3.5 Undetected Sexual Online Grooming: A Qualitative Analysis of Help-seeking Men with a Pedophilic and/or Hebephilic Sexual Preference Disorder

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Sexual online grooming (SOG) is a rising social problem in online environments (e.g., Instagram). To prevent SOG, it is essential to analyze the offender's strategies. For this reason, the current study investigated exploratively the strategies of undetected sexual online groomers with a sexual preference for children by conducting semi-structured interviews with seven men who were diagnosed with a pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder and repeatedly groomed children online. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with a qualitative content analysis technique. In contrast to previous research, the results highlight that offenders with a sexual preference for children do not always consider themselves to consciously search for victims in online environments (e.g., met their potential victims coincidentally by playing an online game together). Moreover, most interviewees aimed to contact children to fulfill their emotional needs (e.g., enjoying the company of a child) rather than their sexual needs (e.g., sharing nude pictures). Simultaneously, the article discusses the consequences of such behaviors (e.g., higher inhibition of victims' self-disclosure caused by the intense emotional bond to the offender) and raises new research desiderates (e.g., investigating online interactions between adults and children before sexual motivations occur).
Keywords: sexual online grooming, offender, pedophilia, hebephilia, cybercrime, prevention

Sexual online grooming in the German Dunkelfeld: a qualitative analysis of men with a sexual preference for children

Nowadays, approximately up to one-third of children and adolescents worldwide have been confronted with various sexual contact initiations online (Deutscher Kinderverein, 2020; Hasebrink et al., 2019; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Staksrud, 2013; Ybarra et al., 2004). This phenomenon is called sexual online grooming (SOG) and is defined as "a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child" (Craven et al., 2006, p. 297).

To understand the phenomenon of SOG and derive prevention strategies, researchers have identified up to six sexual grooming stages that appear in most SOG processes (Gupta et al., 2012; Pranoto et al., 2015). According to O'Connell (2003), the first stage, the (1) victim selection stage, describes the process in which the offender lures and selects potential victims. Thereby, the perceived attractiveness of the child and the easy access are offenders' key selection criteria. In the second stage, the (2) friendship forming stage, the offender tries to get to know the selected victim by asking him or her many personal questions like 'What kind of hobbies do you like?'. The (3) relationship forming stage is an extended version of the friendship forming stage and aims to convince the victim that he or she and the offender are close friends. The main goal of both stages is to maintain the build-up of infirmity and trust with the child. The following fourth stage, the (4) risk assessment stage, describes the part in which the offender estimates the likelihood of being detected by the victim's parents, relatives, etc. To assess the risk, the offender asks the victim, for example, about the number of people who have access to the victim's mobile phone or computer. If the offender evaluates the risk of being detected as low in the fourth stage, the (5) exclusivity stage follows. In this stage, the offender convinces the victim to tell no one about their conversations and the conversation's content. Frequently offenders communicate to their victims that their conversations are secrets no one is allowed to know, and if someone discovers them, their relationship will not continue. In most cases, the victims have already built up an intense emotional relationship with the offenders, so they do not tell anyone about the relationship to avoid a break-up, lose contact or damage the relation. In the sixth stage, the (6) sexual stage, the offender tries to integrate sexually colored topics into the conversation by asking the victims questions like 'Have you ever masturbated?' or motivating the child to send some nude pictures of him or her (in this volume, see Schmidt in chapter 3.2). Methods on concluding the SOG include tactics of 1) "hit and run" or 2) "damage limitation". 1) After the offenders have fulfilled their sexual needs, they show little interest in minimizing the damage caused at the relationship level. They often simply break off contact with the victim (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). 2) "Damage limitation" tactics involve excessive praise and reassurances like "this is our secret" and "I love you," aiming to prevent the child from disclosing the activities. This behavior is especially common in the later stages of grooming and can become ritualistic over time.

As the grooming process is preferably continuous, it is essential to note that not all grooming interactions include all of the mentioned grooming stages sequentially and that different modus operandi can take place simultaneously (Aitken et al., 2018). Also, not all cited grooming stages are necessarily part of a sexual grooming process (Black et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013). This variety is mostly caused due to the characteristics of the involved individuals. Studies about the vulnerabilities of potential victims show that the probability of experiencing SOG is increased for children who are female, have psychological problems or problems within the family and/or school, are aged between 13 and 17 years, are gay, bisexual, or unsure about their sexual orientation, and are curious about sexual experiences (Kloess et al., 2017a; Mishna et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2001; Whittle et al., 2013b; Wolak et al., 2004; in this volume, see von Weiler in chapter 2.1; Ioannou & Synnott in chapter 2.2).

