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Case Studies of Men's Perceptions of their Online Sexual Interactions with Young People:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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### Abstract

The aim of the present study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of men who were convicted of committing a sexual offense that included online sexual grooming. It explores their experiences of illegal interactions with young people via Internet communication platforms, which progressed to physical meetings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two men and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), providing in-depth accounts of their personal experiences. These are presented in a case study format. Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis: (a) fulfilling an unmet need, (b) spiraling cycle of use, and (c) confrontation with reality. Narrative tones employed by the two men were 'being trapped in a lie', analogous to a problem narrative through which their Internet use was presented as a poor and/or failed coping strategy to deal with life stress. Through a process of habituation, their Internet use spiraled out of control. A progression was described in terms of time spent on the computer, frequency and intensity of online interactions, and the impact this had on the men's personal lives, highlighting the 'compulsive' nature of such interactions for them. A consideration of individual and situational vulnerability factors provides new insight into the progression of online sexual behavior and contributes to our understanding thereof.

*Keywords:* sexual grooming, solicitation, offender experience, Internet communication

This paper presents in-depth case study analyses of two men who engaged in sexually exploitative interactions with young people via the Internet. In the literature, these interactions are commonly referred to as 'online grooming', 'online luring' and 'online sexual solicitation' (e.g., Cybertip.ca, 2012; Gottschalk, 2011; O'Connell, 2003; Seto, 2014). As part of such interactions, offenders may engage in the manipulative process of sexual grooming that typically involves accessing Internet communication platforms to approach young people and initiate conversations with them, which may progress to the engagement in and performance of sexually explicit talk and activities. Some offenders may further request sexual images and exposure via webcam [names removed for masked review]. 'Sexual grooming' itself is defined by Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist (2006) 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." (p. 297).

The sparse literature on online sexual grooming has predominantly focused on offenders' modus operandi and motivation, different stages of the offense process and typologies of offenders, as well as how offenders who engage in this type of offending behavior may differ from those who commit contact sexual offenses and offenses relating to indecent images of children ([names removed for masked review]; Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Lööf, 2014). While these are important aspects in the commission of sexual offenses via Internet technologies, the current research tells us little about the internal processes at play within an individual that may increase their vulnerability to engage in offending behavior.

By facilitating access to a vast amount of diverse and variable material that caters for almost any sexual interest and/or preference, the Internet has the potential to magnify certain vulnerabilities already present in an individual (e.g., confused sexual identity, perceived

unmet intimacy needs), which may not have been significant up to the commencement of using the Internet as a sexual outlet. It would therefore be of interest to explore how individuals describe their experiences, not only of the situation in which they encountered themselves prior to engaging in offending behavior, but also of the offending behavior itself.

Eatough and Smith (2006) argue that when people narrate personal events they also “imbue these events with meaning so that they come to form part of their past, present and future lived experiences” (p. 118). In order to explore the lived experiences of men who engaged in online sexual interactions with young people, the present study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA allows us to explore and gain insight into how individuals make sense of their experiences of the offenses they committed, as well as the meaning they attach to these, furthering our understanding of how offenses may develop, given that these experiences are important, personally relevant and of ongoing significance to them (Eatough & Smith, 2006). While most IPA studies have been conducted in the area of health and clinical/counselling psychology (Smith, 2011), more recently IPA has also been used on interviews with men who were convicted of sexual offenses (e.g., Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011; Winder & Gough, 2010). Given the small sample size ( $n = 2$  in light of a recommended sample size of 6-8; Smith et al., 2009), the accounts of the personal experiences of two men who were convicted of a sexual offense that included sexual grooming are further presented in a case study format.

The case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth. It is therefore used to understand and contribute to our knowledge of individuals and related complex phenomena (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, it specifically “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Finally, a phenomenological account represents a useful development given the lack of literature in relation to the psychological transitions that can occur from non-offending to

online offending, and from online offending to contact offending respectively (for a description of the offense processes and progression of this type of offending behavior see [names removed for masked review]). It also provides a unique insight into individuals' experiences of virtual reality and its ability to fulfil their perceived need to live out a desired fantasy.

## Method

### Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was granted by [names removed for masked review]. Additionally, the principal researcher received vetting clearance to undertake research activities as part of the Child Exploitation Investigation Team at a police force in the United Kingdom (UK), and adhered to the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) throughout the entire contact with the research participants.

### Participants

The two participants are referred to throughout as Robert and Steven. Participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms and any other identifying features removed in order to protect their identity.

**Robert.** At the time of the study, 'Robert' was in his 40s and lived alone. Up to his arrest, Robert lived with his wife and children, and was in full-time employment. He had access to a laptop as part of his work. Robert used Internet communication platforms to engage in sexually explicit chat and activity with adolescent boys. Of note were interactions that progressed to exchanging sexual images via mobile phone and developed into physical meetings, where sexual activity took place.

**Steven.** At the time of the study, 'Steven' was in his 30s. Up to his arrest, Steven lived alone and was in full-time employment. He had never been married. Steven frequently worked in the evenings and at night from his home computer. He used Internet

communication platforms to engage in conversations and sexually explicit activity with adolescent girls. One interaction progressed to physical meetings, where sexual activity took place.

### **Data Collection & Procedure**

A total of seven suitable participants across the UK were identified through police forces' intelligence systems, based on meeting the criteria of the individual having been convicted for committing (a) an offense of sexual grooming under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003), or (b) any other offense under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that included sexual grooming. Letters containing an information sheet and inviting them to take part in a study on people's use of the Internet and their experiences in relation to this were sent out by the designated officer at a police force involved in the study to those seven individuals, of which two responded (Robert and Steven). The information sheet outlined that participants were asked to participate as they had committed an Internet-related offense that was initially dealt with by the contacting police force. Interviews between the first author and the two participants were then arranged, and took place in a private room in one of the police force's facilities (Robert) and a prison (Steven).

