

3.3 Hedonistic Utilitarianism: The Strategic Use of Digital Media along the Online-Offline Continuum of Sexualized Violence

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The present study examines how offenders targeting children and adolescents strategically use digital media when committing acts of sexualized violence along the online-offline continuum. Even offenders who are previously known to their victims use digital media extensively. The choice to instrumentalize digital media in order to initiate, threaten, exploit, and humiliate victims demonstrates the rationale of offenders when committing acts of digitally supported violence. Through digital media, offenders can assume the power of interpretation over their victims' situations. The ways in which digital media is used to commit violence along the online-offline continuum are a direct manifestation of the hedonistic utilitarianism demonstrated by offenders: a disposition characterized by the weighing of pleasures ("mental states") and intrinsic value expected from using digital media against the risk of an outcome subjectively experienced as uncomfortable. Thus, sexualized violence using digital media goes beyond the traditional understanding of sexual online grooming.

Keywords: sexual online grooming, mediated sexualized violence, child sexual abuse material, gaslighting, hedonistic utilitarianism

Introduction

Academic and public discourses define sexual online grooming (SOG) as virtual interactions with minors for the purpose of exploitation, in other words, the process of preparing and establishing a framework for sexual abuse (Vogelsang, 2015; Broome, 2018; Lorenzo-Dus & Kinzel, 2019). The term SOG, coined in the early 2000s, tends to be associated with offenders who do not previously know their victims (Whittle, 2014; Kloess et al. 2018; Jonsson et al., 2019; Sorell & Whitty, 2019). According to this definition, the ultimate goal of SOG is often violent acts committed offline. However, academics and crisis intervention experts tend to focus on digital forms of contact and communication.

Experts tend to fundamentally differentiate between SOG and sexualized contact (grooming) arranged offline, which may include child sexual abuse that is initiated in person. However, due to the spread of digital media as a standard means of communication, online activity can also play a role

in cases of child sexual abuse within the family. The same can be said for other forms of mediatized violence, such as sexualized cyber-bullying, cyber dating abuse (Machimbarrena et al. 2018), the use of child exploitation material (Franke & Graf, 2016), and, in some cases, online sexual victimization (Kloess et al., 2019). Nevertheless, these forms of sexualized violence, together with SOG, can be collectively categorized as “sexualized violence using digital media” (Vobbe & Kärgerl, 2019) or “mediatized sexualized violence” (Vobbe & Kärgerl 2022).

Despite increased examination of offender strategies and the experiences of SOG victims, there has been considerably less research on the ways in which digital media is used to commit sexualized assaults along the online-offline continuum¹.

The present study

Against this theoretical background and the aforementioned research gap, the following report employs a social-psychological perspective on how offenders who target children and adolescents strategically use digital media when committing acts of sexualized violence along the online-offline continuum. It will also consider the corresponding consequences experienced by victims.

The following discourse is based on the qualitative empirical research project “HUMAN. Entwicklung von Handlungsempfehlungen für die pädagogische Praxis zum fachlichen Umgang mit sexualisierter Gewalt mit digitalem Medieneinsatz“ (HUMAN. Development of recommendations for pedagogical practice when dealing with sexualized violence using digital media), which was carried out by the SRH University Heidelberg between 2017 and 2021 and was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of the Federal Republic of Germany. Part of the multimodal data material was subject to a second evaluation for the present article, with the aims of 1) showing the spectrum of possibilities to instrumentalize digital media in the context of sexualized violence against children and adolescents

1 Following Nicholas Negropontes’ concept of the post-digital society, we assume that online and offline living environments in the late modern industrialized countries essentially overlap with one another. Most perceived offline activities have a digital component and vice versa. This spectrum of activities can be conceptualized as an online-offline continuum, on which the actions are differently weighted according to their online or offline relevance.

and 2) demonstrating the ‘appropriateness’ of using these instruments in the context of the dynamics of violence.

Methods and materials

The analysis is based on 46 case reports which document psycho-social crisis intervention in cases of sexualized violence using digital media. These case reports were compiled in and by ten counselling centers across Germany for the purpose of this research project. They contain information on specific acts of violence, strategies used by offenders, consequences experienced by victims, and offers of help from the centers.

