

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition and Characteristics of the Phenomenon of Sexual Online Grooming

Zeev Hille¹, Daniela Stelzmann² & Laura F. Kuhle¹

¹Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine, Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Berlin, Germany

²Institute of Psychology, Technische Universität Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany

Sexual online grooming (SOG) constitutes a specific form of online child sexual exploitation that shares some characteristics with grooming in offline environments regarding the complexity and diversity of grooming behaviors as well as the goals that offenders seek to achieve by these behaviors. On the other hand, differences pertain to the means of victim selection, overcoming external barriers, and the temporal progression of the grooming process. Against the background of the SOG complexity, the current chapter gives an overview of the definition and characteristics of SOG in general, distinction of different facets of the phenomenon, prevalence, victim and offender characteristics, and preventive efforts. In summary, SOG is a notably complex phenomenon that warrants further empirical efforts on clarifying some of its key aspects in order to inform the design and implementation of useful preventive approaches.

Keywords: sexual online grooming, online child sexual exploitation, grooming offenders, grooming victims, grooming prevention

Definition and characteristics of the phenomenon of sexual online grooming

Sexual online grooming (SOG) is one major risk for youth online and a topic associated with heightened public concerns (Williams & Hudson, 2013). By the end of the last decade, the majority of European countries had established legislative instruments to define online grooming as a criminal offense (Klimek, 2020) while at the same time the scientific discourse delivered a multitude of different definitions in order to capture this relatively new construct. This introductory chapter aims to distinguish the concept of SOG from other related types of offenses (e.g., online sexual solicitation) by clarifying key aspects of SOG. Furthermore, studies regarding prevalence estimates of online grooming and their methodological challenges will be reviewed. Finally, this chapter highlights the main characteristics of online grooming offenders and victims as well as current preventive efforts.

Online child sexual exploitation – online sexual solicitation – sexual online grooming

Sexual offenses against children and adolescents have existed prior to the Internet; however, technological advances in the new millennium and their associated features (e.g., anonymity and accessibility) set the stage for new technology-mediated sexual crimes against youth, which pose challenges for law enforcement agencies, governments, and prevention systems alike (Kierkegaard, 2008; in this volume, see Büchner in Chapter 4.1). In this regard, *online child sexual exploitation* has been used as an umbrella term to subsume technology-mediated forms of abuse, such as the production, distribution, and possession of child sexual abuse material resulting from prior offline victimization vs. both online sexual solicitation and SOG as abusive and exploitative interactions taking place in online environments (Gottfried et al., 2020; Seto et al., 2012).

Online sexual solicitation refers to a specific kind of online interaction by which sexual activity or sexual conversations are requested from a minor or attempts are made to receive intimate sexual information from the victim (Mitchell et al., 2007). Notably, online sexual solicitation can be wanted or unwanted, and it can also occur when the solicitor is another minor (Madigan et al., 2018; Villacampa & Gómez, 2016). Being solicited by another under-aged individual can have negative consequences on the victim, although in many cases it can be conceived of as more or less developmentally appropriate (Gottfried et al., 2020; Ybarra et al., 2004). Adult solicitors, on the other hand, in any case display an abusive and sexually motivated behavior that in many jurisdictions can be prosecuted as soon as intentions are expressed to sexually interact with that minor in the context of offline meetings (Barber & Bettez, 2021; Klimek, 2020; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). Hitherto, there is no clear consensus on how to differentiate sexual solicitation in online environments from SOG, with some scholars using the terms interchangeably (e.g., Ospina et al., 2010), whereas others point out to the more complex nature of grooming online (e.g., Kloess et al., 2019). While solicitations can occur as a single event and do not require the minor to react or agree to the sexual desires or requests made by the adult offender, they can also be embedded in prolonged online interactions that require the victim to react or participate (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018). In this view, soliciting behaviors can be indicative of a more dynamic grooming process, of which they can be initial steps, specific outcomes or elements within a set of strategies aimed at asserting influence

on the interaction (Aitken et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2016). In addition to sexual solicitation, other strategies and techniques like harassment, threats or compliments are common characteristics of SOG associated with grooming behaviors in offline contexts (O’Leary et al., 2017; Wachs et al., 2016). However, although online and offline grooming share some common features, they are yet phenomenologically different (Ioannou et al., 2018). Hence, in addition to distinguishing SOG from other forms of online child sexual exploitation, delineating commonalities with, and differences to, offline grooming is essential in order to highlight novel aspects of grooming in online environments (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011).