Prior to the commencement of interviews, participants were reminded of the purpose of the research and given full information in the form of the information sheet. It was made clear that interview questions did not have to be answered and that participants could withdraw at any time up to a month post-interview, leading to the destruction of their interview record. Participants were further informed of procedures surrounding anonymity and confidentiality, as well as circumstances within which the latter would not be granted (i.e., reporting information that includes anything indicating a threat or risk to the participant or others, or about a previously unknown offense with an identifiable victim). Informed consent was obtained through participants signing a consent form.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out and audio-recorded using a dictaphone, for which participants' agreement was required. The interview schedule, which was applied flexibly, aimed to invite participants to tell their story, with a particular focus on what their life was like around the time when they commenced using the Internet frequently and their progression to offending behavior, as well as how they experienced this process and what meaning they attach to it (e.g., Please could you tell me about what your life was like around the time when you started using the Internet for sexual purposes, and what sort of activities you used the Internet for prior to this?; Can you describe the stages of establishing contact and engaging children in online conversations?; What kinds of things did you talk about, what kinds of things did you do together?; Can you describe what usually happens before you go online to chat to children? What do you think? How do you feel?). Throughout, where appropriate, prompts were used to explore this in more depth. Following the interviews, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask questions and/or add anything they wished to say. Interviews resulted in 60 and 80 minutes of data and were transcribed semi-verbatim, with any potentially identifying information removed from the transcripts (e.g., place names).

### **Analysis**

The study employed a qualitative design by using IPA – an approach to qualitative data analysis that requires rich and reflective personal accounts (mostly interview data), and which is “committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). It incorporates a phenomenological aspect that is concerned with understanding the meaning and quality people attach to lived experiences from their perspective. It therefore pays particular attention to what matters to a participant and what these things mean to them, ‘giving voice’ to a particular experience in a given context (Larkin, 2014; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). This further



highlights IPA's idiographic nature, whereby each case is analysed in detail (Smith, 2011).

The steps undertaken and strategies used to perform IPA are outlined here, and follow recommendations by Larkin (2014), Larkin et al. (2006) and Smith et al. (2009).

Prior to the commencement of coding, the first author familiarized herself with the data by reading the interview transcripts in detail several times. Following this, free coding involved the notation of initial thoughts and ideas alongside the transcribed interviews (Smith et al., 2009). This is a useful process for noticing and managing one's preconceptions and their influences on perceptions of the data in order to attempt to separate them from the intended focus (Larkin, 2014). Subsequently, a close, line-by-line analysis was performed to identify: (a) *objects of concern*, namely concepts, ideas and/or things that are of significance and matter to the participant; and (b) *experiential claims*, which describe what objects of concern mean to the participant (Larkin, 2014; Larkin et al., 2006). Larkin (2014) further recommends analyzing a whole paragraph or narrative at a more "global level" (p. 32) by characterizing their tone or mood, which helps specify a participant's stance or *positionality*.

For the identification of *emerging themes* and patterns within and across participants, the meanings attached to objects of concern were summarized by assigning them a descriptive title. This facilitated the development of an interpretative account and the organization of themes, which illustrated relationships between them. It further highlighted patterns of convergence and divergence within and across accounts.

As part of the analytic process, all coding, as well as the identification of *objects of concern* and *experiential claims*, were verified by the second author in terms of accurately representing the raw data through a process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Where necessary, these were revised following discussion between the first and second author. Similarly, emerging themes and any interpretation thereof were explored and deliberated together by the two authors, as well as by referring to relevant literature.

## Results

Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis, which capture the participants' experience of using Internet communication platforms for sexual interactions with young people and the meaning they attached to this experience: (a) *fulfilling an unmet need*, (b) *spiraling cycle of use*, and (c) *confrontation with reality*. 'Fulfilling an unmet need' refers to what motivated participants to seek out the Internet, and how they experienced their interactions online. 'Spiraling cycle of use' describes the progressive pattern of participants' Internet use, and how the experience became 'compulsive' in nature over time, significantly impacting on participants' lives. 'Confrontation with reality' refers to participants' experiences of the process of change following the escalation of physical meetings taking place, and the meaning they attached to these. Each theme will be discussed in the context of the different participants, and conclude with a summary of convergent and divergent aspects.

### 'Fulfilling an Unmet Need'

**Robert.** Robert described first noticing a sexual attraction towards boys of his age as a teenager, which developed into a sexual attraction towards sexually mature young males as an adult.

"When I was growing up when I was teenager I was attracted to boys my own age [...] my sexual interest has or is younger men erm and so I think erm my interest is not prepubescent I don't I'm not erm sexually attracted to anyone who is not developed sexually erm that doesn't interest me."

Although Robert committed offenses against adolescent boys, he emphasizes (above) that his sexual interest does not lie with prepubescent children, thereby differentiating himself from 'pedophiles' as they might conventionally be represented. In doing this, he adopts a narrative tone of anticipating disapproval and judgement, and defends himself. Despite Robert's sexual attraction towards young males, he had occasional sexual encounters and some brief relationships with women, eventually getting married to his wife.

