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Thematic Analysis of Online Predatory Grooming Behavior Among Male Offenders

Ryan Christopher Dronek
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Ryan Christopher Dronek

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Thematic Analysis of Online Predatory Grooming Behavior Among Male Offenders

by

Ryan Christopher Dronek

MPhil, Walden University, 2021

BS, Southern New Hampshire University, 2019

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2023

Abstract

Social media sites, gaming platforms, and online communication tools have been integrated into children's everyday lives. This has created a new avenue for child predators to identify, communicate, and victimize children. Just as the internet and the ability to communicate online have evolved, predatory grooming behavior has evolved as well. This qualitative study aimed to identify predatory grooming themes and the thematic stage progression for online male offenders who target child victims using online chat rooms. O'Connell's typology of cyber sexploitation and online grooming practices was used to explore online child predators' grooming themes and stage progression. Nine male Wisconsin offender chat logs were obtained from the Perverted Justice website. Thematic analysis was applied to each chat log to identify predatory grooming themes and stage progression. Further analysis was conducted using NVivo software. Four themes were identified: (a) establishing a relationship, (b) sexual exploration, (c) arranging a meeting, and (d) risk mitigation. These themes did not occur in a vacuum but were employed by offenders in a fluid and dynamic fashion, and offenders appeared to exhibit contact-driven characteristics. The results of this study could promote positive social change by adding to the current literature and advancing law enforcement and public education.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my loving and supportive wife, Amy, and my children, Aubrey and Malin. Without them, I would have not persevered. You all inspire me every day to do better and be better. Aubrey and Malin, it is your turn to do better and be better. Change the world each day through your actions and through your heart. Amy, thank you for sleeping until 9:00 AM most mornings which allowed me to work on this endeavor. I love you forever, plus two minutes.

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Cheers to both of you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a global health concern, affecting most countries. Female children are often more likely to be victimized than their male peers (Lindenbach et al., 2021; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). Sexual assaults on children create several immediate and long-term biological and mental health concerns, including sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance abuse disorders (Lindenbach et al., 2021). According to a recent meta-analysis, 1 in 5 children are exposed to sexually explicit material online and approximately 1 in 10 children are exposed to online sexual solicitation (Madigan et al., 2018). A recent Crimes Against Children Research Center survey reported that 9% of youth have had unwanted sexual solicitation while using the internet (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

The internet, computers, and cell phones have become integral to children's lives, fostering education, socialization, and entertainment (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). As these devices and accessibility grow, the concern and potential for victimization grow as well. The use of mobile devices or computer-based communication allows an offender the ability to engage with their victims as the internet allows accessibility and affordability and provides the offender with relative anonymity (Seto, 2013; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). The internet can increase the opportunity for offenders to engage in online sexual solicitation and amplify an offender's ability to exhibit grooming behavior (Seto, 2013).

This topic should be studied further to keep pace with the constant evolution of predatory behavior online and advancements in communication platforms. The findings

of this study have several potential social implications. First, the outcomes add to current empirical knowledge surrounding grooming themes and thematic stage progression. Additionally, results may help enhance law enforcement training and increase public education. In Chapter 1, I briefly discuss the background and literature surrounding this topic along with pertinent definitions. This chapter also covers the purpose of the study, research questions, and the nature of the study. Lastly, I address the scope and delimitations, assumptions, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

In 2020, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2021) reported that Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task force agencies conducted more than 109,000 investigations and 85,600 forensic exams of alleged child exploitation cases, resulting in the arrests of more than 9,200 offenders. Law enforcement officers assigned to ICAC task forces or child exploitation investigations suggest there is a lack of training central to the behavioral characteristics of the online predator and grooming process (Wolf et al., 2018). Internet chat rooms, social media, and gaming sites are often the entry point for an offender to identify a potential victim and initiate contact (Ioannou et al., 2018; Malesky, 2007). These various social media platforms provide offenders with easy access to potential victims and the ability to choose victims by viewing their profiles; moreover, these profiles provide information offenders can use in the grooming process (Ioannou et al., 2018).

Identifying a unified thematic stage progression that is generalizable to an offender population has been met with difficulty. Aitken et al. (2018) studied the

grooming themes present in online chat transcripts obtained through the website Perverted Justice between male offenders and male or female victims. Aitken et al. (2018) found five main themes: (a) positivity, (b) emotional connection, (c) self-protection, (d) sexual content, and (e) arranging to meet. The authors found no identifiable difference among these themes across victim genders (Aitken et al., 2018). However, the authors noted the validity of their identified themes is marginal because they used a small sample of participants from Perverted Justice; future research should focus on larger sample sizes. Similarly, Kloess et al. (2017) studied how online child sex offenders engage victims during online chats. The goal of Kloess et al.'s study was to identify the themes and strategies of the offenders. Five cases were analyzed in which the offender was male, and the victims were actual female child victims. Kloess et al. (2017) identified four themes: (a) directness in initiating online sexual activity, (b) pursuing sexual information, (c) the next step, and (d) fantasy rehearsal. The authors indicated the study was limited by small sample size, suggesting more thematic analysis research be conducted using chat transcripts with different offenders and victim genders to identify how they each contribute to the progression of the conversation (Kloess et al., 2017).

Offenders' will use several tactics to manipulate their victim. Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018) studied different persuasion strategies used by online offenders through a survey of 196 identified child victims in Madrid, Spain. The researchers found persuasion and bribery were central to manipulating victims into sexual acts, either through illicit images, conversation, or physical contact (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018). Furthermore, the authors emphasized the stage of relationship building between offender and victim, which

suggests the stronger the influence of the perceived relationship between the victim and offender, the more likely the victim will comply with sexual advances or requests (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018).

Although previous research focused on the identification of grooming themes, the progression and duration of the themes had not. O'Connell (2003) researched predatory grooming, and the research team posed as children and entered chat rooms dedicated to child or teen participants. Researchers were approached by several adult participants who engaged in predatory grooming behavior (O'Connell, 2003). Using sociolinguistic analytics, O'Connell explored how these offenders communicate and groom victims. O'Connell (2003) identified five stages of grooming: (a) friendship forming, (b) relationship forming, (c) risk assessment, (d) exclusivity, and (e) sexual stage. These stages are not linear and may occur out of order, and there is no specific duration of time for each stage (O'Connell, 2003).

Creating an offender typology and their intentions may assist law enforcement prioritize their investigations. Seto et al. (2012) conducted a study of 38 low-risk child sexual assault (CSA) contact offenders, 38 child pornography offenders, and 70 online solicitation offenders, examining the differences between their sociodemographic and psychological variables as well as current risk measures through different risk assessments. Seto et al. (2012) found most of the solicitation offenders were contact driven, meaning they wished to meet and engage in sexual activity with a child victim. Seto et al. (2012) also indicated a need for more research on offenders who use the internet to offend child victims, as this area of study is new and underresearched.

Victims of CSA have the potential to experience various levels of trauma and negative life outcomes. Joleby et al. (2021) explored online child sexual abuse and the potential negative mental health outcomes by examining 98 court case verdicts in which children sent illicit images to adult offenders or children received illicit images from adult offenders. Joleby et al. (2021) found that child victims sustained negative mental health outcomes, low self-esteem, and participated in high-risk behaviors later in life. Additionally, Hebert et al. (2019) surveyed 8,194 Canadian youths in Quebec to understand the prevalence of child sexual abuse and negative mental health outcomes. The research showed that youth who experience sexual abuse as a child are more likely to participate in high-risk behaviors, such as illicit drug or alcohol consumption, as well as higher reported negative mental health disorders (Herbert et al., 2019).

Public education surrounding online predators and how to protect children can be enhanced. Furthermore, qualitative research on the grooming process between a male offender and a child victim is scant. The thematic stages an offender progresses through are not unified nor is there an identified succession of the stages (Aitken et al., 2018; Henshaw et al., 2017; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). In this study, I aimed to further explore the gap in research surrounding online predatory grooming themes. Kloess et al. (2019) and Seto (2012) recommend further research on online predatory grooming themes, stage identification, and progression due to limited qualitative research in this area. Such continued research may enhance law enforcement training and increase public education.

Problem Statement

Predatory grooming has evolved. Predatory grooming was once thought to require physical access to a child victim (Craven et al., 2006). With the advent of the internet, however, the ability to communicate with individuals has expanded and provided a new avenue for child sex offenders to identify and access victims (Kloess et al., 2014). Predatory grooming can now take place on the internet via text through social media, gaming, and chat platforms. Child sex offenders have created new strategies or adjusted their predatory grooming tactics to compensate for lack of physical access (Kloess et al., 2014). Understanding the predatory grooming process that takes place online is necessary so that law enforcement and the public can create effective investigative and preventive strategies.

A singular study cannot address all the dynamic elements of grooming behavior. Although researchers have investigated this issue, Aitken et al. (2018), Kloess et al. (2017), and Seto et al. (2012) all indicate a lack of research that focuses on the identification of predatory grooming themes and manipulative strategies within different populations of online offenders. Other qualitative research that has been focused on identifying online predatory grooming themes has been limited to small samples and geographic locations. Research has not been conducted, to date, in which researchers explore online predatory grooming themes between a male offender and a child victim in the United States, specifically in the state of Wisconsin. This study was conducted to address the research gap by exploring predatory grooming themes of online male offenders in Wisconsin.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to identify predatory grooming themes and the thematic stage progression for online male offenders who target child victims using online chat rooms. This study addressed the research gap by furthering knowledge on grooming theme identification and thematic stage progressions for male offenders in Wisconsin (Aitken et al., 2018; Henshaw et al., 2017; Kloess et al., 2017; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Through new information on this topic, law enforcement investigative strategies and public awareness may identify at-risk child victims sooner. Additionally, victimization may be reduced due to preventive education on the evolution of online predatory grooming themes.

Research Question

What are the online grooming themes and thematic stage progressions observed within text dialogue between a male offender and child victim?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theory that grounded this study is O'Connell's (2003) typology of cyber exploitation and online grooming practices. O'Connell's (2003) typology of cyber exploitation and online grooming stages have been used in several recent qualitative studies conducted to explore thematic stages of online offender grooming behavior. O'Connell (2003) postulated five distinct stages an offender progresses through to manipulate a child victim. O'Connell's (2003) theory provides the characteristics of each grooming stage, how an offender conducts risk assessments, and the varying subcategories of sexual fantasy development with the victim. Using this theory allowed

me to conceptualize several themes present in the grooming process while chat logs were reviewed. This theory also allowed me to be open to the development of potentially new themes or subthemes that arose during the coding process. Lastly, O'Connell's (2003) theory allowed me to apply identified stages with the understanding that they may not present a linear progression, but rather a dynamic progression. This allowed me to understand that an offender may take a fluid approach to grooming a victim based on their interactions with the victim.

Nature of the Study

In this general qualitative study, I used thematic analysis as it allowed me to identify patterns or themes across a data set, which provided rich detail to explore the complexity of the predatory grooming process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kloess et al., 2017). The advantage of using thematic analysis is its flexibility, as it can be applied across several theoretical domains (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis allowed me to identify grooming themes and stages within the chat logs, further exploring the dynamic progression of the themes. The research design required access to transcribed chat logs from Perverted Justice, a public and open-source website on the internet. These are previously recorded chat logs between an offender and a trained adult volunteer, who works for Perverted Justice, posing as a child. The use of transcribed secondary data was an acceptable form of data to employ thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I used purposeful criterion-based sampling of convenience (Creswell, 2014). I reviewed the chat logs were reviewed and used NVivo to code and analyze themes.

Definitions

Chat log: Documentation of transcribed online communication between an offender and child victim on social media, mobile phone, or internet communication platforms.

Child decoy: A trained adult volunteer for Perverted Justice who poses as a child to identify and investigate child sexexploitation online.

Child exploitation: A form of sexual abuse in which a child is manipulated to perform sexual activities either in person, via the internet, or through any other mode of communication (Roache & McSherry, 2021).

Cognitive distortion: Maladaptive beliefs that justify actions that conflict with social norms (D'Urso et al., 2019).

Entrapment: The use of coercion and other overbearing tactics to induce someone to commit a crime.

Grooming: The process or strategy of an offender in which they prepare a child and their surrounding environment for abuse through identification and access, gaining trust or compliance, and mitigating risk of disclosure (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2017)

Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC): A task force comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies that investigate and prosecute internet crimes against children (ICAC, 2020).

National Crime Victim Survey: Conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, this survey collects data on crimes that may or may not have been reported to law

enforcement. This survey is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021).

Perverted Justice: A private organization that uses adult volunteers posing as children to assist law enforcement in the identification and prosecution of offenders who use the internet to commit crimes against children.

Sexual abuse: Unwanted sexual penetration or physical contact, including but not limited to oral sex or manual stimulation.

Sexual offender: An adult who engages children with the intent to commit sexual assault or sexual activities.

Uniform Crime Report: Statistics generated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2021) detailing crimes reported to law enforcement.

Victim: A child who has not attained the age of 18, who has been afflicted by sexual grooming, sexploitation, or sexual abuse.

Assumptions

The data set for this study was collected from an open-source website: *Perverted Justice* (www.perverted-justice.com). The website posted online chat logs between offenders and volunteer adult decoys attempting to identify online child sexploitation. I assumed the offender initiated contact with the decoy. It is customary during this type of investigation, to avoid the potential of entrapment, the offender must have contacted the decoy first. I also assumed the offender believed the decoy to be a child. It was necessary to assume the offender believed the decoy is a child because it showed how the offender used the grooming process to manipulate an actual child victim. The data set included

transcripts between male offenders and either male or female decoys. I assumed the transcripts would create data saturation for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I assumed the data would provide enough rich detail to identify present themes.