Commonalities and differences in defining grooming in online vs. offline environments

Since the contexts, offenders, victims, and specific kinds of behaviors involved in face-to-face grooming vary considerably, definitions for sexual grooming are highly heterogeneous, accordingly. In an attempt to provide an operational definition of sexual grooming offline, Winters and colleagues (2022) reviewed several past definitions of the construct in order to identify common aspects as well as limitations that became evident from both a theoretical and empirical point of view. As a result of their evaluation, the authors proposed the following conceptualization:

“Sexual grooming is the deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection. Prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, the would-be abuser may select a victim, gain access to and isolate the minor, develop trust with the minor and often their guardians, community, and youth-serving institutions, and desensitize the minor to sexual content and physical contact. Post-abuse, the offender may use maintenance strategies on the victim to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure” (Winters et al., 2022, p. 933).

This comprehensive definition of offline grooming proves to be beneficial in both clarifying key aspects of online grooming and highlighting its distinctiveness from in-person grooming. First, the view of the grooming interaction as a *dynamic and complex process* is pervasive in the literature on online grooming as well (Aitken et al., 2018; Hui et al., 2015; Lorenzo-

Dus et al., 2016). In fact, research has shown that depending on the victim's reaction the duration of the SOG process can vary between minutes to months (Webster et al., 2012). However, since interactions are not dependent on physical encounters or proximity, technology-mediated grooming processes can proceed faster and, in turn, lead to the offender's desired (sexual) outcomes more readily (Hui et al., 2015).

These outcomes can be conceived of as *specific goals* towards which the behaviors displayed in the grooming process are directed at. Amongst others, they might include desensitizing the minor to, and reducing resistance against, sexual content (Berson, 2003), facilitating sexual abuse (Tener et al., 2015), and minimizing the likelihood of disclosure (Whittle et al., 2014). Hence, the goals identified in SOG strongly overlap with those identified in offline contexts (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Craven et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, *selection of and access to suitable victims* to arrive at these goals differ notably between contexts. In offline environments, intrafamilial offenders may simply select their victims based on proximity and availability, while extrafamilial perpetrators generally need to rely on grooming strategies since victim access is rather established by acquaintance or by working in institutional contexts (McAlinden, 2013). In chat rooms or social networking sites, on the other hand, offenders can capitalize on a pool of potential victims regardless of geographical distance and select those minors that seem to be most vulnerable and suitable based on personal information in profiles and posts (Berson, 2003; Eneman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2014).

Additionally, SOG does not necessarily require offenders to display grooming behaviors targeting *significant others, the community or the institution*, which might be necessary means for offline offenders to overcome external inhibitors (Finkelhor, 1984; Plummer, 2018; Sullivan & Beech, 2004; A. Williams, 2015). Rather, online offenders can benefit from the anonymity provided by online environments and are, therefore, confronted with fewer obstacles (Briggs et al., 2011). Nevertheless, they still have to circumvent inhibitors unique to online sexual exploitation such as parental supervision of minors' online behavior (Dos Santos Lemos Fernandes, 2015). Hence, instead of grooming the environment, they need to assess potential obstacles in the evolving online interaction, e.g., by inquiring about parents' whereabouts or other individuals using the same computer (Williams et al., 2013).

Apart from risk assessment, *deceptive strategies* like flattery and compliments or expressions of love and trust are applied to manipulate the target by building rapport as is the case with face-to-face grooming (de Santisteban et al., 2018). However, only in online contexts offenders can make use of the potential anonymity in order to conceal their true identity by posing as another minor (Williams et al., 2013). Additionally, this fake online persona can be further embellished by making false statements about physical appearance, personality traits or interests in order to increase the likelihood of the victim participating in the (sexual) interaction (Quayle et al., 2014). However, research has shown that only a small amount of offenders present a fake persona, which means that most victims seem to be aware of the fact that they are interacting with an adult (Malesky, 2007; Wolak et al., 2008).

