about the offender, identified victims and additional evidence derived as part of forensic analyses (e.g., possession of child pornography). Researcher bias in the form of preconceived knowledge about each case was therefore avoided, ensuring objective interpretation.

Results

In all cases, offenders approached and established initial contact with victims via public chat rooms ($n = 5$), social networking sites ($n = 17$), or a dating website ($n = 1$). Following initial contact, conversations in Cases 1, 2 and 3 were moved to instant messaging ($n = 5$) and e-mail ($n = 1$). The transcripts of chat logs from these cases stem from the latter contexts, and hence represent continued conversations following initial contact elsewhere. In Cases 4 and 5, offenders predominantly used the chat function of the social networking sites via which initial contact had been established to interact with victims. The majority of transcripts of chat logs from these two cases (10/16) appear to represent the beginning of those interactions. In instances, where offenders moved conversations to instant messaging and email, it was not possible to ascertain how long they had communicated with victims prior to this.

The themes identified in the transcripts of chat logs can be related to the central theme of sexualization of content. After reading the first transcripts, it immediately became apparent that this theme played a fundamental role in all of the interactions examined as part of this study. Offenders' role in the interactions, which reflected online sexual activity, included the engagement in and performance of a variety of sexual behaviors, sexualized talk, "fantasy rehearsal" (E. Quayle, personal communication, June 12, 2013), and the discussion of a range of topics, of which most had a sexual focus. Illustrative quotes of offenders' contributions are presented here for each theme, and supported by a more detailed description and discursive

interpretation. Following this, additional, more prominent manipulative strategies are outlined

in more detail. Please be aware that the following sections include data which are deemed to

be sexually explicit. Table 2 provides an overview of the identified themes.

Insert Table 2 about here

Theme 1: Directness in Initiating Online Sexual Activity

Offenders used both suggestive and directive styles of interaction, as well as a range

of other strategies to initiate online sexual activity. Online sexual activity primarily included

exhibiting genitals, and body parts in general, via webcam, as well as performing

masturbatory sexual acts. Occasionally, female victims were directed and thereby incited by

offenders to carry out digital penetration of the anus and vagina (i.e., inserting a finger), or to

use foreign objects to perform penetrative sexual acts.

Extract 1[3], Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   angel i better go im getting..er...excited just looking at you and ill need to do the guy

2   thing :$ and i dont want to embabrres you. then get a shower

3   unless you can help me out ?

4   i have been begging to see you in just your underwear and your ass

5   lol i cant im erm well you know what im doing

In Extract 1, the offender refers to being sexually aroused as "excited," which appears

to be an attempt to flatter the victim by stating that this is as a result of "just looking at her"

(line 1). The use of "just" in relation to looking is a minimizing case formulation that serves

to strengthen the offender's case (Pomerantz, 1986). He expresses the act of masturbating as

a "need" out of his control, seemingly serving the purpose of inciting the victim to show

herself via webcam to "help" him relieve his "need" (lines 1&3). What is of interest here is

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[3] Extracts solely represent offenders' contributions to the conversations due to confidentiality and ethical considerations

the way the offender presents as being "gentlemanly" by saying he "better go" and "not

wanting to embarrass her" (lines 1-2), yet opening up her involvement as a matter of choice

(line 3).

Extract 2, Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   so what preasent did you get me ?

2   yay

3   you look so sexy baby

4   kiss

5   lol so whats my prezzy ?

6   ??

7   what nooooooo

8   :'(

9   what was it

10   show me your boobs before you go

11   and your perfect bum

12   awww :'(

In Extract 2, the offender attempts to incite the victim into performing sexual acts by

using flattery, compliments and affection (lines 2-4). Through repeating his initial question

(line 5) and following the victim's non-responding up with questions marks (line 6), the

offender persistently tries to elicit a response from the victim. Through insinuating

disappointment and sadness (lines 7-8), the offender attempts to manipulate the victim into

telling him "what the present was" (line 9). The initial strategy of using flattery, compliments

and affection to incite the victim to perform sexual acts subsequently develops into directive

requests (lines 10-11), which are not fulfilled, prompting the expression of potentially

imitated disappointment and sadness by the offender (line 12).

Extract 3, Case 4 (V3, female, 14 years):

1   hi

2   wats ur age

3   wana see my cock

4   wana see me jerk off

5   can i see u too

6   can i see ur tits

7   tits

8   chest then plz

9   wana see me naked

10   ??

11   make me cum

Extract 3 shows a more direct, blunt approach in that the offender immediately attempts to initiate sexual activity via webcam. He first enquires about whether the victim "wants" to see him, before requesting (lines 5-6) and ordering (line 7) to see the victim, and for her to show certain body parts. Following this is another request, where the use of "chest" and "please" (line 8) appear to serve the purpose of eliciting a positive response through making the request sound less crude than the previous order (line 7), which did not yield a response from the victim. Subsequently, the offender makes an offer of reconciliation to show himself (line 9). The non-responding by the victim is then followed up by asking for a reply ("??," line 10), before ordering the victim to engage in sexually explicit activity (line 11). Extract 3 represents the first nine minutes of this interaction, highlighting the aggressive and persistent attempts by the offender to pursue his goal. Such more extreme strategies can also be observed in the following two extracts.

