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Experiences in Online Grooming from Initial Contact with Offender to Relationship Ending

Lyniece Lewis
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Lyniece Lewis

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Experiences in Online Grooming from Initial Contact with Offender to Relationship

Ending

by

Lyniece Lewis

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of adult women who were sexually groomed online as an adolescent, to understand the experiences in online grooming from initial contact to contact ending. The theory used to guide this study was sociometer theory. Sociometer theory looks at self-esteem as the cause for why individuals want to seek and maintain relationships. This theory also explains why individuals choose certain social relationships. While the victim or the offender may have a fear of acceptance, they will potentially look for relationships that accept or approve of them. The research question for this study examined female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending, through interviews with 8 women. Several themes emerged to answer the research question. Positive feelings, belonging, feeling of being understood, betrayal, relationship closure (awareness). Results of the study revealed that adolescents are affected by the process of online sexual grooming psychologically from initial contact with their groomer, whether the feeling is from a positive feeling given or by the sense of belonging in a friendship. All contact ending revealed an increase of awareness of how their groomers were trying to manipulate them in some way. This study provides an understanding of what tactics the offenders used to lure victims, what impressed the victims about their offenders, and at what stage the participant realized that the online relationship was not of the norm.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Social media and portable technology have contributed to adolescents becoming more accessible to sexual abusers (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014b). To date there has been much research that has contributed to online sexual grooming experiences trying to bridge the gap of adolescents online risky behavior. Whittle et al. (2015) identified common manipulation tactics that are utilized throughout the grooming process and those tactics where offender and victims have perception differences. Manipulation tactics that are commonly utilized in online sexual grooming are flattery, blackmail, threats, sexualized games, deception, and bribery (Whittle et al. 2014b). Although most of online grooming victims describe their online experience with their offenders as some form of a relationship, usually perceptions were not disclosed the same when discussing the sexual elements that created the relationships.

In this study, I focused on the time between initial contact with offenders to contact ending. According to Whittle et al. (2014b), the gap in the literature is in understanding the effects of offenders' manipulation tactics on victims upon initial contact and what influenced victims to realize that the relationship was inappropriate. These findings can be used to help end risky online behavior and inform adolescents on how self-esteem may have impacted their choice of acceptance as well as if manipulation tactics were easier to be established because of self-esteem.

In this chapter, I will present a brief overview of the research literature related to the topic and an explanation as to why this study is important. I will identify and discuss the problem statement and the purpose of the current study. I will define and describe the conceptual framework of the study relationship between the framework and the research questions. I will detail the nature of the study, provide the definition of key terms, and list any terms that are critical to the meaningfulness of the study. Finally, I will define the scope of the study, provide the limitations, and identify the significance of the potential contributions.

Background

Research has demonstrated that many child sex offenders use the Internet to access and groom young people (Whittle et al., 2014). Offenders who groom children usually have different goals, the goals may either be fantasy driven/to acquire sexual footage of the victim, or contact driven/to gain access to the victim offline for the purpose of contact sexual abuse. Regardless of the goal, victims can experience a range of manipulation styles. Some may include flattery, trust building, threats, sexualization, and bribery (Whittle et al., 2014b). Manipulation techniques utilized throughout the grooming process can vary considerably and are likely to incorporate both physical and psychological grooming to sexualize the child. Whittle et al. (2014) identified the process of online grooming as a sequential process such as friendship forming, relationship forming, risk assessment/ to assess the likelihood of detection, exclusivity/through

intensified conversation through mutual respect, with an emphasis on trust and secrecy, and sexual and fantasy enactment.

It is generally accepted that grooming is multifaceted and complex because grooming varies considerably in style, duration, and intensity, usually reflecting the offender's personality and behavior (Briggs, Simon, & Simonson, 2011). Regardless of what manipulation techniques are utilized, increased understanding of the subtleties within the grooming process is imperative in order to improve prevention and intervention techniques. While research has focused on significant steps in understanding offenders who groom young people and initial steps have been taken to understand online grooming from the perspective of the victim (European Online Grooming Project 2012), there is still a gap in literature. Whittle et al. (2014b) suggested that future research be conducted to understand the effects of offenders' manipulation tactics on victims during online grooming, the impacts the tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the relationship.

Whittle et al. (2013) found that 33% of 354 children reported having been approached sexually online. Whittle et al. (2014a) conducted interviews with eight young people, all of whom experienced online grooming to the point of sexual abuse whether online or offline. Results of the study showed that all six female victims considered their abuser to be a boyfriend (having an emotional connection) at some point during the contact. Sixty-three percent of the victims in this study noted that friendship became the basis of a romantic relationship with the abuser. The victims described feeling

emotionally attached to their offender. Offenders did not move through phases of grooming in a stage, however it may be cyclical by nature and groomers may adopt various manipulation strategies as necessary.

Whittle et al. (2015) explored and compared the perspectives of victims and their offenders at different stages of the grooming process where all victims were female and between 12 and 14 years of age. All offenders were males. Dyads between victim and offender most commonly disagreed in their accounts of the sexual elements of the relationship, including initiation, stage when sexualization took place, and photos and videos. Results indicated that the play on victim emotions is pivotal to the grooming process and that majority of the victims felt enmeshed in the relationships with their offenders. In another study by the European Online Grooming Project (2012), a total of 33 online groomers were interviewed. Accounts of length of contact varied from seconds, minutes, days, months, and even years. No average timeframe was identified. Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2004) found that 64% of offenders communicated for more than one month with their victim. Briggs et al. (2011) noted that in a sample of 51 Internet-initiated sex offenders, 70% communicated for less than a week and 40% for less than 24 hours before arranging to meet.

Although grooming is widely acknowledged throughout the world, and there are commonalities within research, no researchers to date have explored the impact that manipulation tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the relationship. In this study, I filled this research gap by interviewing

women of online sexual grooming and exploring what caused the individuals to end the relationship.

Problem Statement

Sexual grooming online is defined as a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults, and the environment for the abuse of the child. The offender carries out this process by gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure (Whittle et al., 2014a).

Social media and portable technology have contributed to adolescents becoming more accessible to sexual abusers. Online technology has altered the way abuse can now be carried out (Whittle et al., 2014b). A very critical and relatively new manner of forming relationships is that younger individuals are forming bonds and sharing personal information with offenders who have the hope of potential victimization of sexual assault (Black, Wollis, Woodworth, & Hancock, 2014). Researchers have reported that over 95% of American teens are utilizing the Internet, creating a large population of youth who are at risk of becoming victims of online crimes, especially those that are sexual in nature (PewInternet, 2013). In this study, I focused on female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending.

In this study, I examined the offender and adolescent relationship. I examined self-esteem as a measure of effectiveness in social relations and interactions that monitors acceptance or rejection from others, this places an emphasis on relational value the degree to which a person regards his or her relationship with another such as a mating

relationship, kin relationships, and friendships (Leary, 2005). This type of sexual abuse has been known to adversely impact a child's cognitive, emotional, academic, and psychological development (Young & Widom, 2014).

Whittle et al. (2014a) looked at online grooming timespans that ranged from 10 days to 1.5 years with their offender. The majority of the victims are most likely to establish some form of a relationship with their offender. Grooming styles tend to differ according to personalities and manipulation tactics. Some of the tactics may include some form of bribery, gifts, money, flattery, sexualized games, force, and threats (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). On both ends, the formation of the relationship could be due to external cues from the environment; this could signal advantages or disadvantages and evoke positive or negative feelings internally about oneself and become a potential threat for acceptance, respond to cues indicating real or potential rejection, evoke feeling that alert the individual to the threat, or motivate the person to behave in ways that minimize the probability of rejection and promote acceptance (Leary, 2002).

According to research about the experience of social rejection from mates and peers, it is reasonable for rejected youth to rebuild relationships to make up for their damaged needs and relationships (Thau, Aquino, & Wittek, 2007). Self-esteem declines in the face of rejection from others and causes negative emotional reactions. In order to maintain their original self-evaluation, individuals take action to restore relationships. Researchers also highlight that these social rejections are risk factors and they may not lead to vulnerability of youth; however, recurring risk factors and their accumulation over

time will increase the likelihood of harm to the individual (Masten & Powell, 2003).

Offline vulnerabilities that often lead to online risk include problems with family, social rejection as described in the sociometer theory, and previous victimization (Berson, 2003). This research is important to understand the manner in which offender's target and pursue their victims to ensure that offenders are identified as well as vulnerabilities are targeted (Katz, 2013).