Scope and Delimitations

This study sought to identify grooming themes and the thematic stage progression within online chat logs between an offender and an adult decoy posing as a child. The grooming process allows an offender to identify and manipulate a child, online or in person, with the intent to sexually exploit them (Craven et al., 2006). Law enforcement officers and prosecutors who conduct investigations into online child sexploitation need to understand how the grooming process presents itself in an online format. A better understanding of the grooming process during undercover operations allows for more thorough investigations and better prosecution through evidence that aligns with grooming behavior (Wolf et al., 2018). Furthermore, identified themes between individuals who are fantasy-driven versus contact-driven may provide behavioral insight that could assist with investigative prioritization.

This study was delimited to the use of secondary data versus collecting primary data. This was due to the sensitive nature and the risk to a researcher when collecting primary data because of the legal investigation and the potential commission of a crime by a live participant. Further delimitations were the adult volunteer decoys from Perverted Justice. The conversations between offenders and decoys are not representative of a conversation between an actual child and an adult offender. Due to the delimitations

noted above, this study was only generalizable to the specific participant criteria indicated.

Limitations

In this study, I used qualitative thematic analysis, which is highlighted by its flexibility; however, the use of this research method can lead to issues in trustworthiness. To establish trustworthiness, I employed several strategies to address creditability, transferability, dependability, and conformability. To address credibility, I employed peer debriefing. Peer debriefing allows an external researcher to review and check initial findings and interpretations of raw data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is the generalizability of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance transferability, I employed thick descriptions. Thick descriptions of dialogue between offender and decoy contextualize the interaction and I explicitly noted grooming themes present, as well as the progression of the grooming stages. Dependability was addressed through audit trails, detailed documentation, and rationale showing my decisions regarding theoretical, methodological, and interpretative choices made during the research process (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Another limitation of this study was the sample size of the data. The sample size was not generalizable to the entire population of online offenders, and the sample size is limited to offenders in the state of Wisconsin. The study was limited to secondary transcribed data from the Perverted Justice website. Perverted Justice indicates their transcribed chat logs have not been manipulated or redacted except in instances when an offender provided legitimate addresses, phone numbers, or illicit pictures or completed a

telephone call to the decoy. In those instances, notations posted by Perverted Justice describe what occurs.

Significance

In this study, I focused on a specific geographic offender population that has not yet been explored through the lens of O'Connell's (2003) typology of cyber sexploitation and online grooming practices. Law enforcement efforts to combat and mitigate online child sexploitation is a progressive social change movement. The results of this study add to the growing base of research into online predatory grooming behavior and support the advancement of law enforcement training and public education in this area. Many law enforcement officers engage in these types of investigations and require updated knowledge and training to effectively conduct investigations that could result in arrests and convictions. Furthermore, public education surrounding this topic could afford those who care for children the ability to act through a proactive and preventative lens.

Summary

Online child sexploitation is a national epidemic. The use of the internet by children, including social media platforms, online messaging platforms, and games, has increased their risk of victimization. Furthermore, the internet has provided offenders the ability to easily target children and manipulate them to commit crimes. This study was conducted to further explore and gain a better understanding of the grooming process. Current research on the phenomenon of the online grooming process is scarce and limited due to the ability to directly access the population of offenders and the sensitive nature of the crime. This research is important because I explored the thematic elements of the

grooming process exhibited by a geographic demographic, which had not yet been studied. In Chapter 2, I discuss historical research conducted on the grooming process, O'Connell's theory on grooming practices, characteristics of online predators, victim risk factors, and online communications strategies employed by online predators.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore predatory grooming behavior through identifying grooming themes and the thematic stage progression for online male offenders who target child victims. Officers assigned to ICAC investigate many reports of online child sex exploitation or solicitation and need to understand the behavioral characteristics of online predators and the grooming process so they can effectively identify high-risk offenders to mitigate potential victimization (Chiu et al., 2018; Hui et al., 2015). Additional information suggests that public education surrounding online predators and how to protect their children could be enhanced (Wolf et al., 2018). Furthermore, qualitative research on the grooming process is scant, and researchers have found that although there are thematic stages offenders progress through, they are not unified nor are the succession of the stages (Ioannou et al., 2018).

Research suggests that online child sex predators employ strategies to identify, isolate, and manipulate potential victims (Craven et al., 2006). O'Connell's (2003) theory suggests five distinct stages are present during the grooming process: (a) friendship forming, (b) relationship forming, (c) risk assessment, (d) exclusivity, and (e) sexual. Using O'Connell's (2003) theory, Black et al. (2015) and Kloess et al. (2019) posited that the stages exist, but they do not occur linearly and different stages can be present at one time depending on offender intentions and victim variables.

In this chapter, I discuss predatory grooming behavior, theoretical constructs, and current themes observed in online child exploitation. Research on predatory grooming

behavior, both physical and virtual, as well as presenting themes, offender characteristics, victim characteristics, and grooming processes are reviewed. To provide a comprehensive understanding of predatory grooming behavior, literature that features the limitations of this research is also presented. Lastly, I discuss how previous research lacks a uniform identification and understanding of grooming themes observed during an online interaction between offender and child victim.

Literature Search Strategy

The following databases were used to search the literature: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Google Scholar, LexisNexis Academic, PubMed, PsycArticles, PsycInfo, PsycTests, SocIndex, and Sage Premier. In addition to the Walden University Library, keywords were searched to identify if any other educational facilities, as well as government and nonprofit agencies, had information. The following keywords were used to identify scholarly articles germane to this study: *child sexual abuse, sexual grooming, online grooming, online sexual grooming, victim, offender, and mental health*. The searches produced scholarly peer-reviewed articles and journals published in the past 10 years, with the primary focus on the last 5 years. Although current research articles were identified, most of the articles on this topic were published within the last 10 to 15 years as the topic of grooming—specifically, grooming through the internet—is a new and relatively underresearched area. Additionally, literature was located by reviewing the reference list of identified research articles that focused on the same or similar topics. Literature was also found by searching the author of related articles, as authors tend to research and write on the same topic building on past research.

Theoretical Foundation

The purpose of this study was to explore predatory grooming behavior through themes and thematic stage progression for online male offenders who target child victims. Online child sexploitation presents in several different ways. In some instances, an offender may share illicit images or ask a victim to provide illicit images to them. In other instances, an offender may engage in sexual conversation or even arrange to physically meet a victim with the intent to have sexual contact with them. In any form, an offender engages the victim to gain trust, manipulate, and mitigate discovery. To accomplish this, an offender must be able to communicate with the victim through text and linguistics, thus displaying distinct behavioral patterns in their communication.

O'Connell (2003) suggested five stages of grooming based on the behavioral themes of an offender during online conversation. The stages present during online child sexploitation conversations include (a) friendship forming, (b) relationship forming, (c) risk assessment, (d) exclusivity, and (e) sexual stages (O'Connell, 2003). Depending on the intentions of the offender, either contact-driven or fantasy-driven, these stages do not have a specified duration. An offender may spend more or less time engaging the victim in each stage (O'Connell, 2003). Furthermore, an offender may exhibit different behaviors during the sexual stage, partaking in sexually explicit conversation, requesting or giving illicit images, or even suggesting a real-life sexual encounter. Through these conversations, the offender may engage in damage limitation, or risk mitigation, manipulating the victim to not disclose their encounters (O'Connell, 2003). However, other research in online grooming stages suggests the progression of the stages is fluid

and dynamic and is not linear as O'Connell suggested. Lastly, other researchers have attempted to refine or propose new stages of online grooming using O'Connell's theory as a foundation, but there has yet to be a universally accepted definition of online grooming stages (Black et al., 2015; Craven et al., 2006; Hui et al., 2015; Kloess et al., 2017).

According to O'Connell (2003), the friendship-forming stage is the first stage of manipulation and occurs during the initial contact between offender and victim. During this stage, the offender is likely to ask the child about personal information, e.g., their age and gender. Additionally, the offender may ask the child victim if they have any pictures to confirm they are conversing with a child and to ensure the victim matches their personal physical preferences (O'Connell, 2003). This stage may vary in length and is dependent on how often the offender is in contact with the victim. O'Connell's friendship forming and relationship forming stages do not come without contention. Kloess et al. (2017) found that these stages were not present when they investigated online grooming and predatory behavior. Kloess et al. (2017) speculated that the lack of these two stages may be due to the abundant availability of potential victims online.

The relationship-forming stage is a continuation of the friendship-forming stage in which the offender begins to ask more personal questions of the victim (O'Connell, 2003). During this stage, an offender may ask about the victim's family, school, or other personal interests, thus gaining more insight into the victim's personal information and attempting to create a bond or build rapport. Efforts during this stage lay the foundation of perceived trust between offender and victim, which allows for future manipulation

(O'Connell, 2003). Questions may arise about dating life, if they have a significant other, have had sexual experiences, or are interested in romantic relationships.

Williams et al. (2013), using O'Connell as foundational theory, found three distinct phases, or stages, of grooming. The first phase, rapport building, appears to encompass O'Connell's friendship-forming and relationship-forming stages. According to Williams et al. (2013), the rapport building phase is hallmarked by a conversation that builds trust, mutuality, and a sense of security between offender and victim.

The risk assessment stage begins when an offender starts to question a child victim about specific aspects of their life. Questions may surface about the location of the victim's computer, laptop, or phone they are communicating on (O'Connell, 2003). Additionally, the offender may attempt to identify the victim's routine with school or their parent's/guardian's work routine. These questions assist the offender in determining the risk involved if communication with the victim continues. Although O'Connell suggested this stage may follow the relationship-forming stage, Black et al. (2015) suggested this stage may start, or at least intertwine with other stages, as early as the first communication between offender and victim. This may be due to the offender's desire to identify if the victim is worth pursuing. Williams et al. (2013) also suggested that an offender engages in risk assessments throughout the grooming process, always assessing the relationship with the victim and determining how vulnerable they are.

During the exclusivity stage, an offender begins to interject that they, the offender and victim, are friends and a level of trust has been established (O'Connell, 2003). The emotional offering of friendship or stating they have romantic feelings is based on the

implied sense a relationship that has been formed is mutual and beneficial to both parties (O'Connell, 2003). The purpose of this stage is to begin introducing sexual topics and solidify their relationship all while mitigating the risk of being discovered (O'Connell, 2003). According to Black et al. (2015), a linguistic analysis found words associated with the concept of exclusivity were used later in the conversation, suggesting like O'Connell that offenders refrain from using dialogue that displays emotion to the victim until trust is established.

The sexual stage has several varying and differential patterns. This may be due to the perceived trust in the relationship and the victim's understanding of human sexuality. Although some child victims may have knowledge of sexual behavior, either from exposure to sexual abuse or inquiries through friends or the internet, this stage can be trying for both offender and victim (O'Connell, 2003). The offender may test the victim's boundaries by asking if they have been kissed or hugged. The exploration of the topic is often conducted delicately over an extended period if an offender wishes to maintain contact with the child (O'Connell, 2003). If the offender's question is met with resistance, often the offender will convey remorse and attempt to rebuild trust. Kloess et al. (2017) found a similar theme when conducting a qualitative thematic analysis of chat transcripts between an online offender and a victim. Kloess et al. (2017) identified a theme called *pursuing sexual information*. This theme aligns with O'Connell's sexual stage, as the offender attempts to broach sexual topics through light conversation, jokes, and the ruse of giving sexual advice (Kloess et al., 2017). Conversely, Winters et al. (2017) found that this stage is observed early during conversations and the sexual

intentions are made clear between offender and victim sooner than suggested by O'Connell (2003).

Rationalizations are also used to overcome obstacles from the victim. The offender may suggest they are a mentor or teacher for the victim, desiring to help them explore their sexuality. Conversations may include requests for illicit images, instruction on self-masturbation, sexual techniques, and at times, suggestions to physically meet with the intent of sexual contact (O'Connell, 2003). Fantasy-driven offenders will often engage the child victim in sexual fantasies. The offender will describe to the victim what the physical sexual encounter with them would entail. The offender will often conduct damage limitation conversations with the victim, stressing the need to keep their relationship a secret. This may be done through promises, gifts, threats, or bribes. Throughout all stages, the offender is gaining actionable information from the victim that assists in risk assessment and helps determine the willingness of the victim to engage in future conversations or to physically meet (O'Connell, 2003). These stages can be fluid and dynamic, always interlacing with each other (Williams et al., 2013)

O'Connell's (2003) theory has been applied in past qualitative research into linguistic analysis, as well as thematic analysis of transcribed online chat conversations that have provided insight into the complexity and dynamics of the grooming process based on victim-offender variables conducted by Black et al. (2015) and Kloess et al., (2019), respectively. O'Connell's theory provides structural stages that can be identified during the review of an offender's or victim's online communication, but because it has not been empirically tested, it allows for the exploration of new stages and substages.

One of the main limitations of this theory, due to the lack of research in this area, is that it is not generalizable to the population. The use of this theory in future research will potentially build on the currently identified grooming stages, better understand if the stages present linearly or dynamically, and potentially identify substages.

Literature Review

Sex Offending Statistics

Sexual offending is a substantial social problem. In 2020, there were 65,728 rape incidents and 68,258 sexual offenses reported by law enforcement agencies (U.S. Department of Justice, FBI, 2021). Of these reported offenses, there were 7,923 victims ranging from 0-to 9 years old and 26,736 victims who range from 10 to 19 years old (DOJ; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021). Half of the reported victims are under the age of 19. Furthermore, the National Crime Victim Survey reports that 459,310 individuals were victims of rape or sexual assault, a far larger number of victims than compared to the Uniform Crime Report (UCR; U.S. Department of Justice, FBI, 2021). Although these data are significant, there are limitations as not all law enforcement agencies report to the FBI UCR, suggesting this offense may be underreported.

