

Online child sexual exploitation

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Online Child Sexual Exploitation: Prevalence, Process, Offender Characteristics

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Abstract

This review provides an overview of current knowledge and understanding of the process of sexual grooming and exploitation of children via the Internet. Specifically, the prevalence of online sexual grooming and exploitation is explored, as well as associated challenges relating to the identification of its occurrence. This is complemented by a detailed outline and discussion of the process, both online and in the physical world, and legal responses to this phenomenon. A number of factors are examined to provide an explanation of the facilitating and contributing role they may play in offense processes online. Finally, current typologies are discussed in relation to characteristics of Internet offenders in general, and ‘groomers’/chat room offenders specifically. This review concludes by offering suggestions for future research.

Keywords: sexual grooming, online sexual exploitation, Internet communications

Online Child Sexual Exploitation: Prevalence, Process, Offender Characteristics

With increasing reports of solicitation and exploitation experienced by young people online, the use of the Internet by individuals who seek to initiate contact with children for sexual purposes is of concern, and requires attention. There is no agreed definition of the term Internet offending, and it is therefore used to describe a range of Internet-facilitated offenses (Taylor & Quayle, 2010). Durkin (1997) proposes various ways in which the Internet may be misused by individuals with a deviant sexual interest in children: (a) exchanging child pornography; (b) locating potential victims for sexual abuse; (c) engaging in inappropriate sexual communication – here, sexually explicit material may be used by these individuals for desensitizing purposes, functioning to normalize certain behaviors and sexual activity to lower the victim's inhibition (Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007; Quayle, Holland, Linehan, & Taylor, 2000); and (d) corresponding with other individuals who have a deviant sexual interest in children. The interaction and exchange of information between these individuals may occur via different computer-mediated communication platforms, such as chat rooms, newsgroups, discussion and bulletin boards, or e-mail (Durkin, 1997), and more recently social networking sites.

Traditional pedophile organizations advocate pedophilia and provide information, support and validation for individuals with a deviant sexual interest in children (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011). Websites, such as BoyWiki and GirlWiki, contain literature supporting pedophilia (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008), thereby pseudo-legitimizing, facilitating and reinforcing this proclivity for those who have it. The Internet therefore enables easier and faster distribution of this type of material and the communication among pedophile communities across national and international boundaries (Kierkegaard, 2008). It may further be used to fulfill needs in relation to pornography, erotic text-material, and a like-minded, supportive community, allowing for the validation and reinforcement of cognitions and

behavior (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008). Such communities also offer advice regarding access to contacts/potential victims, as well as how to avoid detection (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2008; Quayle & Taylor, 2001).

According to the "Internet World Stats" (2012), over two billion people used the Internet world-wide by 30th June 2012. Cooper, Golden, and Marshall (2006) argue that with the ever-increasing proliferation of web users, the number of people using the Internet for online sexual activity has increased dramatically. This is further reflected in the rising number of children reporting experiences of sexual solicitation and exposure to sexually explicit material (CEOP, 2010). Cooper et al. (2006) further argue that the Internet provides users with the opportunity to pursue sexual contacts from their homes, and engage in a great variety of sexual activities and associated behaviors online. This is facilitated by the "Triple A Engine" (Cooper, 1998), namely accessibility, affordability and anonymity, whereby vast amounts of varied sexual content can be accessed by anyone presenting as either themselves or as an online persona, at any particular time, and at affordable costs.

Research has focused on the area of child sexual offending online and ways in which the Internet is used to commit offenses surrounding the production and distribution of child pornography (Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008; Elliott & Beech, 2009; Quayle & Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Quayle, 2010). Considerable attention has also been paid to explaining and furthering the understanding of child pornography offenses in order to inform risk management and preventative strategies to protect children, as well as to aid the detection of offenders who commit such offenses. While the concept of sexual grooming in the physical world and online has been considered, most research conducted into the area of Internet sexual offending merely refers to it as part of a wider picture of offending behavior (e.g., an offender seeking contact with a child for the production of child pornography). Current research on this specific area largely focuses on explaining and understanding the

phenomenon of offenses related to child pornography, and often neglects to consider offense-specific processes, such as sexual grooming (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006).

Sexual grooming refers to the process whereby an offender prepares a child for sexual abuse (Craven et al., 2006); so far, the process of sexual grooming as an underlying dynamic in online offender-victim interactions remains practically unexplained. Hence, literature on this specific area is sparse considering the rapidly increasing number of incidents of adults using the Internet to befriend and exploit children in various ways (for example, for sexual gratification, production and distribution of images of a sexually explicit nature, and contact which may facilitate, or lead to sexual offenses). We will now examine the prevalence of online sexual grooming and exploitation of children via the Internet. For the purpose of the following discussion, the term ‘child’ refers to any minor person under the age of 16 years, whereas the term ‘young child’ denotes any child under the age of 12 years. The term ‘adolescent’ will be used in places that specifically refer to the age group of 12- to 18-year olds, in particular in the context of online sexual exploitation.

Prevalence of Online Sexual Grooming and Exploitation

The under-reporting of sexual abuse has been a long-standing challenge (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussali, & Tapp, 2008), which also extends to the Internet. Estimating the prevalence of online sexual exploitation of children is dependent on the child’s awareness and recognition of the problem, as well as knowledge or availability of support mechanisms to facilitate reporting of problematic or negative experiences (Bryce, 2010). Similarities between online sexual grooming, and both general online relationship forming and sexual experimentation, may hinder recognition of the problem, particularly in cases where children are not aware of conversing with an adult or someone with a sexual motive. Additionally, interactions may never progress to become sexually explicit, or in cases

where concerns or suspicions arise, the offender may employ coercive, threatening strategies to prevent disclosure by the child (Bryce, 2010).

Despite potential difficulties in terms of recognition and reporting of online sexual grooming, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP, 2010) announced increasing incidence of allegations in relation to this phenomenon between 2009 and 2010. Of a total of 2,391 reports received by the public, 64% related to grooming, making grooming the most reported activity to CEOP (CEOP, 2010). CEOP (2010) further highlights that an increasing number of reports involve social networking sites and the use of webcams to sexually exploit children. This includes causing/inciting to watch sexually explicit material and performing sexual acts. These figures are also in accordance with reported rates of problematic online experiences by adolescents elsewhere. According to Ybarra, Leaf, and Diener-West (2004), 97% of those between the ages of 12 and 18 use the Internet in the United States, with 20% having received online sexual solicitations between 1999 and 2000. Eighty-two percent of young children between the ages of 9 and 11, as well as 95% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16 have used the Internet in Sweden in 2006, of which 32% reported to have received online sexual solicitations (Shannon, 2008).