The counselling centers were selected according to a case-typological-qualitative sampling with a focus on specialization in sexualized violence in the form of a public mandate to act. The following descriptions are the results of a secondary analysis, bounded by the focal points of the documentation chosen by the centers themselves. On the other hand, the data contains extensive insights into histories of violence and subsequent intervention processes. According to the premise of reflexivity (Langer et al., 2013), we interpreted the data by means of a typology designed by Kelle and Kluge (2010), which originated in the Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1998).

Twenty-seven case reports identify female victims, while 19 reports identify male victims. The majority of the offenders are male ($n_{\text{male}} = 32$, $n_{\text{female}} = 2$). In 12 cases, the violence was perpetrated by a group whose gender distribution is not clearly documented. The exact age of the offenders is not documented; however, the reports distinguish between legal adults ($n = 31$) and minors ($n = 11$). In four cases, no information is listed regarding the offender’s age category. Most reports list the ages of victims, with the majority of victims falling between 11 and 14 years of age ($n_{0-3\text{-years-old}} = 1$, $n_{4-6\text{-years-old}} = 3$, $n_{7-10\text{-years-old}} = 8$, $n_{11-14\text{-years-old}} = 21$, $n_{15-18\text{-years-old}} = 9$, $n_{>18\text{-years-old (abuse started earlier)}} = 1$, $n_{\text{age unknown}} = 3$).

Four case reports describe the offenders and victims as online acquaintances, whereas 12 case reports indicate that the offenders and victims come from the same family. In 21 case reports, the offenders and victims belong to the same immediate social environment.

Results

The following sections present the different ways in which digital media is instrumentalized along the online-offline continuum of sexualized violence.

1. Digital media as an instrument of initiation and extortion by offenders previously unknown to their victims

In 14 of the 46 case reports, in which one or more of the offenders was previously unknown to their underage victims, the offender used digital media to initiate sexualized acts.

Digital media as an instrument for requesting nude images

Explicitly violent acts could not be confirmed in three of the aforementioned 14 cases. Nevertheless, the victims in these three cases were persuaded to send nude images or perform sexual acts, in some cases on camera. In the absence of verified violence, these three cases were evaluated based on the limited, sometimes ambiguous, information available. Because the interactions took place online, the ages of some of the offenders are completely unknown and/or it is unclear to what extent the alleged instigators were aware of the ages or capacity for consent of their counterparts. These cases also appear to lack typical threatening or grooming strategies. For example, the instigators include a pornography distributor residing abroad, who directed an actor to participate in a fee-based chat with an intellectually disabled 13-year-old boy.

The boy has access and contact to porn providers and performers via a messenger. He regularly receives pornographic content, e.g., masturbation videos or videos with anal penetration. In some cases, he forwards these clips. He also sends photos of himself to this number (case report 14).

Notably, aggressive automated spam bots, from which such chat contacts can arise, have recently flooded Instagram (Noll, 2019).

Digital media as an instrument for targeted sexual online grooming

Another nine out of the aforementioned 14 cases did result in violent acts or attempts thereof, the production and dissemination of child exploitation materials², and the attempt or actual child sexual abuse. Most of the affected persons experienced multiple forms of abuse. In one case, a ten-year-old was approached off and on by 70 different, presumably male, adults. In these nine cases, digital media served as a typical grooming instrument, encompassing the complete spectrum of online-grooming strategies described by Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2016): deceptive trust, compliance testing, withdrawal, reverse psychology, explicit and implicit sexual gratification, and isolation. Offenders feigned romantic relationships with their victims, which evolved into dominant/submissive relationships with sadomasochistic elements with the offender acting as the 'dom'.

He slowly began to build up a relationship of trust with S. by listening to her problems with her parents, giving her advice and also helping her with her schoolwork. This is how he created S.'s emotional dependence. Then he started to manipulate S.: she was his porn-wife, he was her master and S. was responsible for his sexual satisfaction (case report 23).

In such cases victims who attempt to leave the relationship are often blackmailed with the threat that damaging chat threads, implicating them in their own abuse, will be exposed or that abuse images will be disseminated in their social environment. Occasionally the offenders follow through with these threats. For example, in one case the offender sent an abuse image to 5,000 contacts.

