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Understanding online grooming: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of adolescents' offline meetings with adult perpetrators

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Abstract

Background: It is the norm for adolescents to form friendships online, but connecting with strangers poses risks of online grooming. Adult perpetrators take advantage of the anonymity and accessibility of the internet to befriend and groom young people for sexual abuse. Much of the existing research has focused on the offender's perspective and grooming tactics, while extensive studies on victim profiles have centred on risk factors and young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming.

Objective: This research takes an in-depth look into the processes of grooming from the perspective of the adolescent victim and explores how the relationships progressed online-to-offline, resulting in abuse. It aims to understand young people's motivations and mindset by exploring their lived experiences of meeting with adult perpetrators offline.

Methods: Using data from the Risk-taking Online Behaviour Empowerment through Research and Training (ROBERT) Project, six interviews with adolescents aged 14-21 were examined using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method.

Results: Four themes emerged: 1) Varied interpretations of risk 2) Taking control 3) Seeking security and validation; and 4) Shifts in perspective. The participants navigated a relationship with the perpetrator that presented perceived risks and benefits. The subtleties of online grooming were masked by the adolescents' misplaced trust as they displayed agency in pursuing opportunities for online friendships or sexual activities.

Conclusions: The findings suggest an insufficient knowledge of grooming and the need to more clearly define risks amongst adolescents. Safety guidelines should highlight the subtleties of grooming tactics and harmful behaviours that may not be readily perceived as abuse.

Keywords: online grooming, adolescents, adult perpetrators, IPA

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1. Introduction

1.1 Online grooming

Online grooming is the technology-facilitated process of befriending a young and vulnerable person by an adult perpetrator for the express purpose of sexual abuse and exploitation (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). What traditionally took place offline involving the physical proximity of perpetrators has shifted dramatically with the internet, enabling groomers to entrench themselves fully into the victim’s life by maintaining consistent contact via multiple channels (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell & Ybarra, 2008). Technology has become highly embedded in the daily lives of young people, even more so with the global pandemic increasing internet usage during the lockdown. This pervasiveness of communications technologies has blurred the ‘online’ and ‘offline’ distinction in young people’s interactions (CEOP, 2010), making it vital to understand how they navigate the landscape of online relationships. Although grooming can occur online and offline, perpetrators often establish initial contact online before moving their relationships offline to commit sexual offences (Briggs, Simon & Simonsen, 2011). This type of online-to-offline meeting is the focus of this qualitative study, which aims to contribute to our understanding of grooming as a complex process using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of adolescent victims.

The growing need to raise awareness of internet-initiated sex crimes and implement safety guidelines has resulted in an expanding body of literature on online grooming. Given its delicate nature, incidences of online-facilitated child sexual abuse are likely to be underreported by victims who are reluctant or embarrassed to disclose their experiences (Schulz, Bergen, Schuhmann, Hoyer & Santtila, 2016). The potential for abuse remains a serious concern for adolescents and should not be overlooked. The victim age profile spans important developmental shifts, potentially resulting in negative outcomes such as mental health disorders and high levels of substance use (Mitchell, Ybarra & Finkelhor, 2007). Girls are twice as likely than boys to exhibit depressive symptomology afterward experiencing unwanted sexual solicitation (Zetterstrom Dahlqvist & Gillander Gadin, 2018) and research findings report a reciprocal relationship between depression among minors and online sexual solicitations and interactions with adults (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018). The rate of developing post-traumatic stress disorder after experiencing unwanted online solicitation is as high as 57.8%, reports Donmez & Soylu (2019).

1.2 Adolescent victims of online grooming

This research study uses the term 'adolescence' in reference to the World Health Organisation's (2010) classification of ages ranging from 10-19 years. Marked by processes of identity formation, self-expression and solidifying peer group memberships (Meeus, 2011), adolescence as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood presents heightened risks of grooming and unwanted sexual solicitations. Using the internet to form close relationships and satisfy their sexual curiosities, young people often engage in online risk-taking behaviours, such as the posting of images of a sexual nature function for attention-seeking and affirmation (Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson & Svedin, 2016). Understanding adolescents' online risk-taking behaviours is integral to addressing online grooming but given the heterogeneity of victim profiles, there is evidence to suggest that this is insufficient to fully comprehend the grooming process. As Wolak et al. (2008) asserts, the vulnerabilities to online grooming cannot be attributed to either adolescents' naivete about the internet or ignorance about sex. Research into adolescent perception of online safety has demonstrated an awareness of risks when interacting with strangers online (De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck 2006), yet young people still fall victim to grooming. Groenestein, Baas, van Deursen & de

Jong's (2018) survey of 102 female adolescents in the Netherlands found that the majority of participants consider themselves invulnerable to online solicitations. They employ a number of strategies to assess online risks and screen profiles of strangers or unknown persons by paying attention to language and content cues. However, when tested on their ability to differentiate between peers and adults with sexual intentions in online interactions, more than half overestimated their ability to detect risk as only 43% made accurate assessments (Groenestein et al., 2018).

Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech (2013b) used an ecological model as a lens to conceptualise risk, resilience and protective factors that contribute to a young person's vulnerabilities to grooming. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights the importance of context and considers biological, psychological and social factors against various environments in which a child is enmeshed. A child's development is impacted by a diversity of influences from his or her immediate environment including family, friends and schooling, the wider societal and cultural values, and the interactions of these ecosystems. Within this ecological model of human development, Bronfenbrenner also emphasised a fifth ecosystem called the chronosystem. This is a temporal dimension of events occurring over time that are normative, naturally occurring phases in lifespan development such as adolescence, and non-normative, such as the unexpected loss of a parent. Though intrapersonal factors like self-esteem and psychological difficulties are important determinants, family factors such as single parent or reconstituted families most significantly increase a young person's vulnerability, further exacerbated by a lack of parental monitoring over internet use (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014a). The dynamic interplay of the offline and online worlds must also be considered as their interactions have an immense influence on a young person's behaviours and degree of risk taking. It is therefore important to recognise the complex layers of influences and the accumulation of risk factors over time as contributors to a young person’s vulnerabilities.

Young people who met new online contacts offline, whether ‘friends of friends’ or ‘complete strangers’, reportedly scored high on measures of self-efficacy and sensation seeking (Barbovschi, 2013). These psychological constructs help to explain at an individual level why adolescents might pursue what they perceive as thrilling experiences with adults, but it is not well understood what sustains these online relationships or how they progress to offline meetings.

Despite recognising the illegality of the relationship, minors under the age of 16 who engaged in sexual relations with adults at least two years older were reportedly motivated by either physical attraction and pleasure seeking, or a need for emotional support fulfilled by the older person (Tener, 2020). Recent findings from Wood & Wheatcroft (2020) showed that young people aged 18-23 also lacked knowledge about the grooming process. They entered into relationships with groomers unsuspecting of the deception and manipulation tactics used, often viewing the relationship as consensual rather than abusive. This was observed in Whittle et al.’s (2015) dyadic study of the dynamics in grooming relationships, in which victims as young as 12-14 years old experienced romantic feelings that were not shared by the much-older offenders, aged 20-49. Although limited to only three pairs of offender-victims, the degree of divergence in how the relationships were perceived supports the notion that grooming is a multifaceted experience. Challenges to understanding this phenomenon is further complicated as grooming techniques, such as regular or intense contact, sexualisation, kindness and flattery, draw parallels with relationship development in adolescence (Whittle Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014b). This makes preventative strategies difficult to implement when warning signs of grooming are subtle.

1.3 Current study

Adolescents play an active role in negotiating their online experiences. This underscores a need to look critically at how the young people navigated the grooming process and acknowledge their sense of agency and decision-making throughout the relationship. It warrants further exploration into the lived experiences of adolescents who met with adults offline and the psychological shifts that occurred throughout this process. This study seeks to expand on the knowledge of online grooming by analysing a subset of data from the Risk-taking Online Behaviour Empowerment through Research and Training (ROBERT) Project. The analysis of interviews from victims is a departure from previous research that relied on interviews with offenders and offers the perspective of victims that has been scant in the literature (Bryce, 2010; Whittle et al., 2014a). Unlike quantitative surveys and cross-sectional data captured from a single time point, the first-hand accounts of the victims' experiences offer valuable insight into the quality of the relationships and chronological development of the grooming process. The focus here remains only on cases in which adolescents first developed an online relationship with an adult perpetrator that later resulted in sexual abuse offline. As this area is not heavily researched, this exploratory study will adopt IPA as the method of analysis to gain a richer perspective on the meaning-making of the grooming process, which is unique in its examination of the young person's motivations, mindset and psychological needs throughout the journey of their online-to-offline experiences.

2. Method

2.1 Design

Co-funded by the EU Safer Internet Programme from 2010-2012, ROBERT was a two-year project aimed at improving the safety of online interactions for children and young people. The project involved participation and data collection in Sweden, UK, Germany, Italy, Denmark and Russia. Institutional ethical approval was granted from the Research

Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh and Linköping University for the original ROBERT study, and subsequently from the University of Edinburgh for this study’s secondary data analysis (See Appendix). Upon receiving ethics approval, six data sets of interviews that met the inclusion criteria were selected for an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). In line with the idiographic approach of IPA, the sample size of six allowed for a focus on depth instead of breath to study the phenomenon in question for this homogenous sample - in this case, adolescents with the shared experience of meeting adult perpetrators offline.