Extract 4, Case 5 (V5, male, 14 years):

1   go on cam and make me horny

2   na wanna see u get hard on cam

3   if you last ages ok cam i will

4   go on cam then prove its ur cock

5   na bye

6   [arrangement of camera]

7   ok stand up lets see more of ur body

8   move back

9   shorts off

10   annd boxers

11   lets see closer

12   play with ur tight little balls

13   show ur face for a bit or im gonna go

In Extract 4, the offender makes directive requests to incite the victim to show himself via webcam and perform masturbatory sexual acts (lines 1-4), which develop into orders (lines 7-13). What stands out is the non-compromising (line 2), pressurizing (lines 3 & 5 & 13) approach the offender employs to persuade the victim and achieve their compliance. Further to this, Extract 5 below highlights the insistent, explicit questioning by the offender about the victim's state of sexual arousal, which is followed by directive requests for the victim to show herself via webcam and perform masturbatory sexual acts. By repeating an earlier request (line 7), the offender appears persistent and slightly aggressive. Although he responds to the non-compliance by the victim in an accepting and apologetic manner (lines 8 & 10-11), the offender continues to attempt to achieve the victim's compliance by reducing the intrusiveness of his initial request (line 9).

Extract 5, Case 4 (V8, female, 13 years):

1   r u horny

2   u never r

3   how much

4   r u wet

5   touch ur pussy

6   can i see u

7   touch ur pussy

8   ok

9   can i see ur tits

10   ok

11   sorry

The above extracts show how offenders made use of a suggestive, yet very directive style to introduce and initiate online sexual activity. Offenders employed various strategies in order to incite victims to show themselves via webcam and engage in sexual behaviors. These strategies ranged from flattery, compliments and affection to severe manipulation in the form of persistent and pressurizing requests and orders. The extracts further highlight offenders' sexual motive and drive for sexual stimulation and gratification, which can be attained through the engagement in sexual conversation, and "pursuing sexual information."

Theme 2: Pursuing Sexual Information

Across the interactions and as part of online sexual activity, a pattern of *pursuing sexual information* was identified. It involved offenders enquiring about victims' sexual likings and practices, as well as their body parts and previous sexual experiences. The theme predominantly emerged in interactions during phases where there was no webcam in use.

Extract 6, Case 5 (V5[4], male, 14 years):

1   chilling having a wank

2   u like wanking yet?

3   good lad

4   how bigs urs?

5   in inches?

6   im 7 and a half lol doubt urs is bigger lol

In Extract 6, the use of "yet" (line 2) makes it clear that the offender is aware of the victim's younger age. The victim's response in the affirmative to the offender's previous question is met with encouragement (line 3), and is followed up with specific questions about the victim's genitals and a statement (line 6) that can be interpreted as playful and teasing, as well as of a rather belittling nature. This may have served the purpose of cajoling the victim into competing and revealing himself via webcam.

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[4] Half way through the conversation with this victim, on the second occasion they communicated, the offender disclosed his true identity and stated that he was male.

Extract 7, Case 1 (V1, female, 13 years):

1   do u mind if i ask what size r they hehe?

2   ok lol, i said.....do u mind if i ask what size r they hehe?

3   wow, quite big 4 your age hehe :P

4   were u 13 when someone 1st touched them?

5   did u ever tease guys before that lol?

6   how old were u wen u started teasing guys then hehe?

7   wot did u do 2 tease?

8   not even a bit?

9   ok lol

In Extract 7, we can see how the offender uses compliments and flattery (line 3) to comment on the victim's body parts. The way the topic is introduced is of interest in that the offender gently places the question by initiating it with "do you mind" (line 1), which almost guarantees a response by the counterpart. The frequent use of "lol" and "hehe" (lines 1-9) makes the conversation appear in a playful, frivolous light, whereby the offender attempts to increase the likelihood of responding by the victim. Lines 4-6 illustrate the offender's pedantic interest in the victim's age at the onset of sexual experimentation, which may be indicative of a sexual preference for this particular age group. Again, offenders could be seen to be persistent by repeating questions and statements, as well as using question marks ("??"), to elicit responses by victims (E7, line 8; E8 lines 2-5). Specifically, Extract 8 highlights the offender's insistence (lines 6-8), which may function to entice the victim into co-participation, and instill feelings of shared responsibility through making the victim feel as though they were playing a participatory role in sexualizing the conversation.

Extract 8, Case 4 (V9, female, 13 years):

1   have u seen a guy wanking

2   did that turn u on

3   what turns u on

4   ??

5   wat turns u on

6   u like watching my cock dont u

7   so u like my cock

8   does my cock turn u on

A pattern of offenders discussing their own sexual experiences with other victims, both online and offline, was also identified.