Online Child Sex Offender Characteristics

The offender tends to be a Caucasian male, younger than the general population, and is twice as likely to be unemployed (Babchishin et al., 2010; Briggs et al., 2011). Offenders tend to have higher levels of education and are less skilled in obtaining and maintaining romantic relationships (Henshaw et al., 2017). Furthermore, the offender tends to have a negative family life and may have experienced sexual assault, resulting in

the expression of externalized disorders and increased sexual misconduct (Babchishin et al. 2010). The offender has higher levels of victim empathy and sexual deviance than offline contact offenders (Babchishin et al., 2010). Recent research suggests there are a set of common cognitive themes relative to offenders, such as low self-esteem, the inability to effectively cope, low social skills, ineffective adult romantic relationship skills, and the need for control and self-affirmation (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020). Some research suggests the offender exhibits prosocial behavior, having very little prior contact with law enforcement or documented arrests (Briggs et al., 2011).

Psychological Pathways to Offending

The Pathways Model of Child Sexual Offending, theorized by Ward and Seigert (2002), suggests there are four distinct deficits presented by the offender: (a) intimacy (b) deficits, (c) deviant sexual scripts, (d) emotional dysregulation, and (e) cognitive distortions. First, intimacy deficits are believed to be the result of negative parenting styles creating an insecure attachment, thus generating poor or ineffective relationship schemas (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020). Early childhood trauma or sexual abuse may substantiate deviant sexual scripts whereas the offender, out of loneliness and rejection, seeks out inappropriate sexual encounters to produce emotional reinforcement (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020; Ward & Seigert, 2002). Emotional dysregulation, the third pathway, suggests the offender, due to insecure attachments stemming from childhood, has a poor self-image, emotional impairment, and decreased social skills, all psychological attributes which increase the risk of sexual offending (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020). These offenders often act when their inhibitions are lowered and use

sex as a coping or soothing skill (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020). Cognitive distortions, the fourth pathway, are presented by improper thinking styles, negative schemas, and constructs that the offender uses to justify their behavior (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020; Ward & Seigert, 2002). These distorted belief structures allow the offender to rationalize violating social norms or laws because they are driven by self-gratification and impulsivity, attempting to create a desired emotional state (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020; Ward & Seigert, 2002). The fifth and final pathway, dysfunctional pathways, are considered true pedophiles, as their internal scripts suggest the perfect sexual relationship is between an adult and a child (Ward & Seigert, 2002). These offenders' profile encompasses attachment issues, difficulty regulating their emotions, poor relationship skills, and the inability to relate to adult peers (Ward & Seigert, 2002).

Most CSA offenders fall within one of the previously described pathways to offending, but notably, most displayed some degree of cognitive distortions (Osbourne & Christensen, 2020). Cognitive distortions, maladaptive beliefs, and thinking styles are created as rationalizations when the offender's actions conflict with social norms or laws, presenting as excuses, blaming, or justifications for their actions (D'Urso et al., 2019). Some common cognitive distortions are personal entitlement, believing children are sexual beings, and uncontrollable thoughts or actions (D'Urso et al., 2019; Howitt & Sheldon, 2007). Furthermore, there appear to be more cognitive distortions in child sex offenders which rationalize and substantiate their sexual encounters with children as a way of protecting themselves and continuing offending (D'Urso et al., 2019).

Sexual Offenders Versus Sexual Predators

Although the statistics surrounding sex offenses in the United States are staggering, it is important to understand they are not representative of the different types of offenders. Generally, those who commit sexual offense crimes can be delineated between sex offenders and sexual predators. Sexual offenders tend to commit a low volume of offenses and generally have a low volume of victims who are known to the offender, either through familial ties or acquaintances (Hickey, 2016). Furthermore, they have behavioral characteristics which suggest they can form meaningful relationships (Hickey, 2016). Sexual predators, on the other hand, commit high volumes of offenses, have multiple victims who are either strangers, or known to the offender, and most likely display psychopathic and paraphiliac traits (Hickey, 2016).

Common Mental Health Disorders Associated With Child Sexploitation Crimes

Several risk markers exist that help identify those who are at risk of committing crimes against children. Some of those risk markers fall into the categories of sexually deviant behaviors or ideations, as well as behaviors that suggest general criminal behaviors (Babchishin et al., 2019). Mental health disorders, such as pedophilic disorder and hebephilia may present behaviors that increase the risk of offending. Additionally, individuals that have committed child exploitation crimes are more likely to have pedophilic or hebephiliac interests, and sexually deviant behaviors or ideations (Babchishin et al., 2019).

Pedophilia

The American Psychological Association (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.) outlines pedophilic disorder as an individual who has sexually arousing fantasies or urges for prepubescent children and may have acted on the fantasies or urges (APA, 2013a). Additionally, the individual must be in distress (APA, 2013). Prepubescent, for this disorder, suggests the individual is attracted to children who are exhibiting Tanner Scale 1, which usually represents children between 0- and 11 years old who have underdeveloped secondary sex characteristics (Seto, 2018). The Tanner Scale is used to measure the development of secondary sex characteristics of males and females (Tanner, 1978). Although this serves as the diagnostic criteria for this disorder, not all child sex abuse offenders may be diagnosed with this disorder. Houtepen et al. (2016) suggest some individuals fit these criteria; however, they have never acted out their fantasies or urges.

Hebephilia

Hebephilia, within the scholarly context, carries a similar criterion as Pedophilic Disorder, suggesting an individual has sexually arousing fantasies and urges for children who are exhibiting Tanner Scale 2 and 3 (Seto, 2013; Stephens et al., 2017). This presents a distinct differential sexual interest in children, as hebephiles are interested in children who have begun to develop secondary characteristics but are still physically immature. The development of self-awareness of pedophilia and hebephilia appears to begin at a young age. According to Seto (2013), individuals with these disorders begin to be aware they are attracted to children younger than 14 years old at approximately 14

years of age and they become aware or understand that this attraction is abnormal around 18 years of age (Seto, 2013). This suggests that over time, individuals with pedophilia or hebephilia understand their sexual attractions are different from their peers (Seto, 2013). Their sexual attractions were maintained with younger children as their peer's sexual attractions matured and were considered age-appropriate (Seto, 2013).

Pedophiles Versus Child Molesters

Just as sexual offenders and sexual predators can be summarily distinguished, those who commit sexual offenses against children can as well. Pedophiles are romantically and physically attracted to children and do not wish to commit acts of violence or sexual aggression toward them (Hickey, 2016; Houtepen et al., 2016). Many of them prefer the company of children over their adult peers, and seldomly have romantic relationships with adult peers. Pedophiles, through cognitive distortions and fantasies, believe children can give consent for sexual relationships (Hickey, 2016). It is important to note that being diagnosed with pedophilia does not suggest an offender has high-risk characteristics to commit sexual crimes against children. Recent research suggests approximately half of offenders that sexually assault children may satisfy the full diagnostic criteria for pedophilic disorder (Babchishin et al., 2019). Child molesters, on the other hand, are opportunistic, do not form emotional relationships with children, and have a clear understanding they are violating a child (Hickey, 2016). Furthermore, child molesters have relationships with adult peers, are often married, and have children (Hickey, 2016).

Common Crimes Associated With Child Sexploitation

Federal and state legislatures have enacted laws that are meant to protect children as well as hold offenders accountable for their actions. Not all individuals who have pedophilic or hebephilic tendencies commit crimes against children, however, there is a population that will violate federal and state laws. There are several types of crimes that are common among child exploitation offenders, such as the manufacture and distribution of child pornography, CSA, and online child solicitation.

Child Pornography

Child pornography is any media, pictures, or movies, containing sexually explicit images of children. The internet has provided individuals the ability to create, share and distribute these images with relative ease and anonymity using chat rooms or Peer to Peer (P2P) networks (Seto et al., 2015). Furthermore, recent research suggests there is a correlation between individuals with pedophilia and child pornography viewing (Seto et al., 2015). Although there are law enforcement task forces that solely operate with the intent to identify these offenders, there is evidence that suggests the population of individuals who access, possess, and distribute child pornography is larger than the population identified by law enforcement investigations (Seto et al., 2015).

Child Sexual Assault

CSA is generally defined as sexual behavior or interactions with an individual who has not attained the legal age of consent. Relative to law, each jurisdiction may have a different definition based on age, sexually explicit acts, or offender/victim variables. According to Gewirtz-Meydana and Finkelhor (2020), most CSA is perpetrated by

someone known to the victim, either a family member or acquaintance. It is important to understand not all CSA is committed by adult offenders. Recent research implies peer-to-peer CSA, otherwise described as similar-aged offender and victim, reports are on the rise (Gewirtz-Meydana & Finkelhor, 2020). This brings to light, that in the context of this study, offenders may not only be adults but potentially similar age peers of the victim.

Online Child Solicitation

Online child solicitation offenses of children can encompass activity online using social media, chat rooms, games, or any other platform which engages children in sexually explicit behavior through sharing illicit images, grooming, or sexual contact. Offenders who commit these crimes do not always have to present symptoms that align with mental health disorders, such as pedophilia or hebephilia (Seto et al., 20212). Research suggests most of the victims whom offenders have contact with are between the age of 11-and 15, which is consistent with hebephiliac preferences (Seto et al., 2012). In most cases, the offender may engage in sexually explicit chat, send, or receive sexually illicit images, or groom the victim for sexual contact. Offenders using the internet to identify a victim and arrange an in-person meeting for the purpose of sexual contact, are often called *travelers* (Seto et al., 2012). Initially, the meeting between the offender and victim may take place in a public location and move to a more secluded location for the actual offense. After the offense, the offender may continue the relationship and attempt to minimize the risk of being caught through continuous risk assessments and manipulation.

Contact Versus Fantasy-Driven Offenders

Online child sexexploitation offenders surface as two distinct typologies, contact-driven offenders and fantasy-driven offenders, otherwise known as non-contact offenders (Briggs et al., 2011; McManus et al, 2016). Contact-driven offenders are driven by arranging a physical sexual encounter with the victim through grooming behaviors (Briggs et al., 2011). These offenders will engage in sexually charged conversations and share illicit images with the victim, however, they have the primary goal of achieving a sexual climax with the victim in person (Briggs et al., 2011). The duration of the relationship with the victim is generally short with the goal of arranging a physical meeting (Briggs et al., 2011). The contact-driven offender uses the grooming process to quickly identify a child victim, investigate if they have any desire to have a sexual relationship with an adult, and keep the relationship secret (Briggs et al., 2011). Typically, these offenders are identified by law enforcement through undercover investigations.

The second typology is the fantasy-driven offender. Fantasy-driven offenders are more focused on sexually charged conversations, sharing of illicit images, as well as mutual masturbation, or other exhibitionist behavior (Briggs et al., 2011; McManus et al., 2016; Seto, 2013). The primary motivation for the fantasy-driven offender is to reach sexual climax through the online conversation with the victim (Briggs et al., 2011). Compared to the contact-driven offender, the fantasy-driven offender has a longer duration of contact with the victim and spends more time creating a relationship with the victim. It is also not out of the realm of possibility that the fantasy-driven offender

crosses into the contact-driven offense typology and attempts to arrange for a physical meeting with the victim with the intent of carrying out a contact sexual offense (Briggs et al., 2011).

There is conflicting research relative to the behavioral themes presented by both contact and fantasy-driven offenders. Contact-driven offenders are thought to spend more time building the relationship, however, research is inconsistent suggesting either typology may have an extensive or short-term Relationship Building stage (Broome et al., 2018). Another area with conflicting information is the introduction of sexually explicit conversation, as both typologies have been cited as introducing sexually explicit conversation quickly, and at times, taking a slower more deliberate approach (Broome et al., 2018). Two areas of grooming behavioral themes are consistent between the two typologies. These themes are deception and risk assessment (Broome et al., 2018). In these instances, both typologies use deception to gain trust, often indicating they have the same interests as the victim (Broome et al., 2018). Interestingly, both contact and fantasy-driven offenders are not restricted to a behavioral pattern of grooming, rather each theme can present at different times, and not in sequential order (Broome et al., 2018).

Grooming

Child sexual abuse grooming is defined as the process or strategy of an offender which prepares a child and their surrounding environment for abuse through identification and access, gaining trust or compliance, and mitigating the risk of disclosure (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). The process of grooming can take place in person or through other avenues, such as the internet or over the phone

(Wolf et al., 2018). The advent of the internet has provided the offender a new avenue, through relative anonymity, to exploit children. Online chat rooms or social media platforms have been identified as a preferred method for offenders to identify potential victims (Kloess et al., 2017; Kloess et al., 2019; Malesky, 2007). Research has suggested grooming behaviors are an indicator of offender-initiated contact offenses (Broome et al., 2018).

Grooming can be considered a set of behaviors that assist the offender to identify the victim, gaining access to the victim, and initiating and maintaining sexual abuse and activities which mitigate or conceal the abuse (Burgess & Hartman, 2017). Additionally, grooming can be consciously manipulative, aimed toward victim access and compliance, or can reflect relationship processes similar to those in romantic relationships with peers (Seto, 2013). Sex pressure offenses are characterized by a relative lack of physical force in the commission of the offense; in fact, the offender usually behaves in counter-aggressive ways through the persuasion of reward, attention, affection, money, gifts, or entrapment. Offenders aim to gain sexual control of the child by developing a willing sexual relationship (Burgess & Hartman, 2017). Sex-force offenses are characterized by the threat of harm and/or physical force in the commission of the offense. The offender uses intimidation, verbal threats, manipulation, and physical strength to overcome any resistance on the part of the victim (Burgess & Hartman, 2017).