Despite numerous studies describing the various stages throughout the grooming process, adolescent vulnerabilities could lead to individuals decreased sociometer in self-esteem and encourage offender manipulation tactics that are utilized online. What is still not understood throughout this body of research is how the grooming process ends and what encourages these adolescents to end their online contact with their offenders (Whittle et al., 2014b). Previous researchers have described adolescent feelings toward the end of the relationships, such as the victims disliking their abusers due to feeling scared by him, feelings of confusion, or feeling like they were not in control. These points form the focus of the current study. This literature will help with understanding the effects of offender's manipulation tactics on victims during online grooming, the impacts the tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the relationship (Whittle et al., 2014b).

The majority of research on this topic is focused on the grooming process, focusing on the offender's point of view; very little research contributes to an understanding of the beginning and end of the grooming process from the adolescent's

point of view. Research about the grooming process and different manipulation tactics differ because groomers tend to adopt, relapse, and readopt strategies as necessary (Whittle et al., 2014b). Despite the homogenous process of experiences this research tends to highlight commonalities among victims to include similar effects on ending the relationship and what offender tactics were displayed at the end of the online relationship.

Purpose of the Study

Previous researchers have described many victims of online grooming experience as having fulfilled romantic and positive relationships with their offenders (Whittle et al., 2015). Recent literature has shown that these adolescent vulnerabilities are associated with self-esteem. Researchers have concluded that these vulnerabilities come from family, peers, community, and wider society. Researchers have asserted that these offline vulnerabilities extend to online risk (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011). Researchers have described this period of transition to be impulsive as well as increased awareness of sexuality, experiencing sexual arousal and for some engaging in sexual activity. These vulnerabilities are correlated with online victimization (Young, Young, & Fullwood, 2007).

Previous researchers have stated that grooming is a process. However, the process has not been exactly pin-pointed because manipulation strategies differ according to the victim (Whittle et al., 2014b). Previous research is contributed to both the offender perspective and the victim perspective in sharing similar occurrences. Most commonly described is the manipulation portion through different avenues such as conversation,

deception, and many more (Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Loof, 2014). While majority of the research is apparent as to how the offender obtains contact and maintains contact with their victims, what is not disclosed are the impact the tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the relationship. To date, researchers have not determined what influenced the victims to realize that the relationship was inappropriate (Whittle et al., 2014b)

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to examine how victims of sexual grooming experience offenders' manipulation tactics on them. My focus in this study was the span between the initial contact with offenders to contact ending. The findings can be used to inform adolescents on how self-esteem may have impacted their choice of acceptance as well as if manipulation tactics were easier to be established because of self-esteem.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used for this study was Leary et al.'s (2002) sociometer theory. This theory is used to interpret several interpersonal phenomena in terms of the self-esteem motive. The concept developed by Mark Leary and colleagues was used to explain behavior according to social emotions, personal behaviors, self-serving biases, and reactions to rejection. Leary and Baumeister (2000) found that the formation of these relationships could often be motivated to enhance and protect individual self-esteem. The theory explains self-esteem in an individual as a response to how others value and perceive them.

Previous research has focused on the unfulfilled areas in adolescence lives, which causes them to fulfill those feelings with unknown individuals online, like their offenders. These social cues are important in friendships, social support, group memberships, social influence and romantic bonds (Weisbuch, Sinclair, Skorinko, & Eccleston, 2009). The theory is used to propose that humans have evolved a psychological meter or gauge that monitors the degree to which other's value and accept them (Steiger, Allemand, Robins, & Fend, 2014). The individual's level of acceptance by others is a determinant of self-esteem (Leary, 2002). This could cause a problem for future relational value in the eyes of others and the individual themselves. For instance, victim/offender relationships or aggressive disruptive behavior. This is said to be caused by rejection or either acceptance (Weisbuch et al., 2009).

In this study, I explained that the interpersonal relationship between an offender and an adolescent utilizing the Sociometer Theory. Previous research has tied the sociometer's role in guiding social behavior. Research has hypothesized that people with low self-esteem base their social decision-making on acceptance (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007). Insecurity, the need to belong, and rejection sensitivity are associated with low self-esteem. Researchers have found that social expectations have marked influence on individual's social strategies. Individuals with low self-esteem are overly vigilant for and reactive to cues regarding their relational value (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Myers, Southard, & Malkin, 2013). Their low sociometer reading causes the individuals to crave belonging, it also causes them to fear rejection because it heightens the risk

associated with cultivating new relationships (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002).

Self-esteem can best be defined by what an individual thinks about themselves. It is about how an individual evaluate their self-concept (Burger, 2006). Having low self-esteem and experiencing rejection offline can lead to online risk. Engaging in risk-taking behaviors online has been proven to lead to online grooming victimization (Marshall, Parker, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2014). This could include talking to strangers, sexual behavior, sharing personal information with strangers, and meeting online contact offline. In addition, researchers have concluded that young people who have experienced problems with family and social isolation were especially particular to being vulnerable online (Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Haralson, 2013).

When offline vulnerabilities cause low self-esteem, individuals experience a feeling of rejection. The emotional toll on victims or offenders could develop an emotional connection and sexual relationships online that the victims have with the offender needs to be recognized and outcry for support (Whittle et al., 2014b).

The sociometer theory was suitable for my study because this theory focuses on the self-esteem aspect for the reasoning of obtaining a relationship and can be used to understand manipulation tactics. While the victim or the offender may have a fear of acceptance they will potentially look for relationships that accept or approve of them. In this situation an adolescent may feel as if an offender may be more accepting of them and are able to establish better relationships due to fear of rejection or low self-esteem.

Research Question

My goal for this study was to understand online grooming experiences from women who have been victims of online sexual grooming and at what stage do they realize that the online relationship is inappropriate. The research question for this study was: What are the female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending?

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study, I focused on female adults who experienced sexual grooming online as an adolescent. Their online experiences were described with the use of semistructured interviews. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis to guide the study methodology. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative methodology that is used to provide an understanding of the participants lived experiences. Researchers use lived experiences to understand how participants make sense of their personal and social world. This approach involves a detailed examination, as it is used to explore personal experiences and is concerned accompanies a focus on an individual's personal perception in order to produce correlations (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

IPA is a two-stage interpretative process. The first stage is the empathetic hermeneutics and the second stage is the questioning hermeneutics. The empathetic process is concerned with trying to understand what the experience was like from the participants' point of view, and the questioning hermeneutics involves a detailed analysis

from critical questioning (Smith & Osborn, 2007). I used empathetic hermeneutics during the data analysis stage while eliciting themes from what participants said and I gained an understanding of experiences from the victim's point of view in online grooming. I used questioning hermeneutics during the data analysis stage, while eliciting themes from what participants said. I used process codes as an interpretative process in understanding participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Definitions of Key Terms

Adolescents: Emotionally or intellectually immature. A young person who is developing into an adult. A person who is no longer a child but not yet an adult.

Online Technology: Computer or device connected to a network such as Internet and ready to use or be used by other computers or devices. Capabilities such as online help through a computer system.

Sexual grooming. Befriending an establishing an emotional connection with a child, and sometimes the family, to lower the child's inhibitions with the objective of sexual abuse (Randhawa, 2013).

Offender. Prison inmates and lawbreakers are often referred to in news reports. People arrested for breaking the law.

Vulnerabilities. The quality of being easily hurt or attacked. The state of being opened to injury or appearing as if you are. Liability to failure under pressure or stress or strain (Whittle et al., 2014b).

Victims. Someone who has been wronged or harmed. A person who suffers from some adverse circumstance.

Self-esteem. Reflects an individual's overall subjective emotional evaluation of his or her own worth. It is the decision made by an individual as an attitude toward the self (Leary, 2002).

Manipulation tactics. Social influence that aims to change the behavior or perception of others through abusive, deceptive, or underhanded tactics (Winters, 2017).

Risky online behavior. Teenagers using sexually inviting usernames, discussing sex online, and arranging to meet for sex place themselves at great risk. Teens who are exploring sexual issues online, including sexual orientation, and those interested in meeting strangers online (Whittle et al., 2014b).

Rejection. The act of not accepting, believing or considering something. Occurs when an individual is deliberately excluded from a social relationship or social interaction. Rejection can have especially negative effects (Leary, 2005).

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs held by the researcher as true but that are not verified. First, I assumed that the semistructured interview questions would yield valid data to answer my research question. This means that a victim would not label themselves as a victim without actually having experienced online sexual grooming. This also means that the participants are honest and forthcoming with their lived experiences. I assumed that

the selected participants were cooperative with the purpose of the study and answered the interview questions open and honestly about their sexual online grooming lived experience. I also assumed that the number of participants were sufficient enough to provide the data necessary to identify relevant themes. A sufficient sample size is always important in order to identify potential emerging themes within the research. I also assumed that I would be able to administer the interviews in a manner free from bias, interruptions, and with privacy, and confidentiality. I also assumed that I would ask questions in a nonjudgmental and open way to ensure participants express themselves freely.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, psychological experiences from women who have been victims of online sexual grooming were examined. The participant selection for this study involved females who had experienced online grooming. This sampling allowed for thematic findings and analysis. I chose to focus on offender's manipulation tactics from the victim's stance, and gain understanding not only what tactics the offenders uses to lure victims in, but also what influences their victims and at what stage do they realize that the online relationship is inappropriate.