Extract 9, Case 4 (V11, female, 14 years):

1   can i see u

2   i wana see u plz

3   this girl i masterbating on cam for me, do u wana see

4   nice virgin pussy

5   wait i will record it and show u

6   her pussy is so sweet

7   shes putting a spoon handle in her pussy

8   i am well horny

9   fuck me

10   i wana fuck u

11   can i see u plz

In Extract 9, the offender attempts to incite the victim to show herself via webcam. We can see that the initial interrogative (line 1) develops into an expressive (line 2), which, through the use of "please," makes the offender appear as begging and almost desperate. Immediately subsequent to this, he reveals online contact to other female victims by explicitly commenting on sexual activity performed by another girl via webcam (lines 3-7), which the offender offers to record and show the victim (line 3 & 5). This leads to expressives of sexual arousal (line 8) and the desire to engage in sexual intercourse (lines 9-10), which are followed by an apparently begging interrogative to incite the victim to show herself. What is of interest here is the change in the offender's language at different points in the interaction, going from kindly asking the victim to show herself to highly explicit sexual expressions and statements.

Extract 10, Case 1 (V3, female, 15 years):

1   its very thick, wen ive been wiv girls round ur age b4, its been quite hard 2 get it in

         hehe

2   ive taken a few virginities before, so i know how 2 do it and not hurt u ;)

3   you'll be my 9th virgin lol

4   13, was the girls 13th bday

5   yeh, thru msn

6   yeah, she asked me 2, so i did

7   she liked pain lol

8   yeh, it hurt her a bit, but she loved it

9   5 times that day, and more times when we meet again

10   shes 14 now, it was last year

11   only wen im single, ive never cheated in my life, so if i have a gf, i never meet anyone

Extract 10 offers insight into how the offender reports offline sexual contact with a number of female children in a very detailed and highly explicit way in order to manipulate the victim to engage in sexual activity online. The use of "hehe" and "lol" throughout the account displays the information in a playful and frivolous light, thereby detracting from the seriousness of the nature of such events. Further to this, his account normalizes sexual contact with children, denying any autonomy or responsibility with reference to one particular victim by stating that "she asked him to" and that "she loved it" (lines 6-8). The offender presents himself as experienced and sexually knowledgeable (lines 2-3 & 8-9), which we would argue may have served the purpose to either 'impress' the victim or to reassure her and gain her confidence that he would be an appropriate sexual partner. Thereafter, he almost appears to retract his position by clarifying that "it was last year," and that he would "only do it when he is single," "never cheat," and "never meet anyone" if he has a girlfriend (lines 10-11). He therefore uses three extreme case formulations in one sentence, which serve to strengthen his case (Pomerantz, 1986).

This theme would appear to primarily serve the purpose of initiating sexual themes and sexualizing the conversation in order to "set the scene." By offenders enquiring about victims' state of sexual arousal, they were either exploring what victims would find sexually arousing, or seeking assurance that the experience is mutual. Overall, the engagement in such conversation is suggested to provide sexual stimulation for offenders, and mental imagery for fantasy formation. It may have also served the purpose of establishing victims' tolerance to discuss such topics, as well as their level of experience and preparedness to engage in certain sexual acts. While references to online and offline sexual contact with other victims could be fabricated, they normalize sexual contact with children, and simultaneously manipulate a victim to engage in similar sexual activities.

Theme 3: The Next Step

The theme of *the next step* in the form of a physical meeting, as loosely suggested by the offender in Extract 10, was identified in two cases. It predominantly appeared in places where offenders discussed the exclusivity of their relationship with a particular victim.

Extract 11, Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   when your older i would love you to live here, we can have all the fun we want

2   i wish we was closer babby

3   what you doing ?

Extract 12, Case 1 (V3, female, 15 years):

1   shame ur not here now

2   i hope we have a really long relationship

3   i really like u as well

4   ur such an amazing girl

5   brb, just gonna have a quick shower

The above extracts illustrate how offenders used the strategy of making a victim feel special by insinuating a strong desire for physical contact and closeness (E11, lines 1-2; E12, lines 1-2). What is of interest here is the offender in Case 2 openly referring to the future

("when you are older") when talking about living together (E11, line 1). This may be supportive of an awareness surrounding the illegality of a sexual relationship with a child, suggesting an attitude towards refraining from it. Alternatively, it may have merely served the purpose of keeping the victim close and engaged, while subtly indicating that the relationship would have no immediate future, nor could be acted upon. We can also see the use of flattery, compliments and affection again (E12, lines 2-4).

Extract 13, Case 1 (V3, female, 15 years):

1   r u looking 4 a relationship?

2   cool, so am i ;)

3   if u like me, wud u wanna go out wiv me?

4   cool :)

5   wud u tell all ur mates about me?