Before the internet, offenders had to rely on the physical interaction between themselves and the victim (Seto, 2013). Winters and Jeglic (2017) suggested the grooming process has distinct stages, such as victim identification, gaining access to the

victim, developing trust, and desensitizing the victim to physical touch. Each stage has its hallmarks. During the stage of victim identification, the offender locates suitable targets based on physical appearance or vulnerability due to family structure or mental vulnerabilities, such as depression or low self-esteem (Finkelhor, 1994; Olson et al., 2007; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Some of the stages present during physical grooming are parallel to stages found in online grooming strategies.

Online Communication Strategies

The internet has afforded multiple platforms for the offender to identify and target victims. Often the offender will utilize several platforms at once and attempt to identify or communicate with as many potential victims as possible (Quayle et al., 2014). Online chat rooms and platforms which provide access to instant messaging features remain the preferred method of communication, however social media sites and gaming sites are quickly becoming primary sources for offenders to identify victims (Quayle et al., 2014). It is also not uncommon for the offender to transfer communication from one platform to another. In this sense, the offender will ask the victim to communicate through a different platform, such as text messaging, or another platform that may allow for a video messaging function (Quayle et al., 2014).

Once a victim has been identified, the offender resorts to positive statements about the victim, often presenting in the form of compliments and suggesting the relationship they have online is special (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015; Kloess et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2007). Offenders will tell the victims they have special feelings for them, stating they may miss them, love them, or think about them when they are offline

(Kloess et al., 2019). Furthermore, victims will be made to feel the relationship is exclusive, furthering the notion of trust and encouraging mutuality (Aitken et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003). This manipulation tactic slowly desensitizes the victim and reinforces the ideation the relationship they have is normal and special (Kloess et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2007). Trust is a central component of the grooming process. Deceitful trust is not always a tactic, as some offenders are truthful about various aspects of their lives and their emotions (Kloess et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2007). Communication and relationship-building efforts are important at this time as later serve as a basis to keep the relationship and their activities secret (Olson et al., 2007).

As the online grooming process continues, offenders will engage in behavior that is meant to reduce the victim's resistance to discussing sexual topics or even participating in sexual activity. Offenders employ common methods, such as persistence, bribes, making promises, and peer pressure (Joleby et al., 2021; Kloess et al., 2019). These methods enhance the influence the offender has over the victim and greatly increase the chances the victim will comply with their wishes as they have created a sense of reciprocity (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2007). These social influence behaviors increase involvement, suggesting the victim believes they have feelings or attachment to the offender, thus increasing their likelihood to be motivated to satisfy sexual requests (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2019).

To test the victim's boundaries, offenders will often initiate sexual conversation in such a manner in the offender, if rebuked, can play off the conversation as playful banter, making the victim feel more comfortable (Kloess et al., 2017). Offenders may ask about

prior relationships or sexual experiences, providing the offender the opportunity to push these boundaries and turn any comment into a sexually charged statement (Aitken et al., 2018). Offenders may reframe the conversation, suggesting the victim may become better lovers in the future. The offender may also offer to be a “teacher” or even suggest the sexual behavior between an adult and a child is not wrong (Olson et al., 2007). This boundary testing strategy can be seen in both contact and fantasy-driven offenders as it allows the offender to see how inquisitive or open the victim is to the sexual conversation, and it offers the chance to change or adjust their strategy (Kloess et al., 2017; O’Connell. 2003).

Risk assessment strategies may be employed throughout the conversation (Black et al., 2015). Offenders may ask where the victim lives, and whom they live with and inquire about their parents or other guardians to determine if the victim’s online activity is being observed or checked (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015). Additionally, these risk assessments help decipher the access to the victim, for instance, if the victim lives far away, this may be less desirable to the offender (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015). Due to law enforcement investigative strategies, risk assessments help the offender determine if they are communicating with a decoy to avoid being caught (Black et al., 2015).

Grooming strategies present several different ways online and are not predictive of potential offline contact offenses. The motivation of the offender plays a critical role in how the conversation between the offender and victim is present. As stated earlier, some offenders take time during the relationship forming stage to ensure the victim trusts them

before they begin to discuss sexually explicit topics. Other offenders can be more direct, not taking any interest in the victim (Kloess et al., 2017). These offenders introduce sexual material quickly via sexually explicit statements, displaying their webcam to facilitate masturbation, and direct requests of the victim to participate. This suggests the motivation of the offender is immediate sexual gratification (Kloess et al., 2017). This style of communication suggests the offender may be more fantasy-driven with behavior directed at fantasy rehearsal or roleplaying (Kloess et al., 2017; O'Connell, 2003).

Risk Factors for Victimization

Several factors increase the risk of victimization by online sexual solicitation and grooming. These victim risk factors include the child's age and gender, sexual orientation, negative relationships with their parents, traumatic or negative childhood experiences, and their internet practices or habits (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). Additional risk factors suggest children who spend large amounts of time on the internet and who have less parental oversight or supervision are more likely to use the internet for social functions such as social networking, which increases the likelihood they will engage in risky sexual online behaviors (Vaala & Bleakley, 2015). Youth who display disinhibited behaviors and high body self-esteem are more likely to engage in sending sexually explicit images of themselves as well as participate in sexually explicit conversations (Schoeps et al., 2020). Gaining sexual compliance is also easier with adolescents, given their natural curiosity about sex, propensity toward sensation-seeking and impulsivity, and desire for romantic connections (Wurtele, 2012) Male youth are more likely to engage in risky online behavior as well as male youth identify as homosexual or unsure

of their sexual identity (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). Additional risky online behaviors can be considered one or more unknown people in the messenger list, accessing adult pornographic websites, using profanity, entering adult chatrooms, sending sexually explicit photos or videos to someone known only online, and, discussing sex online with strangers (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

Negative Outcomes

Victims of online child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse may experience several negative outcomes relative to their mental health and biological health. Child victims may experience long-term mental health effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol or drug abuse, mental health disorders, suicide ideation, and delinquency (Chen et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2021; Frost, 2019; Goldstein et al., 2010; Herbert et al., 2019; Kozak et al., 2018). These negative outcomes not only strain the healthcare system for services but also affect the victim's daily life. For victims of child sexual abuse, the use of controlled substances or alcohol, potentially as a coping method, increases (Fletcher, 2021; Goldstein et al., 2010; Herbert et al., 2019). Male and female victims who have experienced childhood maltreatment, including but not limited to, child sexual abuse, use alcohol consumption to cope with the effects of depression, anxiety, and other emotions they feel (Goldstein et al., 2010). Overall, child victims of sexual abuse or trauma are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior as compared to those who do not experience sexual abuse or trauma (Kozak et al., 2018). Child male victims are more likely to act out and partake in delinquent behaviors as compared to their child female counterparts

(Kozak et al., 2018). Victims of childhood sexual abuse are at higher risk for lifelong mental health disorders as well as suicide ideation and self-harm (Steine et al., 2020)

Summary

As online communication platforms evolve, offenders are provided with relative anonymity and easier access to those they wish to victimize. Offenders can identify and locate several potential victims at one time across multiple platforms, increasing their opportunity to victimize. Victims tend to be youth who have had negative family experiences, trauma access to the internet, and disinhibition. Using grooming strategies, offenders manipulate their victims through the sense of false trust, exploiting their age, personal situations, and emotions. It is imperative to understand the complexity of the offender. Although they present as ineffective in peer relationship skills and social skills, they are experts in manipulation.

Previous research suggests the grooming process appears in several different stages; however, these stages are not linear, rather they are dynamic and fluid (Black et al., 2015). For some offenders, such as fantasy-driven offenders, the focus may be quick sexual gratification, therefore the grooming process may be less lengthy and focused on sexual stages as compared to a contact-driven offender, whose process may take longer and be more focused on relationship building and risk mitigation (Hickey, 2016). These dynamics and offender characteristics are important to understand as there is a lack of scientific agreeance on the grooming stages. Furthermore, a better understanding of grooming behaviors will help law enforcement officials create updated training programs that will facilitate better investigations and prosecutions. Lastly, public educational

programs for parents with children who can access online communication platforms can be enhanced, thus creating foundations for a more proactive and preventative response to this problem.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to study the research question. This chapter discusses the use of thematic analysis as a means to analyze grooming stages present in online communications between an offender and victim. This chapter also includes a description of the secondary data, population, protocols, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative study aimed to identify predatory grooming themes and the thematic stage progression for online male offenders who target child victims using online chat rooms. This study addressed the research gap by furthering knowledge on theme identification and thematic stage progressions for male offenders in Wisconsin (Aitken et al., 2018; Henshaw et al., 2017; Kloess et al., 2017; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Through new information on this topic, law enforcement investigative strategies and public awareness may identify at-risk child victims sooner. Additionally, victimization may be reduced due to preventive education on the evolution of online predatory grooming themes.

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology selected for this qualitative study. Additionally, I describe the method for exploring themes present during the online grooming process and the coding process and analysis of the data collected. I discuss thematic analysis research methodology and its appropriateness for this study. Lastly, I discuss ethical considerations for this study and how trustworthiness was ensured.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

What are the online grooming themes and thematic stage progressions observed within text dialogue between a male offender and child victim?

Definition of Central Concepts

For the purpose of this study, *child exploitation* was defined as a form of sexual abuse where the child is manipulated to perform sexual activities, either in person, via the internet, or through any other mode of communication (Roache & McSherry 2021).

Grooming was defined as the process or strategy of an offender which prepares a child and their surrounding environment for abuse through identification and access, gaining trust or compliance, and mitigating the risk of disclosure (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). *Sexual abuse* was defined as unwanted sexual penetration or physical contact, including but not limited to oral sex or manual stimulation. An *offender* was defined as an adult who engages children with the intent to commit sexual assault or sexual activities. A *victim* was defined as a child that has not attained the age of 18 and has been afflicted by sexual grooming, exploitation, or sexual abuse.

Research Traditions

Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are both used by researchers who strive to explain how things work, from the simplest of inquiries to the most complex questions (Frost, 2011). Quantitative research methodologies rely heavily on statistical analysis to explain research questions and understand relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014; Frost, 2011). The other research lens, qualitative research methodology, relies on exploring the problem through human experiences, perceptions, and individual beliefs (Creswell, 2014; Frost, 2011, Jason & Glenwick, 2016). Qualitative research has several distinct characteristics that set it apart from quantitative research.

Qualitative research is interpretive, allowing for the exploration of human experiences through different viewpoints (Frost, 2011; Jason & Glenwick, 2016). Another unique characteristic of qualitative research is the ability to be situational, letting a researcher to view phenomena through different contexts, allowing for a holistic understanding that is rich in detail and derived from the identification of patterns and themes (Frost, 2011; Jason & Glenwick, 2016). Through the identification of patterns, one can better understand what is occurring within the context. There are several different qualitative research strategies, including narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, case study, and thematic analysis (Frost, 2011). Thematic analysis is a particularly useful qualitative research strategy that allows a researcher to identify themes in data that are text-based (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This qualitative thematic analysis study was designed to explore data from secondary archival data—more specifically, transcribed chat logs between an offender and an adult volunteer posing as a child from the Perverted Justice website—with the intent to identify grooming themes and thematic stage progressions. Thematic analysis is a suitable methodological approach and allows for the identification of themes and patterns within a particular data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2006) and Jason and Glenwick (2016) indicated that thematic analysis is a useful research strategy to identify themes within text-based data. Thematic analysis is also flexible in nature, allowing for several different theories to guide a researcher's approach to studying a topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis can be inductive, allowing data to create the themes, or deductive, allowing for preconceived

themes, theories, or previous knowledge to create themes. The flexibility of thematic analysis allowed me to approach this topic through a deductive position and provide rich descriptive data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Role of the Researcher

I became familiar with the topic of online predatory grooming through my employment as a law enforcement detective at the Waukesha County Sheriff's Department in Wisconsin. I was assigned to the ICAC task force, which investigated, both proactively and reactively, online child enticement and the manufacture and distribution of child pornography. My understanding and knowledge of this topic were expanded through university coursework and a review of empirical research. During this time, I found a lack of available training for law enforcement officers who conduct these types of investigations. Furthermore, there have been studies conducted into the themes present during the online grooming process, but there is a lack of generalizability due to low populations used in studies and a need for more research using different populations and geographic locations (Kloess et al., 2017; Kloess et al., 2019). This generated interest and motivated the research design. This study was designed to contribute to the growing knowledge base in the online grooming process to create positive social change.

My role as the researcher was to identify a gap in research, design a qualitative thematic analysis study, obtain Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, obtain the data, analyze the data via coding, and provide a detailed report on the findings. I did not have any personal or professional relationships with any aspect of this study. There were no ethical concerns identified.

Having participated in official law enforcement online undercover child enticement investigations and having arrested individuals for these crimes, I did possess a potential bias toward identified offenders. I was aware that children and investigators who experience this crime can have negative emotional outcomes or even sustained physical trauma. I knew that it was important to conduct these investigations to identify offenders, arrest them, and prosecute them so that future offenses may not occur. The bias toward offenders was mitigated through constant self-observation and understanding of my personal boundaries and limitations.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

For this study, I employed criteria-based sampling of convenience. A convenience sample was chosen due to the availability of the data (Creswell, 2014). The selection criteria for the chat logs in this research were specific because they allowed me to better understand the problem based on the research question (see Creswell, 2014). The chat logs contained text from male offenders who were at a minimum 18 years old, who initiated conversations with Perverted Justice decoys in Wisconsin and were arrested for a child exploitation-related crime as a result of their contact, online or in person, with the decoy. The chat logs were known to meet the criteria based on the demographics of the offender provided by Perverted Justice in their case summary. In this study, I used nine transcripts of chat logs to obtain data saturation. To reach data saturation, Guest et al. (2006) suggested that 12 transcripts will produce approximately 92% of themes.

