2.2 Victim's Individual Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities to Sexual Online Grooming

Maria Ioannou[1] *& John Synnott*[1]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Grooming involves a set of actions, ranging from flattery to intimidation, by an individual in order to gain access to another individual. Research has identified a number of risk factors that make an individual more vulnerable to this process. These include: age, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, personality and personal traits, risky and sexual behaviour, offline vulnerability, time spent online. These risk factors are explored in detail in the chapter below with particular emphasis on sexual online grooming.

Keywords: sexual online grooming, risk factors, vulnerability, victims, review

Introduction

Grooming has been defined in the UK by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) as: "when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or trafficking. Children and young people can be groomed online or face-to-face, by a stranger or by someone they know – for example a family member, friend or professional. Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age. Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed or that what has happened is abuse" (Reeves et al., 2017).

Grooming involves a specific set of steps that an offender employs with the ultimate goal being gaining access to the individual (Black et al., 2015). Offenders will use a variety of strategies ranging from flattery to intimidation in order to achieve their goal. In order to understand offending behaviour, research on criminal narratives has had some success across other crime types (Ioannou et al., 2015; Ioannou et al., 2015; Ioannou, et al., 2017; Yaneva et al., 2018; Ioannou et al., 2018; Ioannou et al., 2018). This approach, specifically examining the "victim roles model", which differentiates between offending styles through the premise that all sexual and violent crimes are an interpersonal transaction between the offender and victim, was applied to grooming characteristics of 103 victims targeted online and offline (Ioannou et al., 2018). The research found support for the model and in general consistency across both groups for grooming characteristics where victims were assigned the role of vehicle, person or object. The role that the offender assigns to the victim is expressed through the control or characteristics of the transaction during the offence commission.

Research conducted by the Office of Communications in the UK (OFCOM, 2016), examining the nature of access and use of the Internet among a national sample of children aged five to 15, showed that the vast majority of children use the Internet, with over 88% having access to the Internet at home. Furthermore, the average 16- to 24-year-old spends just under nine hours a day with online media and communications. The increased use of the Internet has generated a virtual platform for sexual online grooming (SOG) and has afforded many opportunities to sexual offenders (McManus et al., 2016). The risk of SOG has increased with the increased access of young people to the Internet and social network sites (SNS; Schoeps et al., 2020) and with the rise of messaging apps like 'WhatsApp' and image sharing apps, like Snapchat and Instagram, adding the fact that it is socially acceptable for individuals to form friendly and intimate relationships with strangers online (Visser et al., 2013). It becomes apparent that many young people may be unknowingly forming bonds and sharing personal information with individuals whose goal is to exploit them sexually (Lenhart et al., 2010). Even as far back as 2001, research showed that approximately one in five youth were being solicited for sex online annually (Mitchell et al., 2001). In 2010, there were more than 700,000 registered online sex offenders in the United States alone (Black et al., 2015). In Europe, around 15% of adolescents indicated to have received a sexual message online (Livingstone et al., 2011). Whittle et al. (2014) found that 33% of 354 13- and 14-year-olds reported having been approached sexually online. As such, online activities, such as sexting, grooming, distribution of sexual imagery, child sexual abuse and so on, have become a serious concern for parents, teachers, and mental health professionals (Graciela et al., 2015) especially as the impact on a young person's cognitive, emotional, academic, and psychological development can be severe (Young & Widom, 2014).

Risk factors and vulnerabilities

Predators will always seek out the easiest prey (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1999). Research has extensively demonstrated that there are specific risk factors and vulnerabilities that may determine individuals' risk and harm online (Dixon et al., 2009) and has concluded that vulnerability to abuse is due to a complex interplay of multiple risk factors (Whittle et al., 2013). Although most young people are resilient online (Webster et al., 2012), there is a proportion that are vulnerable, and this vulnerability is exploited by offenders when they select their victims. However, offenders do not agree on what vulnerability is necessary, as it may be understood in terms of gender, personality, sexual orientation, and so on (Sullivan, 2009). Talking about sex online, appearing needy or submissive or using sexualized usernames have been found to be important factors in the SOG process and have an impact on the decision-making of a groomer. Furthermore, groomers claimed that they were seeking for young people whose profiles were revealing certain information, including images (Quayle et al., 2012).