2. Digital media as an instrument for initiating cyber dating abuse

In two cases, situations that began as online dating led to direct contact abuse. The offenders used digital media to initiate contact with the victims and to arrange in-person meetings. The evidence in these cases did not indicate the use of traditional grooming strategies. For example, there was no indication that victims were pressured into meeting their eventual abusers,

2 With the term 'child exploitation material' we opt for an open understanding of sexually abusive photograph and video recordings. In accordance with Kuhle and colleagues (2018), we also include sexualized but non-explicit material that is used for the sexual satisfaction of the offender or the sexual humiliation of the victim.

and presumably the meetings were planned consensually. In both cases, the victims later came forward about the violent acts committed against them. The subsequent trials were each characterized by victim-blaming. The victims were held jointly accountable for the abuse they suffered, alongside the offenders, based on the fact that they were not coerced into meeting their eventual abusers. This had a mitigating effect on the perpetrators' sentences.

The proceedings should finally be opened after two years of waiting, so that the family can close the case. The offender has confessed so far. However, the public prosecutor's office blames the girl for her part in the crime (case report 16).

On the basis of our data, we assume that sexual offenders, being aware of the increasing popularity of online dating, are incorporating undercurrents of victim-blaming into their tactics. For example, in some cases chat histories have been presented in the context of the offender's legal confession to prove the consensual nature of a date.

3. Digital media as an instrument in the initiation and progression of sexualized violence by offenders previously known to their victims

In nine cases, digital media served as the instrument of initiation and/or in the progression of sexualized violence by offenders previously known to their victims.

Digital media as an instrument for targeted sexual online grooming

Five of the aforementioned nine cases diverged from the definition of SOG used by Kloess et al. (2019) in that grooming activities and sexual exploitation took place exclusively online despite repeated and ongoing interactions offline in settings such as sports clubs or schools. With one exception, in which an offline encounter led to severe child sexual abuse, the offenders' in-person behaviors are either unknown or they maintained a noteworthy distance from their victims.

The perpetrator used digital communication specifically to groom and put pressure on the boy. In contacts during sports training, he paid no special attention to the boy. (...) He reinforced the relationship digitally.

He paid special attention to the boy, asked him intimate questions and demanded intimate photos. After the first sexual abuse, he used recordings to continue pressuring the boy (case report 11).

The victims tended not to know how many others in their social circles had been sexually abused by the same offender until the crimes were exposed. The offenders interacted with their victims throughout the day, often very regularly, thereby deepening the victims' senses of dependence and ambivalence.

Digital media as an instrument for continuing contact and building emotional pressure despite any evidence of particular grooming strategies

In four of the remaining cases, there was no evidence of a particular grooming strategy. In these cases, offenders contacted victims online despite their previous offline acquaintanceships. They sometimes threatened and blackmailed the victims into sending them child exploitation material. The offenders used digital media to build emotional pressure against the victims. In two cases, offenders used child exploitation material to increase pressure on the victims and force offline sexual assaults. In some cases, offenders also distributed images of the victims from these assaults. In one case, the offender used digital media to continue the sexual assault for years after the victim had moved away.

4. Digital media as an instrument by which offenders use child exploitation material to shame victims who were previously known to them

In eight cases, youth and adult offenders, who were previously known to their victims, used digital media to distribute child exploitation material. In all of these cases, the dissemination served to expose and humiliate the victims.

In two cases, SOG preceded dissemination of the compromising images. Through the use of deceit (fake online accounts), deceptive trust, and sexual gratification, offenders misled victims into sending them nude photographs of themselves for the purpose of dissemination. In five cases, the offenders recorded an incidence of abuse or sexual assault. This is noteworthy, as the recorded incident served as incriminating evidence of a serious offense committed by the offender.

Public shaming and humiliation harm the victim by attempting to damage their reputation and expose them to mockery or other forms of social sanction. In such cases, public shaming and ongoing harassment in a victim's social environment may take the form of attacks on their sexual identity based on heteronormative gender attributions. For example, a female may be accused of being too sexually uninhibited or called a "slut", while a male who does not conform to a hypermasculine, heterosexual dominant stereotype may be labeled as "gay".

It was part of the offenders' plan to portray D. as a youth who engages in sexual acts with men. The filming was thus a central part of the perpetrators' strategy. Against the background of the family feud, it can be assumed that the targeted publication of the video (or the threat of it) was intended to violate or destroy not only D.'s honor but the honor of his entire family (case report 6).

5. Digital media as an instrument of (commercial) sexual exploitation in the context of child sexual abuse and organized sexualized assault committed offline

In six cases, digital media supplemented (commercial) sexual exploitation in child sexual abuse that was committed primarily offline. This type of abuse can take two distinct forms. In some cases, digital media acts as the bait for in-person grooming. For example, an offender may offer to give a victim an electronic device to enhance the victim's social status or as a reward for sexual favors. In other cases, acts of sexual abuse are recorded to produce child exploitation material. In all of the latter cases, there is a clear link to organized or ritual exploitation. Corresponding case documentation indicates that victims were actively prostituted by their families or sexually abused in connection with cults.