In the case of offline grooming processes, there seems to be a consensus that strategies like the ones outlined above are embedded in a *sequence of stages* (Winters et al., 2020), while the literature on online grooming does not unequivocally support this notion. In this regard, O'Connell (2003) proposed a model of SOG that specifies several stages of the online interaction, i.e., friendship-forming stage, relationship-forming stage, risk-assessment stage, exclusivity stage, sexual stage, and damage limitation, of which each is supposed to be associated with specific grooming techniques and goals. While in the cases of SOG studied by O'Connell (2003) these stages were found to occur more or less in the proposed sequence, other research revealed differing results. By analyzing transcripts of online interactions between offenders and victims, Williams and colleagues (2013) found evidence for three SOG themes (i.e., rapport-building, sexual content, and assessment) that strongly overlap with the assumed stages in the O'Connell model. Yet, they all occurred at a very early point of the conversation, and the sequencing varied considerably between offenders. These findings are also consistent with research conducted by Black et al. (2015), which revealed risk assessment and the subsequent introduction of sexual content, in particular, to be themes that occurred rather early and were highly prevalent throughout a given online interaction. Moreover, all stage-specific terms or phrases did not emerge significantly more frequently in the corresponding stage as proposed by O'Connell but instead were found to be distributed equally in all sections of the transcript. Hence, the SOG process does not seem to follow the suggested linear progression but seems to be more cyclical in nature and, thereby, different from the assumed sequencing of the offline grooming process as well (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015; Elliott, 2017; Winters et al., 2020).

Finally, the possibility that offenders may make use of *post-abuse strategies* (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014) is one feature of offline grooming that does not become evident from the literature on SOG. In this regard, O'Connell (2003) found evidence of what she labeled a "hit-and-run" tactic, i.e., that most online offenders did not show interest in damage limitation, maintaining the online contact or even continuing it offline and instead simply abandon the interaction. Likewise, in cases where the online grooming process actually did lead to an offline meeting and a concomitant hands-on abuse, 71% of victims reported that the relationship ended post-abuse (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020).

Prevalence of sexual online grooming

Reliable prevalence estimates of SOG are difficult to obtain. For instance, for minors to report grooming victimization they first need to identify online relationships with adults as exploitative, distinguish it from appropriate forms of sexual experimentation, and know about, and make use of, potential reporting structures in their social environment and respective country (Bryce, 2009). Reporting is further complicated by a minority of offenders posing as another minor and contacting multiple victims simultaneously (Schulz et al., 2016; Wolak et al., 2004). Therefore, both self-report data on grooming victimization and police reports are unlikely to represent reliable approximations (Wachs et al., 2016).

In addition, the prevalence estimates provided by the few quantitative studies at hand vary depending on methodological aspects like sample choice, means of data collection, or operational definition of the concept. In this regard, the body of literature rather delivered prevalence estimates for online solicitation due to either blurred conceptualizations of grooming or simply because operationalizing and assessing soliciting behaviors is more viable than finding appropriate methodological approaches for capturing the complexity of online grooming interactions.

Hence, research funded by the European Union (EU Kids Online) showed that 15% of minors received sexual messages online, 30% have communicated with someone unknown online, and 9% have met an online contact face-to-face (Livingstone et al., 2011). In addition, for all of these solicitations a follow-up project reports inclining numbers, albeit with substantial variability between minors from different age groups and countries (Smahel et al., 2020). For instance, in Germany a repeated data

collection period was conducted applying the same survey that was used in the multinational assessment (Hasebrink et al., 2019). Here, 35% of respondents aged between 12 to 17 reported having received sexualized messages within the year prior to data collection, while another 30% have been made sexual requests that they felt uncomfortable with. In both cases, higher prevalence rates have been found for older teenagers at the age of 15 to 17, of which more than a fourth (27%) reported at least one offline meeting with someone they had met online (vs. 12% of the whole sample).

Conversely to the rising numbers found in European samples, a consecutive US project with data collection periods in 2000, 2005, and 2010 found a decline in proportions of youth reporting online sexual solicitation from 19% to 13% and 9% in 2010, respectively (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2012; Wolak et al., 2006). Meta-analytical prevalence estimates, on the other hand, range between 9.4% and 13.6% of minors experiencing any kind of online solicitation (Madigan et al., 2018). However, almost all of the studies included in this meta-analysis failed to assess and report separate prevalence rates for solicitation by peers vs. adults, which, in turn, makes it infeasible to draw conclusions regarding predatory and exploitative online behavior since it is very likely that most online sexual interactions occur between peers (Jones et al., 2012).