To identify the chat logs, I accessed the Perverted Justice website, chose the archives tab, and selected the location hyperlink. Then, I selected the Wisconsin hyperlink, which provided all the archived chat logs for offenders who have been identified in Wisconsin. All chat logs were identified by location in Wisconsin, the offender's screen name, and if a conviction of a crime occurred as a result of the investigation. I accessed the chat logs and reviewed the summary, which provided the offender's real name and age, as well as the purported age of the child (Perverted Justice decoy) they conversed with. Once IRB approval (06-06-22-0993939) was obtained, I accessed the Perverted Justice website, located the hyperlink for cases in Wisconsin, and reviewed each case.

Instrumentation

In this study, I sought to explore predatory grooming themes and thematic stage progression using archival data in the form of transcribed chat logs between an offender and an adult Perverted Justice decoy. The chat logs data were obtained from an open-source website, Perverted Justice (www.perverted-justice.com). Perverted Justice is a nonprofit organization that was established in 2003 with the intent to identify and assist in the arrest and prosecution of child sexexploitation offenders who use internet chat rooms to gain access to their victims. In 2019, Perverted Justice discontinued their organization, but the website remained active and accessible.

Perverted Justice used trained adult volunteers who posed as children online. During online chats between the offender and the decoy child, offenders used grooming strategies to manipulate child decoys into a physical meeting with the intent to have

sexual contact. Perverted Justice has regularly partnered with law enforcement, as well as national news media, not only to arrest offenders but to provide public education on this topic. Furthermore, Perverted Justice indicates on the website home page researchers are allowed access to their content and can use their content for research studies.

Perverted Justice has been used as a data set in past research surrounding this topic. Black et al. (2015), Kloess et al. (2017, 2019), and Williams et al. (2003) have used Perverted Justice chat logs as data sets and employed thematic analysis as a research strategy. Previous research also suggested that chat logs obtained from Perverted Justice provide sufficient data to answer research questions, as they have all been able to identify both similar and different grooming themes (Black et al., 2015; Kloess et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2003). Perverted Justice is a reputable and best source of data for several reasons. Perverted Justice employed computer programs to record every keystroke of chats, ensuring conversations between offenders and child decoys are accurate and true to the actual conversation. Additionally, the computer program that Perverted Justice used does not allow anyone to edit the content. In this study, I was the primary instrument for data collection. I identified suitable chat logs on the Perverted Justice website based on participant criteria.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Once the chat logs were identified as outlined above, I downloaded the chat log transcripts and documented the date, time, and demographic data in a Microsoft Word document. Transcripts met the following selection criteria: the offender was 18 years of age or older, male, and convicted of a crime related to the investigation. I uploaded the

transcripts into NVivo software. This process was anticipated to take 1 to 2 weeks. If the recruitment process resulted in too few participants, no additional participants would be selected from surrounding states. The research would continue with only the chat logs from Wisconsin that met the sampling criteria.

Data Analysis Plan

The research design involved obtaining chat logs from the Perverted Justice website. I used a Word document to record when and how chat logs were discovered and to provide offender demographics and ancillary information from the chat logs. I read each chat log several times to familiarize myself with the data. Becoming familiar with the data allowed me to better understand the scope of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this initial phase, I began to develop and document any initial ideas for codes that surfaced (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I then began to create initial codes. Codes are words or statements that represent the most fundamental aspects of the data in a meaningful way (Clarke & Braun, 2006). To assist with precoding, I relied on codes or themes present in O'Connell's (2003) typology of online grooming; however, I was aware that other codes may exist. I continued to reread the data, which allowed for the revision of codes and the development of new codes. I also provided evidence from the data that justified the code.

I used the codes to identify themes present in the data. I paid attention to codes and how they combine into a larger theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I paid attention to codes and theme development, understanding that various levels of themes, including subthemes, could emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase of analysis, I

remained cognizant of the significance of themes, as they may not hold on their own; rather, they may have to be combined, refined, or discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I began to review themes on two different levels. The first level of review is the theme(s) against the coded data extracts, checking for coherent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second level of review was broader, reviewing the theme(s) against the totality of the data set, and identifying if the theme(s) are an accurate representation of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, I defined and named the themes, providing the essence of each theme. Each theme was justified through chat log evidence and explained how they were interconnected and fit into the overall structure of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I used computer software to store and analyze the collected data. I retained both digital and physical files. I used Word files to organize data, take notes, and document findings. NVivo was used to store and analyze the transcribed chat logs. The use of NVivo assisted me in maintaining efficiency and accuracy during the research process, as well as, assisted in the presentation of the data when it came time to report the findings of the research (Richards, 1999). All data was collected was stored on an external hard drive which was placed in a safe only accessible to me.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Creating a qualitative study that was trustworthy was paramount and was considered before and during the research design phase. Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence that one may have in the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The

criteria for trustworthiness are the study displays credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Creditability

Credibility, the notion that the findings accurately represent reality, was established through several means (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used triangulation. This was done by interpreting multiple chat logs for themes and then comparing them with information obtained from the other chat logs. I also engaged in peer debriefing, having an analytic discussion of the data with an objective peer who was not involved in the study.

Transferability

Transferability, the applicability of the findings based on the comparability of contexts, was established through the thick description of the chat logs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Portions of the chat log were provided which describe in rich detail, the context of the conversation that produced the theme. This allows others to find the necessary thematic elements to recreate the findings in similar populations and contexts.

Dependability

Dependability, the ability to replicate the study which results in similar findings, was established through an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed an audit trail that described the process, analysis, methodological process notes, and reflexive notes. The audit trail, an outline of the research process, allows other researchers to recreate the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability, the capacity to authenticate the internal coherence of data findings, interpretations, and recommendations, was established through an audit trail and reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I documented in an audit trail, a description of the research steps from the beginning of the research through the end. The reflexive journal documented what I did, felt, and thought during the entire research process.

Ethical Procedures

When addressing ethical concerns, it was important to note that the participants in the study did not involve minors, but rather trained adult volunteers who worked for Perverted Justice. The adult volunteers were posing as children, attempting to identify offenders committing child sexexploitation crimes online. The founder and owner of the Perverted Justice organization gave consent to use chat logs from their website for this study (see Appendix A). All chat logs were obtained through the Perverted Justice website, an open-source website that publicly displayed its investigations. All male offenders' names and screen names were redacted to protect their privacy. They were referred to as *Offender A*, *Offender B*, and so on. The screen names of the Perverted Justice volunteers were redacted and referred to as *child decoy*. Any pictures provided of the offender by Perverted Justice were redacted for their privacy.

All materials including journals, files, and transcripts were stored in a locked safe, located inside my home office. Only the dissertation committee and I had access to the transcripts. Before data validation (external audit) and publication, I redacted all identifying information ensuring it was removed from the transcripts.

To initiate this research, I submitted Form A to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is responsible for maintaining ethical compliance in accordance with U.S. Federal Regulations. An IRB representative reviewed this proposal to ensure the benefits outweigh any risk or harm to potential participants. This process preceded all data collection and analysis.

Summary

As the ability to communicate with others through internet-based platforms such as social media and gaming sites evolves, so do the strategies and tactics of online offenders. It was important to identify the themes that were present during the grooming process which takes place in an online communication platform so better preventative education can be created and provide valuable insight for enhanced law enforcement training (Kloess et al., 2019). This study aimed to explore and identify grooming themes and thematic stage progressions present during online communications between an offender and a child decoy. I hoped that information from this study could be used in conjunction with past research to better understand the offense process of the online offender.

This chapter identified the central concepts of the study as well as my rationale for using thematic analysis to explore the phenomenon of online grooming. I have explained my role as the researcher, my background, and potential biases. I provided the population and sample size which created data saturation. Furthermore, I explained the process of data analysis and the various steps to ensure the credibility, transformability, and confirmability of the data. Lastly, I discussed ethical procedures which will ensure

the integrity of the study as well as protect the identities of the offenders. In Chapter 4, the data collection process and offender demographics will be discussed. Additionally, the data analysis, including the development of themes and sub-themes, stages, and stage progression, will be discussed.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify predatory grooming themes and thematic stage progressions for online male offenders who targeted child victims using online chat rooms. I sought to better understand online grooming themes observed within text dialogue between a male offender and a child victim. This study was conducted to address the research gap by furthering knowledge on theme identification and thematic stage progressions for male offenders in Wisconsin (Aitken et al., 2018; Henshaw et al., 2017; Kloess et al., 2017; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). The findings of this study could enhance law enforcement investigative strategies and public awareness in identifying at-risk child victims sooner and prevent online child sexexploitation.

To address the research question, I used qualitative thematic analysis to gather a comprehensive understanding of predatory grooming themes, as well as their progression, during an online conversation between a male offender and a child victim. In this chapter, I discuss the data collection process, including the study setting, research participant demographics, and the way the data were collected. I present the methodology employed to analyze the collected data, as well as the process used to identify major themes and subthemes presented within the data. I then discuss evidence of trustworthiness as it serves to support the thematic analysis. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, the identified themes are presented in a manner that thoroughly addresses the stated research question.

Setting

The current study took place during July and August 2022. The location of the research took place at my residence in the upstairs office. During data collection and analysis, no one was allowed into the office and the door was closed due to the sensitive nature of the chat logs. Data were collected from the website of Perverted Justice, a nonprofit organization that assisted law enforcement in identifying and investigating online predators. This organization ceased active operations in 2019 but archived its past investigations. The website is public and can be accessed by anyone. At the top of the website's home page are links to chat log archives, frequently asked questions, how to help the organization, and contact links. Additionally, there are hyperlinks to archived chat logs based on *sliminess* and a random option. Chat logs could be accessed by Perverted Justice operations, group operations, or volunteer names. After I obtained authorization from the IRB to begin data collection, I accessed the Perverted Justice website and its archived chat logs for offenders investigated and convicted in Wisconsin.

Demographics

I employed purposeful criterion-based sampling of convenience, as described by Creswell (2013). The selection criteria were specific in that the participants were male offenders, at least 18 years old, who initiated conversations with Perverted Justice decoys in Wisconsin, and were arrested for a child exploitation-related crime as a result of their contact, online or in person, with the victim. Perverted Justice indicated that there were 22 investigations for which they conducted and obtained convictions in Wisconsin. All the offenders listed were male, at least 18 years old, and convicted of a criminal offense

related to computer-facilitated child sex crimes in the state they resided in. Of the 22 potential participants, nine were used in this study. All the participants were male and between the age of 22 and 45 years.

Data Collection

Before collecting any data, I applied for and received approval from the IRB. There were no variations from the approved data collection plan, nor were there any unusual circumstances that arose during the data collection phase. The chat logs used in this study were collected for approximately 1 week and 3 days. I accessed the Perverted Justice website and selected the geographic area of the offenders. I identified 22 potential chat logs using the previously identified purposeful selection criteria. Archived chat logs from offenders on the Perverted Justice website were organized in alphabetical order based on the location of the offense. I reviewed each chat log to confirm that it met the selection criteria.

Because all 22 chat logs in that geographic area met the criteria, I selected and used chat logs for this study in the alphabetical order they appeared on the website. I copied the entire chat log to a Microsoft Word document. Once that was completed, I identified the date the chat log was recorded and provided a research ID, the offender's name, gender, age, screen name, and the crime they were convicted for, if stated, on the Word document containing the chat log. I then saved the chat log and demographic data in a Word document PDF form. Only nine of the 22 participant's chat log transcripts were used in this study due to saturation as new codes stopped populating, a sign of data

saturation. According to Guest et al. (2006), 12 transcripts were suggested to reach data saturation, however, it is possible that data saturation may occur with fewer than 12.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for thematic analysis. This method was sufficient to analyze the data because it is flexible in its application, identifies patterns in data, and works well with transcribed data, such as chat logs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My primary goal was to identify themes present and thematic stage progression in an online chat dialogue between a male offender and a decoy child victim.

The first step in thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is to familiarize yourself with the data. To do this, I read through each chat log several times to become familiar with the content and to develop ideas and initial codes. Becoming familiar with the data allowed me to understand the scope of the data and identify interesting, reoccurring statements for coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, rereading the chat logs allowed me to actively participate in the data, identifying any patterns that initially surfaced and discovering meanings over time (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I reviewed each chat log several times over the course of several days.

The second step, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is to generate initial codes. Codes are the most basic aspect of the data and are identified as features or elements that are interesting to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I kept in mind that codes that were identified were either data driven or theory driven, meaning codes were produced solely from the observed data or developed based on previous theories or

questions I had (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I worked systematically through each chat log. I identified codes that were immediately interesting and codes that, although not immediately interesting, became meaningful as the research progressed. During this step, I identified 35 initial codes based on text dialogue between the offender and the Perverted Justice decoy. These initial codes were logged using NVivo. These initial codes were interesting to me and represented the most fundamental aspects of the data in a meaningful way (see Clarke & Braun, 2006). Table 1 provides examples of codes and the supporting dialogue.