As an analytic method best suited to looking at the lived experience (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005), IPA subscribes to the theoretical framework of hermeneutic, or interpretative, phenomenology. Fundamental to Heidegger’s (1962) philosophy of hermeneutics is the understanding of the individual’s “relatedness to the world” through the meanings they make. Underpinning this hermeneutic approach is the assumption that the researcher’s own knowledge and experience are valuable guides in the interpretative process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For this reason, personal reflexivity plays a crucial role in the analytic process. Mindful of any biases or preconceptions that may impact findings, personal beliefs, attitudes, and relevant experiences of the researcher were noted throughout the entirety of the research journey. Thus, the IPA approach is a dynamic process on the researcher’s part to find a balance between “taking the insider’s perspective” while offering an interpretative account of the observations. This two-way analysis is referred to as the double hermeneutic approach; essentially, “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith, 2015).

2.2 Sample and Data

The inclusion criteria for ROBERT were adolescents aged 12-18 of either gender who have been 1) subjected to: online contact leading to sexual abuse offline; offline sexual abuse leading to online distribution of images; or online contact leading to online abuse and 2) engaged in a helping or therapeutic relationship currently or within the last two years at the time of recruitment. For the purposes of this study, a subset of ROBERT data was extracted for analysis from cases that only involved offline meetings with adult perpetrators. The six participants were aged 11-16 during the time of the abuse when the offline meetings occurred, but were aged 14-21 at the time of the interviews. Four were females and two were males from UK and Denmark. All the perpetrators involved were males in their early twenties up to mid-thirties in age. Conducted by child protection professionals and therapists, the interviews were 60-90 minutes long and semi-structured in nature, guided by sample questions but flexible in manner.

All interview data was anonymised and no personal information was made available to the researcher outside of what was explicitly mentioned in the interviews. Participants’ names were replaced with alphabet coding A-F (Abbie, Bonnie, Cath, Debra, Euan, Fred) to ensure confidentiality and prohibit identification of the participants in the final presentation of the results. Data was accessed and stored via a secure site to ensure security, then deleted upon completion of the project.

2.3 Analysis

The analysis began first by immersion into the data, which was the pre-existing set of semi-structured interviews transcribed verbatim. No audio recordings of the interviews were available. Prior to importing the data into NVivo software for analysis, a process of ‘free coding’ was conducted. This was a reading of the interviews to enable free flowing thoughts and the jotting down of first impressions alongside observations of personal reflexivity. A re-reading of the data was repeated again in NVivo, this time using the software for coding as each individual transcript was dissected and analysed line-by-line to identify any commonalities recorded as ‘nodes’. With overlapping observations that were descriptive, conceptual and linguistic in nature, the highlighted extracts sometimes fell under multiple nodes. Attention was paid to the content shared and the language used to communicate these experiences, such as metaphorical expressions, frequently used terms and those that carried emotional weight. The purpose of the coding was to break down or "condense the data" into manageable chunks, ultimately capturing the "core essences" of each lived experience (Alase, 2017) to come back to for further analysis.

The next phase of the inductive process required moving into a higher level of analysis, while still remaining grounded in the data. Psychological concepts started to emerge via a deeper, even interrogative, way of interpretation (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008), rather than accepting at a descriptive level what the participants revealed.

Table 1

Sample extract

Transcript	Notes
Yeah. But the more we spoke and the more we discussed things, the more attractive he became. And then that's what, and then after him saying he seen me, and obviously saying he thought I was cute, it kind of gives you a bit more confidence and you think, mm, and I thought it would be easy. I thought, well I know him, he seemed okay at the time, you know. He was all right, we got on, he was fun and so I just thought, why not?	Attraction not immediate, developed gradually over conversations Took time to build relationship Perp's compliment boosted confidence, turning point? Easy to navigate - romantically? Certain he 'knows' him – trusting Listing reasons, benefits Compatible Not aware of risks Why not… miss this potential opportunity?

The analysis remained within a single interview, moving from the transcript to working with the notes to identify emerging themes and working in an iterative manner that is typical of IPA. This focus on the individual rather than the general exemplified the idiographic nature of IPA that demands a thorough probing into the uniqueness of each experience (Smith & Eatough, 2019). This process, while methodical and systematic, also allowed creativity and flexibility on the researcher's part to engage in analysis of the meanings the participants assigned to their experiences. In line with a contextualist approach of IPA (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), it was insufficient to simply understand the experience of 'what happened' when adolescents met adult perpetrators without exploring 'how' the experiences evolved.

