3.2 Sexual Online Grooming of Children – A Short Overview of the Offender Literature

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Preparing potential victims for later sexual abuse has ever since been an integral part of child sexual victimization. Sexual grooming is thus a common epiphenomenon of child sexual abuse that has already been described for hands-on offenders in the pre-Internet era. With the advent of the Internet, sexual online grooming of children has sparked new interest in the topic. As a subcategory of online sexual solicitations (i.e., adults' online requests of sexual information or activities from minors irrespective of the following reaction), sexual online grooming refers to the process of approaching and gaining the trust of children for offenders' subsequent sexual gratification aiming at extended (online or offline) sexual contacts. The present chapter gives an overview over the recent literature on sexual online grooming, highlighting definitional challenges and reporting prevalence data from official crime statistics and victim surveys on the dark figure. The chapter outlines specifics of sexual online grooming and discusses offender subtypes including female groomers and grooming strategies as well as offender-directed situational prevention efforts. The chapter closes with short clinical propositions why sexual online grooming should be relevant for the treatment of sexual groomers, and it ends with an outlook on future research lines.
Keywords: online sexual grooming, child sexual abuse, sexual offending, offender

Introduction

For individuals who have offended with child sexual abuse, preparing their potential victims for the abuse and securing ongoing victim access while preventing victim disclosure and detection has ever since been an important part of the chain of offender-initiated events leading up to sexual victimization. This preparatory process is referred to as sexual grooming and has already been described for hands-on offenders in the pre-Internet era (Groth & Burgess, 1977; Ringenberg et al., 2022). It is thus not surprising that virtually every adult who has experienced past child sexual abuse retrospectively reports having experienced at least one sexual grooming behavior (Winters & Jeglic, 2022g). With the ever increasing availability of Internet access for everyone (and the data that thus have become available to researchers), this chapter will focus on *sexual online grooming of children*

(SOG; for reviews of offline sexual grooming of children see Ringenberg et al., 2022; Winters, Spriggs, & Jeglic, 2022). Hereby, SOG refers to the process of approaching and gaining the trust of children[1] online for offenders' subsequent sexual gratification. It can be construed as a subcategory of online *sexual solicitations* (i.e., adults' online requests of sexual information or activities from minors irrespective of the following reaction; De Santisteban & Guadix, 2018; Schulz et al., 2015) aiming at extended (online or offline) sexual contacts.

Typically, sexual grooming in offline and online contexts is comprised of a complex bundle of manipulative and/or deceptive tactics and strategies employed by individuals (but see Broome et al., 2024 for a critical discussion) with the aim to facilitate sexual victimization of minors, prepare their future victims for the impending sexual abuse, and prevent detection (Craven et al., 2006; Elliott, 2017; Winters, Spriggs, & Jeglic, 2022). Notably, it has been shown that sexual grooming has an incremental negative impact on victims beyond known health risks of experiencing child sexual abuse (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

The challenge of defining sexual online grooming of children

Although a large number of individuals who sexually abuse children utilize sexual grooming behaviors (between 30% and 45% according to an estimation by Winters et al., 2020), there is still only a relatively small body of empirical literature on the topic and an ongoing debate about how to define sexual grooming exactly (e.g., Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Winters; Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2022). This is largely due to the fact that – as long as concrete child sexual abuse behaviors have not yet been identified – sexual grooming is difficult to detect prospectively (Spenard & Cash, 2022; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017). In contrast to blunt (online) sexual solicitations, sexual (online) grooming is hardly observable based on a single determining behavior (Seto, 2013). Due to its *preparatory focus* on (more or less subtle) manipulation, it is likely that law enforcement (and researchers alike) will only be able to identify SOG *after* child sexual abuse has already been committed or

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1   Note that grooming behaviors in a broader sense can also be directed towards the offender himself, the familial caregivers of the victim, or the institutional/community context (Craven et al., 2006). However, these fall outside the scope of this chapter, which is focused on SOG in the narrow sense (i.e., direct grooming of the potential victim).

clear indications of offenders' sexual intent have become identifiable. Thus, to a certain degree SOG and normal adult-child interactions may resemble each other with the former differing from the latter only by its sexually deviant intention (although SOG may still remain below the threshold of criminal [sexual] behavior). Therefore, it is to be expected that adult-child activities will be interpreted in a different context once concrete child sexual abuse behavior has been identified (Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017).