A qualitative methodology was used to gather participants for semistructured interviews to understand the lived experiences of online grooming. To be included in this

study, participants had to show proof of age and give consent. Participants were all 18 years and older.

Regarding delimitations, the sample did not include female victims of non-online grooming or females younger than adolescence age when they were groomed. The population was sought through Fairfax, VA and online message boards for online sexual victimized women. Gender was a delimitation. No men were sought for the study due to previous studies reporting majority of women victims of online grooming.

Limitations

This study attempted to gain information on aspects of human lived experiences, because of that limitations were noted.

A few limitations derived from the nature of a qualitative study. Qualitative research develops several theories that are transferable in order to make certain connections between studies and their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). The participants in this study were gained through an organization that is focused on providing therapeutic services to women. The individuals were sought out through telephone contact as well as over the Internet through a social support group page. Limitations were to include consent was obtained over telephonic and digital contact.

Throughout the study interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilized. This allows the researcher to approach the study with their own ideas, knowledge, and biases formulated from experiences. Therefore, if another researcher were to replicate this study,

they could have generated their own themes based on the researcher's background, education, experience, and biases.

Significance

This study is unique because it addresses the lack of research and knowledge about the lived experiences of female women who have been sexually groomed online. It explores the different type of manipulation tactics that are utilized on victims from their stance, and gains insight as to what lures the victims in to begin initial contact with their offender and what encourages the victims to end contact. While different manipulation tactics such as bribery, intense contact, and sexualized games has been identified as being utilized on adolescent vulnerabilities, self-esteem has also played a major part on adolescent vulnerabilities (Leary, 2005). However, what is still unknown is the sexual grooming process from the victim's stance, what about the manipulation tactics causes them to start contact initially as well as end contact with their offender's.

Majority of the research today focuses on manipulation tactics from the offender's point of view and different types utilized to initiate contact (Whittle et al., 2014a). The results of this study will help provide much needed understanding about where in the grooming process the victims realize the relationship is inappropriate. These results provide in depth understanding of the lived experiences of sexual grooming online from women who were groomed while they were an adolescent. This study also focuses on the explanation behind why contact begins, also if self-esteem Mark Leary Sociometer Theory are associated with why adolescents are susceptible to sexual online grooming.

Overall, the results will provide a better understanding of how sexual online grooming starts and how it ends from the victim's stance. The findings can be used to inform adolescents on how self-esteem may have impacted their choice of acceptance as well as if manipulation tactics were easier to be established because of self-esteem. This study will also inform adolescents on their vulnerabilities and may expose the root of their vulnerabilities. This will reduce the number of victims in online grooming as adolescents become more aware of themselves, tactics that are being utilized online by offenders, and how offender's prey on vulnerable youth. Hence adolescents and their families will experience positive social change.

Summary

Existing studies reflect that grooming is a process which consists of several different stages (Winters & Jeglic, 2017). This process incorporates both physical and psychological grooming to sexualize the child, expose vulnerabilities, keep in contact, and gain compliance (Whittle et al., 2013). Although manipulation tactics are utilized by offenders to gain this type of compliance victims' perceptions about themselves and the relationship could contribute to their views of a fulfilled romantic and positive relationship with their offenders (Whittle et al., 2015). Also, Mark Leary and colleagues have attached the theory of self-esteem (Sociometer Theory) which then has been linked to un-healthy relationships, causing these online relationships to may have been established due to vulnerabilities and unfulfilled areas in the adolescent's life (Weisbuch et al., 2009). However, very little is known about the accounts of sexual online grooming

from the victim's stance and why victims end the contact. This research study will make that apparent.

In the next chapter, a brief overview of literature search strategies will be provided as will the conceptual framework that will guide the study. The following chapter will also contain an overview of the current literature reviewed, as well as the limitations and benefits of the information.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The most common victims of online sexual solicitation are adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 years old (Katz, 2013). The process employed by many offenders to target the victims is most commonly referred to as grooming. This involves a specific set of steps with specific goals including secrecy, compliance, and ultimately gaining access to the child (Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014). This type of abuse can adversely impact a child cognitively, emotionally, academically, and psychologically (Young & Widom, 2014).

Existing literature has revealed a specific set of grooming processes in order to pinpoint the process of child sexual grooming (Whittle et al., 2015). The first stage in the grooming process begins with the selection of the victim, the next stage will usually consist of gaining access to their potential victim; this will consist of reaching out to victims requesting the victim online or messaging the victim. The next stage is developing an emotional attachment with the victim through the use of persuasion, pressure, or manipulation in order to get the victim to cooperate (Mooney & Ost, 2013).

There have been serious gaps in research. Researchers have been trying to understand what to look for in adolescent vulnerabilities online (Whittle et al. 2014b). Recent research has linked offline vulnerabilities such as peers, family, and social status to online grooming processes/manipulation tactics. What has not been discovered are the impacts various tactics have on victims at initial contact, and what influences the

adolescent to end the relationship. In this study, I focused on how self-esteem impacts an adolescent's reasoning for obtaining an online relationship, while also examining the reasons that an adolescent ends an online relationship.

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the literature search strategies and the conceptual framework that I used to guide the study. The literature review section will contain an overview of all the current literature reviewed, as well as the limitations and benefits of the information. Finally, the chapter will be summarized and concluded with a discussion of the ways in which this study contributes to the current gaps in the literature.

Literature Search Strategy

A search of the literature was conducted to locate peer-reviewed journal articles through Walden University database including PsycINFO, and websites dedicated to the research and support of adolescent sexual online grooming processes. The terms used while conducting the literature search included combinations of *sexual online grooming*, *online grooming*, *manipulation techniques*, *manipulation tactics*, *adolescents in online grooming*, *adolescent vulnerabilities*, *process of online grooming*, and *vulnerabilities of online grooming*. A total of 86 articles populated pertaining to *sexual online grooming*. The number of articles I allowed in my search ranged from 2013 to 2018. A 5-year time frame was populated in order to obtain the most recent research. In addition, academic books on related topics were reviewed to locate relevant journal articles referenced by the author(s).

Theoretical Framework for the Study

There is no theoretical framework explaining the impact of offender manipulation tactics from initial contact to contact ending. Therefore, the conceptual framework that guided this study was Mark Leary et al.'s (2002) Sociometer Theory. They proposed that humans have evolved to include psychological meter or gauge that monitors the degree to which others value and accept them. The individual's level of acceptance by others is a determinant of self-esteem and how the person will determine future relational value and themselves (Leary, 2002). Social cues are important for the individual to be aware of in friendships, social support, group memberships, social influence, and romantic bonds (Weisbuch, Sinclair, Skorinko, & Eccleston, 2009). These social cues are important because psychologically perceived cues, whether real or not, could bring on feelings of rejection or acceptance depending on an individual's perception.

Feelings of perceived rejection or acceptance can affect an adolescent's mental health. Rejection/acceptance have emotional, psychological, and interpersonal consequences. People not only react strongly when they perceive others have rejected them, but human behavior is also influenced by the desire to avoid rejection (Leary, 2015). This theory interprets several interpersonal phenomena in terms of the self-esteem motive. Due to external cues from the environment, this could signal disadvantages and evoke negative feelings internally about oneself and become a potential threat for acceptance. Responses to cues indicating real or potential rejection evoke feelings that alert the individual to the threat or motivate the person to behave in ways that minimize

the probability of rejection and promote acceptance (Leary, 2002). Perceived cues could cause acceptance to be achieved through manipulation such as deception, bribery, or exposing vulnerabilities (Whittle et al., 2015).

The human organism is characterized by a basic need to belong, to maintain at least a handful of meaningful social attachments (Zhang & Cao, 2011). The importance of Sociometer theory ascertains the internal presence of meter that monitors such relationships. When an organism's well-being is extremely important, internal mechanisms tend to develop for monitoring it (Zhang & Cao, 2011). An example is that pain serves to signal the possibility of damage to the body, and hunger and satiety monitor how well the person is obtaining nutrition and sustenance (Zhang & Cao, 2011). When low relational evaluation, and particularly relational devaluation is experienced, the sociometer evokes emotional distress as an alarm signal and motivates behaviors to gain, maintain, and restore relational appreciation (Liu & Zhang, 2016).