She described the uncle as the "organizer" of the ritual abuse, because in her memory the acts were committed against her by persons other than the uncle. She had discovered the files by chance on her own PC a few years ago and at that moment could no longer remember how they had gotten there. She then contacted the online counselling service (case report 13).

Where there is indication that child exploitation materials were produced and disseminated, the primary objective in these cases appears to have been

commercial – sale or trade of the images – rather than the humiliation of the subject. Sometimes the victims possess video recordings of their abuse without knowing who gave them the videos in the first place. In accordance with the ritual character of the violence, one can hypothesize that the compromising material was leaked to the victim in order to imprison them in the organized structural violence, to trigger them, to control them from a distance, or to alienate them and, in doing so, to hinder them from coming forward about the abuse. Analogous to current research insights about organized violence, these cases are sometimes particularly complex due to the traumatization of the victims (Nick et al., 2018). The trauma can lead to victims suffering from dissociation and split personalities, thereby further complicating efforts to assess the scope of the abuse. Experts have reported that they interacted with different personalities when treating victims and, therefore, could not evaluate the effect of the therapeutic interventions:

A therapist diagnosed a multiple personality in the person affected by violence (...). The voice and also the mood changed several times during the conversation. At the end I was very unsure whether the caller was really 19 years old or rather older. Perhaps it was simply the 19-year-old part who called me (case report 41).

6. The interplay of problematic digital media conduct and suspected child sexual abuse between persons previously known to one another

In nine cases, either problematic digital media conduct led to suspicions of child sexual abuse or verified child sexual abuse led to speculation of additional forms of digital exploitation. Problematic digital media conduct includes: an adult watching pornography with his son; having a collection of nude photographs of one's own children, which are not explicitly criminal in nature; having a collection of questionable images of children; or having a history of online exploitation of children.

Police investigations revealed that there were various discoveries: from the area of adult pornography, from the area of abuse images with adolescents ("youth pornography"), as well as abuse images of children ("child pornography"). A conspicuous feature was the accumulation of one child (80–90 photos, so-called sets). In addition, there were family photos and videos. Among the family photos, three photos of the girl B. were conspicuous: one photo of B. at the age of 3 or 4, in which it had

not been a playful scene but a posed photo of her with another girl in which she had been completely naked, and two other photos in which B. had been seen alone: 1. with a top, but without pants, and in the 2nd photo B. on all fours, in focus B.'s vagina, which had been turned towards the camera (...). The pictures of the daughter were in a "grey area" and the attribution to "child pornography" could not be clearly established. Likewise, the police investigations could not clarify whether two friends of the same age, C. and D., were sexually abused by B.'s father (case report 33).

In the remaining cases it is unclear whether child exploitation materials were also made or whether digital media was used as a sexual grooming tool. In all of these cases, the implications of the use of digital media in (potentially) violent contexts are ambiguous. One can assume that the possession of child exploitation material provides some sort of thrill to the perpetrators. Established correlations between the consumption of child exploitation material and perpetrating abusive acts feed suspicions of sexual abuse, although in the cases discussed here evidence corroborating exploitation remains unverified.

Discussion

Sexual online grooming by offenders who were not previously known offline to their victim, as discussed by Sorrel and Whitty (2019), makes up many, but not the majority, of the cases in this study. Consequently, digital grooming strategies, in the context of sexualized assaults committed on the online-offline continuum, appear to be prevalent among offenders who were previously acquainted with their victims offline. It can therefore be inferred that offenders perceive digital media as an effective tool. The formal distinction between online and offline offenders, as defined by Black and colleagues (2015), must be critically revised with reference to supposed offline offenders. The link between gathering information online about a potential victim, developing exclusively offline relationships or relationships that develop divergently online versus offline, and ongoing digital intimacy should be taken into greater consideration.

At the same time, SOG strategies are also employed in interactions that are more focussed on humiliating the victim than on sexually-motivated exploitation. If a victim has only participated in sexualized interactions online, their awareness of compromising digital materials (e.g., chat conver-

sations, images, and videos) may foster a dependency relationship with the offender. The offender may strategically cultivate fear around the potential dissemination of the materials despite the fact that these are self-incriminating for the offender.