“I was married, I had [children], I was working full-time, erm, yeah, it was a normal, normal family life, I guess. I mean, me and my wife weren't particularly getting on that well, erm, but that was down, although she didn't know it, but that was down to my sexuality, that I didn't [live out] pretty much all my life.”

Here, Robert takes a stance of inviting empathy by describing his life as an ‘existence,’ suggesting passive rather than active participation in living it. He makes it clear that his sexuality had been an issue all his life, and that this also stood between him and his wife, preventing him from experiencing their relationship as satisfying.

“Having to live my life as a straight man erm it's... it's... it was hard it was hard in one way but easy in another because the only sexual contact I was getting was with either a friend or a partner I had and I hadn't had many - or my wife because that was my only sexual outlet my only sexual contact. It was easy to keep up the pretense because it doesn't matter how it is you can close your eyes and think of something then you can put yourself into a different situation and that's how I have coped with it.”

Robert describes the difficulty of living as a homosexual man prior to the Internet, with physical sexual encounters being the only form of sexual activity. He was able to cope with engaging in sexual behavior that conflicted with his sexual identity (i.e., with his wife) by putting himself into a different situation mentally, enabling the pretense of living the life of a straight man. To an extent, the narrative acts to normalize Robert's experience through his presentation of sexual contact as a human need, which he merely ‘coped with,’ rather than experienced as sexually gratifying. He thereby chose a narrative that protects him from accusations by attempting to destigmatize his offending behavior through presenting himself as a homosexual man. Yet, Robert's narrative uncomfortably blurs the line by shifting readers' attention between two sexual identities that are unrelated; homosexuality has no direct bearing on a sexual attraction to young males under the age of consent (which constitutes behavior for which one is charged with an offense).

Robert argues that the experience of ‘being trapped in a lie’ caused his marital relationship to deteriorate. He suggests that his distress (at both the feeling of entrapment and

the deteriorating relationship) was the motive for subsequently seeking online interactions with males.

“It might start off with “how has your day been”, etc. etc. but it would quickly develop into a sexual conversation [...]. And there might be some masturbation going on as we are talking, and sort of when that was finished that pretty much ended the conversation, as it were. [...] but it was quick it really was just a sexual gratification tool.”

Robert adopts a rather blasé narrative tone when describing the process of establishing contact with someone for the purpose of sexual gratification, referring to it as a ‘tool.’ This might be viewed as minimization, or demonstrate a lack of emotional connection to the experience. He explains that sexual gratification was his main motivation. For the first time in his life, Robert was now able to live out his homosexual identity (as part of the online interactions), which may explain his rather strategic approach to fulfilling his sexual need.

“That was really, other than the pornography but the actual first interaction with another gay person or someone who was bisexual or someone who was whatever was on the internet and that was the first sort of time because it made it easier because it was so anonymous.”

Here, Robert adopts a defensive stance, claiming that he would have never engaged in sexual interactions online if it was not for the anonymous nature of the Internet. He believed that he would be unidentifiable, which lowered his inhibitions and enabled his engagement in such interactions. Robert further attempts to explain his behavior by describing it as his first sexual experience with another homosexual person; something he had long desired.

**Steven.** Steven described his difficulties in forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships with adult women. The Internet therefore provided a platform for him to form new relationships during a time of loneliness.

“[...] all my friends had got married and a couple now had a kid as well and had started their own families and so my kind of friendship circle had changed quite a lot dynamically and which meant I was spending a lot of time on my own [...] I had been sort of resorting to the internet, you know, and forming relationships using the internet.”

Steven describes a change in his circle of friends as a result of their marital and familial commitments, which led to feelings of disconnectedness in him. He further explains that spending increasingly more time at home by himself gave rise to feelings of self-doubt and loss of confidence, accessing the Internet to develop new relationships.

“Mum and Dad got married early 20s, had a family and that's what you see as being normal so when you...when that doesn't happen, you know, it makes you feel kind of abnormal [...].”

It can be seen here that marriage and children are considered by Steven to be normal; it is something he has grown up with and longs for. The experience of ‘losing’ his friends to this desired ideal triggers feelings of abnormality due to unmet social expectations. This may be indicative of his vulnerability and a deep desire to belong.

In addition to the decrease in social contacts, Steven described an increasingly stressful employment situation, ending up working long hours in the evening, which allowed for an easy transition to seek out online contacts, replacing his interpersonal relationships in the physical world.

“[...] I'd work and work and work and then because you're on the computer then it's very easy then to go straight online. [...] whatever it was, the connection or the friendship whatever it was you had with that person you obviously want to maintain that or develop it [...] so you go onto a sort of a mix and a form of er, so (private IM provider), er, so then you get that sort of regular contact straightaway [...].”

Steven states that he experienced a connection and/or friendship with his online contacts, an aspect which was absent in the interpersonal relationships in his physical world. He was eager to maintain and develop them. The use of ‘obviously’ serves to contextualize Steven's decision to pursue the relationship (via a private instant messaging provider for regular and more immediate contact) within his awareness of wider social norms. The technology itself is presented as if its use follows an inevitable and normative progression (‘**you** go onto a sort of a mix..., then you get that sort of regular contact;’ [our emphasis]). He acknowledges that the victim is under 18, but this has little effect on the position he takes in

this narrative – it does not prevent him from representing his interactions with the victim as a ‘relationship’, thereby not recognizing the power differential between them.

Throughout, Steven employs a narrative tone of inviting empathy by describing his Internet use as a way of coping with his loneliness. The extract demonstrates Steven’s retrospective sense of himself as having been vulnerable, as he describes being ‘knocked back’ on conventional Internet dating sites. In his view, this led him to search out younger people, who he experienced as more responsive and engaging, making him feel ‘wanted’, ‘needed’ and ‘good’, albeit in the short term. This not only highlights the importance of these relationships for Steven in fulfilling his need for a connection, but also appears to defend and humanize his stance against disapproval and judgement in light of the victims’ age.