Whittle and colleagues (2013) argue that any child could be vulnerable to seduction by any adult online, by simply being accessible to potential online offenders. Not all children are at risk of online sexual abuse, as argued by Livingstone et al. (2013): "the identification of online risk does not imply that harm will follow, nor that all users are equally affected; rather, it is a probabilistic judgment regarding an outcome that depends on the particular and contingent interaction between user and environment" (p. 3). Such risk factors include both personal individual characteristics (such as age, gender, personality) and behavioural and situational characteristics (such as risky and sexual behaviour, amount of time someone spends online). The risk factors that have mainly been researched and been associated with SOG victimization are detailed below.

Age

Most research findings point towards adolescence being the period where children and young people are more at risk of being targeted for SOG (Bebbington et al., 2011; Qayle et al., 2012). Specifically, the most common victims of SOG have been found to be adolescents aged 13–17 years (Katz, 2013). A number of explanations have been put forward for why this may be the case, with the most obvious being level and intensity of communication as well as variety of access for adolescents (Livingstone et al., 2011). Another explanation is concerned with the fact that adolescence is a key developmental stage during which young people seek relationships, experiment sexually (Quayle et al., 2012), seek attention, validation, and acceptance (Dombrowski et al., 2004), take risks, and are impulsive (Pharo et al., 2011), which all may influence their online behaviour and make them vulnerable to SOG.

Gender

While boys use the Internet more than girls (Livingstone et al., 2011a), research has shown that girls are at a greater risk of being targeted online by groomers than boys (Bra, 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2010; Helweg-Larsen et al., 2011; Wolak et al., 2008). It has been found that 66% of girls and 34% of boys who used the Internet had been targeted for SOG (Finkelhor et al., 2000). Livingstone and Palmer (2012) found that the most common child victim of SOG was girls between the age of 13 and 14. When examining the reported data for SOG, Wolak and colleagues (2004) found that only 25% of children targeted online were male. Mitchell and colleagues (2011) showed that 82% of victims of Internet-initiated child sexual exploitation were females. This study though focused on the commercial exploitation of children, which may exclude cases involving boys and young men (Sunde, 2018), as female victims are found to be more common in commercial exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2011; Whittle et al., 2013).

However, Whittle and colleagues (2013) argue that despite the fact that females are more likely to be targeted online, males spend more time online, therefore increasing the likelihood of being targeted (Livingstone et al., 2011). Most of the findings above are based on self-reports, and it may be the case that males are less likely to report victimization due to a number of factors such as masculinity and societal stereotyping and stigma (O'Leary & Barber, 2008; Sunde, 2018). It has therefore been suggested that SOG of males is grossly under-reported (Aitken et al., 2018), especially when males are targeted in chat rooms catering for homosexual males making them more vulnerable due to the possible additional stigma attached to homosexuality (Teliti, 2015) as well as more likely to be exploited by offenders due to their possible sexual confusion and insecurities (Whittle et al., 2013; Wolak et al., 2004). A study found self-reported bisexuality or homosexuality to be the strongest risk factor in determining whether a boy or a girl will be approached online for sexual purposes (Suseg et al., 2008, cited in Whittle et al., 2013). Males, in general, find it difficult to comprehend that they are also at risk of becoming victims of online sexual abuse (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2012). Some of the children that took part in the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) research believe that girls are more at risk than boys, and therefore boys behave with greater disinhibition when online (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2012).