In an attempt to overcome this problem, a German study separately evaluated experiences of online solicitation by peers and adults (Skenarova et al., 2018). Here, 22% of the sample had been victims of soliciting behavior displayed by adults, including sexual conversations, exchanging pictures, or engaging in cybersex. Although these kinds of behaviors can be elements of SOG, they do not necessarily have to indicate a more complex interplay between an online groomer and a victim. Yet, some researchers applied imprecise differentiations between solicitation and SOG using the two concepts interchangeably (e.g., Montiel et al., 2016). For instance, Villacampa and Gómez (2016) found that 10.4% of their sample experienced online grooming by an adult in the year prior to data collection. However, participants were classified as groomed when they had been requested by an adult to talk about sex, provide sexual information, or perform sexual behavior online, i.e., when they had been solicited.

Accordingly, the remaining number of studies utilizing acceptable approaches for estimating prevalence rates of SOG is rather limited. For example, Greene-Colozzi and colleagues (2020) made use of a comprehensive grooming inventory inquiring about long, ongoing conversations with adult strangers as well as assessing several dimensions of that online rela-

tionship such as amount of information shared, use of deceit, or manipulation in order to capture SOG more holistically. The authors found 23% of the sample to recall an online relationship that fit the conceptual profile of SOG; however, in the majority of cases the alleged age of the offender was between 18 and 22, whereas the victim's age was 16. Another approach applied by Wachs and colleagues (2016) was to present a description of SOG and its characteristic features and then ask participants to indicate the frequency of respective encounters. In this manner, 18.5% of the sample reported grooming victimization, albeit with great variability between subgroups based on nationality. Furthermore, a recent study from Spain assessed the grooming process in greater depth by analyzing the prevalence of different online grooming strategies applied by adult offenders (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021). They found aggressive strategies (7.2%), gift giving (7.9%), and sexualization (11%) to be less prevalent, whereas the use of deceit (16.5%) and interest in the victim's environment (18.2%) occurred more frequently.

Finally, Schulz and colleagues (2016) assessed frequencies of different online and offline outcomes from an offender perspective. Results of their online survey showed that of those individuals reporting any kind of sexual online interaction with a minor, 10.9% indicated that the interaction took place over a prolonged period. Furthermore, 4.5% of their adult sample reported soliciting adolescents, whereas 1% solicited children. This difference in rates of victimization not only emerged due to older adolescents being accessible more readily in online environments (Wolak et al., 2008) but also are highly dependent on offenders' preferences and characteristics as well. Therefore, results from empirical investigations into victims' and offenders' characteristics will be reviewed in the next sections.

Characteristics of victims

The process of online grooming can be conceived of as resulting from a complex interaction; thus, victims' characteristics and behaviors contribute to the specific outcomes. Research has identified a set of factors that increase the likelihood of minors to be victimized in online environments. With regard to sociodemographic aspects, victim age consistently has been shown to be positively related to the experience of online victimization (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2012; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Smahel et al., 2020). Compared to younger adolescents or children, older youths use the

internet more frequently, are more likely to possess mobile devices, and, for developmental reasons, are more inclined to respond to romantic or sexual advances – all of which elevates the risk of being groomed and/or solicited (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Wolak et al., 2008). Furthermore, studies frequently found female adolescents to suffer from higher rates of grooming victimization than their male counterparts (Baumgartner et al., 2010; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Jonsson et al., 2019; Wachs et al., 2016; Whittle et al., 2013b; Wolak et al., 2004). This difference might stem from both the sexual orientation of offenders and more risky online behaviors of girls. For instance, female adolescents have been found to disclose more personal and sexual information on their social media profiles, which might increase the likelihood of being targeted as a suitable victim (Pujazon-Zazik et al., 2012).