Collating the nodes in NVivo helped to organise the themes first into clusters before grouping them into subordinate themes. The most laborious stage in the analysis, this required moving back and forth in the data set to re-label or re-work themes several times. The patterns identified across the data reflected how the individual experiences related to one another, although their perspectives were not always convergent, hence connections between themes were based on similarities as well as differences. The effective use of mind maps visually guided the formation of a structure so that the narrative findings were developed upon a framework of overarching themes with further subthemes. The researcher was in frequent dialogue with the project advisor to discuss the themes as a kind of audit to ensure transparency. Finally, the findings were written up theme by theme to provide an interpretative commentary on the insights generated and a demonstration of analysis at multiple levels. The narrative account features extracts from the data as a way to 'retain the voice of the participants' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) while reflecting the dual interpretation process. This IPA of secondary data prohibited any means to cross-validate or triangulate our understanding of the participant's lived experiences.

3. Results

Four superordinate themes emerged from the IPA, each with three subordinate themes (Table 2):

Table 2

Identified themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Varied Interpretations of Risks	Low perceived risk of harm Risk-taking reframed as opportunities Risk of getting caught
Taking Control	Concealment & disclosure Exercising sexual agency Building trust
Seeking Security & Validation	Lacking a strong sense of self Genuine connections & support Therapeutic process of talking
Shifts in Perspective	Victimhood & blame View of self Online behaviours

3.1 Varied Interpretations of Risks

Participants were not ignorant to the risks of speaking to someone who they had met on the internet but their interpretations of risks, and the weight they carried, were varied.

3.1.1 Low perceived risk of harm. The adolescents expressed little awareness of the possibility they could come into physical harm or fall victim to a sexual predator. However, they acknowledged that it was risky to befriend a stranger online for fear of discrepancies in their online versus offline personas. As Abbie explained, "Yeah, quite a lot of them we should be worried about. But the thing is, you don't really know. Someone might seem like really weird, but they could just be normal. You can't tell at all." Yet such concerns were not taken seriously as they ultimately did not deter participants from meeting offline. Abbie's description of the man she met offline, "…he was just like a genuinely nice guy probably a bit shy and stuff, but there wasn't anything that wrong with him", reflects the conviction she held about his character and the trust in her own judgment of him.

Participants also seemed oblivious to the possibility that the perpetrator could have used fake photos and showed little awareness of intentional deceit. Fred reflected, "Looking back I was so stupid. I didn't think any of that at the time. I just thought, well his pictures are there so obviously I know what he looks like."

3.1.2 Risk-taking reframed as opportunities. The decision to continue developing a relationship with the groomer was reframed by adolescents as an opportunity rather than a risk. This manifested in different forms, such as opportunities for friendships, "to meet someone new" and "with somebody I could actually talk together with", or for sexual experimentation, as was the case for Fred who referred to his online relationship "as a learning curve". In contrast, Bonnie's running away from home to meet with a second perpetrator - despite experiencing a violent sexual assault with a prior groomer - was perceived as less of a risk and justified as more of an opportunity to escape her troubles in the real world "just to get away" from all the pressure "building up in [my] head like a big air bubble".

Despite these variations of perceived opportunities, their rationalisation speaks to their conscious weighing of benefits as they considered the development of their online relationship and the end goal that would benefit them.

3.1.3 Risk of getting caught. The risk of having their relationship discovered carried a lot of weight for the young people, who were mindful that their online behaviours would raise concerns from parents or ridicule from friends. Participants considered risks in terms of the disappointment and punishment that may be doled out by parents. Cath recounted her perpetrator's material incentives to engage in sex: "He said you'll get a lot of clothes, and I just – no, clothes aren't going to come from nowhere. My parents would just like.. like did you nick them." This suggests that she refused not because she was distrusting of or uncomfortable with him, but to avoid detection by her parents and "'Cos I can't hack all the questions."

It was evident in all accounts that there was a degree of apprehension, if not fear of consequences, about their parents finding out about their online correspondence with an adult. This was something Abbie tried to avoid at all costs, even when the relationship had escalated to police involvement: "But my mum was there as well, which was like, obviously I wasn't going to tell the truth if she was there."

3.2 Taking Control

Aside from considering the risks, the participants attempted to exercise control in negotiating their relationships with the adult perpetrator through proactive and reactive means.