Both Robert and Steven felt disconnected interpersonally and sexually at the time when they started to interact with young people via Internet communication platforms. Although both used it as a way of coping with their personal problems and a sexual outlet, there were clear differences in the meaning Robert and Steven attached to their experience online. While Robert sought to fulfil his need for sexual gratification, Steven described a need for a relational connection with another person. Both of them presented these needs in ways that conformed to the conventional ways in which people justify taking up ‘relationship-seeking behaviors.’ They further focused on the role technology had played in the rapid progression and escalation of their behavior.

### **‘Spiraling Cycle of Use’**

**Robert.** Robert explains how he kept his Internet use secret from his family and at work, ‘organizing’ it around times when he would be by himself.

“It just depended on the opportunity [...] if it was quiet if I had done all my work and there was nobody else about [...] it was every day [...].”

For Robert, his Internet use was dependent on when the opportunity presented itself, and yet as time progressed, he began to create opportunities daily. A change of job facilitated opportunities through increased Internet access.

“I guess I sort of changed jobs where I was more office-based, so I had more Internet access, erm, and I guess as things deteriorated between me and my wife, erm, I tended to go on gay websites more.”

Robert explains that as the (sexual) relationship with his wife deteriorated, his Internet use intensified and escalated in terms of content of sexual material, moving from adult pornographic websites to online contact with adolescent boys. His narrative seeks to invite empathy and humanize his need for a sexual outlet and gratification by describing how he purposively avoided sexual encounters with his wife.

“I used to make excuses [about my health] and everything else erm so I wouldn't have to have had any sexual relationship with her so my only... this was my only sexual outlet erm was looking at pornography [...] obviously sometimes the opportunity wouldn't be there to get the gratification I was looking for [...] so I'd have to stop and then I'd look again later on because I obviously I hadn't fulfilled that need [...] I'd watch more porn and that and so it was a progression and as one went up one went down.”

Here, the 'compulsive' nature of Robert's behavior becomes apparent, as he describes returning to 'complete' fulfilling the need in situations where this process was disturbed. Robert also recognizes that his behavior progressed, and as it did his marital relationship became increasingly challenging. He describes how he coped with this and his arising depressive mood by engaging in more extreme offending behavior. His account of this behavior takes on the structure of an account of a poor coping strategy. Robert describes how his interaction with one particular victim escalated to several physical meetings, where sexual activity took place.

“[...] the first meeting, we met in the car park, ...I could see that he was...he wasn't 17, [...] so I went but we carried on messaging and contacting each other via text erm and then stupidly I went back and I did meet him [...] Um, and then probably the fourth or fifth meeting that was the first time we had

sexual contact. [...] I felt safe in a way that I thought okay he's...he's...he's younger so he is not going to want me to leave my wife [...] but I also felt flattered [...] but yeah it was mainly sexual gratification.”

Here, Robert explains how he left the initial meeting after finding out that the victim was under the age of 16 years. He presents himself as responsible and ‘stupid’ (when returning to meet him again) through adopting a narrative tone of anticipating disapproval and judgement. Robert explains that the victim’s young age made him feel safe and comforted in the sense that there would be no negative consequences for his marriage, nor would he be revealed. While Robert acknowledges that his main motivation was fulfilling his need for sexual gratification throughout, meeting with the victim made him feel ‘flattered’ and ‘wanted’. Through describing the victim as ‘interested’, he normalizes the sexual activity, representing it as a mutual experience between two people.

**Steven.** Steven described a job move and the remainder of his friends getting married as significant factors that fed his insecurity about his different life situation and unmet expectations.

“When the last of my friends got married and they all had kids [...] and I’d been told that I was being moved about my job which I was having relied on for a lot of my life up to that point [...]. I guess just feeling, I guess almost beaten by the...by the depression and...and by the need to...to do what I was doing, that period I didn’t think I could get myself out of it.”

This extract highlights a time of instability and lack of control in Steven’s life, and how this contributed to his downward spiraling into depression. He describes his experience of how he came to offend as a coming together of multiple factors, giving the impression that he was propelled towards the behavior by circumstances. When having to move his job, he narrates the process of losing perspective, and feeling overwhelmed by the experience of the depression and the need to go online. As the situation intensifies, he describes feeling incapable of breaking the cycle of need. Steven adopts a narrative tone of inviting empathy



throughout, using 'extreme case formulations' (i.e., semantic ways to legitimize claims) that serve to strengthen his case (Pomerantz, 1986).

"This is like a fix you want to get, you know, a feeling that someone's out there. Yo--you're on your own, I lived on my own, that was fine, er, you know, that becomes your go to, you know, there's going to be someone there that wants to talk to you."

Steven adopts a humanizing narrative tone here, to describe his experience of becoming dependent on his online interactions as a 'fix you want to get,' and how striving to fulfil his need intensified into a cycle of Internet use.

"You just kind of get into that cycle [...] it becomes very difficult to get out of and you rely on it more and more I guess. [...] if you don't find someone to talk to if you don't feel at that sort of...that need. [...] I was lucky or not lucky to have a job where I could go to work and keep my mind occupied [...] so you don't feel the need to talk to someone online."