In an extension of sociometer theory, researchers Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2006) proposed that sociometer theory. They developed the social relationships in different social domains such as the mating domain, the friendship domain, the work domain, individuals faced the problem of adaptively calibrating their levels of aspiration (Liu & Zhang, 2016). Researchers hypothesized that an important function of self-esteem was to guide individuals to approach social relationships based on their perception of their social value.

Engaging in risk-taking behaviors online has been proven to lead to online grooming victimization (Marshall et al., 2014). This could include talking to strangers, sexual behavior, sharing personal information with strangers, and meeting online contact offline. In addition, researchers have concluded that young people who have experienced problems with family and social isolation were especially vulnerable online (Noll et al., 2013). The current study uses this framework to explore how self-esteem affects a victim or offender fear of acceptance, and how relationships form due to fear of rejection or low self-esteem.

Sociometer of Relationship Forming

Theorists have discussed the importance of self-esteem and how it impacts a variety of behavioral, cognitive, and affective reactions including various psychological problems due to the unfulfilled need for self-esteem. Self-esteem is very important to an individual's sense of social belonging. Health, happiness, success, and survival depends heavily on maintaining specific social ties with other people. As a core principle, self-esteem is an individual's appraisal of how they are regarded as valuable, viable, and a sought-after member of the groups and relationships to which an individual belongs or aspires to belong (DeWall & Richman, 2011). Individuals possess a strong and pervasive motive to maintain a certain level of positive feelings about themselves to confirm feelings of personal satisfaction, worth, and effectiveness. As individual's motive for wanting acceptance in part to avoid losses of self-esteem (DeWall & Richman, 2011).

This can also be observed using sociometer theory in reference to mating. In the context of developing relationships in social domains, individuals who faced self-esteem issues also had problems calibrating relationships that matched their level of aspiration (Leary, 2010). These problems appeared in various ways, including (a) investing too heavily in social relationships that were substantially lower in value than an individual hoped for, (b) failing to get a fair return on the value they bring to the relationships, or (c) wasting investments that were higher in value than what they could realistically obtain and protect (Leary, 2010). Kirkpatrick and Ellis stated that an important function of self-esteem was to guide individuals to approach social relationships that were of high quality. Their model posited that experiences of social acceptance and rejection fed into domain-specific sociometers, causing alterations in state self-esteem in the relevant social domain, which in turn affected aspiration levels in approaching new relationships in that domain (Leary, 2010).

When looking for a relationship, individuals are looking for likability, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. An individual's sociometer is likely to monitor the environment constantly looking for cues that pertain to their inclusionary status. Assuming that most people have some social ties most of the time, and the danger of losing attachments is more urgent than the appeal of forming new ones, theorists assume that the sociometer should be attuned to cues that connote devaluation, rejection, exclusion, or any undesirable aspect of the self (Zhang, Li, & Ruan, 2015). The salience, pervasiveness, and emotional power of the sociometer most likely means that people may

become concerned about self-esteem without noting the link to belongingness (Zhang et al., 2015). Ultimately self-esteem helps strengthen the adolescent emotionally through their transition with peers as they are learning more about themselves and taking advice from unknown individuals.

Self-Esteem in Adolescence

The formation of self-esteem is a long process. Self-esteem is correlated with self-image and self-consciousness (how a person sees themselves). Its evolution in time involves transition periods from one stage to another, from one status to another, adolescence (due to psychosomatic changes), or grand stages (consequences of the change in status, retirement, or the change in task and responsibilities (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010). Self-esteem normally declines during adolescent stages, but it tends to increase during the young adulthood. The affective model of self-esteem development assumes that self-esteem forms early in life in response to relational and temperamental factors, once formed, high self-esteem people have the ability to promote, protect, and restore feelings or self-worth (Talib, Mohamad, & Mamat, 2011). The period of adolescence is important for the process of self-esteem formation. Adolescence is the critical period of development of self-esteem and self-identity, and low self-esteem endangers adolescent's emotional regulation (Moksnes & Espnes, 2012).

Previous research has correlated low self-esteem with feelings of worthlessness, inferiority, and emotional instability, leading to dissatisfaction with life. Normally, individuals with low self-esteem have a negative attitude toward many things, including

other people and people circumstances (Mackinnon, 2015). Self-esteem has been significantly and negatively correlated with Internet addiction (Aydin & Sari, 2011). Researchers stated that the addictive use of social media was reflecting a need to feed the ego (narcissistic personality traits and an attempt to inhibit negative self-esteem; Aydin & Sari, 2011).

Because online profiles are not controlled, they may provide an opportunity for sexual online grooming. As adolescents become more involved with forming relationships, they become more open to starting online relationships with individuals whom they do not know. As they are transitioning, they are looking at the forming of these relationships as ways to improve their social skills and obtain a higher sense of self (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Also, offenders who are seeking relationships look online for individuals whom they can deceive and manipulate and someone who will be accepting of them. This turns into the adult being able to control this online relationship because they are adults, and adolescents are highly vulnerable, in the need of friendship forming, and this also allows the offender to gain compliance and fulfill their desires (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

Peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on social media has been used as a way to maintain, protect, and enhance adolescents' self-esteem. Social media allows adolescents to control what they want to present to others and to initiate relationships in a safer context compared to face-to-face interactions (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Online communication enhances the adolescent feeling that they have a satisfactory number of

communication partners to interact with. Health, happiness, success, and survival depends heavily on maintaining specific social ties with other people. Implementing social ties with others helps the adolescent during their period of transition from adolescence to adulthood. It reassures how well an adolescent will respond to future relationships. These relationships are measured by a person's sociometer, which determines an individual level of self-esteem. Self-esteem affects a person physically, mentally, and emotionally. Also affects whom they connect with on and offline. Affecting who becomes more susceptible to manipulation tactics during online sexual grooming.

Review of Research and Methodological Literature

A thorough search of literature about adolescent sexual online grooming revealed a plethora of studies. Nevertheless, a few studies were able to provide more in-depth information on potential self-esteem motives, and offender manipulation techniques utilized with adolescent sexual online grooming. However, since only a few of referenced articles pertain to adolescent sexual online grooming, these studies can only be considered preliminary and require cautious interpretation.

Adolescent Vulnerabilities and Risky Behaviors

Adolescence usually takes place between the ages of 13 and 19 years of age. These are the transitional stages between physical, cognitive, and psychosocial developments that demarcate the period of the life course that's labeled "adolescence"

(Hardgrove, 2014). Adolescent risky behavior can be defined as all behaviors involving potentially negative consequences (Hardgrove, 2014). Engaging in these behaviors usually peaks during adolescence. These individuals are over-represented in nearly every category of risky behavior; drug use, alcohol consumption, smoking, skipping school, and unsafe sexual activities.

As of date, the rise of the Internet has provided adolescents with many new outlets in risky behaviors (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010). Understanding adolescent vulnerabilities and some of the hypotheses about how it develops is essential to this study. According to research many times adolescents engage in risky behaviors due to their perceptions of invulnerability. During this stage of transition, adolescence are more prone to partake in risky behavior which makes them feel invincible due to their perception of life just starting. On the other hand, others take risks because they feel vulnerable to a point of approaching constant rejection (National Academy of Science, 2018). These are most likely individuals whom have experienced rejection at an all-time high. These adolescences are making decisions based on fear. The idea that they will be rejected consistently if they do not partake in risky behaviors with others. Whittle et al. (2014a) suggest that these offline vulnerabilities are considered to come from problems within the family, social isolation, and previous victimization which can extend to online risk.

Previous researchers have examined that up to date females have been identified as the number one victim most susceptible to online risk factors. In a study conducted by

the Center of Disease Control and Prevention and the US Department of the Justice, one in six women were found to be the victim of rape or attempted rape, the statistics for men was one in 33 (International Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2017). Although men are targeted along with women in sexual online grooming, statistics state that it could be men victims are underreported. Researchers state that boys are much less monitored while female behaviors are monitored heavily looking for any potential danger warning signs, such as fear, anxiety, loneliness, or depression. Females are monitored more heavily to ensure they are not succumbing to their emotions, as women have a higher demand for emotional security (International Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2017).

Offline risk behavior can typically be divided into three groups: biological, psychological/cognitive, and environmental/social. Biological risk factors are factors affecting the body physically. These factors include understanding puberty/sexual development and their physical appearances and body images (Sanders, 2013). These are all important to consider when looking at adolescent behavior because this is the period of transition where males and females are starting to become interested in the opposite sex, they are also cautious about their body/weight. According to their peer's appearance is how they will compare themselves.