Typical offender activities common both to sexual on- and offline grooming (Ringenberg et al., 2022) consist of attempts to entice children into abusive sexual activities with an adult. This can be accompanied by various forms of coercion. The aim of these behaviors is to gain trust of the potential victims and to isolate children via depriving them of their social support and protection by their peers and family. To this end, secrecy is a frequently employed means to secure privacy and solitary access to the groomed child by the offender. To facilitate the ultimate aim of child sexual abuse, the whole process is progressively sexualized with the offender trying to introduce and facilitate sexual activity with the child while desensitizing the potential victim (Elliott, 2017).

One of the challenges in defining sexual grooming stems from the fact that it is a complex sequence of varying approach behaviors that is dependent on the person seeking to commit child sexual abuse, the targeted victims and their living circumstances, and the situational grooming context. Here, for example, the age and gender of the groomed children, their relationship with the abusers, the offenders' effectiveness in reaching their goals, the offenders' fears of detection, and the time frame of the grooming attempts may play important roles in determining the exhibition of the specific sexual grooming behaviors. In line with this notion, Winters, Kaylor et al. (2022) have proposed a universal definition of sexual grooming behaviors based on their five-stage sexual grooming model, which is an attempt at integrating prior grooming models (Winters et al., 2020; for a detailed overview of sexual grooming models see Winters & Jeglic, 2022a):

"Sexual grooming is the deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection. [1] Prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, the would-be sexual abuser may select a victim, [2] gain access to and isolate the minor, [3] develop trust with the minor and often their guardians, community, and youth-serving institutions, and [4] desensitize the minor to sexual content and physical contact. [5] Post-abuse, the offender may

use maintenance strategies on the victim to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure" (Winters, Kaylor et al., 2022, p. 7; the numbering of the five model stages in brackets have been added by the author for ease of comprehension).

This five-stage model has been validated using expert ratings of the relevance of single behaviors for sexual grooming of children (Winters et al., 2020) and has informed the development and pilot-testing of the Sexual Grooming Scale-Victim Version (Winters & Jeglic, 2022g). In a recent study designed to identify red flag indicators of sexual grooming of children based on their scale, Jeglic and colleagues (2023) found that, although potential sexual grooming indicators were highly overlapping between comparison samples of individuals with or without a history of sexual abuse as a child, indicators clearly differed in terms of reporting frequencies and the sheer amount of experienced behaviors. Expectedly, the most distinguishing behaviors that differentiated non-abusive adult child-interactions from sexual grooming behaviors were related to desensitizing for physical touch and sexual content, separating the child from its peers and family, and post-abuse maintenance. These findings may pinpoint an important oversight in conceptualizing such a broad definition of sexual grooming. Elliott (2017) already alerted to the fact that it is equally important to define what sexual grooming is *not*. To this end he proposed that

"any definition of grooming should distinguish it from other processes in the commission of a sexual offense […]. The grooming process, however, should be distinct from any targeting or solicitation phase, since a person can only be groomed after that person has been targeted for approach and contact has been made. Similarly, distinction should be drawn from any post offense maintenance phase" (Elliott, 2017, p. 84).

Following this important recommendation, the first and the last stage in Winters, Kaylor et al.'s (2022) five-stage model might be considered irrelevant. Removing these stages should increase the distinctiveness of the grooming definition by focusing on the core sexual grooming activities of a) maximizing victim potentiality and b) careful disclosure of the offender's ultimate sexual intentions (Elliott, 2017).