Steven's hopeless situation becomes clear as he narrates the difficulty of breaking out of the cycle of Internet use. He appeared to be trapped in the cycle and only able to escape from it during the time he spent at work, describing himself as lucky to have that time to be occupied and focus on other things in order not to 'feel the need.' The online interactions progressed to physical meetings, escalating in sexual activity taking place, which Steven recalls experiencing as a real conflict, highlighting the desperate situation he was in.

"[...] the relationship online then it got to the point where it wasn't so much an ultimatum but they would say, you know, "What's this relationship? Where is it going?" um, er, I don't think well for me that relationship online didn't seem completely real [...] I didn't want to lose that relationship it felt like it was all I had at the time, you know, and that's when you can then say if it's a choice between moving from online contact to...to meeting them or losing that relationship then that was...that was the real sort of conflict."

The beginning of the extract highlights that the online contact was clearly construed by Steven as a 'relationship' by the time a physical meeting was first mentioned. Steven normalizes this, presenting it as a natural next step after a period of time of getting to know

each other online, and describing it as an ultimatum placed on him by the perceived desire of the victim, rather than himself. He thereby humanizes his decision to attend the physical meeting in light of otherwise losing an important relationship in his life. Within his account, the conflict which he claims to have experienced is psychologically plausible, and this has the narrative effect of diffusing responsibility for the meeting. However, it is of course a form of victim blaming. Steven is clear that he was aware throughout that the relationship was not 'real' and had no future. His description of experiencing an inner conflict, however, suggests that he may also have felt a genuine connection with his victims, and that, to him, his interactions with them resembled aspects of a 'real' relationship. His claim is that this impeded his ability to make a responsible decision.

Both Robert and Steven experienced a similar progression in terms of frequency and intensity of Internet use, spiraling into a cycle of 'compulsive' aspects which encouraged their continued engagement. For Robert, this progression appeared to be predominantly related to a newfound way of experiencing sexual gratification and fulfilling this need in a much more efficient and satisfying manner. The physical meeting is suggested to have arisen out of opportunity, with the victim living in close proximity to Robert. Steven's progression of Internet use appeared to have largely been affected by situational factors, and him experiencing a connection with his online contacts, which he lacked in interpersonal relationships in the physical world. He therefore became increasingly dependent on the online interactions to cope with and escape his personal life, as well as fulfil his need to be wanted and needed by someone. However, the escalation of offending behavior in the form of physical meetings led to a process of de-escalation in the form of discontinuation of contact between Robert and Steven and their victims. In Robert's case, the process of arrest had commenced following disclosure by the victim to the police, while for Steven, the physical meetings acted as a catalyst and a shocking realization of the consequences of his actions.

### **'Confrontation with Reality'**

**Robert.** Robert's account features a more passive process, whereby a change of life situation was triggered by the revelation of his offending behavior and subsequent arrest.

"I think by after the last meeting I think the process of me getting arrested had started. [...] then contact stopped, I just thought he'd lost interest or whatever because he was a young lad [...]."

Robert initially assumed that contact stopped as a result of the victim having lost interest, which may have been a sign of how safe he felt that he was not going to be revealed. However, he later learnt that the process of his arrest had started, and Robert's sexual orientation became common knowledge, ending his marriage.

"Now it's a strange thing is perversely it's one of the best things that happened to me because now I'm honest with people I'm more open, before even my family knows and before I didn't really say much because I was frightened I would slip up and say something [...]."

In this sentence, we can see that a problematic sexual offense is reframed as if it were merely a prelude to a 'coming out' narrative, in one respect highlighting how fearful Robert was of being revealed to his family and friends as homosexual. He describes the subsequent openness about this aspect of his sexuality as positive (i.e., "I'm honest with people I'm more open"). Despite this, there are also indications that Robert realizes that this reframing is only partially possible: if this was a good outcome for him 'in that small bit' (i.e., the openness), it was "not [good] for everyone else." There is tacit recognition here that his behavior towards young people was directly at odds with a conventional account of 'coming out.' Other people were harmed during this transition. Robert therefore concludes, "if I could turn back the clock I would still go back to live as I was and wouldn't have committed the offense." The ambiguity cannot be resolved here. In this interview, we may be hearing from someone on the point of recovering a new and acceptable identity for themselves, after a disastrously mishandled transition out of a suppressed sexual identity. Alternatively, we may be seeing

someone who is simply attempting to present a more acceptable narrative of his offending behavior, or failing to confront its existence at all.

**Steven.** Steven narrates how the physical meetings acted as a catalyst and a shocking realization of the consequences of his actions. This triggered a mental process, whereby a decision to change his life was generated.

“...in the end that was kind of what shook me out of that cycle, it was the sort of catalyst that started with, you know, me thinking really about the implications and where it possibly could go, you know...and the fact that it wasn't, um for me a long term solution to my problems but the fact that it was going to harm somebody else, you know [...] it felt very different to being online, there was no barrier there it was right in your face, it was uncomfortable.”

Steven describes how the confrontation of the physical meetings not only prompted him to realize the implications of his offending behavior, but also that his online contacts were not going to truly fulfil his desire for a satisfying relationship. There is a sense of disappointment in Steven's narrative tone that this realization did not occur earlier on in the process. He explains this by referring to the absence of online barriers at physical meetings as very threatening and uncomfortable, which mirror Steven's earlier claims about his difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships. This catalyst led to Steven taking immediate action to shut off this part of his life.

“I closed down my (private IM provider) and deleted everybody off it, I deleted everything on my computers, everything I could think of that had any connection with that period. And I suppose that initially was a quick fix, it made me feel better. There was a real sense of relief to shut that part of my life off and there was still a lot of pressure, there was still a lot of feelings of unease about there not being any contact [...]”