Psychological/cognitive risk factors in adolescence includes the changes in how adolescents think, reason, and understand. Adolescents whom have been deprived emotionally may not have grown to be strong psychologically. The individuals whom

have not will show signs of insecurity, irrational thinking, substance abuse issues, etc. These are adolescents who have been deprived in some area of development, and cognitive thinking skills have not gradually developed. Adolescents who have been emotionally fulfilled, they are now able to analyze situations logically in terms of cause and effect. At this stage the adolescent develops cognitive competence (Sanders, 2013). This is the ability to reason effectively, problem solve, think abstractly and reflect, and plan for the future.

Environmental/Social risk factors includes relating to peers, family, school, work, and community. This concern is how well adolescent adapt to different social environments. How well do they take on a number of hats and still be effective in a specific environment (Sanders, 2013).

Understanding adolescent offline risky behavior helps with understanding the risks that become associated with risky online sexual behavior on the Internet (Baumgartner, 2010). Previous research has identified online risky sexual behaviors such as exchanging intimate sexually insinuating information or material with someone exclusively known online. This is considered risky behavior because majority of the time the communication is exchanged with an unknown person (Baumgartner, 2010). This could be done as sexual curiosity peaks and adolescents begin to use the Internet in unsafe ways looking for intimate partners.

Adolescent perceptions of the involvement of their peers has been shown to predict subsequent risk engagement. During this stage, youth are vulnerable, therefore if

an adolescent think that something is popular at the moment, or they perceive majority of their peers to engage in a certain behavior they will also. During the stage of adolescence social orientation shifts from parents to peers. Research shows that adolescents who perceive their friends to engage in certain risk behaviors are more likely to also engage in that behavior (Boyer, 2006). This behavior is perceived by the individual to be socially acceptable and become more willing to engage in this behavior. Another perception of the adolescent could be their presumed tendency to underestimate the chance that they will experience negative consequences when engaging in risky behavior could also influence their risk behavior (Boyer, 2006). Ultimately, whatever adolescence see they will portray as they are entering a phase where they are leaving their parents and looking to others for advice. Adolescents are obtaining their risky decision making from peers online, school environments, and through visual parameters.

Social Networks and Self-Images

The utilization of social networks such as Instagram, Twitter, and most commonly Facebook are substantial for adolescents, because it allows them to communicate and stay in contact with friends, also to create new ones. Secondly, identity development interacts the need for self-presentation with social media satisfying their need in different ways. Websites such as these allow adolescents to demonstrate who they are by a means of profiles and to gain positive feedback (Metzler & Scheithauer, 2017). Positive feedback is really important during these stages of an adolescent life, however face-to-face context with peers or new peers can lead to awkward or anxious feelings (Metzler & Scheithauer,

2017). Therefore, presenting oneself online can help adolescents to overcome these uncomfortable feelings due to computer mediated communication. Computer mediated communication involves communication allowing self-presentation with reduced visual and auditory cues (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2016). The importance of this contact is adolescents can become less concerned about how others perceive them. Today adolescents spend a large amount of time on social media. A study by Tsitska et al. (2014) across six different countries reported that 40% of participants along the ages of 14-17 years spends two or more hours daily using social media. Utilizing these websites give youth increased life satisfaction in the form of self-esteem, well-being, social support, belonging to friendship groups, and reduced feelings of loneliness (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).

For focusing on self-presentation, adolescents focus more on profile pictures which is the most important presentation on social media (Wu Y, Chang, & Yan, 2015). Adolescents also state that before they accept any friend request or send friend requests they access a person's profile picture to gain potential knowledge of an individual's character and personality (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Hitsch et al. (2010) examined self-reports of profile searching and contact initiation of 6,485 male and female online users ages range from 14 to 18 years old. The study revealed the likelihood that users would contact a potential partner after viewing their profile picture. Men were 40% more likely to initiate contact with a woman after viewing her profile than women after viewing a male's profile.

The desire for social belonging is one of the fundamental motives for initiating/maintaining social relationships, or even creating a social media profile. During the adolescent stage's friendship demands are greater in the number of establishing close relationships than childhood, they must be able to initiate conversations and relationships outside the classroom (Liu & Brown, 2014). A lack of intimate relationships could cause an adolescent to feel less secure, more anxious, and less worthy. Research also states that individuals who are afraid of face-to-face interactions can meet their social needs through online communication. More than likely, establishing online relationships in adolescents are more prone to come from the introverted, lonely, social anxious, and shy adolescents (Liu & Brown, 2014). In a survey conducted by Strikzke et al. (2004), 134 students age ranging from 13-17 reported lower levels of shyness, lower levels of rejection sensitivity, and higher levels of interpersonal competence with respect to initiating relationships online compared to offline.

Research does support the notion that shy individuals are drawn to the Internet and prefer it as a place to meet people (Whitty & Buchanan, 2007). This could be used as a result to maintain some form of lasting positive and significant interpersonal relationships. Feeling acceptance and belonging is a very important in this stage of an adolescent life whether it be acceptance through members, friends, family members, mates, acquaintances or whomever this establishes self-esteem in an individual and this tends to affect how a person will interact with others for future relationships. Talking to individuals online could be used as a developed biopsychological mechanism used to

apprise them of their threats to acceptance, at the same time their motivational system in order to remain and protect their sociometer (self-esteem) (Leary, 2015).

Online communication can also provide positive feedback in the enhancement of self-esteem. Positive feedback online can also give adolescents that encouraging experience they need for initiating offline relationships confidently. The initiation of online relationships can help practice and reinforce their communication abilities with many other teens and peers (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). This online communication opportunity could in fact carry over to offline lives so that their offline social competence can improve. Recent studies have shown when examining the relationship between social networking sites (SNS) and friendship quality, shows that SNS use is associated with enhanced relationship quality and intimacy (Reich et al., 2012).

In a survey conducted by Reich et al. (2012) 43% of high school students believed that SNS use made them feel closer to their friends. Similarly, 20% of college students indicated that SNS brought them closer to their friends. Ellison et al. (2007) reported that those who use Facebook intensely (actively engaging in Facebook activities) perceived greater bonding social capital or strong social ties and closeness to others who can provide emotional support. However, what becomes risky about online communication is when adolescents began to disclose intimate information with unknown sources such as online predators (Liu & Brown, 2014). This in fact opens the door for sexual online grooming. However the good thing about these social networks are they have reporting

options, where if you feel the individual may be too explicit with language, content, or suspicious in nature, individuals are able to report the individual. The security measures online does help adolescent from being irrationally explicit, however there are parameters that are not public, such as instant messaging with then paves the way for predators to exchange sexual content and criminal offenses to take place.

Laws Regarding Online Sexual Offenses

In many child sexual abuse cases, the abuse was first preceded by sexual grooming. Sexual grooming is defined as a preparatory process in which predators gradually gains a person's trust with the intent to be sexually abusive. The victim is usually a child, teen or vulnerable adult (Pollack & MacIver, 2015). Understanding sexual grooming and common sexual grooming behaviors can help professionals prevent sexual abuse before it occurs. Evidence of sexual grooming can be used to convict offenders. These individuals intentionally build relationships with the adults around a child or seek out a child who is less supervised by adults (Pollack & MacIver, 2015). This increases the likelihood the offender's time with the child is welcomed and encouraged. The purpose of grooming is to manipulate the perception of other adults around the child, to manipulate the child into becoming a co-operating participant which reduces the likelihood of a disclosure and increases the likelihood that the child will repeatedly return to the offender (Pollack & MacIver, 2015).

Understanding sexual grooming and pinpointing when it occurs is important from a psychological or sociological perspective to prevent sexual abuse. While seen as a

precursor to the criminal act of sexual abuse, in certain contexts sexual grooming is a stand alone criminal offense. Under the Federal Enticement Statute section 2422 of the United States Criminal Code, the government has made it a crime to use interstate commerce to attempt or to knowingly persuade, induce, entice, or coerce any individual under age 18 to engage in prostitution or any sexual activity for which any individual can be charged with a criminal offense. Criminal statute 2425 makes it a federal offense to transmit information about a person below the age of 16 for this purpose some states have additional statutes covering seducing a child online, such as the Florida law makes the use of a computer to seduce a child a felony (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014).

Criminal statutes target the sexual grooming of minors as well as the actual sexual exploitation of them (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014). The statute's focus is on the intended effect on the minor rather than the defendant's intent to engage in sexual activity. As such section 2422(b), does not require a defendant to demonstrate an intent to actually engage in illegal sexual activity with a minor, rather a defendant violates 2422(b) by merely attempting to persuade a minor to engage in illegal sexual activity. To prove a violation of section 2422(b) of the Code, a prosecutor must show that an offender intended to complete the crime and took a substantial step toward its completion. With regard to intent, the government must prove that the defendant intended to cause assent on the part of the minor, not that he acted with the specific intent to engage in sexual activity. The term substantial step can be an elusive concept, it is described as more than mere

preparation, but less than the last act before the crime is committed (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014).