Male victims, however, still constitute a substantial proportion of victimized youth and are possibly less prone to disclose abusive experiences due to gender-specific ideals and differences in socialization (O’Leary & Barber, 2008). Therefore it might be the case that male youth’s experience of online victimization tends to be rather under-reported. In addition, research has shown increased vulnerability for a variety of different kinds of online sexual abuse of youth identifying as sexual minority (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Sklenarova et al., 2018). Compared to heterosexual youth, queer minors use the internet more frequently in need for orientation and guidance regarding insecurities in the development of their evolving sexual orientation and identity (Park & Kwon, 2018). Thus, they are more willing to connect with like-minded others and, in turn, are exposed to elevated risks for exploitative relationships (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). In fact, Wolak and colleagues (Wolak et al., 2004) report that 25% of the chat room sex crimes they studied occurred between adolescent boys and adult men and were facilitated by the guise of supporting the teenage victims in terms of questions regarding their sexual identity.

Turning to social and environmental factors, research has emphasized the role of parental aspects. For instance, minors whose online behavior is monitored and supervised and whose caregivers show a rather privileged educational and socioeconomic profile report significantly less incidences of sexual online solicitation (Jonsson et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; Noll et al., 2013). Moreover, qualitative aspects of the relationships to parents such as perception of the relationship as conflictual or non-supportive, separated living conditions, and illness all contribute to minor’s vulnerability to being victimized since these individuals are more likely to respond to the alleged interpersonal closeness presented by offenders’ deceptive grooming

strategies (Jonsson et al., 2019; Maas et al., 2018; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Whittle et al., 2014; Wright & Donnerstein, 2014). Furthermore, social deficits outside the familial context, such as lack of supportive and caring relationships with peers, constitute social vulnerabilities that are associated with risk for victimization (Whittle et al., 2013b).

In a similar vein, individual psychological factors pertaining to mental health are related to involvement in exploitative sexual online relationships. For instance, experiences of SOG were associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and compulsive internet use (Dönmez & Soylu, 2020; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2019; Wachs et al., 2016). However, due to the cross-sectional design of these studies inferences regarding the direction of effects remain hypothetical, although a reciprocal influence can be assumed as it is the case with other forms of online victimization, i.e., pronounced levels of psychopathology increase the risk of victimization, which, in turn, increases the burden of mental health problems (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013).

Finally, on a behavioral level, potential risky online behaviors increase the likelihood of victimization. For instance, victimized youth significantly more often displayed specific behaviors such as extensive amount of time spent online, sharing personal or contact information, adding unknown strangers to one's list of friends or talking to strangers online (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2007). In terms of sexualized online behavior, exchange of messages with sexualized content and nude pictures or videos or intentionally looking for someone to talk about sex or to have cybersex with were reported significantly more often by minors who experienced online sexual abuse (Jonsson et al., 2019).

Characteristics of offenders

Currently, there is debate on whether or not online offenders are a distinct offender group or whether they can be conceived of as not fundamentally different from their offline counterparts since they simply use technological advances to commit crimes similar to the ones committed in offline environments (Tener et al., 2015). In order to approach this question, Babchishin and colleagues (2011) carried out a meta-analysis of 27 studies describing characteristics of online offenders and differences in relation to both offline offenders and males in the general population. Compared to the latter group, online offenders were more likely to never been married

($d = .49, p < .001$), unemployed ($d = .67, p < .05$) and showed higher rates of childhood sexual ($d = .58, p < .05$) and physical abuse ($d = .66, p < .001$). When face-to-face offenders served as the reference group, the authors found online offenders to be younger ($d = -.28, p < .001$) and less likely to be of a racial minority ($d = .86, p < .05$). Furthermore, online offenders showed lower rates of childhood physical abuse ($d = .29, p < .05$), higher rates of victim empathy ($d = .56, p < .05$), and more sexual deviancy ($d = -.57, p < .05$), whereas they scored lower on measures for cognitive distortions ($d = .66, p < .001$) and emotional congruence with children ($d = .28, p < .05$). However, most of the studies included in this meta-analysis failed to provide information on whether their samples consisted solely of online offenders without any prior offline offence and offline offenders with no prior online offence, respectively. Due to the possibility of online offenders having a history of hands-on crimes (Malesky, 2007), or vice versa, the two groups compared here are rather mixed offender groups, which, in turn, leads to an overestimation of effect sizes. Moreover, the results are not conclusive regarding distinct characteristics of online groomers since the samples of online offenders consisted of different offender types.