Following a large number of studies on online offending (Aitken et al., 2018; Babchishin et al., 2011; Briggs et al., 2011), a German survey revealed that people who groom online and indicated sexually motivated contacts with unknown children on the Internet are more likely to be young, have a high educational degree, and a sexual preference for children (Schulz et al., 2016). Furthermore, Briggs and colleagues (2011) identified two types of SOG offender: (1) the *contact-driven* type aims to meet the potential victims in offline environments and potentially engage in sexual activities, e.g., sexual intercourse, whereas the (2) *fantasy-driven* type seeks to interact with the potential victims online, e.g., sharing nude pictures. In contrast to the contact-driven type, the fantasy-driven type can be characterized as older, more often in a relationship, better educated, more frequently employed, more socially isolated, dysphoric/depressed, and having a sexual preference for children.

The sexual preference for children (pedophilia and/or hebephilia) is defined by recurring sexual fantasies involving children as well as behavioral impulses (Seto, 2009, 2012). Besides the sexual interest in children, research suggests that pedophilia and/or hebephilia might also include emotional needs (e.g., preferring children's company rather than adults, seeking romantic relationships with children; overview see: Seto, 2012). And even though not every person with a sexual preference for children sexually abuses children (Cantor & McPhail, 2016) and a huge number of sexual offenses against children were committed by persons without a sexual preference for children (Schmidt et al., 2013; Seto, 2009), there is strong evidence that the sexual preference for children is a predictor for

repeated child sexual offenses among detected sexual offenders in clinical and correctional samples (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

Consequently, it can be hypothesized that the risk for repeated SOG is increased among the subsample of people with pedophilia and/or hebephilia. Moreover, it can be assumed that SOG offenders with pedophilia and/or hebephilia may be motivated not only by their sexual but also by their emotional needs. They may, therefore, deviate from common SOG strategies. As this is a relatively under-researched area, the present study aims to examine the strategies of SOG of undetected people with a pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder within a clinical sample and highlight differences in the current state of research. In order to do so, a qualitative design was utilized.

Material and methods

Participants

Participants were recruited at the Berlin site of the Prevention Network "Kein Täter werden" (meaning: "Don't offend", https://www.kein-taeter-werden.de), which was funded at that time by the German Federal Ministry for Justice and Consumer Protection. Two independent therapists conducted interviews with seven male participants diagnosed with a pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder (further information, see Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Volume 5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). All participants have been identified beforehand as having repeatedly been active as SOG offenders in the past. At the time of data collection, the interviewees were 41.29 years old ($SD = 12.57$ years), two were in relationships, five were employed, and two of the participants were previously detected for their SOG offending (darkfield).

Procedures

A semi-structured interview guideline was used to investigate the strategies. It included three main themes: contact initiations (e.g., "How do you contact the child?"), motivation and legitimization of behavior (e.g., "How would you evaluate your behavior?"), and sociodemographic characteristics

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(e.g., "How old are you?"). At the end of the interview, all participants were encouraged to report other experiences that were not covered by the interview guidelines. The study was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2022).

Analyses

The answers were recorded on a dictation machine and transcribed subsequently. The transcripts were evaluated qualitatively in terms of content analysis, oriented on Mayring (2015), and by using the f4 software (version 2.5 for iOS). In detail, the interviews were systematically read, and the raw data was interpreted several times. Thereby, essential quotations and identified specific thematic frames were captured. The results were revised and refined until consensus was achieved between the authors.

Results and discussion[1]

In the following, thematic frames highlight how SOG offenders with a pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder have groomed their victims. In line with previous research (e.g., Gupta et al., 2012), up to six grooming stages could be identified. The following sections are titled according to the grooming stages and the qualitative analyses' extracted thematic frames.

Victim selection stage: between targeted search and coincidence

At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked about how they identify their potential victims. Some participants mentioned that they intentionally used specific online applications like Fortnite or Snapchat to target potential victims. When selecting the online environment, the participants chose those who were popular among preferred potential victims. Results therewith underline the instrumentalization of social media applications and online gaming to get in contact with children.