Grooming refers to deliberate actions taken by a defendant to expose a child to sexual material, the ultimate goal of grooming is therefore referred to as forming an emotional connection with the child and reducing the child's inhibitions to prepare the child for sexual activity (McAlinden, 2012). As a result the court found significant evidence of grooming, which was sufficient to establish a violation of section 2422(b). This included speaking to the minor in sexually explicit terms, emailing her adult and child pornography, discussing sexual activities with her, instructing her on how to arouse herself etc. Under section 2422(b) sexual grooming behaviors can be used to convict an offender of a crime when interstate commerce exists (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014).

Literature which displays offender's manipulation tactics allows these predators techniques to be better monitored by law enforcement officials. That way when undercover officials are in investigations, they understand what an offender likes and dislikes when acting as an adolescent and building an investigative online relationship with the predator.

Building Online Relationships

Every year Internet availability and accessibility continue to improve. More than 50% of the world population actively uses Internet services. About 70% of the Internet population is aged 15-24 and there are an estimated 750,000 predators online at any given time (Thomas-Gabriel, 2015). However, most teens utilize the Internet to stay in touch

with people they already know or friends that they rarely see in person. Teens also agree that the use online sources to make new acquaintances. Boys are more likely to report using Internet services to meet new friends than girls (Thomas-Gabriel, 2015).

What makes contact initiation comfortable are the types of information presented on profiles. Users have complete control over whether their Internet sites or information placed on profiles are public or private. If a profile is not protected this allows anyone to access the adolescent's personal information such as hometown, age, sexual preferences, telephone number, address, friend list, personal comments and concerns, etc (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). This makes gathering information about an individual more accessible and easier if those security parameters are not in place. Recent studies reveal that adolescents are still currently displaying this information, but more are using security measures such as private profiles (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). A recent study of 9,000 profiles on Myspace found that 40% of those profiles are private, only 9% of those revealed their birth names on their profile and about 0.3% released their telephone numbers on their profile. Which means that more adolescents are taking caution when it comes to privacy settings online (Ybarra, 2014).

Peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on the self are both important features of friend networking sites. These are vital predictors of social self-esteem and well-being in adolescence. Therefore, if the Internet has the potential to influence adolescent's self-esteem and well-being its most likely via social media sites. This assumption is that human beings have a universal desire to protect and enhance their self-esteem. Friending

networking sites provide adolescents with more opportunities than face-to-face situations to enhance their social self-esteem. These sites provide a great deal of freedom to choose interactions. In comparison to face-to-face situations, participants can usually more easily eliminate undesirable encounters or feedback and focus entirely on the positive experiences, thereby enhancing their social self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2014). Not only are adolescents prowling for effective friendships, you also have adult individuals looking for individuals to comply with what they may want. If other avenues have not fulfilled their emotional/relationship desires, they may extend to the online world even targeting adolescents as relationship partners, which could turn into sexual online abuse.

Sexual Online Grooming

Grooming is the process by which an adult establishes or builds a relationship with a child, either in person or using the Internet and related technologies, to facilitate online or offline sexual contact with the child (Laville, 2016). The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) reported that the Internet was being used to commit an average of eight sexual crimes against children, including rape, grooming, and live streaming of abuse every day in 2015 (Laville, 2016). Sexual offending requires an offender to use charm and manipulation to coerce a victim into a sexual relationship, a process that may take place over an extended period of time (Wood, Wilson, & Thorne, 2015). The sexual grooming literature suggest that the grooming process consists of a series of stages that the child molester progresses through as they groom the victim for

the pending sexual abuse (Williams, 2015). The European Online Grooming Research Project found that girls seem to be at a greater risk than boys. Boys have been victims of online grooming however they are less willing to report instances of abuse (Davis, 2016). Online grooming can occur via email, instant messaging apps, social networking sites, chatrooms, online gaming sites, photo sharing sites, and dating apps which can be accessed through personal computers, laptops, tablets, and through mobile phones

According to a 2012 UK survey 1,718 children aged 11-16 years old revealed that 42% received online attachments by email from strangers, 37% added a stranger to their instant messaging contacts, and 35% added a stranger to their social networking friends group (McGuire & Dowling, 2013). One in six or 17% of online teens and 31% of social networking teens have friends on their social networking profiles who they have personally never met. Older teen boys ages 15-17 are much more likely than any other group to say that they have friends in their network who they have never met in person (McGuire & Dowling, 2013). Out of the group of individuals whom have friends online whom they have never met, their friends ended up friending someone who was a friend of a friend. At least 12% of online teens have friends on social networking sites whom they have never met, but who have some connection to their offline friends (McGuire & Dowling, 2013). In today's society friending online strangers is being done due to the feeling of comfortability online and having to make less face-to-face friendships. Individual's online can mask their identities, can be in the comfortability of their home maintaining friendships and have to put in less effort to maintain effective and fulfilling

friendships. These friendships online also allows adolescents and teens to be more aware with what's going on in the world and in their age bracket (Davis, 2016).

These technologies are not only popular to the younger generation they also provide offenders a platform to mask their true age and identity. In doing this they can connect better with children and more easily gain their trust and cooperation, with ultimately introducing a sexual element into the relationship (McGuire & Dowling, 2013). Online access also gives the offenders a variety of victims, allowing the offender to choose which one is best for them. This could be done by monitoring their victims online profile, also watching their friends to obtain a better idea of who the victim is and what they may like.

Offenders use the Internet to find vulnerable children who meet their preferred sexual interest by scanning sites to find a young person's personal information before contacting them. Offender's use these Internet sites to access profile pictures, demographic information, interests and communication with others (news feed, status posts, comments on post) to target victims. The first step in grooming usually begins with the selection of the victim, this is based on appeal, attractiveness, ease of access, or perceived vulnerabilities of the child (Mooney & Ost, 2013). The second stage of the grooming process involves the offender gaining access to the potential victim, with the goal of isolating the child both physically and emotionally from those around them. This requires spending more time online with the adolescent. Setting aside times and dates for them to meet online, disclosing more information with the offender (Mooney & Ost,

2013). The next stage in the grooming process involves the emotional recruiting of the victim. Deceptive trust development is the ability to cultivate relationships with potential victims through trust (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). While the grooming process can occur in person, online grooming often progresses more rapidly, the offender may use a variety of techniques to persuade, pressure, and manipulate the child to cooperate (Davis, 2016). In 2012 a study was conducted on 264 grooming cases where children averaged 13 years of age, found that suspects requested sexual images in 93.4% of cases, in 24% of the cases the young person was threatened with the distribution of existing images or other harm, the young person actually sent images in 30% of the cases, and in 35% of the cases the suspect sent the victims sexual images of themselves or requested the young person to interact by webcam (Jones, 2010). This desensitizes the victims, making them more comfortable with their offender. Also adolescents during this stage are currently experiencing biological risk factors such as body/weight concerns, and puberty where their hormones are growing and they are interested in the opposite sex. With the offender being aware of the adolescents vulnerabilities, this allows him to open the individual up to opportunities to experience sexual fantasies with them. Also, if the offender can obtain photos and threaten the victim, this brings the manipulation tactics into play, as some offender may even try to blackmail their victims, make them feel ashamed so that they can continue to obtain compliance from their victims (Lancer, 2014).

Pujazon-Zazik et al. (2012) found that coded content on 752 public profiles were done looking for adolescent risky behavior in teens self-description of themselves.

Almost one-third of the descriptions 28% contained reference to risky behavior, and 16% of those references were related to sex. Girls were more likely to include sexual references in their descriptions. Reasons behind this was that girls seem to aim to please boys and facilitate social interaction. Most female adolescent's online are portraying and are reflecting sexualized media portrayals (Twenge, Martin, & Spitzberg, 2018). The idea that females in general have to maintain a perfect appearance are making many adolescents, teens, and women in general insecure. As adolescents are going through transition their biological factors are changing. In order to maintain that sense of emotional security that they need from peers they are making references to sex, displaying themselves in revealing photographs to obtain their desired audience attention. This in fact also draws in online sexual predators (Twenge et al., 2018).