Prevalence of sexual grooming of children

Official crime data

Hitherto, prevalence data for sexual (online) grooming largely rest on educated guesses and are likely not reliable. The official prevalence of sexual grooming of children is dependent on national legislation, which differs in terms of the penalized behaviors, age thresholds, and law enforcement activity. In Germany, only recently in 2021 a law specific to sexual grooming of children (victims below 14 years of age) has been introduced (§176b Penal Code; for an overview of the complex US grooming legislation see Winters & Jeglic, 2022b). Prior to this date, relevant behaviors had been subsumed under a subsection of behavior penalized by the general law against child sexual abuse (§176 Penal Code). With 3,539 cases of sexual grooming of children prosecuted by the police, respective official crime statistics (Bundeskriminalamt, 2021[2]) revealed an increase of 35% compared to the prior year. Since 2016, sexual grooming of children has been following an exponential increase of officially detected cases in Germany, and the caseload for law enforcement has grown thrice as large as it had been a decade ago. However, although most Western jurisdictions have some form of legislation that enables to prosecute sexual grooming behaviors, the biggest problem from the perspective of law enforcement is how to prove legally relevant intent and behavior *before* the act of child sexual abuse has occurred – as laid out above referring to the problems of defining sexual grooming of children.

Victim crime survey data – the dark figure of sexual online grooming of children

With the advent of the Internet, adolescents' (below 18 years of age) unwanted sexual solicitations of any kind have become a common experience. According to a recent meta-analysis, approximately one in nine juveniles faces such sexual solicitations (Madigan et al., 2018). Specifically, in a large sample of more than 1,100 North-American undergraduate students (Greene-Calozzi et al., 2020), one quarter retrospectively reported having conversed with adult strangers online as a minor. Out of these, 65% had

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2 Offence key #131400 in the official German crime statistics.

experienced sexual solicitation from adult strangers and 23% indicated having had long, intimate conversations with them that involved SOG. Notably, 38% of those who had engaged in such an intimate online conversation met the adult stranger in-person, and 68% of those who had met their adult stranger conversation partners reported physical sexual intercourse with them. In a recent nationally representative US survey of young adults' retrospectively reported childhood experiences of online and technology-facilitated abuse, 5.4% out of a sample of $N = 2,639$ participants indicated SOG from groomers they were predominantly acquainted with (Finkelhor et al., 2022). On average, girls experience higher levels of SOG, and SOG levels generally increase with victim age, while the strategy of progressive sexualization showed the closest associations with online sexual solicitations and sexual interactions (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021).

Specifics of sexual online grooming of children

In their scoping review, Ringenberg and colleagues (2022) identified behaviors that were specific for cases of SOG. Although pre-Internet child sexual abusers also needed to take precautions in order to manage the level of detection risk they were willing to put up with, online child sexual groomers have to engage in much higher levels of risk assessment as they cannot be sure with whom they are interacting when engaging in anonymous contacts across the Internet. Not only that online child sexual groomers cannot directly ascertain whether the personal information shared by the interlocutor is valid, they also have to be certain that they are not getting trapped by law enforcement personnel posing as underage decoys. Moreover, online child sexual groomers need to be aware that the evolving possibilities of the digital media from their point of view at the same time offer new ways to leave traces of their SOG attempts that can be used as digital evidence against them by law enforcement (e.g., chat protocols, IP-addresses, profile data, identity profiling from online behaviors, tracking of exchanged pornographic media, etc.).

At the same time, SOG offers new possibilities particularly for speeding up the grooming process (as well as the risk assessment of the victim's environment which often starts in the first 20% of the conversations; Black et al., 2015). For example, whereas sexual offline grooming commonly was a slow process over months or years, online access shows that SOG may take only hours and seldomly lasts longer than weeks. Moreover, in the

pre-Internet era, substance use was a means of lowering offender inhibitions, whereas in the post-Internet era substances are used to disinhibit the victim. Additionally, as physical proximity is not a necessity in SOG, offenders often groom multiple prospective victims at the same time, while using online applications and cell phones ensures near constant victim access (which is difficult to achieve in offline grooming). During the pre-Internet era sexualizing grooming behavior was characterized by pushing the boundaries of physical proximity from innocuous to inappropriate touching, whereas in the online environment this shifted to crossing the boundaries between exchanging innocuous vs. sexual conversation and media content (Ringenberg et al., 2022). The possibility to speed up the process of SOG in online environments leads to the paradoxical finding that most online sexual solicitations follow a rather blunt and direct approach where the sexual intent of the offender becomes apparent very early in the process (Winters et al. [2017] report introduction of sexual content in the first 30 minutes of child decoy SOG transcripts in 69% of cases they examined). This renders it questionable whether such "blitz"-type approaching behavior still counts as SOG (Kloess et al., 2019), thus once more highlighting the above mentioned problems in operationalizing SOG.