6   its up 2 u, depends how they will react wen u tell them, im a lil bit older than u

7   nope, im not bothered lol

8   i take it u wudnt be tellin ur parents tho lol

In Extract 13, the offender establishes if a mutual interest in a relationship exists. The affirmative responses by the victim are met with overly positive feedback by the offender, in combination with happy and winking emoticons (lines 1-4), which together appear to serve the purpose of demonstrating the offender's joy with the aim to flatter the victim through making her feel special. Yet, immediately after, the offender probes the "security" of the "relationship" by questioning if the victim would tell her friends and parents about him (lines 5-8). While he offers the possibility of disclosing the "relationship" to her friends (line 6), he ensures non-disclosure to her parents through an assertive statement shortly after (line 8), which he frames in such a way that it is a done deal, needing no further explanation. However, the offender does this in a light-hearted and playful way by using "lol" and "nope." This language suggests that his aim is not to "spoil the moment," thereby ensuring continued

contact and future engagement by the victim, as well as minimizing risk of disclosure, and

detection respectively.

In relation to the above, a pattern was identified that involved dialogues between

offenders and victims about a physical meeting, including arrangements in terms of location,

time and date, as well as suggestions for possible activities.

Extract 14, Case 1 (V1, female, 13 years):

1	yeah, well i share with someone but he is away at the mo on holiday
2	why, u wanna come back to mine then?
3	how comes?
4	how about next weekend then?
5	cool
6	wot wud u wanna do at mine?
7	cool, i'l give u a text in the mornin when im leavin
8	i'll leave at about 11, so shud b able 2 get 2 u about 12
9	where do u wanna meet?
10	which co.op lol
11	ok cool, i can get there
12	how long can u stay out until?
13	cool, a long time together then :)
14	wot else u wanna do then apart from toss me off lol
15	cool
16	im really lookin 4ward 2 meetin u
17	ooops, im erm, gettin a bit turned on thinking about 2moro lol
18	when you show me your boobs, wud i be allowed to touch them hehe?
19	i could drive to a quiet place if u want
20	or do u know any woods near u?

Extract 15, Case 4 (V9, female, 13 years):

1	where u live
2	wana meet up
3	u like me
4	would u fuck me

5   r u a virgin

6   can i see ur pussy

7   plz

8   would u like to suck my cock

From reading the above quotes, it becomes apparent that there were differences in the way offenders approached the discussion of a physical meeting. The offender in Extract 15 presents with an evident sexual motive, if a meeting was to take place, using highly explicit language (line 4 & 8). He establishes whether the victim equally "wants to meet up" (line 2) by determining if it would be feasible in terms of location (line 1) and the victim's feelings towards him (line 3). The victim's virginity appears of importance for the offender (line 5), resulting in a request for the victim to show her genitals. The non-compliance by the victim is met with a begging "please" (line 7), followed by the offender establishing the victim's engagement and compliance, if a meeting was to take place (line 8).

In comparison, the offender in Extract 14 presents as more discrete, making a sexual motive not immediately obvious. Here, a physical meeting is introduced in the context of the victim enquiring about the offender's living conditions (lines 1-2), which very quickly develops into making firm arrangements (lines 4-12). The offender responds in an affectionate manner by expressing joy over getting to spend "a long time" together (line 13), as well as eager anticipation and sexual arousal at the idea of sexual activities taking place (line 14-17). This is followed by establishing the victim's engagement and compliance (line 18), and finding a place of secrecy (lines 19-20). The use of "lol" and "hehe," as well as "ooops" and "erm," let the conversation and upcoming meeting appear in a playful, frivolous light. Yet, the reference to "driving to a quiet place" highlights a certain awareness by the offender surrounding the illegality of his actions.

What is of interest is that both extracts illustrate a somewhat hypothetical wording of questions in relation to meeting arrangements (e.g., E14, line 6 & 18; E15, line 4).

Considering that the offenders did not attend the meetings arranged with victims in the above interactions, it is not entirely clear whether they had a genuine interest to meet in the first place. This raises questions as to the motive of offenders for discussing a physical meeting and potential arrangements in detail. In combination with the following theme of "fantasy rehearsal," we would suggest that this served a separate purpose, namely the fulfilling of fantasy.

Theme 4: Fantasy Rehearsal

Fantasy rehearsal was a common theme identified across all interactions, which refers to the expounding of the fantasized course of a physical meeting.

Extract 16, Case 1 (V3, female, 15 years):

1   damn, ur pics r working their magic again ;)

2   u r 1 of the most stunning girls ive ever seen

3   u wanna see a naughty pic hehe?

4   will this b the 1st time u've seen a dick?

5   ok, u ready then?

6   told u i was bigger than average hehe

7   u think i wil fit it all inside u?

8   mmmm :P

9   u like a bit of pain then?

10   nice

11   i really had 2 force it in the 13yo, it barely fit lol

12   im wanking again ;)

13   u have such an amazing effect on me lol

14   do u wish we had met straight after we 1st spoke?

15   if we had spoken b4 that, wud u have met me before then as well?

16   cool, wot age wud u have 1st met me then?

17   omg really?

18   wow, ive just got the hardest ive probably ever been ;)

19   wot wud we have done wen u were 10?

20   i think u know hehe ;)

21   i wud have wanted to have taken ur virginity hehe

22   wud u have let me?