A person under the age of 18 years old may be able to legally consent to sexual relations, however a child for the purposes of online grooming should be defined as any person under the age of 18. Grooming involves the psychological manipulation with the goal of establishing an emotional connection with a child in order to lower the child's inhibitions. At ages lower than adulthood can cause significant physical and emotional harm that the child suffers as a result (Davis, 2016). Due to the adolescents and teens not being psychologically/cognitively mature, sexual online grooming could affect future relationships in the future for the individual. Studies that have been concerned with short and long term outcomes associated with child sexual abuse covers a range of potential future outcomes. These problematic areas include affecting one's mental health and

functioning, behavioral outcomes, interpersonal and social outcomes, educational outcomes, and physical health and brain development (Cashmore & Shackel, 2018).

These are affecting adolescents because as the adolescent develops they begin to mirror what they think a caring and loving relationship looks like according to their previous experiences, this could result in them not being able to spot manipulation tactics.

Offender Manipulation Tactics for Online Grooming

With the grooming process offenders use different manipulation techniques that are diverse dialogue patterns. Offenders will use decoys or even act as an adolescent to obtain a respective response. Adolescent-offender dialogues shows patterns of reluctance or objections to offender requests for personal information, suggestions of sexual nature, etc. Another tactic is threats to obtain compliance (Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013). An adolescent innocence and vulnerability presents a target for a sexual predator's abusive behavior.

Researchers have identified different communicative elements in the cycle of entrapment including deceptive trust development. Deceptive trust development describes the predator's ability to build a trusting relationship with the victim in order to improve the likelihood of a sexual encounter (Lancer, 2014). Previous researchers have found that gaining victims trust is a key part of engaging them in sexually explicit behavior. During this process groomers hide their main intention to sexually abuse the victim, the developing of a friendly and personal relationship. During this stage negative words are used through communication like alone, angry, or blame, this represents an

unconscious feeling of guilt an anxiety as well as a lack of concern over the development of the social relationships. These words appear convincing and sell the interaction (Abertawe, 2017). One thing an online manipulator does to cover their selves are they use the scattergun approach to find victims. This approach is used to contact dozens if not hundreds of individuals online to increase their chance of success. This also limits their ability to having to use deception in order to maintain contact with their victims online (Abertawe, 2017).

This could influence the adolescent as this approach is used to save the feelings of someone, this approach allows the adolescent to not feel intimidated with the groomer or feel as the two have established a strong relationship of truth (Lewis, 2012).

Manipulation is said to be a way to covertly influence someone through indirect, deceptive, or abusive tactics. Manipulation may seem benign or even friendly or flattering. These techniques are used easily even to where a person can become unconsciously intimidated. An adolescent whom may want to impress their new online friendship may respond with false information just to impress their online relationship, not realizing that the reason behind responding to the way they did was due to a sense of intimidation because they may perceive the truth would not look as eventful or keep their online friend interested.

A sense of perceived rejection could be the reason why the adolescent responds the way they do online this could be vice versa. Some of the most common weapons of manipulators are using forms of guilt, complaining, comparing, lying, denying, feigning

ignorance, or innocence, blame, bribery, undermining, mind games, and emotional blackmail (Lancer, 2014). All these tactics are said to be manipulative tactics because they are psychologically damaging to the adolescent. These tactics creates an atmosphere for the offender purposes to gain power and control over the target.

According to researchers there are also stages to manipulators and the way they carry out their manipulation tactics. Researchers state that there are about six stages a manipulator will carry out in targeting a victim. First the friendship forming stage, this stage comprises of conversation in which the offender tries to introduce themselves to the child (Sustein, 2016). Looking for vulnerabilities, children who are unhappy, needy, and have less parental oversight. The predator will then gather information about the child and the child's family to gain the child's trust over time. Friendship forming increases and promotes happiness and life satisfaction through emotional support and companionship (Sustein, 2016). Researchers have found that components of friendship formation comprise of stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation, and emotional security. Stimulating companionship takes into account engaging in enjoyable, entertaining, and stimulating activities. Helping each other consist of addressing the provision of guidance and other forms of support. Intimacy concerns sensitivity to the needs of others, providing openness to honest expression of thoughts, feelings, and personal information (Sustein, 2016). Emotional security covers the provision of comfort and trust in new or threatening situations. All these components of friendship forming allows the adolescent to become comfortable with their online friend

and the adolescent to become comfortable with disclosing more information (Sustein, 2016).

During the friendship forming stage, the adolescent is expressing independent decision making. Independence at this stage is part of the developmental process to work out one's own problem's independently. With this responsibility is an increase cognitive and intuitive abilities, adolescents begin to face new responsibilities and to enjoy independent thoughts and actions. Adolescents will have thoughts and fantasies about their future and adult life. Also during this stage the adolescent is starting their own source of identity. Identity is defined as a sense of self or self-knowledge about one's characteristics, or personality. One of the fundamental tasks of adolescence is to achieve a sense of a personal identity and a secure sense of self. As the adolescent gains comfort with and acceptance they will learn to use his or her own judgment to make decision independently address his or her own problems. This relates to the friends the choose and how well they manage those friendships (Stanford Children's Health, 2017). During this friendship forming stage adolescence become more thoughtful about who they are and who they want to be. They notice differences in the way they act and the way they think they should act. Many adolescents begin to place importance on attractiveness, this could also be why the choose to initiate an online conversation through profile pictures, etc. This is self-esteem building where they become more aware of their ways of thinking and choosing (Stanford Children's Health, 2017).

After gaining access to the adolescent, the offender will start formalizing a relationship by talking to them about their family and school life. The offender goal is to fill some sort of need that the child has, this could even be monetary (Hanna, 2015). Offenders also fill an adolescent desire for attention by buying them gifts. The next stage could consist of the offender gauging the level of threat and danger the caregiver poses. They may even ask questions to see how closely the child is monitored online and offline (Noggle, 2017). Questions that are usually being asked are questions like age, sex, and location. This stage is considered to be rapport building with the adolescent such as giving, and positively responding to compliments, webcam or image requests, expressing emotions, and polite strategies. The next stage will usually consist of building that special bond with the child trying to take up more of the adolescent's time, spreading the idea of love and care. This stage will make the juvenile more open to ideas and receiving and giving information. This allows the adolescent confidence to share information with others and makes them express more openness. They will use whatever tactics work best for the adolescent and themselves to create that special relationship. Feelings of love and exclusiveness are expressed, and strong compliments are usually given (Noggle, 2017).

The next stage consists of desensitizing the individual, offenders will usually ask questions about the adolescent's sexuality. Whether or not the individual is a virgin, or questions about in depth sexual activities to desensitized them to the language and content. Offenders may even begin to show pictures to the adolescent, pictures of individual naked, or possibly porn videos in order to make the conversation appear

normal and natural (Moles, 2015). According to researchers if something is reinforced in an adolescent's life then that will be the behavior that they will reinforce (Chiang & Grant, 2017). For example, friends, parents, and peers, who encourage bribery, anti-sociality, and blame will determine how a child will respond to future situations. Just as offenders encourage blame and secrecy a child will begin to think that's how personal relationships are suppose to operate, affecting future relationships and the way they respond (Chiang & Grant, 2017). If an offender manipulation tactics are successful they may try to seduce the child offline which then turns into an offline sexual offense.

Online Groomers versus Offline Sexual Offenders

Online technology has created new opportunities for sexual exploitation. The number of sexual offenders who have used the Internet in their crimes of (online offending) has increased considerably in the last past 5 years. Although they remain mostly unidentified because of the non-contact there has been an increased concern about how to manage, assess, and treat online offenders (Ramirez, Jeglic, & Calkins, 2015). Seducing and manipulating victims into sexual content is a common tactic that has been used in offline sexual offending before online communication existed, it is called grooming (Ramirez et al., 2015).

In comparison to offline sexual offenders (child sexual abusers) Internet offenders reports in less psychological difficulties and fewer sexual convictions. In a study of 90 Internet offenders and 120 child sexual abusers, Internet offenders were more likely to succeed in the community and less likely to engage in sexual risky behaviors after being

caught opposed to child sexual abusers. Researchers stated that online offenders had not experienced much psychological trauma and caused as much psychological trauma as a child sexual abuser. Catching the predator early made them understand the seriousness about what could possibly happen if caught again with online or offline grooming.

However online offenders could potentially lead to offline offenses (Grady, Levenson, & Bolder, 2016).

Offline offenders been found to be young, single, living alone, and childless. However online offenders are known to be younger due to experiences with electronics. Antisocial traits and schizoaffective characteristics has been linked with offenders due to their shortage of successful relationship building. Schizoaffective traits are elements of the emotional development of a person as a social being or in response to his social environment. The affect or emotional characteristics can also influence an individual's socialization. Behaviors that show these traits are individuals who suffer from emotional identification, communication, control, loneliness, self-confidence, and social participation (Levenson & Socia, 2016). Meaning these individuals are mainly suffering from the lack of social contact or genuine relationships. The successfulness of relationships are what helps stabilize an individual, through online contact is where the offender results to in order to establish such relationships.