In sum, as corroborated by a small scale qualitative interview study from Stelzmann and colleagues (2020), it seems likely that offenders perceive the online environment as relatively safe medium for their purposes, offering the advantages of 1) easy access to potential victims, 2) a low contact threshold, and 3) facilitated use of manipulative SOG strategies. This resonates with the *Lawless Space Theory* of child sexual exploitation material use (Steel et al., 2023), which posits that online offenders will utilize a perceived lawless space that best meets their psychosexual needs in the most frictionless way and where habituation will reduce the perceived risk while normalization will increase comfort in a particular lawless online space. This way, SOG may be framed as a transitory phase between "passive" online (i.e., child sexual exploitation material use) and "active" on- or offline (i.e., direct manipulation of children into sexual abuse activity) victimization of children (Fortin et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that SOG offenders are not necessarily at the same time consumers of child sexual exploitation material and vice versa.

Sexual online grooming offender subtypes

A popular distinction in SOG subtypes refers to fantasy- vs. contact-driven offenders as it turned out that not all individuals who sexually offend online are indeed interested in gaining offline physical access to their victims. Briggs and colleagues (2011) thus distinguished between 1) *fantasy-driven offenders* reaching sexual gratification with behaviors restricted to the online environment (e.g., cybersex, voyeuristic and exhibitionistic online behaviors) as opposed to 2) *contact-driven offenders* aiming for sexual fulfillment in the offline world yet starting to desensitize their online victims for contact sexual abuse in the online environment and trying to progress to physical offline meetings. This simple categorical distinction between fantasy-driven (i.e., non-contact) and contact-driven offending behavior, however, has been criticized for not reflecting the multiply of child sexual exploitation offenses that have become possible since the advent of the Internet (i.e., any single or combined behavior involving consuming, sharing, producing, selling, and streaming of, or taking part in, child sexual exploitation material), thus questioning the usefulness of this popular dichotomy.

Empirically, it turned out that the proposed distinction is ambiguous as both groups (at least) initially engage in subjectively sexually rewarding online behaviors that only under specific circumstances may lead to offline sexual abuse. More importantly, no clear SOG pattern distinguishing between both types could be identified (Broome et al., 2018); thus more fine-grained typologies have been proposed[3] such as 1) *cybersex-only offenders* (fantasy-driven), 2) *cybersex/schedulers* (mixed type), 3) *schedulers* (contact-driven), and 4) *buyers* (contact-driven; DeHart et al., 2017). Broome and colleagues (2018) argued that an older typology proposed by the European Online Grooming Project (Webster et al., 2012) might be more useful: 1) *Intimacy-seeking groomers* view contact with victims as being consenting and intimate and have frequent and prolonged conversations with sexual content being introduced slowly, leading to the arrangement of offline meetings to further develop the relationship. 2) *Adaptable groomers* regard their victims as being mature and capable for consent while limiting the development of online relationships and focusing on detection risk management. Resembling DeHart and colleagues' (2017) cybersex/schedulers group, they adapt their communication style to the victim with length of

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3 For a detailed overview of sexual grooming typologies see Winters and Jeglic (2022d).

contact depending on victims' responses. This group presents as a mixed-type of online/offline offenders. Finally, 3) *hypersexual groomers* introduce sexual content very early in the grooming process and are in possession of child sexual exploitation material and extreme adult pornography. They engage in identity deception and do not try to develop relationships with their victims whom they desensitize using sexual chat to reach online sexual gratification as fast as possible. Suggestions of offline contact occur less frequently than in the other two subtypes (Webster et al., 2012).