Table 1

Examples of Codes and Supporting Dialogue

Participant	Code	Supporting dialogue
Offender A	Compliments	Offender A: “ur cute” Child decoy: “u think i am? I don’t” Offender A: “i do,,ur very pretty”
Offender I	Sexual questions	Offender I: “ever guy eat ya out before?” Child decoy: “no” Offender I: “and fucked?” Child decoy: “ya” Offender I: “nice”
Offender H	Show or teach sex	Offender H: “i would teach you” Child decoy: “teach me what?” Offender H: “sex”

The third step is to search for themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this step, I focused on placing codes into themes or subthemes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once I created all the codes and reached saturation, I searched for themes and subthemes. I analyzed the codes to identify broader-level themes, combining codes into overarching themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Several subthemes were developed from the data. I

used NVivo software to help organize and categorize these codes into subthemes. Table 2 provides examples of subthemes that were generated and the supporting dialogue.

Table 2

Examples of Subthemes Generated

Subtheme	Codes	Meaning	Supporting dialogue
Introduction	Introduction statements Family structure	Represents conversations where the offender initiates contact and asks for background information	Offender A: “u have brothers and sisters” Offender A: “whats the size of ur family”
Showing interest	Asking for picture Compliments Flirting Checking for significant other	Represents conversations between the offender where they are complimentary toward the child decoy, make flirtatious statements, and ask if they have a boyfriend	Offender B: “u have a boyfriend?” Offender C: “u got a man?” Offender H: “u have a bf”
Illegal behavior	Admitting illegality	Represents the offender making statements that their relationship with the decoy is illegal	Offender F: “If I am arrested for talking about sex with you or trying to see you or having a relationship with you...I lose my job, my ability to teach ever again, and I would have to report to the local police everyplace I live.. and that is after I get out of jail...usually, it is seven years in prison for each year the young woman is under the age of 18. So, for you I would get 35 years.”

The fourth step of the analysis, (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), is reviewing themes. Themes need to be reviewed at two levels. The first level involves reviewing each code and determining if it establishes a coherent pattern. The second level is reviewing the

data from a holistic perspective and determining if the themes accurately represent meanings within the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After creating the seven subthemes, four overall themes emerged: (a) establishing a relationship, (b) sexual exploration, (c) arranging a meeting, and (d) risk mitigation. I reviewed the themes against the coded data extracts and checked for coherent patterns (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes created a coherent pattern. I conducted a second level of review, which was broader, reviewing the themes against the totality of the data set and identifying if the themes were an accurate representation of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fifth step of the analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is defining and naming themes. This involved identifying the essence of the theme and what aspect of the data it described (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I defined and named the themes, providing the essence of each theme and how it described the data. The four themes were justified through chat log evidence and explained how they are interconnected and fit into the overall structure of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 3 provides the four themes and their definitions.

Table 3*Themes and Definitions*

Theme	Definition
Establishing a relationship	Conversational efforts of the offender to create a relationship with the victim through compliments and discussing family and personal interests
Sexual exploration	Conversational efforts of the offender to determine the victim's sexual experience, desire to engage in sexual interaction, and offering to educate the victim in sexual intercourse
Arranging a meeting	Conversational efforts of the offender to suggest, plan, and carry out meeting the child
Risk mitigation	Conversational efforts of the offender to check for and mitigate the risk of discovery

The sixth step, (see Braun & Clark, 2006), was producing a report of the findings. The themes and their definitions were compiled within NVivo. The information contained within each node was also retained for evidence of the findings. The identified themes, definitions, and supporting dialogue are discussed more thoroughly in the results section of this chapter.

Offender B, Offender D, and Offender I were determined to be discrepant cases. In these cases, the offenders initiated meeting the child decoy immediately. Additionally, Offender D only wanted to perform personal self-sexual gratification for the child decoy via their webcam. All discrepant cases are still valuable. They provide insight into the themes of sexual exploration, arranging a meeting, and risk mitigation.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility, the notion that the findings accurately represented reality, was established through several means (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was employed.

This was done by interpreting multiple chat logs from different locations for themes and then comparing them with information obtained from the chat logs from Wisconsin. Additionally, I compared their findings against O'Connell's (2003) theory and found similarities and differences in identified themes. I also engaged in peer debriefing, having an analytic discussion of the data with an objective peer who was not involved in the study.

Transferability

Transferability, the applicability of the findings based on the comparability of contexts, was established through the thick description of the chat logs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Portions of the chat log were provided which described in rich detail, the context of the conversation that produced the theme. This allows others to find the necessary thematic elements to recreate the findings in similar populations and contexts.

Dependability

Dependability was established through an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed an audit trail that described the process, analysis, methodological process notes, and reflexive notes in a journal. The audit trail allows other researchers to recreate the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established through an audit trail and a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I documented, in an audit trail, a description of the research steps from the beginning of the research through the end. The reflexive journal documented what I did, felt, and thought during the entire research process.

Results

This qualitative research sought to explore what are the online grooming themes and thematic stage progression observed within text dialogue between a male offender and a child victim. All nine chat logs took place over an instant messaging service provided by an internet search engine. Several of the chat logs took place over the course of several days, however, in some instances, they took place over one day and it appeared that the offender was only interested in meeting for sexual contact quickly. Data analysis found there were 35 codes, 11 sub-themes, and four primary themes. This section is divided by theme and provides examples of each theme.

Theme 1: Establishing a Relationship

Offenders engaged in conversational efforts which allowed them to create a relationship with the child decoy through compliments and discussing family and personal interests. This theme consisted of sub-themes: (a) introduction, (b) showing interest, and (c) relationship. After introductory statements, which included identifying their age, gender, and where they were from, the offender used compliments to show interest in the decoy. These compliments stemmed from the profile picture of the child decoy visually available to the offender. Six of the nine offenders engaged in conversation that established a relationship. The offender used these statements to begin building a trusting relationship with the child decoy. The offender often asked questions about the child decoy's family and if they have or have had a romantic significant other. For example, Offender A asked the child decoy, "you have brothers and sisters," whereas Offender C asked, "what do you do for fun?" Other statements attempted to build trust by

discussing sensitive topics. After Offender E learned that the child decoy's parents were divorced, he asked, "when did your parents get divorced." These conversational pieces lead to the offender to inquire further about their interests, school, or other hobbies. To help further the relationship between the offender and the decoy, the offender told the decoy affirming statements. For example, Offender H told the child decoy, "u are very cute," whereas Offender A stated, "ur a sweetie." Table 4 provides evidence of dialogue reflecting Theme 1: Establishing a relationship.

Table 4

Dialogue Reflecting Theme 1: Establishing a Relationship

Participant	Dialogue evidence
Offender A	"ur a sweetie"
Offender C	"you have brothers and sisters" "what do you do for fun?" "do you live with your dad too?" "you got a man"
Offender E	"i think your sweet and adoreablle looking...you have the face of an angel... just giving you a compliment...cause its true.....and im saying to bad you werent older cause id be asking you out on a date if you were but your to young for me so that wont ever happen" "when did your parents get divorced" "just spending time with you is enough.....your happiness is my happiness"
Offender F	"I don't really look at you as a kid or whatever...you are a person. I think you are very special" "what do you have for homework"
Offender H	"u are very cute" "do u love me"

Theme 2: Sexual Exploration

This theme reflected the conversational efforts of the offender which helped them determine the decoy's sexual experience, and desire to engage in sexual conversation or

physical interaction, and offered to educate the victim in sexual intercourse. This theme evolved from a conglomeration of four subthemes. The four subthemes consisted of: (a) body discussion, (b) sexual questions, sexual compliments and sexual advice. All nine offenders had sexually explorative conversations. Nine offenders asked the child decoy about their past sexual experiences. Offenders asked if the child decoy had sexual relations within their past relationships, and inquired if they have had sexual intercourse. Additionally, the offender asked what sexual activities the child decoy had participated in. For example, Offender B asked the child decoy, “what is the furthest youve gone” and “did you ever play with a dick?” Eight offenders inquired what the child decoy would be willing to do sexually, and often stated what they wanted to do sexually to the child decoy. For example, Offender F asked, “if we were together now...would you let me suck on your tits?” Offenders discussed the size of their penis, and the size of the child decoy’s breasts or requested that they take a shower together. Five offenders asked and engaged in conversation about the child decoy’s vagina. Offender F asked, “what does your pussy look like? full bush? trimmed? shaved?” Offender I asked, “ur tight pussy?” Six of the nine offenders asked and discussed self-masturbation with the child decoy. Offender C inquired with the child decoy, “how many fingers can you fit?” and “you never play with yourself?” Statements and questions about masturbation seemed to precede conversation about teaching the child decoy how to have sexual intercourse. Five of the offenders engaged in a conversation where they offered to teach or show the child decoy sexual intercourse. For example, Offender E stated, “would you want to make love to me? Would you want to if I showed you how” Statements about teaching or showing

the child decoy sexual activity usually preceded discussion relative to meeting in person.

Table 5 provides evidence of dialogue reflecting Theme 2: Sexual exploration.

Table 5

Dialogue Reflecting Theme 2: Sexual Exploration

Participant	Dialogue evidence
Offender A	<p>“did u lick him?”</p> <p>“u masturbate”</p> <p>“would u let me put a finger inside of u”</p> <p>“I guess u don’t want me to show u how to have sex....lololololo”</p>
Offender B	<p>“did you ever play with a dick”</p> <p>“do you wear a bra yet”</p>
Offender C	<p>“have u given head?”</p> <p>“ever got ur pussy licked?”</p> <p>“and u never play with urself”</p> <p>“i got a pretty big dick too :p”</p>
Offender D	<p>“u like fuck hard or soft?”</p> <p>“u like 69?”</p> <p>“pink or brown nipples”</p> <p>“do u ever masterbate”</p>
Offender E	<p>“would you take off your clothes and touch yourself to see if you feel anything for me”</p> <p>“would you want to make love to me...would you want to if i showed you how”</p> <p>“when we go to spend the night together at a motel....can we take a shower together”</p>
Offender F	<p>“if we were together right now...would you let me suck on your tits?”</p> <p>“do you ever touch yourself?”</p>
Offender H	<p>“would u touch it if my penis is hang out”</p> <p>“i would teach you...sex”</p>
Offender I	<p>“i can make you cum quick”</p> <p>“i wanna lick ur clit baby”</p> <p>“i wanna u suck my cock”</p>

Theme 3: Arranging a Meeting

This theme represented the conversational efforts where the offender suggested and planned a meeting with the child. The theme consisted of two separate subthemes: (a)

meeting plans and (b) what will happen during the meeting. All nine offenders suggested meeting the child decoy while only seven discussed what would take place when they met in person. All nine offenders suggested meeting for sexual activity; however, the initiation of the topic took several different forms.

Some offenders were straightforward, asking the child decoy if they wanted to meet for sexual interaction, while others were coy. Offender A was straightforward and asked, “sou would meet me someday to show u how to have sex?” On the other hand, Offender F played coy and stated, “You should see if Becki wants to go shopping at the mall on Sunday. Cuz I might have to go shopping there on Sunday” Once the topic of meeting in person was broached, the offender discussed or suggested to the child decoy what could take place when they met. This was done by detailing what they wanted to happen or they offered suggestions as to what they could do sexually. Offender E offered, “i was thinking maybe a little cards.....and then snuggle up and watch some tv” Offender I stated, “Ooo I wanna my fingers go in your clit around n fast baby”

After they discussed the meeting and what they would like to do sexually, some offenders discussed the logistics of the meeting. Offenders located directions to the child decoy’s location or determined how they are going to meet them in person once a location was identified. Offender I asked, “What your address so I can come over” Offender H was more elaborate and attempted to choose a meeting place, “we can meet at apt or house if mom dont home” and further asked, “how far is park” Table 6 provides evidence of dialogue reflecting Theme 3: Arranging a Meeting.

Table 6*Dialogue Reflecting Theme 3: Arranging a Meeting*

Participant	Dialogue evidence
Offender A	Offender A: “so u would meet me someday to show u how to have sex?” Offender A: “can u get out of the house for a while” Child decoy: “when” Offender A: “on weekends” Offender A: “maybe slide some fingers in u...play with ur clit to show u how wet”
Offender B	Offender B: “want to meet” Offender B: “so where we going to hang out” Offender B: “we can cuddle and make out and more if you want”
Offender E	Offender E: “so how about i come over and you sneak me in” Child decoy: “oh that would be so awesome” Offender E: “ok ill be right over” Offender E: “can you go to a friends tomorrow?” Offender E: “then climb into bed with me and let me kiss you all over”
Offender F	Offender F: “You should see if Becki wants to go shopping at (location) on Sunday” Child decoy: “how come” Offender F: “cuz I might have to go shopping there on Sunday” Offender F: “If our call goes well...maybe. Do you live near anything public?” Offender F: “will you have a problem answering the door in panties?” Offender F: “Do we kiss at the door?” Offender F: “tongue?”
Offender H	Offender H: “would u try sit on penis” Offender H: “I put my cock in your pussy” Offender H: “we can take trip to my trailer” Offender H: “we go to my place have fun” Offender H: “if u want cut school u come here”

Theme 4: Risk Mitigation

This theme reflected the conversational efforts the offender used to assess and mitigate the risk of discovery. This theme consisted of two subthemes: (a) checking for risk and (b) risk management. All nine offenders, in some form or fashion, checked for

the risk of discovery by an adult, significant other, or the police. This presented as the offender asking if the child decoy is alone, who has access to their computer, and where the child decoy's parents or guardians were. Offender C asked, "ur parents aren't gonna read this right??lol" Offender F asked, "does your mom go through your computer?" Also, offenders instructed the child decoy to delete evidence of their conversation within the messaging platform. Offender E placed a large amount of effort to avoid risk. Offender E stated, "i think it would probably be a good idea if you delete all these messages from me....your mom would be pissed if she read them" Offender E then provided the child decoy with explicit instructions on how to erase all their messages.