Disability

Although research has shown an association between disability and vulnerability to SOG (Brunnberg et al., 2012), studies have shown conflicting results in terms of Internet use by disabled and non-disabled young people. On the one hand, it has been reported that young people with disabilities may be using the Internet slightly less than their non-disabled peers (Livingstone & Bober, 2005), and on the other a study comparing physically disabled young people with non-disabled reported very similar levels and type of Internet use between the two groups (Lathouwers et al., 2009). Livingstone et al. (2011) found that 6% of their participants had a mental, physical, or other disability and reported that the vulnerability of disabled young people to SOG is mainly due to their association with meeting these online contacts in the real world and the fact that their ability to cope with the online environment is reduced as are the chances that they will confide to someone if they think something does not seem right online. Another explanation for disabled young people being vulnerable to SOG is the fact that they trust unfamiliar adults at a greater extent in relation to their non-disabled peers (Whittle et al., 2013) and may be less cautious allowing online groomers to persuade them that they are trustful (Sorenson & Bodanovskaya, 2012).

Socioeconomic status

The relationship between socioeconomic status and vulnerability to SOG is controversial. Some researchers have implied that youths from higher socioeconomic status are more likely to receive sexual approaches online due to the fact that they are more likely to have Internet access at home as well as devices that enable the access to the Internet (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012). As such they have more opportunities to engage with individuals online and their potential for risk increases (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). It has also been reported that due to their more extended contact and range of individuals they know they are vulnerable to online sexual solicitation (Livingstone et al., 2011). The same authors also reported that young people from low socioeconomic status are less likely to come across risks, but when they do, they feel more upset by them, contrary to those with higher socioeconomic status, who are more resilient. In contrast to previous research, Suseg and colleagues (2008) found that young people with financial difficulties were more likely to experience online sexual solicitations than young people with no financial difficulties. Finally, research has found that young people whose parents are well-educated are less likely to be victims of online grooming (Mitchell et al., 2007a, 2007b).

Personality and personal traits

Research has shown that a young person's offline social-psychological characteristics influence how they interact with others (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), therefore potentially making them more vulnerable to SOG and to groomers who look for targets. A number of personality and personal traits have been associated with the risk of SOG victimization. Low self-esteem, susceptibility to persuasion, emotional disturbances, and psychological disorders have all been associated with at risk individuals of SOG (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012; Webster et al., 2012).

Livingstone and colleagues (2011) found that young people with psychological problems encounter more risks online and are more affected by the negative experience. Mental health problems are consistently associated with vulnerability to SOG (De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006; Wolak et al., 2008). This can be explained by the fact that, for example, those young people with depression evidence use chat rooms and access the Internet longer (Sun et al., 2005). Therefore their vulnerability towards SOG is increased.

In regards to specific personality traits the following have been studied extensively in relation to child sexual abuse. Results showed that childhood sexual abuse was associated with personalities involving sensation seeking, unique hobbies, and non-conformity (Pickering et al., 2004). Contrary to this finding, research has found that offenders prefer quiet, withdrawn children (Conte et al., 1989) as opposed to extraverted, sensation-seeking young people (Whittle et al., 2013). Olson and colleagues (2007) propose that personality traits are a key category of risk that makes a young person vulnerable to SOG. These personality traits include low self-esteem and low self-confidence.

Furthermore, seeking attention, affection, and empathy from an adult, especially if children do not fulfil these needs at home, may make them more vulnerable (Lanning, 2005). In addition, emotional loneliness can be exploited by groomers (Webster et al., 2012). Lonely individuals lack resilience in the face of negative events (Whittle et al., 2013) and are more likely to have few friends and face problems with social interactions, therefore increasing their vulnerability (Wells & Mitchell, 2008). In order to compensate for their problems with social interactions, lonely or shy individuals use chat rooms more frequently to communicate with others (Peter et al., 2005), and this puts them at risk of SOG (Wolak et al., 2008). As far as introversion is concerned, related research on social anxiety has shown that socially anxious adolescents communicate online more often with strangers (Gross et al., 2002). Because the Internet offers anonymity as well as less auditory and visual cues, it allows introverted individuals to overcome social inhibitions more easily than in face-to-face communication (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This might be associated with the assumption that the introverted adolescents may, compared to extraverted adolescents, more often talk with strangers on the Internet.