Such reports have led to a number of Internet safety initiatives (e.g., Thinkuknow (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP)¹); NetSmartz (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)² & Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA)³); EUs Safer Internet Plus Programme) to educate children on safe Internet use, as well as the marketing of a variety of software programs (e.g., Keylogger; Netscape Nanny), facilitating parents to control or supervise their children's activities online (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004). Although actual incidence rates of exploited children remain largely unknown (Berson, 2003), the increase in problematic or negative experiences online, and receiving of sexual solicitations, illustrate the level of prevalence of intended contact seeking

and potential sexual exploitation. These figures, however, may still be a severe under-representation of the problem. Coupled with the reality that 66% of adolescents regularly use the Internet to access chat rooms (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008), this provides further evidence of the challenges surrounding early detection and intervention. It is therefore of importance that the process of sexual grooming via the Internet is thoroughly examined with the aim to further understanding and knowledge of this process, thereby informing current approaches to an adequate response to online sexual exploitation. In order to present a detailed outline of the process of online sexual grooming, we will also draw on the literature of sexual grooming in the physical world. Following this, we will discuss legal responses to this phenomenon, and examine a range of factors that may play a role in offense processes online.

The Process of Sexual Grooming

The term 'grooming' has generally been used to describe offenders' actions during the preparatory stages of sexual abuse (McAlinden, 2006), defined as "the situation whereby a potential offender will set up opportunities to abuse by gaining the trust of the child in order to prepare them for abuse" (p. 340), either directly or via computer-mediated communication (McAlinden, 2006). Despite the significance of sexual grooming in the onset of sexual abuse, academic research has largely ignored this process (McAlinden, 2006). The literature varies in its consideration of the onset and ending of the grooming process, with Gillespie (2002) arguing that it would not be feasible to precisely define when 'grooming' starts or when it finishes, as it may be a lengthy process that involves many different stages and acts.

These, as well as the general dynamics of an interaction, may be of a subtle nature, and a sexual motive therefore not immediately apparent. Furthermore, an offender's motivation may change over the course of an interaction, and specific grooming behaviors may not actually emerge until the later stages. Therefore, the grooming process is possibly

best thought of as a re-occurring theme associated with a certain set of strategies and behaviors offenders may employ and engage in during different stages of an interaction. Such may emerge and become apparent during preparatory stages preceding exploitation, but also during stages following exploitation in order to re-establish a relationship, particularly in cases where the victim shows signs of distress. This serves the purpose of preparing a child and gaining their compliance for future exploitation. Yet, a key variable in the grooming process, widely referred to across the literature, is the building, and subsequent abuse, of trust (McAlinden, 2006; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004).

The available literature on the actual process and underlying dynamics of sexual grooming mainly focuses on this phenomenon in the physical world. Craven et al. (2006) were among the first to address the issues surrounding poor definition by proposing a new definition of sexual grooming as:

“A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender’s abusive pattern, as it may be used as a mean of justifying and denying their actions” (p. 297).

Despite its focus on sexual grooming in the physical world, the definition highlights the complexity of the grooming process, and illustrates some of its important features, such as an offender’s goal to gain a child’s trust and compliance while preventing disclosure. The term ‘child’ may be seen as slightly misleading in that it alludes to any minor person under the age of 16 years. It therefore fails to specifically highlight the age group representing adolescents, who are particularly affected by sexual exploitation via the Internet, as they appear to be more prevalent than young children (Dombrowski et al., 2004; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2012; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra,

2008). Yet, the number of young children accessing the Internet is ever-increasing, with children as young as eight years old reportedly using the Internet regularly (Marcum, 2007; Shannon, 2008). It is therefore important that pre-adolescent children are considered potential victims as well.

Types of Sexual Grooming

Three different types of grooming have been identified: (a) self-grooming, (b) grooming the environment and significant others, and (c) grooming the child (Craven et al., 2006). Self-grooming refers to an offender's justification or denial of their offending behavior (Craven et al., 2006), and may be related to overcoming internal inhibitors (Finkelhor, 1984). Self-grooming is therefore argued to play a significant role in the initial, preparatory stages prior to an offense being initiated by an offender. In terms of grooming the environment and significant others (e.g., parents, carers and teachers), it has been suggested that an offender may target single-parent families, where parents are often absent, thereby leaving children with less protection (Craven et al., 2006; Finkelhor, 1984). Victim identification and selection is based on ease of access and vulnerability, as well as general appeal (McAlinden, 2006). Child vulnerabilities may include poor relationships with parents or friends, bullying and problems at school (Shannon, 2008; Whittle et al., 2012), as well as characteristics, such as low self-esteem, behavior difficulties, emotional suffering, and immaturity (Dombrowski et al., 2004; Whittle et al., 2012). Once an offender has identified a potential victim, they may proceed by becoming integrated in a particular community or society, adapting roles in positions of trust and in close proximity to children (Sullivan & Beech, 2004). Such communities or societies may include sport clubs and youth-oriented organizations. Significant others who are close to a potential victim may be groomed in order to create opportunities for access and abuse. Offenders often present as very helpful and

charming, and are considered part of the community. They are therefore shown and met with trustworthiness and acceptance by parents, carers and teachers (Craven et al., 2006).

McAlinden (2006) argues that the process of grooming the environment and significant others serves the purpose of establishing confidence and trust in order to secure cooperation in gaining access to a potential victim, while minimizing “the likelihood of discovery and disclosure by creating an atmosphere of normality and acceptance” (p. 348). To avoid detection and reporting by the victim, offenders may employ a range of strategies in order to achieve this. These mainly involve the developing of an exclusive relationship and building of trust. This is achieved by making a child feel special, as well as providing attention and appreciation (Shannon, 2008). While offenders may engage in several interactions simultaneously, specific strategies are employed to portray the false impression of a special bond and unique relationship with one particular child. This may consist of sharing interests and giving presents (Shannon, 2008), but may also be in the form of developing control and isolating a child from their family and significant others, who would otherwise serve as protection (Craven et al., 2006; Shannon, 2008). Such strategies aim to minimize the likelihood of reporting by a child to their family or significant others. Further to this, offenders may begin to violate boundaries by introducing sexual themes into the relationship and gradually building upon these, thereby desensitizing a child to sexual activities (Craven et al., 2006). First, this may consist of solely non-sexual touching, and subsequently progress to sexual touching and other acts, such as undressing and exposing themselves (Craven et al., 2006). The introduction of sexually explicit material may serve to normalize sexual behavior within the relationship (Shannon, 2008).