3.2.1 Concealment & disclosure. Even without the perpetrator's explicit instructions, many participants actively concealed the relationship from parents. Taking such steps to avoid detection, unfortunately, worked in favour for the groomers as it ensured that they kept their relationship a secret. Lying was a pervasive theme throughout, in terms of the adolescents' attempts at concealing their relationships as well as a means to pursue what they wanted online. For example, Fred was well aware that websites prohibited underage use, "…but there's many ways round it… I would lie and people knew how old I was." Abbie emphasised the amount of lying on her part about her age, rather than the perpetrator's, admitting "…there's a whole lot of lying" that occurs online and offline as well, "…like lying to your family about what you're spending your time doing, where you actually went…"

Several participants, at some point, decided to disclose the truth to their parents and in this way, became agents in their own rescue. Euan alerted his father to contact the authorities and fetch him from the perpetrator's home after the assault, though with some trepidation: "Because I was afraid about what they would think about me… And what would happen next. I kept thinking that if they could get me out of there, it would be – it would be worth it." Debra, too, was fearful to disclose the truth about her secret 'boyfriend' to her parents before it escalated to any sexual harm, "Telling them about it was a very difficult process to go through", but ultimately it brought her relief.

3.2.2 Exercising sexual agency. Participants projected a display of sexual agency while navigating their relationship with the perpetrator. Fred demonstrated an ability to make sexual choices and engage in sexual activities at his own pace. He said:

> And we spoke about sex and things like that. And I was coming away, and I felt quite happy because, you know, nothing was tried on. I didn't feel pressure to do anything. So I carried on talking to him and we met up again where things did happen…we did a few sexual things but it wasn't anything in-depth, it was just like oral and foreplay and stuff like that. And then that went fine.

This sense of autonomy was also evident in Abbie who, by her account, proactively initiated sex with her perpetrator: "I was like 'Oh do you have a condom?' He was like 'No, I thought you didn't want to have sex.' Oh I do. So it wasn't like…". She insisted that all sexual activity was uncoerced and happened at her own accord.

Participants not only pursued sexual experiences, but also exhibited agency in declining unwanted sexual activity. Debra refused to tolerate 'all of the sexual things' he wanted to do with her and decided to end their relationship.

3.2.3 Building trust. The adolescents expressed having developed a degree of trust in the perpetrator, which enabled their relationship to progress to offline meetings. This was a way for young people to enforce the belief that they were in control and that the online friendship was based on a genuine connection. Fred said, "I think, because we'd spoken for a good few months, you do kind of build an online relationship… So you get trusting them online." Participants used the duration of their online correspondence as a barometer of trust, although in hindsight this assessment was flawed. Bonnie realised, "It really hurt – feeling deceived like that. Thinking that it was a person you could trust after the first month."

The participants were quick to call new online contacts 'friends' but their trust was misplaced. Euan had grown close to an online acquaintance whom he considered a "super good friend". He equated his status as an adult with "like you had another parent" and extended his trust in him as a confidant. He explained, "I had a few problems at home at the time, I suppose you can say, which he was able to help me with. So through him I suddenly met Peter, who assaulted me. I don't really know how he got to know him." By association, this person already seemed trustworthy to Euan and therefore did not involve an extensive relationship development prior to the offline meeting: "So I wrote a little together with him – and then one day we agreed to meet."

3.3 Seeking Security & Validation

This theme captures the adolescents' fundamental need for security and validation, which was essentially tied to a weak sense of self and sought after in different avenues.

3.3.1 Lacking a strong sense of self. Participants cited a number of reasons for their heightened internet use. Being online offered a reprieve from the stressors of life, for instance bullying at school or issues at home. Engaging with others on the internet provided Bonnie "a place where I could just be me" and for Abbie an outlet during a time when she was uncertain about her identity transitioning into adolescence: "…because the thing is, you're not a child anymore, but you're not an adult, and you want to be like a teenager and stuff."

The young people had in common a lack of confidence and a struggle to find a sense of self. For Fred, the internet allowed him to solidify his sexual identity. He reflected, "…and I think at the time I was thinking, oh they like me, and I'm liking them, so I must be gay." Outwardly they might have expressed an intrigue and curiosity about sex, but a deeper analysis pointed to underlying feelings of insecurity and low self-worth, which Cath described concisely, “I only got affirmation that I was somebody… No, not that I was pretty, but that I was something at all. I already thought I was worthless.” Whatever their motivations, their online relationship fulfilled a sense of lack they felt in their offline worlds. The perpetrator instilled feelings of security and validation, misleading one participant into thinking that “he liked me for the person I was.”

3.3.2 Genuine connections & support. Participants sought out genuine connections with people they trusted in all areas of their lives, both offline and online. This was a common thread throughout and illustrates the adolescents' intrinsic need for security. The importance of fostering authentic connections was apparent not only in their relationship with the perpetrator, but also in their family and social networks. Bonnie explained:

> I don't feel as though they should know so many things – uh..
> I would rather talk about with other people other than my parents…
> These days, I talk with my dog or my teddy bear – or at least I use my teddy bear as a friend.