Research has also shown that bullies may be at higher risk of falling victim to SOG (Wachs et al., 2015). The explanation for this may be that bullies report to start dating earlier, appear to be highly relationship-oriented and report more advanced pubertal development (Connolly et al., 2000). In addition, they tend to talk with strangers about sexual topics and are more willing to have sexual contacts and form relationships online (Wachs et al., 2015), all this being elements that favour the frequently applied strategy of online groomers who build rapport with their victims prior to sexual abuse (Whittle et al., 2013).

Risky and sexual behaviour

The Internet influences the manner in which people communicate and develop relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Because it offers anonymity, it can lead to both offenders and victims feeling less inhibited and cautious about sharing personal information. Anonymity also may result in individuals becoming more intimate in a shorter time period (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and revealing a lot of personal details about themselves to complete strangers (Jiang et al., 2011). Anonymity may also increase risk taking and sexual behaviour. Risk takers are more vulnerable to SOG through their risk-taking behaviour (Webster et al., 2012). Ybarra et al. (2007) identified a number of online risky behaviours that make young people susceptible to online victimization. Risk taking is also associated with low life satisfaction, which has been linked to victimization (Martin et al., 2008).

Recent studies have linked SOG with sexting (de Santisteban & Gamez-Guadix, 2018). Sexting has been defined as sharing sexually suggestive content (i.e., sexts) via Internet or smartphone (Morelli et al., 2020). According to the findings of previous studies, 10% of adolescents have sometimes sent material with sexual or intimate content to people whom they had met on Internet but not in person (Machimbarrena et al., 2018). Sexting has been associated with general victimization in relationships (Wood et al., 2015) as well as multiple online victimizations (Montiel et al., 2016) including their picture captured by pornographic networks (Ioannou et al., 2018). The relationship between sexting and SOG has been established in research as it has been shown that the more young people engage in sexting, the greater the risk of SOG (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019).

In a study that examined polyvictimization, five possible adolescent risks in the digital media (cyberbullying victimization, cyber dating abuse victimization, sexting, online grooming, and problematic Internet use) and their relationship were explored (Machimbarrena et al., 2018) as research has shown that victimization in one context can make youth vulnerable to other types of victimization and thus extend their victim status over time. According to the "polyvictimization theory" (Finkelhor et al., 2007), victimization often does not occur in isolation but is frequently followed by other forms of abuse. In this study a relationship was found between cyberbullying and grooming victimization as well as SOG and sexting. A profile of sexual risk emerged from the study, which demonstrated a relationship between sexting and SOG.

One factor that relates to sexting is disinhibited personality, which involves different behavioural traits such as sensation seeking and impulsivity (Schoeps et al., 2020). Those individuals who seek sensation have a need for new and varied situations and are very impulsive and generally careless (Zuckerman, 2007). Adolescents with disinhibited traits use SNS to socialize and post various photos at a regular frequency, with no control and unaware of the impact and risks (Schoeps et al., 2020). This impulsivity and carelessness come from a desire to connect, enter SNS, and go through other people's profiles all at a very fast pace. Research has shown that those young people who engage and seek high risk activities are also engaged in sexting (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013). When mediated by erotic or pornographic sexting, such risk behaviors, especially disinhibition, increase the probability of being a victim of SOG. Exhibitionist behaviors have been therefore considered as elicitors of SOG (Peris, 2017, cited in Schoeps et al., 2020). Stanley and colleagues (2016) report that disinhibited adolescents use SNS daringly, clicking and sending erotic pictures without any kind of cognitive or emotional regulation regarding the consequences. Similar results were found by Delevi and Weisskirch (2013), affirming that disinhibited teenagers are impulsive and perform more sexting behaviour.