In this regard, Seto and team (2012) separately compared offline offenders to both child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) offenders and online solicitation offenders on a variety of measures. Compared to CSEM offenders, solicitation offenders were less likely to report pedophilic ($d = -2.20, p < .001$) or hebephilic interests ($d = -.57, p < .001$) and scored lower on measures for sex drive and sexual preoccupation ($d = -.53, p < .001$). In relation to offline offenders, solicitation offenders reported significantly more consumption of CSEM ($d = -1.13, p < .05$) and less stable relationships ($d = -.68, p < .05$).

In terms of demographic and socioeconomic variables, the results of Seto and colleagues are consistent with findings from a large online survey (Schulz et al., 2016) revealing that those admitting to have solicited children or adolescents were rather young and report a high degree of formal education and very low rates of unemployment. Interestingly, however, approximately 28% of this sample comprised female offenders. Although these numbers are comparable to those derived from victimization surveys (Finkelhor et al., 2000), offender samples recruited for investigations into online solicitation and online grooming are generally exclusively male. Unfortunately, Schulz and colleagues did not compare female and male participants in greater depth, albeit they found female offenders to be more likely to target male minors and equally likely to target female minors

online. Apart from this, literature on female offenders is extremely scarce and refers mostly to CSEM offenses (Gottfried et al., 2020; Martellozzo et al., 2010) or offline grooming behaviors (Kaylor et al., 2021). However, Elliott and Ashfield (2011) provide some anecdotal evidence by describing case studies of female online groomers who, in their view, were primarily motivated by socialization deficits, deviant sexual arousal, and cognitive distortions about the sexual nature of both children and males (e.g., beliefs that children can initiate sexual contacts). Taken together, the paucity of information on female online groomers points to the fact that female-perpetrated online abuses seem to be highly under-detected, under-reported, and under-studied as is the case with contact sexual abuse committed by women (Cortoni et al., 2017).

Turning to psychopathological characteristics, online groomers are sometimes referred to as pedophilic individuals (e.g., Berson, 2003), although for several reasons it seems more reasonable to assume that they fit the clinical profile of a hebephilic disorder (Stelzmann et al., 2020). For instance, Seto and colleagues (2012) found solicitation offenders to report less pedophilic but more hebephilic sexual interests than did hands-on offenders. Additionally, phallometric assessments of convicted online groomers revealed no sexual arousal towards prepubescent children (Briggs et al., 2011). Finally, 99% of minors reporting sexual online victimization were between the ages of 13 and 17 (Wolak et al., 2004), which may also be due to the fact that prepubescent victims are simply not quite accessible online and, due to developmental reasons, not inclined to establish romantic or sexual relationships online (Wolak et al., 2008).

Instead of sexual arousal to children, Briggs and colleagues (2011) report further paraphilias in around 10% of offenders as well as clinically relevant sexual compulsivity, i.e., masturbation during the online communication, engaging in cybersex with the victim, sending nude photos, or exhibitionism on web cams. The authors' behavioral analysis revealed that these behaviors were not displayed equally frequent by all offenders, which led them to a dichotomized typology of online groomers based on their assumed primary offense motivation. The first group, so-called fantasy-driven offenders, showed a multitude of sexualized behaviors and are assumed to be motivated by sexual gratification during online interactions with minors. Contact-driven offenders, on the other hand, were less likely to show sexualized behaviors but instead keen to suggest or arrange face-to-face meetings, i.e., motivated by sexual gratification offline.

Notably, this typology has been subject to some criticism since it does not unambiguously categorize online groomers into two distinct entities. In this regard it is unlikely to assume that contact-driven offenders do not experience sexual gratification during the online interaction to some degree and that, foremost, some individuals classified by Briggs and colleagues engaged in specific behaviors that were ascribed to the opposite group (Broome et al., 2018).

As a consequence, DeHart and colleagues (2016) derived a typology of offenders using cluster analysis that is somewhat similar to the one proposed by Briggs and colleagues. However, besides what they labeled cybersex offenders and schedulers (which corresponds to fantasy-driven and contact-driven, respectively) they found support for a mixed group of offenders (cybersex/schedulers) that showed a significantly higher amount of sexualized behavior during the online interaction than did the schedulers-only group, while simultaneously making attempts to arrange hands-on offences as well.