Offenders continuously strive to increase a child’s compliance and cooperation in order to overcome their resistance and avoid disclosure. This may be achieved by treating ongoing activities as secrets, which acts to create a barrier and hinders a child to confide in

others (Craven et al., 2006). Children are keen to please adults, and are therefore likely to present as compliant when asked to maintain secrecy. However, offenders may also employ coercive strategies in order to retain a child's compliance. These may be in the form of threats involving a child's parents, harm, violence or bribes, such as material gifts or other privileges (Cossins, 2002; Craven et al., 2006). As a result, feelings of guilt and responsibility have been reported as a common experience among children, in particular if coerced into performing sexual acts. This may be reinforced by offenders employing more psychological strategies in the form of blaming and complicity (Cossins, 2002; Craven et al., 2006).

Others have explored grooming strategies employed by offenders in order to gain a child's compliance in the context of sexual abuse in sport (Brackenridge et al., 2008). These involved the violating of boundaries of acceptable behavior and personal space, as well as using verbal familiarity. Offenders often employed verbal or physical force, and emotional manipulation or blackmail, particularly in cases where favors were exchanged for sexual acts. Especially in the context of sexual abuse in sport, the use of authority and power by offenders to their advantage is apparent in the athletes' compliance as a result of striving for success, and dependency on their coach/mentor to achieve this.

It is therefore commonly understood that the process of sexual grooming creates a relationship of power and imbalance between an offender and their victim that leaves children feeling confused, in denial and embarrassed, as well as blaming themselves (Cossins, 2002).

Online Grooming

Gillespie (2002) argues that the activity of sexual grooming is not new, but that the Internet provides new and distinct opportunities for the sexual exploitation of children, of which grooming is frequently a pre-requisite. Of relevance in explaining this phenomenon is Finkelhor's (1984) Precondition Model, which highlights a temporal sequence of four

preconditions that may lead to sexual offending against children by linking etiological factors to aspects of the offense process. The four stages to sexual offending are: (a) an offender's motivation to sexually abuse, (b) overcoming their internal inhibitors, (c) overcoming external inhibitors, and (d) overcoming the resistance of the child. Although it was developed to explain contact sexual offense processes against children, it is also useful in highlighting the stages and processes involved in online sexual grooming and associated offending behaviors.

The model proposes that *an offender's motivation to sexually abuse* a child is associated with three distinct motives: (a) *emotional congruence* refers to an offender's emotional identification with children as a result of meeting his/her needs more optimally than adults; (b) *deviant sexual arousal* to children; (c) *blockage* refers to the inability to meet emotional and sexual needs in adaptive ways as a result of stressful or unusual situations. Blockages may be temporary or persistent and of a developmental (e.g., fear of intimacy) or situational (e.g., relationship problems) nature, or a combination of both. Particularly for offenders whose normal sexual outlets are blocked, the Internet may serve as a medium for sexual gratification due to its anonymous nature and the easy access to a wide range of sexually explicit material, as well as available contacts for sexual purposes. This has been reported in playing a facilitating role in overcoming internal inhibitions (Alexy, Burgess, & Baker, 2005; Quayle et al., 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2001). Finkelhor (1984) also suggests the presence of situational factors, such as stress, and offense-supportive attitudes to hinder an individual's self-regulatory mechanisms, and thereby enabling the *overcoming of internal inhibitors*.

Overcoming external inhibitors refers to surmounting constraints and obstacles in the environment in order to create an opportunity for sexual abuse. This may involve the grooming of a potential victim and the environment in which he or she participates. However,

the process of sexual grooming via the Internet is proposed to involve less effort, by presenting other kinds of obstacles to an offender in terms of grooming the environment for access to a potential victim. This is argued to be due to the anonymous nature of the Internet and the ease of establishing contact with a wide range of users via various communication platforms (Wolak et al., 2008).

In terms of *overcoming a child's resistance*, O'Connell (2003) is one of the few who has researched the process of sexual grooming and exploitation via the Internet, providing an initial introduction to the complex nature of this phenomenon. Posing as a child, the researcher gathered evidence to describe the activities and different strategies offenders may engage in and employ to incite a child to meet in the physical world for sexual purposes. Preparatory activities offenders may engage in prior to approaching a child in a chat room include the compiling of a profile that provides a description about their persona, and is accessible by other users. O'Connell (2003) describes the process of offenders masquerading as a child persona with the aim to attract users of a similar age and opposite sex, and awaiting a child's response in order to pursue a conversation. According to O'Connell (2003), this may be pursued on the basis of a child's answers in response to a number of vetting questions. A different approach strategy may consist of 'lurking' in a chat room observing and assessing other ongoing conversations, with the offender then choosing to initiate a conversation with a particular child by sending a private message.

O'Connell (2003), and other researchers (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011; Marcum, 2007), have highlighted that not all offenders pose as children. Malesky (2007) report that only one third of the convicted sexual offenders in his sample represented themselves as children, whereas even fewer offenders (5%) pretended to be younger in Wolak et al.'s (2008) study. Here, many children were aware of conversing with an adult, or someone considerably older. While the majority of offenders appear to present as their true

persona, there remains a minority of offenders who pose as a younger person or child (Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013). Thus, this identifies two types of offenders in relation to representations of online personas – true representation versus deceptive representation of persona. Offenders’ representation online undoubtedly affects the way in which they approach a potential victim. It is therefore of importance that differences in approach strategies across offenders are emphasized. Following the initial introduction, O’Connell (2003) proposes several stages a conversation between an offender and a child may follow.