Having someone to turn to for support was vital, but she struggled to connect with the right people. She elaborated, “I don't feel as though I trust people… I mean, if I'm not sure…can't figure out where they are in relation to me...”, which speaks to her feelings of insecurity.

It was equally crucial for young people to receive the security and validation in the aftermath of the assault when they feel particularly vulnerable, especially when receiving psychological treatment. The young people wanted to be truly seen and heard by people who genuinely supported them. Abbie complained that her counsellor “felt superficial” during sessions that were not “emotion-based”, who “didn't really understand anything, or want to understand it.” In contrast, Fred praised the qualities of his therapists who enabled him to talk freely, “So I suppose yeah, if people are a lot more realistic like they were, and professional and honest as how it was done; it was more like talking to a family friend… you should feel that they cared…they're feeling my pain, they understand my pain."

3.3.2 Therapeutic process of talking. Talking played an integral role in the participants' sense-making of their offline experiences with the perpetrator but moreover, it was a therapeutic process that allowed them to regain a feeling of security and a stronger sense of self. They recognised that the assault had affected their mental health and emotional instability, using phrases like "stupid feelings" and "these images in my mind and that kind of thing" to express their psychological struggles.

In being pressured to talk about it, which for Debra was "most basic thing in terms of moving on", most participants agreed that psychotherapy had been beneficial to them despite an initial resistance to talk about their experiences. Fred attributed his ability to overcome his traumatic experience by opening up to his therapists and expressed his gratitude, "And I was so glad I did because if it wasn't for them I wouldn't be as confident as I am now really..."

This introspection enabled participants to unearth knowledge about themselves that would have otherwise remained buried. Talking therapy validated Bonnie's experience and allowed her to realise the deliberate scheming by the groomer: "At least that's what I was able to figure out when I talk about it and kind of got it out in the open somehow or another."

3.4 Shifts in Perspective

Their changes in perception and psychological shifts reveal some of the lessons they learned from their online-to-offline experiences.

3.4.1 Victimhood & blame. All offline encounters resulted in some of form of sexual contact between the adolescent and the perpetrator. The varied contexts in which the offline incidences occurred elicited a spectrum of responses including shock, sadness and fear, but most commonly self-blame and various expressions of guilt. In a state of confusion after his violent assault, Fred questioned, "Well did I deserve that? Did I do something to make it happen?" In contrast, Cath was more convinced of her culpability and shouldered the blame when her mum discovered she had been raped. She felt guilty for betraying the perpetrator's trust in her to keep the assault a secret. She was the outlier who maintained her guilt throughout, saying, "I really thought it was my fault. I still think it is my fault."

All other participants experienced a shift in perspective, having emotionally processed their experiences to ultimately free themselves of self-blame. Euan, when asked if he blamed himself, attributed this insight to his maturity, "I did in the beginning. But I'm a little older now and I can see how he was the one who did something that he shouldn't have." This acknowledgement of the perpetrator's wrongdoing was not shared by all, however. Some participants also shifted in their perspectives to finally acknowledge the inappropriateness and illegality of their relationships, yet did not assign blame to their perpetrators. Debra adopted a misguided stance: "I knew – it wasn't as though he wanted to hurt me – it was because he had feelings for me." Without acknowledging the perpetrator's responsibility or the true nature of the abuse, the participants perceived varying degrees of victimhood.

3.4.2 View of self. There was a clear delineation between the self 'now' versus 'then' as the participants reflected upon the naivete of their younger selves. For example, the old Bonnie who used to engage in self-harm matured into someone emotionally intelligent. In retrospect, her running away from home to meet the adult perpetrator was an obvious cry for help: "…when I think back – it's always easy to figure out afterwards." This clarity in hindsight elucidated the young peoples' inexperience as children. When participants described the targets preyed upon by online predators, phrases like "the tricking of a 12-year old boy", "a little, solid, smart girl", or "a curious little child who had gone along with it" expresses almost a lamenting tone about the loss of innocence.

This notion of self-discovery leading to increased confidence and a renewed sense of self was evident in all participants except Cath. Again an outlier, she was neither able to recognise the damage inflicted on her by her perpetrator nor learn from her experience, as she responded, “What, what can who learn?” She exhibited little self-growth and struggled to engage in or see the benefits of therapy. Her behavioural response to the assault, which she said was “sleeping with people at parties and stuff”, was a stark contrast to others like Abbie who has learned the value of self-love and the discovery that “I'm good enough.” Cath demonstrated relatively little agency throughout her relationship with the perpetrator - as if it were relinquished to him - in a telling remark, “And I was already hooked on him and then it wasn't possible to like break off… It didn't mean you wanted to just because you went there yourself.”