23   :P

24   get u 2 suck me

25   its ok, i cud teach u ;)

26   yeh hehe, i wud push as much of my dick in ur mouth as possible

27   ive gotta go now babe

In Extract 16, the offender initiates sexual talk and activity by making a sexual innuendo about the victim's profile pictures and compliments about her looks (lines 1-2), which serve to flatter the victim. The use of "damn," and phrasing the sentence in such a way that "the pictures are working their magic," present the offender's sexual arousal as out of his control and the victim as having an overwhelming effect on him. This leads to the offender offering to send a picture of his genitals to the victim. The use of "naughty" and "hehe" (line 3) make this action seem secretive, yet playful. Through asking if this was the first time the victim had seen someone's genitals and if she was ready, he appears to caringly prepare her.

Yet, the use of "dick" (line 4) and the immediate transition to presenting the victim with a hypothetical situation of engaging in sexual intercourse with her (lines 7-9), along with stating such an experience with another victim (line 11), are highly explicit and come across as apparently aggressive. In conjunction with the reference to pain (lines 9-11), this may be suggestive of sadistic tendencies in the offender. Furthermore, through the mentioning of sexual experiences with another girl, the offender normalizes sexual contact with children, while simultaneously manipulating the victim to comply.

The expressions of enjoyment at (line 8) and liking (line 10) of the idea are followed by a statement of the offender engaging in masturbatory sexual activity (line 12), which he again associates with the "amazingness" of the victim (line 13), serving the purpose of flattering her. Throughout the extract, the offender frequently uses "hehe" and "lol," as well as winking and cheeky emoticons (showing a tongue), which present the subject matter in a

light-hearted and playful light, giving the impression that the interaction is more an act than of any seriousness.

The conversation then takes a turn by the offender enquiring about whether the victim would have met with him immediately after their first contact online, and if she had also met with him at a younger age (lines 14-17). It appears that the offender is aiming to fuel a fantasy of engaging in offline sexual activity with a girl aged 10 years (lines 17-23). The offender's overly positive responses (lines 17-18) to this revelation may suggest a sexual preference for this particular age group, which finds support in his disclosing statement of what he would have wanted to do, if such a meeting had taken place (line 21). He then seeks assurance from the victim that the experience would have been mutual (line 22), before specifying additional sexual fantasies in a highly explicit manner (lines 24-26). The abrupt departure by the offender to attend a social gathering (line 27), directly following a conversation of the level of explicitness as outlined here, gives rise to the interpretation that it predominantly served to heighten the offender's sexual arousal and fulfil his sexual fantasies. It further illustrates the highly exploitative nature of some of these interactions in light of their extremely sexual nature and offenders leaving conversations without attempting to re-establish their relationship with victims in order to minimize the risk of disclosure (i.e., damage limitation; O'Connell, 2003).

Extract 17, Case 1 (V4, female, 12 years):

1   u definately wanna meet up then?

2   cool

3   how late do u think u will be able to stay out?

4   cool

5   wot time wud u wanna meet up then, wud u be able 2 meet b4 midday?

6   i wanna make u really happy

7   wot wud make u really happy hehe?

8   a long passionate one?

9   good good

10   wud u like it if i had wandering hands when we kissed hehe?

11   wud u like them 2 wander over ur clothes or under ur clothes ;)

12   naughty hehe :P

13   wud u have wandering hands as well?

14   wud ur hands be going inside my boxers then?

15   hehe

16   how far wud u wanna go?

17   really, u wanna have sex then?

18   mmmmmm :P

19   r u still a virgin, or have u had sex since we last spoke?

20   mmmmm, im gettin hard now thinking about me taking ur virginity hehe

In conversation with another victim (E17), the same offender developed a discussion about a physical meeting, which he begins by seeking assurance that the victim is mutually interested (line 1). His enquiries about time issues (lines 3-5) appear a little rapid and out of context, considering the line of conversation that follows. Here, the statement of "wanting to make the victim really happy" initially appears caring and affectionate (line 6); however, following the question of "what would make the victim happy" (line 7), the intended sexual meaning becomes more obvious, particularly through the use of "hehe," which appears to represent a cheeky or naughty thought. The offender then "rehearses" the course of a physical meeting by progressively introducing increasingly more sexual behaviors (lines 8-16).

In order to seek assurance from the victim and establish mutuality, he does this in an interrogative manner, which indirectly places the victim under pressure to respond. At the idea of engaging in sexual intercourse with the victim, the offender expresses enjoyment (line 18), which is reinforced by the victim's confirmation that she is still a virgin (line 20), leading to an expression of sexual arousal (line 20). Throughout, the offender again uses "hehe," as well as winking and cheeky emoticons (showing a tongue), which present the subject matter in a light-hearted and playful light, thereby allowing the offender to dismiss it

as a joke at any time. Such rehearsals of a physical meeting may represent an offender's mental imagery or sexual fantasies.

Again, no interaction that displayed the above theme resulted in a physical meeting. This could support our initial suggestion that offenders may have predominantly engaged in this kind of explicit chat for the purpose of sexual stimulation and gratification, as well as fantasy fulfillment. In addition to this, some offenders openly referred to their sexual thoughts and fantasies as part of their conversations with victims.