Stages of online sexual exploitation and offender strategies. According to O’Connell (2003), various stages during sexually exploitative interactions provide important information about the patterns of offenders’ behavior and their underlying motivation. These identified stages are: (a) friendship-forming stage, (b) relationship-forming stage, (c) risk assessment stage, (d) exclusivity stage, (e) sexual stage, and (f) the concluding stage in form of damage limitation and the ‘hit and run’ tactic. Early stages in an interaction involve an offender getting to know a child by discussing interests, hobbies and daily activities. This provides the basis for and precedes stages where an offender may incite a child to engage in sexualized conversation and/or sexual activities. A range of strategies, such as persuasion, coercion, threats or bribes, may be employed by an offender in order to obtain a child’s compliance. Encouraging a child to watch sexually explicit material in the form of pictures, videos, and/or live via webcam or streaming serves to desensitize the child and normalize the behavior. Following sexual exploitation, an offender may conclude the interaction by either re-establishing the relationship with the victim, or simply abandoning it. Each of these stages is described in more detail in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

O'Connell's (2003) research offers the first attempt to explore and clarify the online sexual grooming process in terms of identifying different stages interactions between offenders and victims may follow. However, it is important to note that not all interactions follow this format, and offense processes will vary based on an offender's motivation and goal (Briggs et al., 2011; Shannon, 2008). This may be in the form of a meeting in the physical world or immediate sexual gratification via the online environment. Depending on the goal an offender is motivated to achieve, they may employ different strategies of varying degree in directness and force.

The *modus operandi* convicted sexual offenders used in identifying potential victims and contacting adolescents in online chat rooms for sexual exploitation is examined by Malesky (2007). Offenders reported to have deliberately visited chat rooms geared towards minors for the purpose of meeting adolescents. They further reviewed online profiles and postings to bulletin boards by minor users to identify potential victims. Offenders appeared to be predominantly motivated to contact adolescents who posted sexual content in any form (e.g., in an online profile, screen name, message, e-mail), or indicated a young age in their screen names. This is similarly noted in a study by Wolak et al. (2008), where adolescents were more likely to experience sexually exploitative interactions, if they had sent personal information to and talked about sex with unknown people. Once contact had been established, some offenders used sexually explicit material for purposes of normalization. Almost all offenders reported to have engaged in sexually explicit conversations with adolescents.

Various approach strategies used by offenders are identified in a study by Marcum (2007) who analyzed transcripts of interactions between offenders and adult volunteers of the group 'Perverted Justice'⁴ posing as children. These included instant stating of gender, age and location, and introducing the topic of sex, as well as exposing of genitals followed by

masturbation via a web camera. One offender introduced the sexual abuse of another victim in an attempt to normalize this behavior in order to incite the child to engage in sexual activity with him. It appeared that this particular offender received sexual gratification from engaging in sexually explicit conversations with children, which was also reflected in his immediate attempt to introduce sexual content into the interaction. Marcum (2007) concludes that all men in the interactions analyzed as part of her research openly revealed their sexual intentions.

Similar findings have been identified in a study examining a sample of offenders convicted of Internet-initiated offenses (Briggs et al., 2011). This study reports additional behaviors engaged in by offenders in order to initiate contact and incite adolescents into sexual activity: First, the acknowledgement of the age of their victims at some point during the conversation; second, in addition to engaging their victims in sexually explicit conversations, a majority of the sample also sent nude pictures of themselves, engaged in masturbation or attempted to teach their victim to masturbate. A minority of the sample reported engagement in cybersexual interactions with their victims, including the projection of naked images of themselves while engaging in live sexual activity. One offender engaged in mutual telephone sex with his victim. The duration of the interactions and engagement in online sexual behaviors were reported to vary according to offenders' motivation (i.e., physical meeting for sexual activity versus cybersex). Generally, cybersex is understood to be a computer-mediated interpersonal interaction, in which participants may engage in a variety of sexual behaviors and acts for the purpose of sexual gratification (Döring, 2000).

Furthermore, a range of incentives have been identified to be offered by offenders in order to incite children to follow requests of a sexual nature (CEOP, 2008). These included money and gifts, such as concert tickets, day trips, cell phones, as well as games. However,

an increase in offenders' use of blackmailing and coercive strategies in order to ensure compliance was also highlighted (CEOP, 2008).

Additional Forms of Online Sexual Exploitation

Although the focus of this particular review is the sexual exploitation of children by offenders whose initial contact takes place online, it is important to refer to the other contexts in which sexual exploitation may take place via the Internet. Recent research has highlighted the incidence of online sexual exploitation among adolescents (Ybarra et al., 2004). This illustrates that cases of sexual exploitation via the Internet not only occur between adults and children, but may emerge in interactions between minor persons of the same age. A study by Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2005) demonstrates the extent to which the Internet may be used by family, and acquaintance, sexual offenders in order to further their contact offenses. In particular, the use of the Internet served several purposes, including the storing and dissemination of sexually explicit images, communication, arrangement of meetings, and the advertising and selling of victims (Mitchell et al., 2005). This exemplifies the new opportunities the Internet provides in terms of expanding abuse, in addition to engaging victims in exploitative online activities, such as exposure to sexually explicit material and incitement to perform sexual acts via digital technologies.

Recognition of the way the Internet may be used by some offenders to further their contact offenses is not only of importance in adding to current knowledge and understanding about the nature and dynamics of conventional family/acquaintance sexual abuse, but it also challenges public misconceptions and stereotypes of the Internet merely being used by 'adult strangers' to befriend and sexually exploit children.

Sexual Grooming Legislation

In the UK, the 'sexual grooming' legislation was included in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 in the form of Section 15 (Home Office, 2003). Section 15 criminalizes such behavior

(i.e., the meeting of a child under the legal age of 16) of an adult following sexual grooming rather than the grooming process per se. The legislation states that someone commits an offense of meeting a child following sexual grooming if they have communicated with a child under the age of 16 years, on two occasions, and then travelled to meet the child with the intention of committing a sexual offense involving that child (Home Office, 2003).

Section 15 has been challenged and received criticism for merely criminalizing the act of arranging to meet or meeting a child, and not considering more subtle, non-contact mechanisms, where intent may not be as explicit (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2007; Gillespie 2001, 2002, 2004). Craven et al. (2007) further argue that the use of the new legislation has been mostly reactive rather than preventative by “merely providing an additional charge for those who nevertheless would have been convicted of a contact offense” (Craven et al., 2007, p. 68). This may be reflected in the remarkably low number of offenders (n = 70) currently in custody for the offense of “meeting a child following sexual grooming” (Ministry of Justice, UK, March 2012).

Similarly, in the US, § 2421 and § 2422 under Title 18 of the United States Code (U.S. House of Representatives, 2012) criminalize the persuading, inducing, enticing, or coercing of a minor to travel to and meet to engage in any sexual activity for which a person can be charged with a criminal offense. Both sections also include the attempt to do any of the actions listed.