3.4.3 Online behaviours. What was once seen as a platform for opportunities to forge exciting new online relationships has since shifted to a perception that the “internet is a vicious place”. Participants were keenly aware of their past oblivion to online ‘stranger danger’. Abbie said, “When you're that young, you don't realise, like Oh my God, that's so bad.” It was clear to them that their youth made them accessible targets for online “perverts” looking for sex: “…it's really sickening because that picture attracted more people ‘cos I looked younger.”

Fred also realised the ambiguous nature of online interactions, saying that it was easy to misinterpret others' behaviours “so you can take things the way you want to take them”, thus constructing a false reality. Were it not for the flirting that was done so easily behind a screen, Fred does not believe he would have allowed this relationship to develop in real life.

4. Discussion

The identified themes encapsulate the adolescents' decision-making and motivations as they navigated an online-to-offline relationship with the perpetrator, supporting the view that the relationship was developed during a process of two-way socialisation. The findings illuminated how the adolescents negotiated a relationship that presented potential risks and benefits, as they exercised agency that in some way facilitated - even if not proactively - the relationship development. As young people usually enter into relationships with the perpetrator unaware of their grooming intentions (Whittle, 2015), a deliberate decision was made to avoid framing the research question around 'the grooming process' in order to deliver an analysis more aligned with the victim's perspective.

The superordinate theme 'Varied interpretations of risk' is supported by an earlier study on young adult perceptions of internet communications with similar findings. Wood & Wheatcroft (2020) found that young people acknowledged the risk of meeting a stranger offline, but perceived limited risks of deception and only realised their risk-taking behaviours through maturity. The same study, which was administered to participants aged 18-23, also found that young people have a general awareness of grooming as a concept but lack a clear understanding of the manipulative tactics employed in the process. As the ROBERT dataset was gathered in 2012, it stands to reason that the participants were likely to be even less informed about grooming as compared to those surveyed in Wood & Wheatcroft's 2020 study. That this IPA study was conducted on a younger age group with actual victims of online grooming further substantiates these findings of ignorance around the risks of grooming.

Despite a common knowledge of 'stranger danger', the participants of this IPA study did not perceive the perpetrator as a complete stranger, having invested time to build an online friendship rather than meeting offline on impulse. In developing trust in the perpetrator and exercising sexual agency, their feelings of control reduced their vigilance against manipulation tactics, thus making it challenging for the young person to identify even if they had any previous knowledge of online grooming. They trusted their own judgements about the perpetrator as someone reliable, or at the very least, someone they did not perceive as threatening. They displayed a semblance of control as they engaged in risk-taking behaviours that were reframed as opportunities. Existing studies on adolescent risk-taking indeed found that those who engaged in risky behaviours perceived greater benefits compared with those who did not take risks (Parsons, Siegel & Cousins, 1997). It is uncertain, however, if the participants of this IPA reflected an accurate assessment of their perceived risks and benefits at the time, or merely the effects of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and self-justifications *after* their negative offline meetings.

The theme 'Seeking Security and Validation' reflects the participants' attempts to address feelings of inadequacy, which they believed the relationship with the perpetrator could fulfil. Low self-worth impacts one's perceived sense of self (Evenson, 2006) and is associated with poorer mental health (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma & De Vries, 2004). This manifested in the participants as individual vulnerabilities that, for some, were compounded by external factors such as family difficulties or bullying at school. Some participants had a history of self-harm and eating disorders predating their online-to-offline encounter with the perpetrator, while others engaged in self-harm and suicidal ideation afterwards as maladaptive coping strategies. This suggests a bidirectional association between mental health and grooming; that is, poorer mental health leads to greater risks of grooming, and grooming negatively impacted their mental health and psychological wellbeing. This correlation is congruous with Whittle's (2013) previous findings on abuse impact and the level of vulnerability prior to the onset of grooming.

Although an abundance of research documents the negative repercussions of sexual abuse (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2017), the participants worked through their feelings of self-blame and shame so commonly reported by sexual abuse victims (Feiring & Cleland, 2007), due in part to a good therapeutic relationship. Their shifts in perspectives demonstrated success in processing their difficult emotions to arrive at a state of positive wellbeing, even for those who were traumatised and suffered from flashbacks. This finding stresses the importance of talking therapy and the need for survivors to understand they were not at fault - but it also raises another point of consideration. Revelations of their abuse was not as clear cut to all participants. Abbie and Debra recognised that it was unlawful for an adult to begin a relationship with them as minors, but their denial of the perpetrator's manipulation or ulterior motives might lead them to believe they were victims of circumstances rather than grooming. Although their shifts in perspective demonstrated clear self-development and growth, the fact that there were no perceived feelings of abuse calls into question their full comprehension of grooming. Whittle et al. (2014a) noted that acknowledgement of grooming as a process is lacking in the literature, which often underemphasises the development leading up to abuse. This IPA study further supports the notion that victims may not realise the extent of the manipulation that underlies grooming, a concept seemingly foreign to the participants at the outset of their relationship.