Preventive efforts

In contrast to the substantial body of literature regarding the characteristics, offenders, and victims of SOG, only few scholars explicitly focused on prevention measures and suggested different means of prevention (Berson, 2003; Whittle et al., 2013a; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

In terms of legislative instruments, most European countries as well as legislations in the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand criminalized the use of communication technologies for the purpose of SOG (Gottfried et al., 2020; Gottschalk & Hamerton, 2022; Klimek, 2020). Furthermore, technological advances regarding software that filters, blocks, or monitors the online activity of minors is considered a useful measure (Whittle et al., 2013a), although simply restricting access to certain media does not always reduce the likelihood of being victimized online and, moreover, might reduce specific online opportunities for minors as well (Mitchell et al., 2008; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). However, there is a continuous progression in the development of software that can detect sexually exploitative interactions online (e.g., Anderson et al., 2019; Ashcroft et al., 2015; Miah et al., 2011; Villatoro-Tello et al., 2012; in this volume, see Felser et al. in Chapter 4.4).

Nevertheless, raising awareness among minors, parents, and educators is crucial. In this regard, several online-safety websites emerged in the last years that provide youth with safety information and messages as well as (class-room-based) educational programs (e.g., *Thinkuknow*) (Calvete et al., 2021; Davidson et al., 2009). These educational resources, however, have been criticized for not meeting necessary standards in terms of evidence-based validation or evaluation (Brennan et al., 2019; Quayle, 2020) and do not draw on the potential of integrating insights from victims’ statements in the development of preventive programs (Redondo-Sama et al., 2014). In any case, open conversations with minors about online risks should be encouraged by caregivers and educators in order to help them identify grooming tactics, predators, and exploitative interactions as well as to make disclosure of abusive online relationships more likely (for recommendations and overview on parental and educational guidelines, cf. Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

Finally, intervention programs like the Prevention Network “*Kein Täter werden*” (meaning: “Don’t offend”, <https://www.kein-taeter-werden.de>; Beier et al., 2014) have shown that self-identified individuals with a pedophilic and/or hebephilic sexual preference disorder can be motivated to take part in a preventative treatment program in order to enhance behavioral control and reduce offense-related risk factors with the aim of preventing sexual assaults towards minors both offline and online.

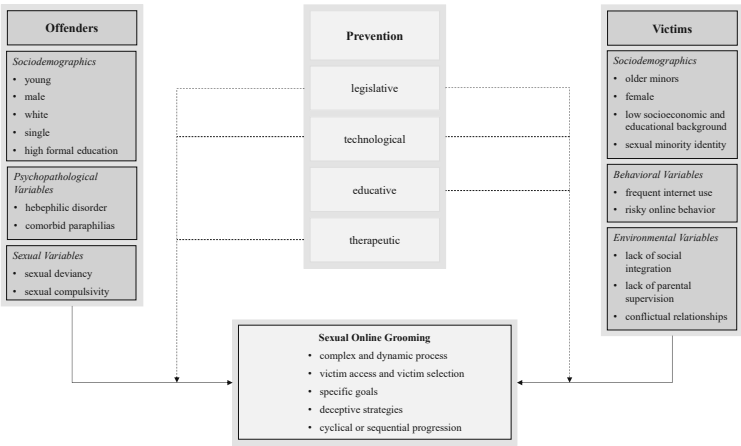


Figure 1: Key elements of sexual online grooming

Conclusion

This chapter documented the complexity and heterogeneous phenomenology of SOG (cf. figure 1) accompanied by a set of different (deceptive) strategies and techniques aimed at the facilitation and secrecy of deviant behavior. However, compared to offenders grooming offline, online offenders benefit from the unique features of the internet, which pose a facilitated environment to sexually offend against minors. Consequentially, these features also contribute to pronounced difficulties in estimating reliable numbers of offenders and victims as well as of the occurrence of online grooming interactions. In order to arrive at distinct types of SOG offenders, a multitude of typologies have been proposed that differ notably in the selection of variables and dimensions on which classification is based as well as in the methodology to derive specific offender types. Regarding SOG victims, research has provided less equivocal results and shown that older adolescents who display risky online activities and who suffer from enhanced emotional and social vulnerabilities are at heightened risk for being targeted by online predators. In order to prevent these minors from being victimized, several preventive efforts have been suggested, e.g. legislative, technological, therapeutic, and educative approaches. For all aspects of SOG outlined here more empirical efforts and clarification on some key issues are needed; however, this is especially true for the development of effective prevention measures.

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