In the absence of a meeting occurring between an offender and a victim, sexually exploitative interactions, via computer-mediated communication, may only ever come to the attention of police authorities when a victim comes forward or discloses the abuse, or as a result of proactive undercover police investigations. Although offenses of causing/inciting a child to engage in sexual activity or watch sexual acts as part of such interactions may be covered by various sections under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 in the UK (Home Office,

2003), and additional statutes in some states in the US (e.g., California, Florida, New York), it is apparent that approaches to constructing and providing an adequate response to the problem are still in its infancy, particularly in light of the extension to other forms of technology, such as cell phones (McAlinden, 2006). We will now examine a number of factors that may play a facilitating and contributory role in offense processes online.

Factors Facilitating and Contributing to Online Offending Behavior

Research on the publications of pedophile organizations (De Young, 1988), as well as the content of pedophilic websites (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008) and message boards (Malesky & Ennis, 2004), illustrates how accessing such content may serve the function of validation and provide information (Durkin, 1997). The communication and networking with individuals of mutual deviant interests serves to support beliefs, lowering inhibitions and justifying behavior through a normalizing environment (Alexy et al., 2005; Quayle et al., 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2001; Wolak et al., 2008).

Quayle and Taylor (2001) suggest that the Internet offers pseudo-intimacy in the form of accelerated and eroticized contacts. This may foster feelings of belonging and a sense of community in terms of forming relationships and building friendships. It further enables and allows for the communication with other like-minded people of mutual interests, providing a supportive environment which may act to validate and reinforce attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. In terms of offending behavior, such communities may also have changing effects on users' views due to its supportive and understanding, as well as justifying and normalizing, features. Quayle and Taylor (2001) argue that the anonymous nature and 'playful' quality of the Internet may have powerful and disinhibiting effects on human behavior, coupled with the ability to express oneself in terms of sexual interests and fantasies. This highlights the driving role of contextual and motivational factors in users' self-representation online.

For some, engagement in online activity over a prolonged period of time has been suggested to replace social interactions, resulting in increased social isolation and further intimacy deficits, negatively impacting family life and other relationships (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011; Elliott & Beech, 2009). Individuals may become increasingly reliant on “online interaction as a safe and controlled way of relating to people emotionally and sexually” (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011, p. 4). This may include cybersexual interactions with adults or engagement in the sexual exploitation of children. In the absence of social sanctions, such interactions may act to diminish moral attitudes, and serve to evoke an underlying motivation for the search of sexual gratification via the Internet (Döring, 2000). In addition to larger social networks with fewer controls, this further facilitates engagement in certain online activities, some of which may be illegal.

The type of activities people engage in via the Internet will predominantly be determined by the function their online engagement serves. Some individuals may use the Internet to avoid negative emotional states, such as boredom, anxiety, or depression (Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006), whereas others may engage in sexual behaviors online as a result of personal factors, such as dissatisfaction with current persona, early sexualized experiences, and poor adolescent socialization (Lambert & O’Halloran, 2008). Although type of activities and the function they serve vary across individual users, it is possible that increasingly more time is spent online as a result of greater involvement with certain activities and associated behaviors. Individuals seeking to meet needs for intimacy may access the Internet in order to develop online sexual relationships, as well as those who present with a lack of social or interpersonal skills, finding the virtual environment less threatening. They may therefore prefer the conversing and interacting with others online (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011). Moreover, cybersexual interactions allow those individuals merely seeking sexual gratification via

computer-mediated communication to 'operationalize' sexual fantasies that prior to the Internet would have self-extinguished (Quayle et al., 2000).

The number of communication technologies equipped with the Internet function is ever-increasing, providing covert ways for engaging in offending behavior while allowing it to remain hidden (Chase & Statham, 2005). This undoubtedly raises the question of the role of these technologies in the progression and escalation of offenses, which is highlighted as a significant factor in the Model of Problematic Internet Use by Quayle and Taylor (2003).

Model of Problematic Internet Use

Quayle and Taylor (2003) proposed a model that specifically encompasses problematic Internet use in individuals with a sexual interest in children as part of the process of offending. They argue that as current understanding of sexual offending is predominantly based on cognitive-behavioral models, it neglects to take into account the interaction between an offender and their environment, and the role of new technologies, such as the Internet, on offending behavior respectively (Quayle et al., 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2003). The proposed model therefore emphasizes the role of cognitions in the etiology, as well as the engagement in and problematic use of the Internet, serving to support and justify offending behavior and associated activities. Quayle and Taylor (2003) identified various factors that may play an interactive role in the process of the engagement with the Internet. These include distal and proximal setting events (such as early sexualized experiences and poor adolescent or adult socialization; existing sexual interest in children, commission of prior contact offense, and dissatisfaction with current persona), Internet use, problematic cognitions, and offending behavior. Certain Internet factors, namely anonymity, disinhibition, and accessibility of fantasy, influence an individual's Internet use and associated problematic cognitions, as well as a number of cognitive-social factors (such as increased fantasy/sexual behavior, risk-taking behavior, reduced offline social contact, increased empowerment and control, and validation

and normalization). The Model of Problematic Internet Use (Quayle & Taylor, 2003) is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

This model proposes that sexual offenses committed via the Internet are not a single activity, but rather form part of a complex array of offending behaviors (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). Due to the process of offending as a continuum of functioning, engagement in offense-related behaviors may vary greatly among individual users. It is therefore important to consider offending as a dynamic process, with individuals moving along a range of potential continua related to stages of involvement and processes of engagement in different online activities, mainly for sexual purposes (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). The model further highlights the important role of distorted cognitions in supporting, maintaining or potentially escalating individuals' engagement in certain activities and related problematic behavior. The role of communities and networking also serves, and allows, offenders to justify their behavior, remaining unchallenged with decreasing offline social contacts, as a result of greater Internet use precluding interpersonal relationships. This, in turn, has widely been reported to increase levels of depression and feelings of loneliness (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2003).