4.1 Limitations

Due to IPA's commitment to the idiographic, this study is inherently limited to a small sample size allowing for a deeper analysis of the individual's subjective experience. This study's sample size of six strikes a balance between Kloess, Larkin, Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis' (2019) IPA examination of offender perspectives in two case studies and Whittle et al.'s (2014b) thematic analysis of eight young victims' experiences with online grooming.

The small sample size inevitably limits generalisability of findings but still offers valuable contribution to our understanding of grooming as a complex phenomenon. Data collection from victims of online grooming is difficult to collect, thus the rarity of this study in capturing the victim's voices adds to the currently small number of studies on the grooming process and reinforces its individualised nature.

Finally, it must be stressed that the data was collected in 2012 when knowledge of grooming was less proliferate. Over the last decade, adolescents' understanding of technological knowledge has increased significantly, alongside a flourish of social media platforms offering more opportunities for online connections. There is now greater public awareness about the realities of online grooming, which has helped to dispel outdated misconceptions about sexual predators. Yet, it seems that recent findings such as those by Tener (2020) and Wood & Woodcraft (2020) suggest the need for more nuanced understanding.

4.2 Future research and implications

The importance of talking as an outlet for the young people has implications on a preventive and therapeutic level. Given that several participants expressed a reluctance to disclose personal issues with parents, perhaps more emphasis can be placed on peer mediation. Pasquier, Simoes & Kreden's (2012) study comparing agents of mediation in online safety found that 62% of children talked to someone after a negative offline encounter with an online contact, and more importantly, they turned first to their peers before any other family member regardless of the type of online risk. In this digital age where young people consider themselves adept at using technology (Shifflet-Chila, Harold, Fitton & Ahmedani, 2016), parental guidance is crucial but also delicate to navigate without being perceived as unnecessary interference or a threat to an adolescent's increasing autonomy. In addition to being sources of comfort for adolescents after unpleasant online experiences, peers can also be potential agents of safety to intervene before online relationships move offline. Future research should be developed in this area to explore how best to leverage the positive influences of peer mediation, while recognising the detrimental peer pressures on online risk-taking (Baumgartner, Valkenburg & Peter, 2010).

The need for security and validation was one of the prominent themes, which may have implications on practice considerations in the aftermath of a sexual assault. It is vital that police procedures adopt an trauma-informed approach to ensure that the victim's sense of security is not threatened during this period of extreme vulnerability. The environment in which police interviews are conducted must also be considered, including parental participation. For some victims, this could be a source of comfort. For others like Abbie, who refused to "tell the truth" in her mum's presence, this might add to the victims' discomfort and prevent them from disclosing pertinent information. A male participant in the study also highlighted the negative attitudes he received from police personnel and the stigma towards his sexual orientation. Although gender analysis was not conducted in this study, it would be interesting to further explore how this impacted their experiences.

It is worth noting that despite being an anomaly, Cath also expressed her lack of agency and an inability to extricate herself from the relationship with the perpetrator. This was not only emotional but physical as well. Although the participants willingly agreed to meet perpetrators offline, they ultimately found themselves in compromising and inescapable situations, for example, being trapped in the perpetrator's home or rendered particularly vulnerable due to alcohol intoxication. This indicates the need for further research on identifying signs of situational vulnerabilities, which will help establish safer practices for adolescents meeting online contacts offline.

Altogether, these findings reinforce the need to strengthen young people's knowledge on grooming with clearly defined risks. It needs to be emphasised that, unlike the overt nature of sexual solicitations, manipulation tactics can be obscured by the adolescent's misguided perceptions of online friendships. Given the confluence of increasing agency and sexual curiosity as evident in the participants' accounts, adolescents should be encouraged to assert their agency in navigating online friendships, but only when equipped with accurate knowledge about online grooming. Safety guidelines must involve realistic scenarios to highlight the subtleties of grooming tactics and harmful behaviours that may not be readily perceived as abuse. Parents, policy makers and educators need to rectify misconceptions of risk in order to establish effective preventative measures, while communicating the true benefits and educational purposes of internet use. According to the latest EU Kids Online Survey (Smahel et al., 2020), one in six children surveyed experienced positive outcomes from offline meetings with an online contact. Though the survey provided no age specifications of these online contacts, the majority of participants reported “feeling happy” after the meetings. Future research could further examine the nature of these meetings in relation to their positive outcomes. Nevertheless, it is important to communicate the legitimate concerns about adult contacts without ignoring the opportunities to befriend peers in their own age group.

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