Extract 18, Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   i allways think about you in your underwear lol

2   and i allways get hard when i do

Extract 19, Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   lol love you angel was dreaming about you all day

2   just about being your teacher at school and looking up your skirt cos you was flirting
        with me and you was wanking me off over your knickers. then after i cum on your
        bum you weed on the floor foor me

3   i wana wank over you with your knickers on bent over

4   and watch you wee your self tonight ?

Extract 20, Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   lol hey baby girl

2   you still havnt done your hair up in pigtails yet for me

3   ok baby

While Extract 18 may represent an attempt by the offender to flatter the victim in order to incite her to engage in online sexual activity, the other extracts not only exemplify what this particular offender may find sexually arousing, but also where his sexual preferences lie. In fact, the offender's engagement in role play-fantasies involving teacher-pupil (E19) and father-daughter themes may be evident of hebephilic tendencies. However,

the reference to "pigtails" (E20) could be more characteristic of a sexual preference for

prepubescent girls (i.e., pedophilia).

Some additional content that was identified may provide further information about

offenders' deviant sexual interests.

Extract 21, Case 1 (V1, female, 13 years):

1   how young were u the 1st time u remember?

2   (victim states the age of 13 years)

3   nice :P

Extract 22, Case 5 (V3, male, 12 years):

1   kinda love how u have no pubes too

2   i just find it nice seeing a hairless boy

Extract 23, Case 2 (female, 14 years):

1   do u shave/trim or leave it?

2   yeah, i prefer it all smooth and hairless

3   looks so sexy, and younger lol

The positive reaction by the offender in response to the victim stating her age at the

time of her first sexual experience may represent a sexual preference for this particular age

(E21, line 3). The notion of favoring "hairless" bodies or body parts may support a deviant

sexual interest in prepubescent children (E22). Although it is recognized that this might also

find its origin in esthetic or psychological-developmental causes, the offender in Extract 23

clearly states that he prefers hairless body parts because it looks "younger."

Manipulative Strategies

Supplementing sexual stimulation. Across offenders, a pattern identified was the

use of sexually explicit digital material, which appeared to predominantly serve the purpose

of sexual stimulation. This involved encouragement and requests for victims to send images

of themselves (e.g., "have you got a pic i can use baby"; Case 2), as well as the offender

watching pornographic material (e.g., "just watching porn"; Case 4). It is, however, unclear

whether offenders accessed this kind of material online or from their computers.

Additionally, offenders also delivered digital material to victims by sending pictures of their

genitals, and pornographic material in the form of videos or hyperlinks (e.g., "i will show the

full version if you want"; Case 3). In one particular case, the offender recorded webcam

footage of a girl he had interacted with, and forwarded this material on to two victims (e.g.,

"wait i will record it and show u"; Case 4). Here, the sending of this kind of sexually explicit

material by the offender arguably served the purpose of normalizing sexual activity online,

with the aim to incite the victim to engage in similar sexual behavior. In other instances, the

offender's motive for sending such material appeared to be both to sexualize the

conversation, as well as to provide sexual stimulation to victims.

       Security. A pattern of security measures were identified in a number of interactions,

where offenders made enquiries to victims if they were keeping him a secret, or told friends

about him ("wud u tell everyone about me, even tho im 20 lol wud i be your naughty secret

then lol?"; Case 2). This was also related to victims' secret use of chat rooms ("lol dont get in

trouble for being on here"; Case 2). A few instances showed the offender seeking reassurance

from the victim, by issuing a warning not to get caught when preparing for performing

sexually via webcam ("u sure u wont get caught dont want to get u in trouble"; Case 5). In

particular, in one interaction this was related to the victim's attempts to engage in sexual

activity that would be classified as sexually humiliating ("Ok…, i dont want you to get

caught...that would be a huge problem"; Case 2). Overall, they further have a precautionary

function in order to minimize offenders' risk of detection. One offender also requested to see

the victim via webcam in order to verify who they were speaking to ("listen plz i wana chat to

u but not to a perv and unless u can prove to me ur a girl delete me"; Case 4). It is suggested

that these may have also been pleas to prompt victims' engagement in webcam usage.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine offenders' *modus operandi* as part of naturally-occurring, sexually exploitative interactions with victims, with particular focus on the specific strategies they used to engage them. Interactions were analyzed both thematically and discursively in order to highlight any patterns within them, as well as how interactions were constructed through the use of offenders' language and which function this served. Four predominant themes were identified: (a) directness in initiating online sexual activity, (b) pursuing sexual information, (c) the next step, and (d) fantasy rehearsal. All could be related to the central theme of sexualization of content, and similarly describe aspects identified in previous research (Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007; O'Connell, 2003; Williams et al., 2013).

It became apparent that the offenders in Cases 1 and 2 spent more time conversing and interacting with victims, and at times interactions featured a familiarity that would resemble the development of a kind of relationship. Sexual content was introduced more gently, employing discursive strategies, such as compliments, designed to flatter the victim and with the purpose of inciting them to show themselves via webcam and/or engage in online sexual activity. Similarly to O'Connell (2003) and Williams et al. (2013), sexual topics were initiated as part of a general "getting to know each other sexually", through a construction thereof as a joke or game and presenting it in a frivolous, playful light, as well as in the context of providing sexual advice. The "desire" for the victim's engagement to facilitate masturbation was often discursively constructed as a need out of the offender's control, effectively positioning the victim as someone would could "help him out", and thereby encouraging continuation of their online contact. This was further supported by offenders insinuating a longing for physical contact and closeness that would be representative of a romantic relationship.