Steven describes how deleting his account and anything in connection with it acted as a ‘quick fix’ that made him feel relieved. He thereby gains back control (after having been out of control) and removes this shameful aspect from his life. Yet, the frequency and intensity of his engagement in online interactions left a mark, with Steven describing

experiencing sensations of pressure and uneasiness. These may be understood as withdrawal symptoms or feelings of the unmet need resurfacing, again highlighting the compulsive nature of this experience. Steven made a conscious decision to change his life and describes reconnecting with his family and friends, as well as looking for more positive things to fill the void, such as taking up leisure activities. By doing so, Steven began making steps to help him meet people in a more appropriate and healthy way.

Both participants experienced the process of arrest as life-changing. While Robert initially appeared to lack insight into why contact with the victim was discontinued, Steven experienced the physical meetings as a catalyst, which motivated him to take active steps towards changing his life for the better. Specifically, Robert presented his role more passively, as if his actions were an inevitable consequence of hiding and suppressing his homosexuality for many years. He offered an account which aimed to reframe the offense as a pivotal step in recognizing his own sexual identity, but which was undermined by the harms he had caused to others in the process. In both men's cases, the transformational experience of being caught and stopped (i.e., arrested) is complex, and involves intertwined emotions, which are both positive (e.g., liberation, change) and negative (e.g., regret, guilt).

### **Discussion**

The study reported here aimed to explore men's lived experiences of engaging in sexual interactions with young people that were initiated via Internet communication platforms, by specifically focusing on the meaning they attach to these experiences through their narratives. Using the qualitative data analysis approach of IPA, two men's narratives were presented in a way that differs from traditional interpretations of such data – the aim was not to accept the narratives as descriptions of factual information of the events that occurred, but rather to understand their point of view through the experiential claims they made, describing the things that matter to them.

Despite merely presenting two case studies, the analysis revealed similarities and interesting differences between them. Robert's and Steven's accounts both drew upon an implicit analogy to a different, more socially accepted form of 'problem narrative', whereby Internet use was described as a poor and failed coping strategy to deal with stressful factors in their personal lives. Robert was 'trapped in a lie' by living the life of a heterosexual man, and he experienced this conflict of sexual identities as a significant stressful factor in his personal life, which was alleviated for him once he experienced sexual fulfilment and gratification through the Internet by means of adult pornography and engaging in sexually explicit interactions with adolescent boys. For Steven, the loss of social resources and his experiences of rejection led to feelings of disconnectedness, isolation and frustrated intimacy, which may have made the Internet an understandable choice in his motivation to search for an idealized relationship and/or connection with another person. Both participants therefore appeared to present with intimacy deficits (one of the pathways in Ward and Siegert's (2002) Pathways Model of Child Sexual Abuse) around the time when they commenced using the Internet for sexual purposes.

Through a process of habituation, the participants' initially legal use of the Internet to access adult pornography and Internet dating sites was described as spiraling out of control. They had approached and interacted with young people via Internet communication platforms, and spent progressively more time on the computer to fulfil their unmet needs. Both participants chose to highlight positive emotional aspects (avoiding negative emotions through experiencing positive emotions; Surjadi, Bullens, van Horn, & Bogaerts, 2010; Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006) of their motives for maintaining online contact, and described a sense of growing loss of control over their behavior as it did not produce the anticipated escape from their personal circumstances, or at least not in the long term. This loss and lack of control demonstrates – rhetorically and experientially – the perceived

compulsive nature of the participants' online interactions. Their accounts thereof highlighted aspects of desperation, and presented their choice to pursue their unmet needs via the Internet as a 'poor-but-understandable' one, given the pressures, stresses and lack of control they were experiencing. With reference to the Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation (Ward & Stewart, 2003), this pursuit of unmet needs may have functioned to fulfill the primary good of relatedness. We can speculate that these decisions may have partly been mediated by the nature of Internet technologies, which depersonalize online interactions (Cooper, 1998), as well as providing an anonymous environment in which users may act outside social and moral boundaries for they feel safe and perceive themselves to be unidentifiable.

The progression of Internet use by both participants in terms of frequency and intensity is not surprising, given that the engagement in sexual behavior is particularly reinforcing when it culminates in masturbation (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Quayle et al., 2006). Consequently, both participants withdrew personally, and their 'real world' social contact diminished as a result. Excessive involvement that interferes with work, social and/or recreational dimensions of an individual's life is characteristic of pathological Internet use (Davis, 2011), and fits the description of 'online sexual compulsivity' by Cooper and Griffin-Shelley (2002). Once their online interactions had escalated to physical meetings, the participants were able to acknowledge that they had lost control, and that their offending behavior had a significant impact on their lives. Their recollections suggested that they had lacked insight into these developments and the consequences of their actions throughout the process, which may have functioned to overcome their internal inhibitors (one of the stages in Finkelhor's (1984) Precondition Model).

Furthermore, for Robert, the victim's young age seemed to strengthen his sense of anonymity, as he described feeling safe in the thought that he would not have to leave his

family for the victim, ensuring that there would be no negative consequences (i.e., exposure or revelation) following offline contact. Whether this feeling of safety and comfort triggered the escalation to physical meetings cannot be concluded with certainty; yet, it is of interest how Robert experienced both his offending behavior online and in the physical world, making sense of it through a narrative mediated by beliefs of anonymity and safety. Similarly, Steven appeared to experience his online interactions with adolescent girls in a way that he had not experienced other relationships beforehand. This undoubtedly compromised the search for more age-appropriate relationships and is argued to have also been a triggering factor in the process of escalation, with a physical meeting being perceived as the natural next step based on the quality of the online relationship.