It is concluded then that disinhibited personality may therefore be linked to sexting and grooming (Peris, 2017). In another study it was found that disinhibition is indirectly associated with SOG through erotic sexting and direct sexual initiation strategies (Schoeps et al., 2020). Body self-esteem, disinhibition as well as sexting are factors that have an important impact on SOG (Cruz & Soriano, 2014). Furthermore, disinhibited adolescents who use direct and coercive sexual strategies and more often engage in pornographic sexting (involves publishing photographs with total or partial nudity) are more likely to suffer from SOG (Wachs et al., 2012).

Offline vulnerability

Children who are 'vulnerable' and risk-takers offline are more likely to be susceptible to SOG (Martellozzo & Jane, 2017). A number of risk factors that have been identified to increase someone's vulnerability to offline abuse have also been identified for SOG (Livingstone, 2010). For example, a history of past child sexual abuse is considered a risk factor for SOG victimization (Wolak et al., 2008), and those who have been abused offline appear to be more vulnerable to SOG. Mitchell and colleagues (2011) found in their study that 96% of participants who reported SOG by any individual also reported offline sexual victimization by any individual within the same period. Not everybody who has been a victim of SOG, though, is also a victim of offline sexual abuse, as for some young people the online environment and the anonymity it offers may transform their personality, and they behave in a disinhibited way they wouldn't do offline, thus making them more vulnerable.

Time spent online

Research reports that young people who access the Internet frequently have an increased likelihood of experiencing SOG (Baumgartner et al., 2010). Rice et al. (2012) found that American adolescents with daily access to the Internet through a mobile phone are more likely to report being solicited for online sex, being sexually active, and having sex with partners that they met online. Nonetheless, high levels of access alone are not a necessary, or sufficient, cause of SOG. Research has shown that, if adolescents engage in long chat sessions, they tend to talk with strangers on the Internet more often (Peter, Valkenburg & Schouten, 2006). Motives of entertainment, meeting new people, and social compensation increased adolescents' online communication with strangers. Chat rooms are particularly favoured by groomers with up to 76% of initial encounters taking place there (Wolak et al., 2004). After the initial approach through a chat room, offenders will try to switch to instant messaging in order to establish more privacy and decrease the risk of detection. Therefore, the more time spent in chat rooms, the more likely it is for a young person to be victimized.

Conclusion

The current chapter has reviewed the literature in order to identify those individual factors and vulnerabilities that make a child or adolescent susceptible to SOG. As research has shown, a single risk factor is not sufficient to result in SOG. The relationship is complicated and the factors interconnected (Soo & Bodanovskaya, 2012), and each one may reduce a young person's resilience and make them vulnerable to online groomers. In summary, adolescents, females, those who question their sexuality (both males and females), those with a disability, who spend more time frequently online, who are risk-takers, engage in sexting, have low self-esteem, are lonely, seek attention, exhibit disinhibited personality and various psychological problems as well as mental health problems are more vulnerable to SOG. However, findings should be interpreted with caution due to the limited volume of research. While research has shown that there are a wide range of risk factors and vulnerabilities associated with SOG, it should be noted that they are not necessarily direct causes in themselves: "A major problem of the risk factor paradigm is to determine which risk factors are causes and which are merely markers or correlated with causes" (Farrington, 2000). This means that risk factors are correlational, not causational, and correlation does not prove causation.

In addition to the above observations, it has to be noted that offenders may not always be looking for vulnerabilities online. For example, in 2018 the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP; cited in Whittle et al., 2013) reports that, when their investigators create fake online profiles of young people in order to entice offenders, these profiles do not conform to any assumptions of a vulnerable individual. They found that offenders approach these fake profiles and attempt to sexually groom what they think is a young person without vulnerabilities being obvious from the profile. Therefore, it may be the case that offenders or a proportion of offenders just target everyone who is available online without having any victim selection strategy, attempting to sexually groom anyone who is online. Nevertheless: "It is likely though that only the vulnerable respond, while the resilient remain unaffected" (Whittle et al., 2013, p. 142).

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