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[1] Please be aware that the presented statements reflect the perception of the respondents and may be cognitively distorted accordingly.

critically questioned whether the initiation of contacts really happened by coincidence or whether cognitive distortions might play into this. Another plausible interpretation could be that these online environments provide means to fulfill participants' emotional and sexual needs and that the contact initiations were also unconsciously motivated in order to fulfill these needs.

Friendship and relationship stage: genuine and emotional interest in the children

In line with current research (Gupta et al., 2012), participants stated that discussed topics in the stages of friendship and relationship forming were seldom sexually colored and resembled the topics of conversation known from other relationships. Thus, it concerned such issues as family, school, or vacation ("Where she's spending her vacation"). In contrast to present research (Kloess et al., 2017b; Whittle et al., 2013a), most participants distanced themselves from manipulative motives within these stages. Instead, they expressed genuine interest in the lives of their potential victims and their need for emotional relationships with them. Moreover, they described that they enjoyed the contact with the children and tried to avoid sexual advances. Instead, they were interested in maintaining an emotional relationship with the child, even if they realized that this was not feasible.

"I try to keep things friendly and not become sexual."

"[The participant has] interest in the person, but not to interrogate her [potential victim]."

"I just thought it was nice to have the contact."

"Looking for togetherness."

This result confirms the assumption that people with pedophilia and/or hebephilia groom children to fulfill not only their sexual needs but also their need for an emotional connection. From this it can be concluded that this group highly focuses on building relationships and thus has a strong emotional bond with the victims. However, against the background of a sexual preference for children, emotional and sexual motives might be harder to differentiate because they might overlap considerably. As a result, when it comes to sexually abusive behavior, children may not be able to identify it in the first place. Additionally, research indicates that it is difficult

for victims who experienced sexual abuse to disclose themselves to a third person (e.g., Sivagurunathan et al., 2019). A strong emotional bond with the offender would, in turn, increasingly inhibit this process and possibly maintain sexual abuse.

Nevertheless, one person stated that he intentionally influenced the conversation to "quickly become sexual" and admitted that many potential victims were naive and easy to manipulate. This kind of statements was reflected in previous research (e.g., Briggs et al., 2011).

"On Tumblr, many girls are very easy to manipulate."

Risk assessment stage: few precautions, mainly at the technical level

In line with previous research (e.g., Gupta et al., 2012), participants were less focused on the potential victim's social environment (e.g., potential victim's family) and estimated the likelihood of being detected as low. The participants focused primarily on precautions at the technical level on their site. For example, one explained that he used exclusive email addresses for his accounts. Furthermore, a few of them used specific messengers like Snapchat that delete messages shortly after receiving them.

"But for many [SOG offenders] telegram would be an option, because the messages are deleted immediately, once you have sent them and read them. (…) Snapchat is the same. The messages delete themselves even after two days if you haven't seen them."

When it comes to prosecution, some of the participants expressed the fear of being detected by unknowingly writing with undercover agents of the police acting as decoys. Simultaneously, this fear did not result in further specific precautions like, for example, stating to be of similar age. It should be underlined that despite the fear of detection and prosecution, the offenders might still feel safe enough as no further precautions are installed.

"Yes, I have already [paid attention]. I wanted to find out if there was a real person involved in the conversation."

Interviewee: "The person was aware that he or she was dealing with an adult and not with another 12 years old?"

Participant. "Yes."

"And when they block me or say rather not. Well, then that's how it is. So that's okay as well."

Exclusivity stage: interest is more important than exclusivity

In contrast to previous studies (Briggs et al., 2011; Wolak et al., 2008), only a few participants tried to urge their potential victims to secrecy their relationships.

"Then I just told him that it would be better if his parents didn't know because it would mean nothing but trouble for me."

Rather the opposite, most of our participants stated that there was no need to handle their conversations as a secret. They described that they felt safe and trusted the children, as they perceived interest in the relationship by them. They interpreted that the children, as well as themselves, knew precisely what they were getting into. As demonstrated by previous research, children's sexual curiosity supports this process and thereby represents a risk factor of becoming a victim (Kloess et al., 2017a). Moreover, these results repeatedly show that the majority of offenders feel safe enough and are confident that they will not be detected. This would explain the only little amount of further precautions to cover up their SOG behavior.