While the model proposed by Quayle and Taylor (2003) encompasses the role of the Internet in offense processes online, particularly relating to the sexual exploitation of children, researchers have also considered the role of the Internet on people's experiences and behavior in general. This refers to the offering of opportunities for users to act and interact outside societal confines, increasing risk-taking behavior and having the potential to empower individuals who have previously felt marginalized (Quayle et al., 2000; Quayle &

Taylor, 2003). Some argue that it is the availability of sexually explicit images online that facilitate the engagement in such for sexual gratification. Others have discussed their accessibility in terms of decreased costs and personal risk, in comparison to times prior to the Internet (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008). In conjunction with conflicts relating to users' self-regulation, this may develop social problems, with the Internet becoming a substitute for interpersonal relationships and increasingly more time being spent with computer-mediated communication (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). This is further associated with negative behaviors as a result of an interplay between maladaptive cognitions and reinforcement from the online environment, highlighting the contributing role of contextual factors in processes of problematic Internet use. However, Internet use should be considered a continuum of functioning, with non-problematic Internet use on one side and problematic use on the other (Davis, 2001), and that individual differences in terms of cognitive, motivational and behavioral factors further determine whether Internet use remains adaptive or turns maladaptive. Consequently, we will now examine current knowledge of characteristics of Internet sexual offenders in general, and 'groomers'/chat room offenders specifically.

Offender Characteristics

There has been debate as to whether 'online/Internet offenders' are distinct or distinguishable from offenders who committed contact sexual offenses. A meta-analysis by Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann (2010) examined the extent to which online and offline offenders differed in terms of demographic, such as age and level of education, and psychological characteristics, such as offense-supportive attitudes, victim empathy and emotional dysregulation (Bates & Metcalf; 2007; Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech, 2006). The meta-analysis found that online offenders tended to be Caucasian males, who were younger than offline offenders and more likely to be unemployed when compared to the general population, although online offenders did not differ from the general

population in terms of educational level (Babchishin et al., 2010). Online offenders were also more likely to be in a romantic relationship than offline offenders. With regards to psychological characteristics, the meta-analysis identified relatively few reported differences between online and offline offenders. Online offenders tended to have fewer offense-supportive attitudes, less emotional identification with children, and greater victim empathy (i.e., an offender's awareness and understanding of the impact of sexual offending on the victim; Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009) than offline offenders (Babchishin et al., 2010). Along with decreased victim empathy, offense-supportive attitudes may play a facilitating role in the escalation to more severe offending behavior, in that both factors have been argued to reduce psychological barriers to offending behavior (Maruna & Mann, 2006). This may therefore explain their higher prevalence and occurrence among offline offenders.

Babchishin et al. (2010) further report higher levels of sexual deviancy among online offenders in comparison to offline offenders. Measured using penile plethysmography and psychometric assessments, this finding may be argued to be related to experimental studies using stimuli that resemble the type of material online offenders would seek out and access, and therefore find arousing. In fact, a lower rate of prior criminal involvement and reportedly fewer contact offenses were revealed, leading some researchers to suggest that online offenders present with greater self-control and less impulsivity than offline offenders (Babchishin et al., 2010). Although both groups of offenders reported a history of physical and sexual abuse (Babchishin et al., 2010), more specific information related to online offenders' offense processes is required prior to drawing conclusions about the effect of such experiences on offenders' online behaviors. While sexually abusive experiences and adverse living conditions during childhood have widely been researched and discussed as part of the etiology of contact sexual offending (Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Elliott & Beech, 2009), little

research exists into developmental histories of Internet offenders (Elliott & Beech, 2009). Finally, there were no differences between groups of online and offline offenders in terms of loneliness and self-esteem (Babchishin et al., 2010), although a number of studies have reported low levels of self-esteem to play a considerable role in Internet offenders' decision to pursue sexual gratification via the less threatening online environment, as well as increased feelings of loneliness as a result of greater Internet use (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011; Elliott et al., 2009; Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008; Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007; Middleton et al., 2006).

The notion that psychological vulnerabilities are evident in Internet offenders is also supported by research investigating the applicability of the Ward and Siegert (2002) Pathways Model to Internet offenders. The Pathways Model (Ward & Siegert, 2002) proposes that there are five etiological pathways that may lead to the sexual assault of a child: (1) deviant sexual scripts, (2) intimacy deficits, (3) emotional dysregulation, (4) antisocial cognitions, and (5) multiple dysfunctional mechanisms. In particular, Middleton et al. (2006) assigned 72 Internet offenders convicted of an index offense involving possessing and/or distributing child pornography to the five different pathways. Over sixty percent of this sample could be assigned to the intimacy deficit pathway (35%) or the emotional dysregulation pathway (33%), based on a standardized battery of psychometric tests (Middleton et al., 2006). Offenders assigned to the intimacy deficits pathway reported high levels of emotional loneliness, and low levels of self-esteem. This is a finding that is frequently documented in the literature, whereby individuals may engage in problematic Internet use and associated sexually-motivated behavior in order to alleviate loneliness and dissatisfaction, as well as compensate for a lack of intimacy (Elliott & Ashfield, 2011; Elliott et al., 2009; Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008; Laulik et al., 2007). Offenders assigned to the

emotional dysregulation pathway may access the Internet for sexual purposes in order to deal with and manage negative emotions.

A small proportion of the sample could also be assigned to the pathways of distorted sexual scripts (5%) or antisocial cognitions (2%) (Middleton et al., 2006). However, Middleton et al. (2006) denoted that while a proportion of the sample in their study shared similar psychological deficits as other groups of sexual offenders, they also recognized that the group of Internet offenders is heterogeneous within itself. 40% of the sample could not be assigned to a particular pathway, and therefore did not share the psychological vulnerabilities commonly displayed by other groups of sexual offenders. This further supports the idea of the Internet playing a considerable role in offense processes online, whereby relatively harmless Internet use may develop into offending behavior as a result of changes in immediate personal and situational circumstances (Davis, 2001; Elliott & Ashfield, 2011; Quayle et al., 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2003).

Elliott et al. (2009) compared Internet and contact sexual offenders on a range of psychological measures relating to offense-supportive beliefs, empathic concern, interpersonal functioning and emotional management. Only offenders with an index offense relating to child pornography were allocated to the Internet offender group, with offenders having committed a combination of Internet and contact offenses, or offenses including online sexual grooming, being excluded. Elliott et al. (2009) found that contact offenders scored considerably higher than Internet offenders in relation to general cognitive and victim empathy distortions. This suggests that the development of offense-supportive attitudes and deficits in victim empathy may increase the risk of, and potentially precipitate, contact offending behavior. Furthermore, Internet offenders in this study also appeared to utilize the Internet to compensate for a lack of intimacy and emotional loneliness in real life, while minimizing the possibility of rejection in an environment perceived to be less socially risky

as a result of low self-esteem. Elliott et al. (2009) concluded that while Internet offenders did not appear to differ from contact offenders in terms of socio-affective constructs, significant differences were apparent across offense-related constructs, such as antisocial cognitions. These findings are similar to those of Bates and Metcalf (2007), where it was found that groups of Internet offenders and contact offenders shared similarities across the socio-affective measures, however, presenting with distinct differences across offense-specific variables, with Internet offenders having fewer offense-supportive attitudes, greater victim empathy, and less emotional congruence than contact offenders.