Offenders draw upon a societal bias of hostility towards victims. Cases in which compromising materials were disseminated document the effectiveness of this bias, with the effects of victim-blaming ranging from peer-to-peer bullying to criminal prosecution. Publishing damaging materials within one's peer group is consistent with the dynamics associated with bullying; online and offline humiliation tend to merge. Bullies and their associates justify their behavior with the rebuke that the victims allowed themselves to be the subject of damaging images and videos. This is presented as proof of a victim's own responsibility in their abuse and as provocation for the sexual slurs (Pickel & Gentry, 2017). Digital media, therefore, plays a role beyond the violent act itself, serving as an instrument to spread disinformation by peer and adult offenders. Thus, the response by the social environment into which compromising materials are disseminated is just as important as the actual disingenuously distributed "content". It appears that the offenders have given greater consideration to the potential consequences the images could have to their victims than to the consequences to themselves in the form of self-incrimination. This logic demonstrates the depths of their hostility towards the victims and their willingness to rationalize acts of violence.

Against this backdrop, the central characteristic exhibited by offenders who engage in sexualized violence through the use of digital media may be a vague fear of abandonment by the victim. This fear of abandonment is often strategically tested by the offender as early as the initiation process (strategic withdrawal). Fostering a fear of abandonment through violence on the online-offline continuum allows an offender to manipulate the victim's power of perception. In the context of sexualized violence, digital media allows an offender to gradually strip away the victim's self-awareness (Whittle et al., 2014). The victim comes to associate negative attributions with the use of online media and to avoid digital media for fear of additional repercussions. These negative attributions foster dependence on the offender and a loss of agency on the part of the victim. Digital media transforms this loss of agency into a loss of perception, because the interactions result in evidence of violence, which the offender can reinterpret and use to exert pressure on the victim. As a result, the victim becomes more and more afraid (Kärgel & Vobbe, 2020). To that effect, digital media may be

regarded as a structural amplifier in the violence spiral. Therefore, one must question whether the definition of SOG needs to be expanded beyond sexually motivated seduction strategies employed primarily by offenders who meet their victims online. The majority of cases of sexual violence perpetrated on the online-offline continuum include aspects of SOG. Reciprocally we question the extent to which it makes sense to classify acts of violence that are exclusively committed online as a separate form of violence. After all, young people today live in a world in which relationships and sexual development take place as much online as offline. They may experience not only violence but also romantic relationships primarily online, and predators are taking advantage of this reality.

Choosing to use digital media as an instrument of initiation, threat, exploitation, and/or humiliation demonstrates an offender's rationale when committing digitally supported violence. One should not underestimate the power of digital media as an instrument through which offenders assume the power of interpretation over victims' situations and are able to tap into their everyday realities. The ways in which digital media is used along the continuum of online-offline violence, in other words SOG and sexualized violence through the use of digital media, are a direct manifestation of the hedonistic utilitarianism demonstrated by offenders. We base this assessment on a concept from social-philosophical decision theory. Hedonistic utilitarianism is characterized by the weighing of the psychological pleasures ("mental states") or intrinsic value expected from a decision over the risk of a subjectively uncomfortable outcome (Harsanyi, 1977). As it is a broadly conceived theory, sexual forensic and deviance theory typologies can be integrated into hedonistic utilitarianism. In the context of our case studies, the violent experience of a victim only plays a role in an offender's decision-weighting process to the extent that it generates resistance and inhibitions on the part of the offender that may serve to reduce their expected pleasure.

From this perspective, digital media fulfill multiple purposes for the offender. According to theoretical classification, it serves to regulate feelings of empathy for the victim, thereby creating an obstacle to the offender's consumption of child exploitation material or participation in hand-on-violence, i.e. pleasure (Franke & Graf, 2016). Within a framework that rationalizes pleasure versus risk, digital media primarily serves to maximize the experience of pleasure over uncomfortableness for the offender. In doing so, we do not succumb to the erroneous syllogism that the exclusivity with which digital media is used for sexualized violence in the context of our

cases justifies the renunciation of digital media. Instead, we consider the roles of diverse applications of digital media and their modes of operation in the dynamics of violence, which can shift both the power of definition as well as control away from the victim to the offender. In this respect, using digital media to perpetrate violence is worthwhile for offenders – to the detriment of children and adolescents affected by violence.

Ethical approval

This 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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