"I didn't feel that I had to [tell the potential victim that it was a secret between them], because the interest was there with her."

"For the most part, they know exactly what they are getting into. They also know that they have to keep their parents out of it themselves."

Sexuality stage: online contact is more fantasy-driven than contact-driven

Interestingly, contrary to previous research, only a portion of the participants indicated that their SOG behavior aimed to fulfill their sexual needs, while the majority of them described themselves as fantasy-driven.

"First, a little bit of small talk and then sharing photographs."

Also, few participants stated that they not only did not engage sexually with children but also actively tried to avoid any sexual interactions with the children (*"I try everything not to do anything illegal"*). From their

perspective, they were mainly looking for emotional connection, as previously described (see: friendship and relationship stage). This result matches previous research. Finkelhor (1984) already stated in his "four pre-conditions model" that one of the main motivators to child sexual abuse is emotional congruence with children and deprived emotional needs. Also, meta-analytic research proved loneliness, deficits in social functioning, and difficulties in intimate relationships to be risk factors for child sexual abuse and child sexual abuse image offending (Houtepen et al., 2014; Mann et al., 2010; Whitaker et al., 2008). Accordingly, Gupta and colleagues' (2012) analysis of chat conversations of people with pedophilia found out that the relationship-forming stage is the most dominant online grooming stage.

Conclusion

The present study identified detailed grooming strategies (e.g., scattergun) and stages described by previous research (e.g., Gupta et al., 2012; Pranoto et al., 2015) within the specific subgroup of people with a pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder. Beyond that, the results give additional valuable insights about this under-researched and specific group of online groomers.

1. Following social media trends. Some participants stated that they oriented themselves to the current social media trends of children and adolescents searching for potential victims. For this reason, future studies should record in which environment SOG has taken place and examine which affordances and technical settings may favor grooming situations (e.g., direct deletion of messages after receiving, no identity check when creating an account, etc.).

2. Structural coupling. In contrast to previous research, many participants also claimed that they met their potential victim coincidentally (e.g., playing Fortnite together) rather than searching for them. Therefore, future studies should also focus on online interactions between adults and children before sexual motivations occur (e.g., Rüdiger, 2016). This may further help to differentiate potential situational risk situations (e.g., playing online games together). Moreover, research has to examine how the process of structural coupling is biased due to the (unconscious) desire for fulfilling the emotional and sexual needs of SOG offenders.

3. Emotional needs. Interestingly, emotional motivations when contacting children were underlined and focused by the participants. This result might

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be a specific characteristic of the group of people with pedophilia and/or hebephilia. Therefore, future analyses, and that is essential for upcoming research, should focus on social interactions and aim to investigate emotional connections between adults and children. These studies could highlight the implications that these emotional bonds might have for the further dynamic and development of child sexual abuse (e.g., higher inhibition of victims' self-disclosure caused by the intense emotional bond to the offender, development of sexual motivation resulting from the emotional bond).

4. Precautions on the technical level. It is striking that participants felt safe and only undertook minor technical precautions (e.g., using a fake name, using Snapchat) while grooming children online. This underlines the responsibility and necessity of social media platforms and messenger systems to provide technical measures and prevention strategies that secure children when using their applications and detect online groomers.

5. Handling secrecy. In contrast to previous research, the majority of our participants did not see any need to convince their victims to handle their contact as a secret. If the offenders perceived the children to have a genuine interest in the contact, they trusted them to handle the situation "right". There is a great need to investigate the variety of online interactions between adults and children before sexual motivations occur and also to examine the motives of children besides sexual curiosity to interact with adults online (also see: Peter et al., 2006).

Limitations

The present study examined a specific sample of SOG offenders who were problem-aware and self-referring to treatment because of their pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder. Therefore, results cannot be applied and generalized to all SOG offenders or merely to all sexual online groomers with a sexual preference for children (e.g., not to those who were not problem-aware). Moreover, the present sample consisted of seven participants; therefore, results can only be explorative. Future studies must examine the current research questions quantitatively and compare the results of clinical and forensic samples with samples from the general population.

Ethical approval

This *case study* has been conducted in strict adherence to established ethical guidelines for scientific research. The ethical considerations and principles governing this research align with recognized standards and regulations to ensure the welfare and rights of all participants involved (informed consent, anonymity/ pseudonymity and confidentiality, voluntary participation, beneficence and non-maleficence, transparent communication).

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