Patterns of personality traits and clinical symptomatology have been explored in a sample of Internet sexual offenders who committed offenses related to child pornography (Laulik et al., 2007). 50% of the sample reported to have experienced interpersonal difficulties, in terms of low levels of dominance and warmth, suggesting self-consciousness and under-assertiveness, as well as lacking empathy in personal relationships. A lack of intimate relationships is associated with difficulties entering age-appropriate relationships or an inability to uphold such relationships (Laulik et al., 2007). As a result, individuals may utilize the Internet and associated facilities in order to meet sexual needs in an attempt to compensate for deficits in intimacy. A number of offenders in the Laulik et al. (2007) sample also reported experiencing prominent dysphoria and increased levels of depression. For those offenders, the Internet may have temporarily served to relieve negative emotional states and unpleasant feelings, as well as to cope with stress and social isolation (Reijnen, Bulten, & Nijman, 2009). This in turn may reinforce the use of the Internet for alleviating purposes, and have potentially escalating consequences in the progress of offending behavior, as well as interfering severely with the development and maintenance of a satisfying lifestyle (Tomak, Weschler, Ghahramanlou-Holloway, Virden, & Nademin, 2009).

Characteristics of ‘Groomers’/Chat Room Offenders

Data derived from cases of Internet-initiated sexual offenses resulting in arrest, conviction, and a court-ordered offense-specific mental health evaluation, revealed two subtypes of offenders according to motivation: (a) fantasy-driven, and (b) contact-driven (Biggs et al. 2011). While the former was characterized by a motivation to engage adolescents in cybersex, the latter subgroup was motivated by a desire to develop a sexual relationship with an adolescent. This was reflected in the comparatively short online interaction. The Internet therefore served different functions for the two subtypes. That is, to either act as a sexual medium for purposes of cybersex and masturbation, or for the purpose of locating victims, building a relationship, and arranging a physical meeting respectively. Offenders in this study were not deceptive with regards to their age and their interest in a sexual relationship. This supports findings by Wolak et al. (2008) that the majority of adolescents were aware of communicating with adults and their intentions. In fact, most victims in the Wolak et al. (2008) study, who agreed to attend a physical meeting with an offender, reported that they expected to engage in sexual activity. In fact, a majority of victims (73%) who had engaged in sexual encounters with an offender did so more than once (Wolak et al., 2008).

In terms of demographic characteristics, Briggs et al. (2011) revealed differences between the subgroups, with men in the fantasy-driven group being older, and either married or divorced; in contrast, men in the contact-driven group were younger and most had never been married. Furthermore, contact-driven offenders were less well educated, and more likely to be unemployed than fantasy-driven offenders. Both subgroups had no prior history of sexual offenses or contact with the criminal justice system, and reported to engage in other compulsive, sexually-motivated behaviors, such as pornography use, soliciting adults online and impersonal sex. According to Briggs et al. (2011), offenders' motivation to offend did not appear to be precipitated by sexual deviancy or criminological behavior, but was rather

associated with increased social isolation and dysphoric moods as a result of greater Internet use.

Although some offenders in the Briggs et al. (2011) study were found to be in the possession of child pornography, Wolak et al. (2008) suggest that ‘groomers’/chat room offenders generally display more hebephilic or ephebophilic tendencies to denote their sexual arousal to pubescent children, and older adolescents respectively. This would be in accordance with findings of younger, prepubescent children being relatively absent from the online environment. According to Wolak et al. (2008), ‘groomers’/chat room offenders “occupy a narrow range on the spectrum of the sexual offender population, one that largely excludes pedophiles and violent or sadistic offenders” (p. 118).

Typologies of Internet Offenders

With recent developments of the Internet, different typologies have been proposed in order to categorize Internet sexual offenders according to their online activities and potential motivation for associated behaviors (Alexy et al., 2005; Beech et al., 2008; Krone, 2004; Sullivan & Beech, 2004). These typologies predominantly focus on offending behavior relating to child pornography, and merely consider online sexual grooming as part of a wider picture of offending. Yet, they provide a good starting point in highlighting offenders’ motivational drive along with the function their Internet use may serve.

In contrast to previous typologies, Lanning (2012) distinguishes between situational- and preferential-type sexual offenders according to a motivation continuum based on associated behavior patterns that are need-driven. With regards to offenders who utilize the Internet to sexually exploit children, Lanning (2012) differentiates between ‘pedophiles (hebephiles)’, ‘diverse offenders’ and ‘latent offenders’, with the ‘diverse offender’ displaying a variety of deviant sexual interests rather than a strong sexual preference for children, and adolescents respectively, as present in ‘pedophiles (hebephiles)’. ‘Latent

offenders' refer to individuals with "potentially illegal but previously latent sexual preferences who have more recently begun to criminally act out when inhibitions are weakened after arousal patterns are fuelled and validated through online computer communication" (Lanning, 2012, p. 80). Situational-type offenders include adolescents who search online for pornography and engage in cybersexual interactions, as well as impulsive and/or curious adults with newly found access to a wide range of sexual material and opportunities the Internet presents with. These may involve individuals trafficking in child pornography for the purpose of financial gains.

While this typology lists categories of offenders engaging in more extreme forms of online offending behavior, it also highlights groups of individuals who may access the Internet to engage in 'legal' sexual activities, such as adult pornography and cybersex. Here, the Internet may facilitate the engagement in certain illegal sexual activities by fuelling sexual arousal and lowering inhibitions through access to extensive material and online communities. Typologies of Internet sexual offenders should therefore be considered along a broad and diverse spectrum of individuals who engage in problematic Internet use.

Conclusions

Sexual abuse occurs in a variety of contexts. The Internet presents with features unique to the online environment in terms of anonymity, affordability and accessibility (Cooper, 1998), providing an environment conducive to the engagement in sexually-motivated behavior (Quayle et al., 2000). Its anonymous nature facilitates disinhibition among users and allows for sexual expression and engagement in diverse sexual activities. Such behavior that is associated with positive responses to certain stimuli is reinforced, and therefore strengthens an individual's motivation to continue to engage in the specific behavior. Online sexual resources and facilities, such as pornographic websites and chat rooms, provide immediate feedback and gratification of sexual fantasies and arousal (Quayle

et al., 2000). They are highly reinforcing and therefore deemed to have potentially addictive characteristics that may lead to compulsive patterns of Internet use (Griffiths, 2001).