Female sexual online grooming offenders

Although females who sexually offend are a relatively rare phenomenon in general, there is preliminary evidence, though limited to case studies and media reports, that some women also employ sexual grooming of children primarily as teacher-lover or sex trafficker subtypes (Kaylor et al., 2022). Preliminary sexual grooming-specific prevalence data show that from 115 examined victims of sexual grooming of children, 11 (9.8%) reported that they had been groomed by female offenders (Winters & Jeglic, 2022f). Similar to male groomers, their most frequently used SOG behavior was related to desensitization to sexual content and physical touch with the large majority of female groomers having exposed their naked bodies to their victims. Notably, many female groomers in this study were reported to be minors themselves (Winters & Jeglic, 2022f). Moreover, in a review of all female-perpetrated child sexual abuse cases from 2000 to 2016 in the UK (Darling et al., 2018), the majority were committed by educators and with indications of sexual grooming being present in two thirds of all cases. Here, the data suggested that the female offenders established close relationships with their victims and sent flirtatious text messages before the abuse occurred.

Sexual online grooming strategies

In terms of SOG offender strategies, two broad approaches can be distinguished based on a sample of $N = 81$ cases of real child victims involving SOG (Joleby et al., 2021): using pressure (i.e., threats, bribes, or nagging) vs. sweet-talk (i.e., flattery, acting as friend, expressing love), with the former being used roughly twice as frequently as the latter. On average,

offenders who used pressure were younger and targeted older children than those who used sweet-talk (Joleby et al., 2021). Using the more fine-grained Multidimensional Grooming Questionnaire consisting of five subscales, Gámez-Guadix and colleagues (2021) found the following prevalence rates for specific SOG tactics (as reported by N = 1,704 boys and girls aging from 12 to 15 years, who had been sampled from randomly selected Spanish schools): interest in the victim's environment (18%), use of deception (17%), sexualization (11%), gift giving (8%), and aggression (7%).

Most research shows that SOG tactics (except from the use of technical possibilities of the Internet such as sharing digital media) are comparable to offline settings. As Winters, Spriggs et al. (2022) describe, future child sexual abusers initially aim for selecting physically or psychologically and socially vulnerable victims who are most susceptible to their manipulations (e.g., young, small, socially withdrawn children who lack self-esteem and parental supervision). This is followed by attempts to gain access to the victim and to (physically and emotionally) isolate the targeted victims from their parents by, for instance, providing the child with deprived emotional needs and/or manipulating their caretakers. In the next step, trust and a close relationship as well as cooperation with the child are sought to develop. For example, this is often realized via pleasant interactions with the child, posing as an insider of the child's community and making the child feel cherished and special. Once the relationship has been built up, sexual conversation and physical proximity will increasingly be introduced in order to desensitize the child for the sexually abusive intentions of the perpetrator. To this end, the groomer may use sexualized joking and conversation, pretentious sexual education, or the introduction of child sexual exploitation material while inappropriate physical contact will be escalated. Finally, subsequent to the sexual abuse, the abuser may strive to maintain ongoing access to the victim (e.g., by encouraging secrecy about the abuse, normalizing the abuse, distorting standards for physical contact between children and adults, making children feel responsible for the abusive behavior, or threatening them).

These tactics have been backed up by linguistic research that showed frequently used word collocations in SOG mapping onto the different strategic elements such as isolation, approach, sexual gratification, and compliance testing (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). In terms of victim sex differences, offenders targeting girl victims built more rapport and were less sexually explicit, thus approaching sexual topics more indirectly and invested more time into risk assessment, than offenders targeting boy victims, whereas the

latter group was older but pretended to be younger (in a child decoy study from van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016).

In sum, while much of the perpetrator research is concerned with theoretical and conceptual characteristics of sexual grooming of children (e.g., Winters, Kaylor et al., 2022), the resulting digital artefacts of SOG such as communication transcripts generated by law officers posing as child decoys on the Internet (e.g., Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020), or small-scale interview studies with SOG offenders (e.g., Stelzmann et al., 2020), there is still a dearth of larger-scale quantitative empirical research that directly samples groomers from community or forensic populations. Given the fact that most research on SOG offender strategies relies on studies using interactions with police decoys posing as victims, initial evidence that SOG involving real children includes more overt persuasion and extortion than in decoy settings has to be taken into account (Joleby et al., 2021).