Once those interactions had been sexualized, a progression could be seen not only in terms of the types of sexual activities engaged in, and the sexual topics discussed

respectively, but also with regards to how offenders attempted to incite victims. Here, the

initial discourse of affection, which was maintained through compliments and flattery,

developed from a predominant use of interrogatives and expressives to that of directives and

the imitation of negative emotions. In some more extreme cases, offenders' incitement

appeared to take the form of supplication, a strategy a group of male sex offenders most

commonly self-reported to have used in their interactions with victims (Campbell, 2009),

which, coupled with the former, functions to put one's counterpart under pressure to comply

in the interest of future contact and/or engagement. Such a progression was also noted by

O'Connell (2003) and Williams et al. (2013), who referred to this strategy as "boundary-

pushing" and "repletion", through which offenders repeatedly attempted to maintain an

interaction's sexual focus and overcome victims' resistance to engage in online sexual

activity.

A directive style of communication was particularly apparent in interactions between

offenders and victims in Cases, 3, 4 and 5. Here, offenders presented with little interest in

their victims' personal lives, and used a much more direct and blunt discursive style from the

beginning. In a majority of these interactions, offenders immediately introduced sexual

content in order to initiate online sexual activity by making sexually explicit statements,

revealing themselves via webcam, and/or placing sexual requests to victims. Such an

approach, associated with a quick escalation to the topic of sex and exhibitionistic behavior,

was also revealed in transcripts of chat logs analyzed by Marcum (2007), and may be

suggestive of an individual's existing sexual motive for accessing Internet communication

platforms geared towards and popular among young adolescents, and establishing contact

with this particular age group respectively.

Furthermore, these interactions featured a more aggressive use of language by

offenders, which was also reported by Marcum (2007), in that they appeared to be

constructed as pursuing and achieving the goal of short-term sexual gratification (Grosskopf, 2010). Offenders often attempted to achieve victims' compliance to engage in online sexual activity in a manner that was of a direct, persistent, non-compromising and pressurizing nature. This involved the placing of sexual requests, which at times developed into orders, and were followed by offers of reconciliation through softening and rephrasing them in instances where the offender's initial direct approach did not yield the desired response and/or engagement by the victim.

Across cases, similarities could be seen in the way offenders tried to achieve victims' compliance and overcome their resistance, as well as how sexual contact between adults and children was constructed. Conversations with victims were sexualized through offenders initiating sexual topics and introducing sexual content with the focus on and involving the victim (Grosskopf, 2010). Presenting this information in a frivolous, playful and teasing manner allowed offenders to dismiss it as a game or joke at any time, and made their behavior appear "innocent". The sharing of personal sexual experiences and online contact to other children was further aimed at desensitizing victims, and normalizing both offenders' behavior and the nature of such interactions. This was supplemented by offenders sending victims sexually explicit material in the form of images and videos that depicted a particular sexual activity, which is a reportedly common strategy offenders use (Grosskopf, 2010; Krone, 2005; Malesky, 2007; O'Connell, 2003; Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Lööf, 2012; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Coupled with offenders' frequent use of compliments and flattery, as well as appearing to seek (re-)assurance from victims, an atmosphere was created in which they are more likely to respond. This instills feelings of co-participation and shared responsibility in victims, which minimizes the risk of disclosure by them, thereby decreasing the likelihood of detection. Aspects of impression management, involving self-promotion (i.e., presenting as competent), ingratiation (i.e., presenting likable

or affiliative behaviors), and exemplification (i.e., presenting a self that is worthy; Metts &

Grohskopf, 2003), were also apparent and further helped facilitate this.

In terms of how the findings of the present study fit in with existing research on this

type of offending behavior, a number of differences are noted:

(i)   Most offenders in this sample did not deceive that they were adults, but

        occasionally presented as younger than their true age. While this is in

        accordance with findings by Whittle et al. (2014) and Wolak et al. (2008), it is

        contrary to what has frequently been reported about offenders' deception and

        disguise tactics (Dowdell, Burgess, & Flores, 2011; Lanning, 2010; Malesky,

        2007; Marcum, 2007; Quayle et al., 2012), and may be related to the increased

        opportunity to initiate contact with a great number of children via easily

        accessible Internet communication platforms that grant anonymity.

(ii)   The majority of the interactions in this sample did not progress to a physical

        meeting, supporting more recent research suggesting that there is a group of

        individuals who are solely motivated to engage in "cybersexual" interactions

        with young adolescents (Briggs et al., 2011; Grosskopf, 2010; Webster et al.,

        2012). Briggs et al. (2011) referred to these individuals as "fantasy-driven",

        distinguishing them from those who were predominantly motivated to arrange

        a physical meeting for the purpose of sexual activity (i.e., contact-driven). We

        would argue that this dimension of fantasy- versus contact-driven suggests that

        offenders' motivation may be in place at the time they approach a young

        person via Internet communication platforms, and remains stable throughout.