While both participants showed self-awareness and -reflection in terms of the wide-ranging, negative consequences their offending behavior had on their social environment, the victims and the victims' families, the participants responded by making positive changes to areas in their lives relating to sexuality, relationships, friendships and family (i.e., the pursuit of primary goods in socially acceptable ways; Good Lives Model, Ward & Stewart, 2003). This desire to change one's life was also found in a study by Blagden, Winder, Thorne and Gregson (2011), in which men convicted of sexual offenses described how they overcame denial through a desire to change. Their 'new self' was thereby one that strove for a second chance by making amends and being redeemed. In terms of Internet use post-sentence, Robert reported that his computer was subject to police monitoring at the time of the interview, and Steven explained that he did not want to rush back into using the Internet, but to appreciate the importance of having interpersonal human relationships.

### **Limitations**

The present study used a qualitative approach on a small number of cases due to the extreme difficulty in recruiting participants, which may be related to offenders' general



reluctance to discuss their offenses for a variety of psychosocial and legal reasons (Ahlmeyer, Heil, McKee, & English, 2000; Groth & Lorendo, 1981). Such reluctance may be particularly relevant in the context of research, as the researcher is unknown to the individual. This is not surprising – they are after all personal experiences that portray an individual in a very unfavourable light. Given their sensitive and emotive nature, it is important to bear in mind that research interviews can be extremely challenging for participants.

While the number of cases was appropriate for the methodology used, findings are tentative and not generalizable across other populations. Furthermore, only individuals who had come to the attention of authorities could be approached for participation in the study. The results are therefore not representative of undetected offenses, nor those individuals who declined to take part. In addition to this, participants' willingness to disclose and/or discuss offense details varies, which undoubtedly impacts on research findings.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presented in-depth accounts of personal perspectives of two men who were convicted of a sexual offense that included sexual grooming. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews that were interpreted using IPA. The men's narratives highlighted facets of their personal experiences that were salient for them, providing insight into how they experienced their Internet use, and offending behavior specifically. The experience of 'unmet needs,' and behaviors spiraling out of control, as well as the manner in which participants understood these as failed coping strategies for dealing with life stressors, suggests that there may be psychological parallels between some forms of sexually abusive behavior and other out-of-control, 'excessive appetitive' behaviors.

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### Supplementary Online Material

#### **Fulfilling an Unmet Need**

##### **Robert:**

Extract 4:

“The conversations nine times out of ten were, did lead to a sexual element, and it sort of started pretty much earlier on [...], there was a sexual undertone either from me or from whoever I was messaging, [...] and probably if there wasn't any sort of sexual conversation I probably wouldn't have given them (username) or swapped with it would have just been like “Oh hello how are you,” sort of thing and that would have been it really. It might start off with “how has your day been”, etc. etc. but it would quickly develop into a sexual conversation, and then, you know, they might say what they want and I might say what I want. And there might be some masturbation going on as we are talking, and sort of when that was finished that pretty much ended the conversation, as it were. [...] but it was quick it really was just a sexual gratification tool.”

Extract 5:

“That was really, other than the pornography but the actual first interaction with another gay person or someone who was bisexual or someone who was whatever was on the internet and that was the first sort of time because it made it easier because it was so anonymous [...] I would have been too embarrassed, no one knows who um you are so it's easier because you know no one can identify who you are.”

Extract 6:

“That was really, other than the pornography but the actual first interaction with another gay person or someone who was bisexual or someone who was whatever was on the internet and that was the first sort of time because it made it easier because it was so anonymous [...] I would have been too embarrassed, no one knows who um you are so it's easier because you know no one can identify who you are.”

##### **Steven:**

Extract 1:

“I've had [...] like two girlfriends in my life, both reasonably short, [...] um, and it got to the point when I was in my mid-30s where all my friends had got married and a couple now had a kid as well and had started their own families and so my kind of friendship circle had changed quite a lot dynamically and which meant I was spending a lot of time on my own [...] I had been sort of resorting to the internet, you know, and forming relationships using the internet.”

Extract 2:

“Mum and Dad got married early 20s, had a family and that's what you see as being normal so when you...when that doesn't happen, you know, it makes you feel kind of abnormal, if you know what I mean so if...particularly if it happens to your friends, you know, that you've seen growing up and that, um, you see it happen to them and they're getting married and that sort of normal it is and if it hasn't happened I'm not normal, you know.”

Extract 3:

“I was literally just sort of finishing my work and then going onto the internet to find someone to talk to [...] it was one of my ways of coping with the loneliness. I'd work and work and work and then because you're on the computer then it's very easy then to go straight online. [...] whatever it was, the connection or the friendship whatever it was you had with that person you obviously want to maintain that or develop it [...] so you go onto a sort of a mix and a form of er, so (private IM provider), er, so then you get that sort of regular contact straightaway [...] I've tried internet dating and had no response or you know I wasn't able to get anywhere with that and that again sort of knocks you back a bit and I guess my experience of talking to...to people of sort of 15...you know, [...] were more responsive and they would, er, make me feel more wanted I suppose in a way and more needed [...] it makes you feel good only in the short term and not wholly good obviously because you know that, I suppose that they're under 18.”