Prevention of sexual online grooming of children

As SOG occurs prior to child sexual abuse, it should be of high interest for offence prevention. So far, prevention efforts for SOG have primarily concentrated on primary prevention efforts addressing the general population of youth and their parents before SOG occurs. Empirically, a systematic review shows that some educational approaches for the prevention of online child sexual abuse are indeed able to demonstrate knowledge retainment for online safety; however, this was not accompanied by reductions in risky online behaviors (Patterson et al., 2022). As of yet, methodologically rigorous tests of the effectiveness of such educational programs in reducing online child sexual abuse (and, specifically, SOG victimization) are absent from the literature. In terms of offender-directed secondary prevention (i.e., prevention of situationally imminent or ongoing abuse), Kamar and colleagues (2022) designed a real-life online experiment during which three honeypot chat bots simulated young female users in popular online chatrooms frequently used by youth and sexual online groomers over a period of ten weeks. Chat bots had been experimentally manipulated to convey 1) an active guardianship style to a grooming suspect, 2) a passive style of parental guardianship, or 3) no guardianship as a control group. Findings indicated that online socializing with peers in the absence of any parental supervision increased persistent SOG. In contrast, SOG was less likely to be continued once groomers were led to believe that their targets were guarded

by active or passive parental presence. This line of research on situational prevention approaches seems promising in terms of being incorporated into technical solutions (e.g., detection software for online SOG such as Microsoft's Project Artemis; Microsoft, 2020) and behavioral trainings on safe online communication for parents and adolescents alike.

Sexual online grooming of children and treatment

It has been proposed that sexual (online) grooming behavior should become a necessary part of the treatment of individuals who have sexually offended as well as of victims of sexual (online) grooming (Craven et al., 2006; Winters et al., 2020). In offender treatment, the identification of individual grooming tactics can inform therapeutic interventions targeting sexual-offense-relevant cognitions and should be helpful in determining dynamic risk factors as well as the underlying motivational drivers and/or criminogenic (as well as general human) needs of a child sexual abusing individual. This information might thus also be utilized as an integral part of risk management activities such as, for example, identifying critical phases from the offender perspective for relapse prevention. By recognizing and gaining insight into SOG strategies that offenders are engaging in to facilitate their offenses, they might be better prepared to deal with problematic sexual needs in the future (Winters & Jeglic, 2022c).

Future directions

Child sexual abuse has likely always included sexual grooming of children – as such it is an "old" phenomenon known to clinicians and researchers in the field. However, reading the literature on SOG one realizes that this is a topic that has sparked a lot of interest since the advent of the Internet. One gets the impression that theoretical and overview articles on the topic (including the present one here) outnumber primary (especially offender-related) empirical research on SOG. It becomes obvious that SOG is a multifaceted phenomenon that is difficult to define and, thus, hard to subject to sound research and effective legal prosecution. In such a preliminary stage of research where distinct sexual grooming definitions are scientifically not agreed upon and well-established measures of SOG are lacking, many pressing forensic research questions remain yet empirically

unanswered. For example, it is unknown whether and how SOG is related to reoffending risk. Other open lines of research may be seen in extending online sexual grooming to juvenile (as the most [sexually] active population on the Internet), adult, and female perpetrators of sexual grooming as well as to other contexts such as organizations, institutions, and organized crime. Quantitative longitudinal studies on the time course of SOG and its specific outcomes are virtually non-existent. Thus, a more refined understanding of the construct of SOG might become an integral factor in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, assessment, and treatment of sexual offenses (Winters & Jeglic, 2022e). However, future research will have to show whether the construct of sexual (online) grooming of children will indeed turn out as a theoretically valuable, practically useful, and empirically corroborated addition to the literature or whether it rather remains an epiphenomenon of sexual offending (against children).

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