Overall, the Internet offers opportunities to meet various motivations, ranging from sexual exploration to problematic expression and grooming to facilitate engagement in deviant sexual activities. A number of factors have been identified to play a contributing role in the development of offending behavior, each of which may vary in degree whereby they precipitate offense processes among individual users. This is also suggested to be highly dependent on individuals' motivation and the function their Internet use serves. Various studies have been identified that provide valuable insight into the shared similarities across online and offline offenders in terms of socio-affective functioning, as well as differences in relation to emotional congruence, offense-supportive attitudes, and victim empathy. It is important, however, that future studies consider Internet offending as a dynamic process, differentiating between online-only, cross-over, and Internet-initiated contact offenses, rather than grouping Internet-facilitated offenses together despite being fundamentally different in terms of function, process and outcome. It would therefore be of benefit to match comparable groups of offenders with respect to offense processes online, Internet use and index offense, while acknowledging that some offenses may remain unknown.

Furthermore, it is of paramount importance that future research focuses on clearly encompassing the full offense process online, in order to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the process of sexual grooming and exploitation of children via the Internet. The available studies that have specifically examined the process of sexual grooming and exploitation via the Internet (i.e., Marcum, 2007; O'Connell, 2003; Williams et al., 2013) are restricted in their reliability, and not without criticism. While the authors acknowledge the challenges and objections surrounding the engagement in undercover research activity, and use of data published via the Perverted Justice website, it is important to note that available

studies on this specific area of research are limited, and thus still worthy of consideration. O'Connell (2003) is one of the few to consider the process of online sexual exploitation, and provides first attempts to outline the dynamics of this process by describing different stages during which certain activities may take place. Yet, these studies have mostly utilized data that originated from online interactions between an offender and an undercover police officer, or an adult posing as a child. These data are therefore not representative of online offender-victim interactions, as they lack the dynamic the victim provides in such interactions. Consequently, research to date lacks a thorough analysis and detailed explanation of the dynamic processes underlying sexual grooming and exploitation via the Internet by using truly representative data in the form of transcripts of online interactions between an offender and a victim.

On the whole, it should be noted that computer-mediated communication is ever-developing and evolving, thus highlighting the need for future research. Research findings in relation to the Internet and its users can become dated as technology advances, and may therefore be limited in their applicability and generalizability to current times. However, while certain online mechanisms may affect offense processes and associated behaviors, offender characteristics identified in previous and future studies will continue to have utility in understanding Internet sexual offending.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research would benefit from differentiating between offenders who seek immediate sexual gratification and therefore engage in conversations or interactions with numerous children, and those who aim to develop an exclusive relationship online. Undoubtedly, this would be reflected in the strategies offenders employ. Approach strategies may consist of sending sexual solicitations or selectively identifying a particular child. Of importance is therefore also the identification of different approach strategies and initial

engagement across computer-mediated communication platforms other than chat rooms, such as social networking or gaming sites. Conversations and interactions may then be continued in a more private environment, such as via e-mail and instant messaging. While clearly some attention has been paid to offenders' behaviors, there still remains a need to consider and explain the full range of factors involved in and contributing to this type of offending behavior online. The identification of the main behavioral themes and specific sexual behaviors in online offender-victim interactions, as well as the analysis of the dynamic inter-relationship between offenders' behavior, the victim and the context of the Internet, would therefore be of benefit and fill a gap in the current literature. In addition, the exploration of a victim's behavior, generally as well as in the form of resistance, receptiveness and contribution, and how this may have an effect on both the offender and their subsequent or future modus operandi, would make a significant contribution to the understanding of the dynamic processes involved in such interactions. While girls are more likely than boys to be victims of online sexual exploitation (Whittle et al., 2012; Wolak et al., 2008), particular focus should be placed on identifying differences in victims' characteristics (e.g., gender, age) and any thereby resulting variations across interactions.

Altogether, this would be of benefit in raising awareness and further developing our understanding of sexual grooming and exploitation of children via the Internet. Enhancing knowledge about the processes involved in this type of offending behavior may also aid identification of malevolent interactions, and facilitate early detection of an underlying sexual motive. It is suggested that this may prove useful in the application of legal responses to this phenomenon. Further examining offenders' underlying motivation and the function their behavior serves in terms of meeting sexual needs via the Internet may also highlight relationships with other sexually-motivated activities online. This would aid in clarifying

differences in offense processes across individuals, and identify potential triggers in the escalation to contact sexual offenses.

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Footnote

¹ <http://www.ceop.police.uk/>

² <http://www.missingkids.com/>

³ <http://www.bgca.org/>

⁴ <http://www.perverted-justice.com/>

Table 1

Main Stages of Cyberexploitation (adapted from O'Connell, 2003)

Friendship-forming stage:	Getting to know a child. Pictures may be exchanged for the purpose of verification by an offender that they are conversing with a child, as well as the child meeting their preference criteria.
Relationship-forming stage:	Extension of the friendship-forming stage. Involves discussing a child's school and/or home life, with the aim to present as the child's best friend.
Risk-assessment stage:	An offender may assess the location and other people's usage of the computer for likelihood of detection.
Exclusivity stage:	Making a minor feel special and fostering the feeling of 'best friends' by reinforcing the idea of complete and implicit trust. Gradual introduction of sexual themes and topics, with potential for increasing in intensity by applying gentle pressure on the part of an offender. Expressed feelings of discomfort by a minor may be followed by profound expressions of regret and pleads for forgiveness by an offender, serving to re-establish the sense of mutuality.
Sexual stage:	The nature of sexual conversation may vary from mild suggestions to overt requests, along with varying degrees of explicit descriptions. An offender's rationale for introducing sexual themes may be explained as mentoring and educating purposes.
Concluding stage:	
Damage limitation:	Lavishing a victim with praise and encouragement to re-establish the relationship for the purpose of minimizing risk of disclosure.
'Hit and run' tactic:	An offender has no interest in damage limitation or either repeated or continued contact with a victim, therefore simply abandoning the interaction without re-establishing the relationship with the victim.