### **Spiralling Cycle of Use**

**Robert:**

Extract 1:

“It just depended on the opportunity [...] if it was quiet if I had done all my work and there was nobody else about I might have a look at some [adult] pornography if I was working late

and I was alone I might have a look at it [...] it was every day, yeah, it was every day. [...] so I had a company laptop, erm, which is what I used to use, I'd sometimes take it home and use it at home some evenings, but the majority of the time it would be on the company laptop."

Extract 3:

"I used to make excuses [about my health] and everything else erm so I wouldn't have to have had any sexual relationship with her so my only... this was my only sexual outlet erm was looking at pornography, and obviously when I'd said like three time a day [looking at pornography] obviously sometimes the opportunity wouldn't be there to get the gratification I was looking for so then I'd then sort of...or I would say somebody would come so I'd have to stop and then I'd look again later on because I obviously I hadn't fulfilled that need so you know it just depended on the situation and the opportunity. ...I'd watch more porn and that and so it was a progression and as one went up one went down."

Extract 4:

"The meeting, the first meeting, we met in the car park, and I was...I could see that he was...he wasn't 17, erm, so I questioned him and then he said no he was actually 15, so at that point I left so I went...I came home...so I went but we carried on messaging and contacting each other via text erm and then stupidly I went back and I did meet him...eventually met him again, um, and no there was no...for the first three or four meetings there was no sexual contact or anything like that. [...] Um, and then probably the fourth or fifth meeting that was the first time we had sexual contact. [...] I felt safe in a way that I thought okay he's...he's...he's younger so he is not going to want me to leave my wife etc. etc. So it was not going to be revealed to the family [...] but I also felt flattered [...] it was nice that som--that I felt somebody wanted me as it were erm but yeah it was mainly sexual gratification."

**Steven:**

Extract 1:

"When the last of my friends got married and they all had kids [...] that side of my life was...it felt kind of closed and, um, my life as far as socially going out was kind of hemmed in, um, [...] and I'd been told that I was being moved about my job which I was having relied on for a lot of my life up to that point, particularly over the last sort of two or three years. So I

guess there was a sort of that I knew and not knowing where my life was going to go, um, er, and I guess just feeling, I guess almost beaten by the...by the depression and...and by the need to...to do what I was doing that wasn't around, you know, that period I didn't think I could get myself out of it.”

Extract 2:

“You just kind of get into that cycle that it being really part of your life and, you know, it happened for two or three years and there was this cycle this period when you just...it becomes very difficult to get out of and you rely on it more and more I guess. [...] because of the cycle that you get into, you know, because if you don't find someone to talk to if you don't feel at that sort of...that need. [...] I was lucky or not lucky to have a job where I could go to work and keep my mind occupied and I guess you're trying to keep your mind occupied so you don't feel the need to talk to someone online.”

Extract 3:

“Yeah. I guess, um, [...] the relationship online then it got to the point where it wasn't so much an ultimatum but they would say, you know, “What's this relationship? Where is it going?” um, er, I don't think well for me that relationship online didn't seem completely real but you almost think maybe they thought it was more real than I did, I think on their...on their side of it like, [...] you know, that obviously they felt differently about it, um, and they did want it to go further than that and it gets to the point where, I suppose I didn't want to lose that contact, I didn't want to lose that relationship it felt like it was all I had at the time, you know, and that's when you can then say if it's a choice between moving from online contact to...to meeting them or losing that relationship then that was...that was the real sort of conflict.”

### **Confrontation with Reality**

**Robert:**

Extract 1:

“I think by after the last meeting I think the process of me getting arrested had started. [...] so after that erm the last meeting then contact stopped, um, and I...I just thought he'd lost interest or whatever because he was a young lad so I was just trying to, you know, one of those things so that's how why from my point of view that's why it stopped.”



Extract 2:

“In fact, if hadn't have been arrested I'd still be living the same life I had today I would still be doing a lie I'd still be with my wife and family and making excuses. [...] Now it's a strange thing is perversely it's one of the best things that happened to me because now I'm honest with people I'm more open, before even my family knows and before I didn't really say much because I was frightened I would slip up and say something [...] it is ridiculous but it is has taken something so bad to sort of ...it's a bit late now but you know for me [to] live as who I am it might have been positive for me in that small bit but not for everyone else no so no I'd still you know if I could turn back the clock I would still go back to live as I was and wouldn't have committed the offense.”

**Steven:**

Extract 1:

“All of a sudden I made excuses to people that I'd [...] talked to regularly, um not to have any further contact, I closed down my (private IM provider) and deleted everybody off it, I deleted everything on my computers, everything I could think of that had any connection with that period. And I suppose that initially was a quick fix, it made me feel better. There was a real sense of relief to shut that part of my life off and there was still a lot of pressure, there was still a lot of feelings of unease about there not being any contact with me or [...] there was an instant in terms of relief that that part of your life felt like it had gone in a way. I tried to change my life over and to get to a point where it was positive and I started to reconnect with one friend and with my family [...] but I also started trying to think of things that I could do in normal circumstances, leisure activities or whatever which filled that void I suppose, and helped me to meet people normally.”

Extract 2:

“All of a sudden I made excuses to people that I'd [...] talked to regularly, um not to have any further contact, I closed down my (private IM provider) and deleted everybody off it, I deleted everything on my computers, everything I could think of that had any connection with that period. And I suppose that initially was a quick fix, it made me feel better. There was a real sense of relief to shut that part of my life off and there was still a lot of pressure, there was still a lot of feelings of unease about there not being any contact with me or [...] there was an instant in terms of relief that that part of your life felt like it had gone in a way. I tried to change my life over and to get to a point where it was positive and I started to reconnect with one friend and with my family [...] but I also started trying to think of things

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