        It therefore does not take into account the individual dynamics of each

        interaction, which may lead to changes in an offender's motivation and the

        goal they seek to pursue over the course of an interaction (e.g., the two

offenders who were convicted of contact sexual offenses also engaged in

sexually exploitative interactions with a number of other victims that did not

result in a physical meeting). Furthermore, the notion of "fantasy-driven"

would both trivialize and misrepresent the true nature of the sexually

exploitative interactions engaged in by the three offenders who were convicted

of online sexual offenses. In fact, they featured serious forms of exploitation

and abuse, and, despite their commission via digital technologies, should

therefore be considered as such. Consequently, a description of this type of

offending behavior as "hypersexual" (Webster et al., 2012) may be more

accurate.

(iii)   Offenders in this sample did not engage in a process whereby they attempted

to form a friendship and/or relationship with victims, nor did they appear to

believe that they were in a romantic relationship with victims (Grosskopf,

2010; O'Connell, 2003; Webster et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013).

Additionally, only one offender presented with the online identity of a girl in

order to attract young boys, and only one offender adapted his strategies when

interacting with one particular victim by presenting as a model photographer.

In all other interactions, no clear adaptations or differences were identified in

terms of *modus operandi*, or how the offender represented himself online,

across victims (Grosskopf, 2010; O'Connell, 2003; Webster et al., 2012).

Similarly to (i), these findings may suggest that the availability of a great

number of children online makes it unnecessary for offenders to adapt their

approaches and/or strategies in interactions with non-compliant victims.

These findings may provide further insight into offenders' differing motivations and

the primary function their offending behavior served. As outlined in the Results section, all

offenders at least mentioned, if not suggested, a physical meeting at some point. Only in two cases could this clearly be related to the offender's motivation to arrange a meeting with the victim for sexual purposes, which led to contact sexual offenses. In all other conversations, no further steps were taken towards arranging a physical meeting. Coupled with the use of hypothetical wording and language by offenders in these instances, we would suggest that they may have found the component of imagined physical contact with children highly arousing, and that the discussions of a physical meeting and potential arrangements, as well as the engagement in sexually explicit chat in relation thereto, served the purpose of sexual arousal and gratification, as well as the fulfillment of sexual fantasies.

Limitations

The present study employed a qualitative approach on a small number of cases due to the sensitive nature of the data and the extreme difficulty in gaining access to this kind of material. While the number of transcripts the cases comprised of was appropriate for the methodology used, findings are tentative and not generalizable across other populations, and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, only cases that had come to the attention of authorities could be included in the sample, and the results are therefore not representative of undetected offenses.

<div align="center">

Conclusions and Future Directions

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Overall, the findings of the present study illustrate that offenders in this sample constitute a heterogeneous group. While some appeared to be predominantly motivated to engage in online sexual activity with a child for sexual purposes, others committed contact sexual offenses. It is therefore suggested that for offenders in this study, the engagement in sexually exploitative interactions with children may have been part of a wider picture of offending behavior, and/or a means of identifying and selecting victims for sexual abuse in the physical world (Seto et al., 2012). There were apparent differences in how offenders

interacted with victims, with a range of manipulative strategies and discursive tactics employed in order to overcome victims' resistance and gain their compliance. In fact, offenders were able to design their communication in such a way that frequently achieved the apparently desired goal of sexual arousal and gratification, as well as fantasy fulfilment, while making use of security measures that indicated an awareness surrounding the illegality of their actions.

The data used in the present study represents transcripts of chat logs of naturally-occurring conversations between offenders and victims identified as children. This is a key contribution to the field of Internet sexual offending, as this type of data can provide important information not only about offenders' *modus operandi*, but also about their sexual fantasies, interests/preferences, and potential paraphilic tendencies (e.g., whether offenders' real preference actually lay with prepubescent children, but that it was the higher prevalence of young adolescents on Internet communication platforms (Briggs et al., 2011; Wolak et al., 2004) that led them to establish contact with this age group), whose assessment can prove difficult in light of absent evidence. Knowledge thereof is both useful and essential to inform: (a) appropriate risk assessment protocols, treatment needs, and management requirements; (b) policing in terms of how offenders "operate" via Internet communication platforms, which can be used in efforts both to train undercover police officers, and to equip children with adequate life skills to handle, manage and deal with any negative experiences online (Finkelhor, 2014).

More studies are needed into this area using this type of data to further our understanding of sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that take place via Internet communication platforms. An analysis of a greater number of cases would enable a better comparison across offenders, with a particular focus on apparent similarities and differences in offense processes, as well as factors that play a contributing role in the

progression of such interactions and potential escalation to offline contact. Future research

would benefit from a detailed analysis of both offenders' and victims' contributions, across

genders, which would shed light on the unique dynamics within those interactions that

progress and escalate.

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