Offenders attempted to mitigate risk by acknowledging that their behavior with the child decoy was illegal and that they could get in trouble if they are detected by an adult or law enforcement. Eight of the nine offenders admitted that their behavior with the child decoy or meeting them in person was illegal as a form of risk management. Offender F, who indicated that he is a teacher, stated, "I appreciate that...and I very much want to see you...TRUST ME...and we may yet...but I need to be careful. Being labeled a sexual predator for the rest of my life is spooky" Offender G asked, "are u going to turn me in...to the police and ur parents" Offender E advised the child decoy, "your a minor....thats jail time" Table 7 provides evidence of dialogue reflecting Theme 4: Risk Mitigation.

Table 7*Dialogue Reflecting Theme 4: Risk Mitigation*

Participant	Dialogue evidence
Offender A	Offender A: "r u all alone now" Offender A: "ur not a cop are u?" Offender A: "yes....i did,,,just a little nervous....i dont wanna get in trouble seeing you on Saturday"
Offender B	Offender B: "who u live with?" Child decoy: "my mother" Offender B: "is she there" Offender B: "so your home alone"
Offender C	Offender C: "ur parents aren't gonna read this right?? Lol" Offender C: "u home alone?" Offender C: "but u wouldn't tell on me right?"
Offender E	Offender E: "cause your mom will be able to see what we talk about" Offender E: "well right click on each message and then left click on delete" Offender E: "im not making anything up. i could go to jail for just being with you without parental concent"
Offender F	Offender F: "does your mom go through your computer?" Child decoy: "go thru it like how" Offender F: "read your messages when you are not around?" Child decoy: "no i change my password a lot" Offender F: "k... cuz this conversation could get us both in trouble" Offender F: "If I am arrested for talking about sex with you or trying to see you or having a relationship with you...I lose my job, my ability to teach ever again, and I would have to report to the local police everyplace I live.. and that is after I get out of jail...usually it is seven years in prison for each year the young woman is under the age of 18. So, for you I woudl get 35 years."
Offender H	Offender H: "where is your mom" Child decoy: "in her room" Offender H: "where is computer" Offender H: "in your room" Child decoy: "yea" Offender H: "your mom dont your password get it" Child decoy: "na she doesnt like computers"
Offender I	Offender I: "Are you cop?"

Discrepant Cases

Although most offenders reflected all four themes, Offender B, Offender D, and Offender I, did not exhibit the theme of establishing a relationship. Although it appeared they were more interested in quickly meeting the child decoy, they displayed some degree of sexual exploration, risk mitigation, and arranging a meeting. I was able to use several of their conversations and statements as evidence for those three themes.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided information related to the predatory grooming themes for online male offenders who target child victims using online chat rooms. The qualitative thematic analysis of 9 recorded chat logs from the Perverted Justice website identified four themes. The first identified theme, establishing a relationship, reflected how the offender used compliments, discussed interests, and daily activities, and asked family questions to create a relationship with the child victim. The next theme, sexual exploration, centered on how the offender inquired about the child decoy's past sexual experiences which helped them determine what sexual activity the child decoy would be willing to discuss or potentially engage in if they met. Furthermore, offenders offered to teach the child decoy about sexual intercourse. The analysis revealed a third theme, arranging a meeting, where the offender suggested and planned for meeting the child victim. Lastly, the theme, risk mitigation, reflected the efforts of the offender which identified potential risks for discovery and the efforts they took to mitigate that risk, even admitting to the victim that their behavior was illegal. This research also found that the thematic stage progression was dynamic and fluid. The offenders engaged in all four

themes at various times, and they often intertwined with each other. Chapter five will provide an interpretation of the findings, address the limitations of the study, provide recommendations for future research and provide implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative study aimed to identify predatory grooming themes and the thematic stage progression for online male offenders who target child victims using online chat rooms. This study was conducted to address a research gap by furthering knowledge on theme identification and thematic stage progressions for male offenders in Wisconsin (Aitken et al., 2018; Henshaw et al., 2017; Kloess et al., 2017; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). In this study, I identified four predominant themes: (a) establishing a relationship, (b) sexual exploration, (c) arranging a meeting, and (d) risk mitigation. The thematic stages progressed dynamically rather than linearly; offenders moved between each thematic stage at various times. This behavior suggests offenders tailor their grooming strategy based on the responses they receive. I also found offenders displayed evidence of the contact-driven offender typology rather than characteristics of the fantasy-driven offender typology. Lastly, I found offenders acknowledged the illegality of their interactions during various points of their communication with the child decoy as a form of risk mitigation and offenders were conscious of their behavior.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this study, I identified four primary predatory grooming themes from chat log dialogue that occurred between an offender and an adult decoy posing as a child. The identified themes have similarities with O'Connell's (2003) theory; however, there were distinct differences. I also found that thematic stage progression was dynamic and fluid. Each theme intertwined with other identified themes at various times. This suggests that

the grooming process is not linear and depends on the perceptions of the offender based on responses from the child decoy.

Establishing a Relationship

The theme of establishing a relationship represents how offenders initiated contact and created a trusting, perceived mutually emotional relationship with the child decoy. At the onset of the conversation, offenders introduced themselves and often asked for the child decoy's age, gender, and where they are located. Asking for age, gender, and location is not uncommon in online chat forums; rather, these questions are customary and considered a form of introduction. Offenders could use the information obtained as a variable for victim selection criteria (O'Connell, 2003). Once these introductions were completed, the conversation pivoted and child decoys were asked personal questions relative to their family, whether they had any previous romantic relationships, and about their interests. These questions and conversations build trust between offender and child decoy. The development of trust and mutuality is pivotal for future manipulation of the victim (Aitken et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003). Offenders also frequently asked if the decoy missed them when they did not communicate for a time. Kloess et al. (2019) suggested offenders use these tactics to establish the relationship with the victim and emphasize that the victim is emotionally important or special to them. The use of emotional tactics is a conscious effort on behalf of the offender to slowly desensitize the victim, making them think the relationship is real, exclusive, and normal (Kloess et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2007).

Another hallmark of this theme is that offenders requested additional pictures of the child decoy. Initially, the requests were not for sexually explicit pictures; rather, they were for nonsexual images of the child. The request for pictures provided an additional opportunity for the offender to view an image of the victim. This may have been done to determine if the child met the offender's personal sexual preferences or as a risk mitigation strategy, as they attempted to ascertain if they were conversing with law enforcement. These requests also acted as an avenue for the offender to provide more compliments to the child decoy. Offenders use compliments, not only about pictures but also about answers to personal questions, to gain trust and display interest. Offenders made comments to the child decoy, telling them they were beautiful, intelligent, and unique. This is consistent with Aitken et al. (2018), Black et al. (2015), Kloess et al. (2019), and Olson et al. (2007), who suggested an integral part of the grooming strategy is making a victim feel the relationship is special through compliments that make the victim feel good about themselves. This theme could be observed at several points during the conversation, intertwining with other themes, such as sexual exploration and risk mitigation.

This theme did not agree with O'Connell's (2003) theory—more specifically, the relationship-forming and friendship-forming stages. O'Connell (2003) separated these stages; however, I found this was one overarching theme. Williams et al. (2013) suggested there is a rapport building stage in which an offender attempts to build trust and a sense of emotional reciprocation through conversation. I found that this theme did not have a standard duration, which aligns with O'Connell (2003), who suggested this

theme can vary in length. Additionally, I did not find that the offenders wished to establish an exclusive relationship with the victim, which is contrary to O'Connell's (2003) theory. Offenders maintained a casual relationship with the child decoy, only asking personal questions that assisted or led to sexual conversation.

Sexual Exploration

The theme of sexual exploration represents how offenders initiated, inquired, and expressed sexuality with the child decoy. This theme is often predicated on a conversation with the child decoy about their past romantic relationships, as seen in the establishing a relationship theme. After offenders learn that a decoy had a past relationship, the conversation turns to questions about what the child decoy and their significant other experienced sexually. Aitken et al. (2018) found similar behaviors, suggesting that offenders use this topic or question to test the victim's boundaries and their willingness to discuss sexuality. Offenders use questions about a decoy's past sexual experiences and their responses to gauge future tactics. If a decoy states they had sexual experiences in their past relationship, offenders ask follow-up questions surrounding what specific sexual acts they engaged in and how pleasurable they were for the decoy.

Conversational questions further centered on orgasms and sexual behaviors, such as intercourse or oral sex. If a child decoy stated they did not have any sexual experience or stated it was not pleasurable or had an orgasm, offenders offered to educate them in sexuality, both in the chat log and potentially in person. Similar to Olson et al. (2007), I found that offenders also suggested or asked the child decoy if they would like them to teach or educate them on sexual activity. Offenders use this offer to further trust with the

child decoy and appear as an individual who cares about them. This was also consistent with O'Connell's (2003) findings, as these conversations were meant to establish trust and test the willingness or comfort of the child decoy to discuss sexuality or engage in sexual acts in the future.

During conversations that centered on sexuality, offenders often told the child decoy they were joking around or they did not have to answer the question if they were not comfortable. This tactic is meant to apply pressure on the child decoy to respond and divulge personal information; however, it is disguised as a light-hearted joke. Furthermore, the tactic was meant to create trust, as the offender made the decoy feel they did not have to respond. Kloess et al. (2017) suggested that offenders attempt to broach sexual topics through light conversation, jokes, and the ruse of giving sexual advice.

Offenders also ask child decoys if they have ever had an orgasm. When the decoy replies they had not, the conversation turns to the topic of self-masturbation as a way to experience an orgasm. Offenders suggest and offer to give instructions on self-masturbation; they asked if the child decoy would engage in that act for them and tell them about their experience. This presents as an opportunity for the offender to experience a sexual fantasy. When the decoy rejects that request, the conversation returns to the offender suggesting they can educate them on sexuality, potentially in person. This behavior is consistent with O'Connell's (2003) findings, as this theme encompasses instruction on self-masturbation, sexual techniques, and at times, suggestions to physically meet with the intent of sexual contact.

There were some inconsistencies with this theme compared to past research. First, none of the offenders engaged in sexual fantasy role playing. Additionally, it appeared that offenders were more contact-driven than fantasy-driven. Offenders in this study took time to build a relationship with the child decoy rather than be more direct and introduce sexual topics or suggest using web cameras to facilitate sexual activity (Kloess et al., 2017). Furthermore, this behavior could be due to the restrictions placed on the child decoys while they are conducting these investigations. Typically, to avoid entrapment, decoys are not allowed to actively engage offenders in sexual fantasy role playing, either through text dialogue or web cameras. Another inconsistency was offenders made minimal promises or bribes to victims (Joleby et al., 2021; Kloess et al., 2019). Although not absent, only one offender offered to purchase items for the child decoy. In those instances, the offender offered to purchase a cell phone and prepaid calling card. Both offers also appeared to be a form of risk mitigation, avoiding detection and keeping their contact secret from family members.

Another inconsistency, offenders who requested to take a shower with the decoy, was observed. This question was asked during the themes of sexual exploration and arranging a meeting. During a conversation where this was present, the offender asks if the decoy was willing to take a shower with them when they met. They elaborated that they wanted both parties to be clean before they engaged in sexual activity. It was unknown if this behavior is part of their individual sexual fantasy, a test of the victim's sexual boundaries, or an effort to create more trust with the victim. This behavior was not observed in the previously reviewed literature.

Lastly, one offender requested the child decoy watch him urinate and asked if he could watch them urinate. A direct assessment of this statement could not be made. It appeared that the offender spoke a different language other than English, as their text dialogue displayed characteristics of two separate languages which caused issues contextualizing and analyzing the statements.

Like Winters et al. (2017), this study found that this theme was present early in the conversation. At times, the offender would initiate the theme of sexual exploration in conjunction with thematic elements of establishing a relationship. Lastly, the study aligned with Williams et al. (2013), who suggested that themes or stages are dynamic and fluid. This study found that this theme intertwined with the establishing a relationship, arranging a meeting, and risk mitigation themes, always interacting and never linear.

Arranging a Meeting

The theme arranging a meeting represented the actions of the offender suggesting, and the subsequent plans that they made, to meet the child decoy for sexual contact. Results from this theme should be taken apprehensively. In some instances, the child decoy from the Perverted Justice site initiated and mentioned a meeting for sexual contact. This created an issue of entrapment or placed a thought in the offender's mind that would not have been there originally. In the instances that the offender suggested meeting the child decoy for sexual contact first, planning would take place. The offender asked where the decoy was willing to meet, and how long they would want to stay with the offender. At times, the offender asked what the child decoy wanted to do while they were together.

Offenders asked for the child decoy's address and located the address on a map. In some instances, they explained in the text dialogue how long it would take to travel to the decoy's residence and calculated how long they could stay there. One offender planned and discussed entering into the decoy's bedroom via a window and suggested efforts to keep their encounter quiet from family members that resided in the house. Other offenders discussed renting a hotel room or bringing the decoy back to their residence. In one case, the offender located the residence of the decoy and suggested that they meet in a nearby park. The offender also discussed the bathroom where they would engage in sexual activity. This behavior highlighted the length and detail that offenders would go to ensure that they met the child decoy. Calculating efforts such as this, bring attention to how the offender assessed the desirability to meet the child decoy or determine if they were communicating with law enforcement (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015).

Additional efforts of the offender that were exhibited during this theme, but tie into the theme of establishing a relationship, centered on common activities they could do when they were with the decoy. One offender requested the decoy be his guide and show him their city, citing that he wanted to eat at a good restaurant and sight-see. Two offenders suggested that they watched a movie or play cards before they engaged in sexual activity. In both instances, this was an effort to build trust, show that the relationship they have is special, and capitalize on the vulnerability of the child decoy.

This theme was short in length and presented in multiple variations. For some offenders, the request to meet the child decoy for sexual activity was quick. They took

little time to build a relationship and explore sexuality with the child decoy. Other offenders took time to build a relationship and explored sexuality with the child decoy, and only when they deemed it appropriate, they suggested a physical meeting. There was no singular triggering conversational event that predicated the request, however, in most cases, the offender exhibited thematic elements of establishing a relationship and sexual exploration.

Findings from this study were consistent with Briggs et al. (2011) who suggested that contact-driven offenders quickly identify a potential victim and use the grooming process to lure the victim into sexual contact. Offenders in this study accomplished this as they engaged in conversations that emulated elements from the establishing a relationship and exploring sexuality themes. The offender played coy and suggested that they get food or sightsee, however, there could be a sexual conversation intertwined. The offender asked what the child was sexually willing to do when they met. This could be viewed as fantasy roleplaying or rehearsal for the meeting, however, the conversations lacked mutual masturbation or exhibitionist behavior which is indicative of fantasy-driven offenders (Briggs et al., 2011; Kloess et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2016; O'Connell, 2003; Seto, 2013).

Risk Mitigation

The theme of risk mitigation was present at various points during the conversation and often intertwined with other themes. Consistent with Black et al. (2015) and Williams et al. (2013), the offender often asked where the child decoy's parents are, who had access to their computer, and who knew the passwords to their computer. This

pattern of questions allowed the offender to better understand the potential of being discovered. When the offender requested information about the child decoy's family and parents, it never centered around their physical location relative to the victim, rather it focused on who had access to the child decoy's computer, cell phone, or other messaging devices. In some cases, especially if they requested to speak with the child decoy on the phone, the offender asked when their parents worked to avoid discovery when calling. In another instance, the offender gave the child decoy explicit instructions on how to delete the chat log so that their parents could not see what they had conversed about. The offender also instructed the child decoy to keep their activities secret throughout the conversation, thus implying that the offender was always conducting a risk assessment for potential discovery. These findings aligned with O'Connell's (2003) theory, as they also included similar risk assessment behaviors.

One of the important discoveries of this study was that offenders, across all cases, indicated to the child decoy that they could be arrested and acknowledged their behaviors were illegal. These statements and behaviors were consistent with child molesters, not pedophiles, as child molesters clearly understand that they are violating a child and that their actions are illegal (Hickey, 2016). These statements were used to highlight the need to keep the relationship secret. Often the offender brought this to the forefront during the sexual exploration or arranging meeting themes, a finding that aligned with Black et al. (2015) and Williams et al. (2013).

Dynamic Theme Progression

Contrary to O'Connell (2003) but consistent with Black et al. (2015) and Williams et al. (2013), this study found the themes of grooming behavior did not occur in a vacuum, nor a linear progression. Initially, the offender generally started in the establishing a relationship theme, attempting to understand whom the child decoy was by asking probing questions about their life, what they were interested in, or their relationship history. Furthermore, the offender began to provide compliments to the child decoy, making them feel that the offender had an interest in them, which targeted their vulnerability and attempted to gain trust.

Once the offender deemed that they had sufficiently established an emotional connection and trust with the child decoy, they moved into the sexual exploration theme or began the risk mitigation theme. It appeared that their theme selection was based on the responses of the decoy coupled with their personal perception of the ruse of an established relationship. If the offender felt the child decoy was comfortable engaging in sexual conversation, they would start with small advancements, usually centered around exploring the decoy's past sexual experiences, what sexual acts they have experienced, if they enjoyed those experiences and if they wanted to have more. The offender quickly moved into risk mitigation or reverted to the establishing a relationship theme, in which they suggested that the child decoy did not have to answer any questions if they were not comfortable. They also stated that they were emotionally supportive of them or even highlighted that they could get in legal trouble for the conversation. This dynamic

application of various themes displayed that they wanted to build perceived trust with the decoy, while still focused on their goal of sexual exploitation and avoiding discovery.

Once the offender felt that they had established a trusting relationship with the victim through rapport building, sexual exploration, and perceived risk mitigation, they suggested to the child decoy that they should meet and have a sexual encounter. Even during this theme, elements of previous themes were exhibited. The offender often reassured the decoy they had a special relationship and asked if the decoy missed them or had romantic feelings for them. The offender frequently asked the victim about what sexual experiences they wanted to have if they were to meet. Additionally, the offender conducted risk mitigation with statements that enhanced the fact they could be arrested, lose their job, or get in trouble if their relationship or activities were discovered.

This study also found that offenders restarted the grooming process when the conversation stopped and continued another day. This suggested that the offender felt the need to reestablish rapport and trust, even though they may have perceived this as accomplished during a previous conversation. This furthered the notion of an emotionally reciprocal relationship built on mutual trust with the child decoy. This allowed for ease into sexual exploration and their ultimate goal of meeting the child decoy for a sexual encounter.

The dynamic use of the four themes identified in this study showed that the offender is calculating and assessing their grooming strategy at every point in the conversation. Similar to a game of chess, each move, or response from the decoy, educated and influenced the offender's next move. These calculated responses

highlighted the predatory behavior of online child sex offenders. Offenders were constantly assessing the child decoy's words, conversation flow, and emotional needs to inform and perfect their grooming tactics, which were uniquely tailored to each decoy. The dynamic use of each thematic element ensured that their mission of sexual exploitation is accomplished.

Contact-Driven Offenders and Fantasy-Driven Offenders

This study found most offenders were contact-driven offenders by theory. Contact-driven offenders are motivated to have a physical sexual encounter with the victim through the use of grooming behaviors (Briggs et al., 2011). In this study, it was the offender's primary goal to meet the child decoy for a sexual encounter. Most offenders spent a great deal of time creating a sense of trust, discussing the decoy's past sexual encounters, and avoiding discovery before suggesting they meet with the victim. A very small population of offenders spent very little time establishing a relationship, exploring sexuality, or even mitigating risk. In either scenario, the offender's primary goal was to meet with the decoy for a sexual encounter.

Most offenders did not engage in sexual fantasy role play, thus suggesting that, in this sample, they were not fantasy-driven offenders by theory. Fantasy-driven offenders are more focused on sexually charged conversations, sharing of illicit images, as well as mutual masturbation, or other exhibitionist behavior (Briggs et al., 2011; McManus et al., 2016; Seto, 2013). In this study, only one offender suggested that they conduct mutual masturbation or role-play an explicit sexual act during their online conversation. Most offenders did not engage in this behavior. This study also found that one of the offenders

offered to share pornographic images or explicitly requested pornographic images from the decoys. Also, one offender from this sample suggested exhibitionist behavior, offering to masturbate for the decoy using a web camera.

Child Molesters, Pedophiles, and Hebephiles

Child molesters, as defined by Hickey (2016), are opportunistic offenders, do not form emotional relationships with children, and have a clear understanding they are violating a child were the predominant classification in this study. Several offenders in this study, based on their dialogue, did not form a true emotional relationship with the child decoy, rather it was a guise to further their mission of contact offending.

Furthermore, offenders often displayed and acknowledged that they knew they were violating the law when engaging in sexually explicit conversations or arranging a sexual encounter with a decoy. This exhibited their understanding of the illegality, and wrongfulness of their behavior (Hickey, 2016).

This study did not observe markers of pedophilia within the offender sample. None of the offenders communicated with child decoys that fit the clinical definition of prepubescent children (Seto, 2018). All decoys purported their age to be in their early teenage years and suggested that they have secondary characteristics, but yet were still physically underdeveloped, fitting hebephilia criteria. Offenders frequently asked about the decoy's breast size and when confronted that the decoy felt that they were underdeveloped, they assured them that over the next few years they would continue to physically develop. The offenders also asked about the development of pubic hair, further assessing the development of the child victim. These behaviors align with Seto (2013),

who suggested that hebephiles are interested in children who have begun to develop secondary characteristics but are still physically immature.

Limitations

This study had several limitations, the first being the sample size of the data. The sample size, consisting of nine participants, was not generalizable to the entire population of online offenders, as qualitative research focuses on a particular phenomenon in a certain population within a specific context (Leung, 2015). Furthermore, the sample size was only generalizable to offenders in the state of Wisconsin. The findings cannot be applied to offenders outside the state of Wisconsin due to the specific population and context in which the data was observed (Leung, 2015). Another limitation of this study was that all the participants were male offenders. It is known that there are female offenders that utilize online communication platforms to identify, manipulate and communicate with child victims with the intent to sexually exploit them (Martellozzo, 2010). This study could not account for grooming themes or thematic stages for female offenders. Lastly, the race or ethnicity of the offenders was unknown as they were not provided in the demographics information that was provided by Perverted Justice.

The study was also limited to secondary transcribed data from the Perverted Justice website. Perverted Justice is a non-profit organization, not a law enforcement organization. Their volunteers did not go through advanced training like their law enforcement counterparts do. They did not employ best practices or tactics. Also, the adult volunteers that were posing as children may not communicate as if an actual child were communicating with the offender, thus not providing the naturally occurring

dialogue between a child and an offender (Kloess et al., 2017). Additionally, this study was limited because the child decoys, at times, initiated the conversation about arranging a meeting with the offender, a tactic that is more aggressive than what is allowed during official law enforcement investigations. This initiation may have influenced the offender to consider meeting for sexual contact when that may have not been their initial intention. Similar to Kloess et al. (2017), the chat logs used in this study were only identified due to proactive investigative measures on behalf of the volunteers of Perverted Justice and did not represent any undetected offenses, therefore, the findings cannot be representative of unidentified cases.

Recommendations

This study aimed to explore the grooming themes and thematic stage progression present in an online conversation between a male offender and a child victim. Online offending behavior requires additional research, especially in the area of behavioral characteristics and the dynamic process that the offender utilizes to victimize a child (Aitken et al, 2018; Kloess et al., 2019). Reinforcing Kloess et al. (2017), future qualitative thematic research into grooming themes should focus on wider populations from different geographic locations. Additional research should be conducted into the dynamics of theme interaction. This study found that grooming themes do not occur in a vacuum, nor do they occur linearly. Rather, grooming themes interacted and overlapped with each other. This will provide insight and the ability to compare offender grooming themes between different geographic locations and their dynamic interaction during the grooming process. Because chat logs are a rich source of data that can provide insight

into offender motivation, linguistics, and behavioral patterns, future research should explore grooming themes between an offender and trained law enforcement investigators as well as actual child victims. Although law enforcement investigators' interactions with the offender will not be as real as if a child victim was communicating, they are held to a higher standard and cannot suggest meeting for sexual contact due to entrapment legal issues. Research using chat logs between an offender and an actual child decoy provided the most accurate representation of communication between the two. Lastly, as social media, gaming, and chat platforms evolve, research should focus on how offender grooming behaviors present when they occur within those contexts.

Implications

This study was inspired by O'Connell (2003), whose findings suggested that there were several stages and themes present within an online conversation between an offender and a child decoy. This thematic analysis identified four distinct grooming themes which occurred dynamically during an online conversation between an offender and a child victim. The findings of this study and future research studies could impact positive social change by adding to the growing base of research into online predatory grooming behavior and supporting the advancement of law enforcement training and public education in this area. Enhanced law enforcement training would allow investigating officers to quickly identify, apprehend, and prosecute online predators through a deeper understanding of their grooming tactics and online behaviors. Lastly, further social change could occur through the development of updated public education

surrounding this topic affording those that care for our children the ability to act through a proactive and preventative lens by understanding online predatory grooming behavior.

Conclusion

Protecting our children in a society where the ability and access to communicate with anyone is evolving daily and must be a priority. This study explored themes and thematic stage progression present in predatory online grooming between a male offender and a child victim decoy. This study found that there are four themes: (a) building a relationship, (b) sexual exploration, (c) arranging a meeting, and (d) risk mitigation. These themes did not occur in a vacuum, rather they were dynamic and fluid often interacting with each other.

Offenders quickly attempted to establish a relationship with their victims through conversation that appeared normal to the untrained eye, however, the real intent of the offender is to create a sense of trust that allowed the victim to feel comfortable discussing sexuality with them. After the victim felt comfortable with the offender and began to discuss their sexuality, the offender capitalized on this vulnerable topic and suggested meeting the victim with the intent to engage in sexual contact under the veil of educating them in sexuality.

During the entire time of contact with the victim, the offender actively assessed the risk of discovery, implored secrecy, and acknowledged the illegality of their behavior and relationship with the victim. This process took days, weeks, or months, with each theme intertwined with the other in no specific order. Although this study found that there were thematic similarities shared with O'Connell's (2003) theory, the Exclusivity

Stage was not observed. Furthermore, this study found that assessing risk occurred concurrently with themes, which is consistent with Black et al. (2015) and Williams et al. (2013) who found that risk assessment occurred during various grooming themes or stages.

This study provided valuable insight into online predatory grooming behavior. Information obtained from this study could be used to train law enforcement officers with online grooming themes and strategies as well as the dynamic interaction of grooming themes found within communications with online predators. Furthermore, the findings could assist in establishing malicious intent, as all offenders acknowledged the illegality of their behaviors as risk management within the conversation. The findings of this study could be used to create proactive public education, highlighting key grooming themes present in online dialogue, which may prevent future victimization.

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Appendix A: Consent to Use Chat Logs and Data

To whom it may concern,

I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University (MN). I am seeking permission to the chat log transcripts on your website for research into the grooming process of online predators. With your permission, I would like to use 12 of them from the Wisconsin area. Please reply if I may.

Kind regards,

Absolutely, feel free to use the transcripts for your research.