Several typologies have been created in identifying an online offender. Tener and colleagues have identified four typologies of Internet offenders on a continuum of level of crime expertise (high to low). These typologies have been identified through

continuous analyzation of qualitative studies of online and offline sexual offenders. The highest level of crime proficiency, the experts, consists of sophisticated offenders who procure victims (Tener, et al., 2015). The experts utilize extensive planning, manipulation and techniques to procure victims. They will have the ability to use more than one strategy to achieve their goal of sex, for which they spend extensive time. Expert offenders usually meet their offenders online and strategically manipulate them into a sexual relationship using a false identity. They tend to sexually assault their victims without emotional attachment, they may offend alone or collaborate with others to acquire victims and/or to share porn (Tener et al., 2015).

Cynical offenders tend to know their victims they may fabricate or present true identities, usually the purpose of the relationship is to progress into physical meetings. Cynical offenders have fewer skills, fewer victims, and spend less time manipulating than the expert offender. Their victim selection is based solely on personal preference. Sex is the goal and they are not emotionally involved with the victim, and the use pornography to obtain desensitization (Tener et al., 2015).

Attention focused offenders meet victims online with the intention of developing a genuine relationship. They develop feelings for and become emotionally involved with the adolescent. The offender and the victim are mutually interested in the relationship, sometimes it may or may not include the awareness of the offender's age. If the age is unknown and later revealed it may or may not affect the relationship because these individuals may only be looking for an online relationship only, and pornography is

seldomly used in these cases (Tener et al., 2015). These offender's are not known to ultimately disclose information with their victim's however if the information is disclosed then it may or may not affect the relationship whereas the sex-focused individual will openly discuss private information.

Lastly, the sex-focused type has the lowest level of crime proficiency. Initially the sex focused type is not seeking sex with the minor instead they are looking for immediate sexual interaction with adults. No grooming or manipulation is involved, there is no planning, they present true identities, and the relationship is intentionally brief. The sex focused type inadvertently meets a minor online, they continue the sexual encounter after the victim's age is revealed and both individuals are interested in sexual encounters with emotional attachment. This relationship is looked at as the exchange of deals (Tener et al., 2015). These type of offender's disclose information with their victim's they are known to be open to the individual.

The difference between all these typologies and what they are trying to bridge the gap between is regular contact relationships and child pornography offenses. However the limitation with these typologies are that many of the type offenders share a lot of the same traits and utilize some identical manipulation tactics. The difference of these offenders really lies in the expertise of offending (the number of online/offline contact offenses), the level of sophistication using online communications, and level of security in concealing online activities (Tener et al., 2015). Other typologies that researchers try to identify are the offender's level of offline social competence, how well educated they are,

which also ties into their level of sophistication (offline) and how much experience they have with offending. This could in fact extend as future research from Tener et al., (2015) findings. It should be noted that only a relatively small portion of the online offender typologies are based on current empirical data, whereas others rely on literature review, clinical observations, and opinions. Most of the typologies are focused around particular aspects of the online offending and so do not take into account the psychological aspects such as motivation, background characteristics, and the dynamics of relationships with the victims (Tener et al., 2015).

Research Methods

To date, research regarding the sexual grooming process has not yielded enough research about the process from contact initiation to contact ending in order to pinpoint how the sexual grooming process ends from an adolescent's stance. However, many studies have explored manipulation tactics that offenders use to obtain compliance/initial contact. The research does not reflect experiences of adolescents from initial contact to the reason for contact ending (Whittle et al., 2014b). As a result of this deficiency, the qualitative study was mindfully designed as a process in which data was collected through the use of semistructured interviews and analyzed through the lens of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) involves a detailed examination as it explores personal experiences and is concerned with an individual's personal perception in order to produce correlations (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

A study by Rivituso (2014) used interpretative phenomenological analysis and explored the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced negative experiences online (cyberbullying) and how it affects college students psychologically. Semistructured interviews were conducted on four community college students who reported abuse online to a school administrator. Six themes emerged as an analysis of the data. First theme repeated instances leading to the feelings of vulnerability and fear, second theme was the distrust of technology and the distrust of people, third theme was the value of friendships, and its impact on the victim's self-esteem, fourth theme was self-control versus lack of self-control online, fifth theme was the feeling of stress, depression, and embarrassment, and the sixth theme was frustration leading to self-blame. This study is used to understand the detrimental psychological processes of negative responses online (cyberbullying).

When looking to understand the perception of self-images and perceptions of lived experiences Nunn et al., (2010) study supported a link between women eating disorders and disturbances of self-identity using the IPA approach through qualitative interviews . This study interviewed a variety of women whom had been diagnosed with eating disorders and developed four master themes that supported how thoughts and experiences support their eating disorder. These four themes were the psychoanalytic and development theories, feminist theories, cognitive and behavioral perspectives, and personal construct theory perspectives that supported the link between self-identity and eating disorders (Nunn, 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

Overall, the existing literature has shown that there is a relationship between self-esteem, adolescent vulnerabilities and manipulation tactics that's easily utilized on adolescents. Of the available literature, only a portion of the research relates directly to online relationships from beginning to contact ending. The lack of information has led to the public creating a direct link between manipulation tactics and online sexual grooming, creating a self-esteem related phenomenon. Literature has also hinted on acceptance and rejection of others, as well as manipulation tactics that are easily utilized with adolescent. These are all described through the self-esteem approach which is affected by the approval or disapproval from groups of people.

While the existing literature has been useful in identifying and establishing themes related to the self-esteem approach, there are filled shortcomings, especially about why the current literature has not discovered online grooming contact from beginning to contact ending. This study helps fill the research gap by speaking directly with the adult female population who were online sexually groomed as an adolescent. The next chapter discusses the methodology, setting, sample, instrumentation, and analysis that were used to carry out the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction to Methodology

Over the past few years research has been trying to identify the gaps in the global community's ability to properly protect adolescents from abduction, sexual abuse, and exploitation through online communication (International Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2017). Research suggest that if an individual's self-esteem is low then manipulation tactics are easily utilized to obtain compliance for online grooming (Lancer, 2014). That is why so much research is tailored toward the improvement of adolescents' mental, physical, and emotional condition in order to better help strengthen them during this vulnerable stage of life. What researchers have yet to understand is the processes of grooming from an adolescent perspective and why they choose to end contact.

The purpose of this study was to examine how victims of sexual grooming experience offenders' manipulation tactics. The focus of this study is on initial contact with offenders to contact ending. The study is guided by the sociometer theory of self-esteem. The study will be conducted by interviewing women victims of online sexual grooming and using interpretative phenomenological analysis as a methodology.

In this chapter, the methodology of the study is discussed. First, the research design and the rationale are discussed, followed by a description of the role of the researcher. Next, there is a description of the study methodology, followed by the issues

of trustworthiness and the plan for addressing them within the study. Lastly, ethical considerations pertinent to this study will be discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

There is one main research question in this study. The question was developed in the context of that majority of the research is apparent as to how the offender obtains contact and maintains contact with their victims, what is not disclosed are the impact the tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the relationship (Whittle et al., 2014b).

The research question in this study is: What are the female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending?

Central Phenomena of the Study

The central concepts of this study are women experiences of online grooming, manipulation tactics, and self-esteem. I am defining sexual online groomers as men who chat online with youth in hopes of establishing a manipulative compliant relationship with the adolescent. According to research studies, online sexual offenders are categorized as those who access child pornography out of curiosity or impulse (Seto, Sandler, & Freeman, 2015). A sex offender is a person who exhibits characteristics showing a tendency to victimize or injure others and has been convicted of a sex crime listed in the relevant state statutes. For this study, this focus is on those adult men offenders whom have established an online relationship with an adolescent using manipulative tactics (Seto et al., 2015).

Manipulation tactics are utilized by offenders online as diverse communication dialogue. This enables them to obtain a response that helps achieve their goal. It is used as a cycle of entrapment using deceptive trust development where the predator builds a trusting relationship with a victim in order to improve the likelihood of a online sexual encounter (Lancer, 2014).

The self-esteem or sociometer theory of this study is correlated with self-image and self-consciousness (how a person see's themselves). Adolescence is the critical period of development of self-esteem and self-identity, and low self-esteem endangers adolescents' emotional regulation (Moksnes & Espnes, 2012). This has been correlated with relationship forming.

Research Tradition

This qualitative study utilized the phenomenological research tradition, specifically (IPA). Phenomenological research describes how human beings experience a certain phenomenon. A phenomenological study attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation (Giorgi, 2012). Interpretation occurs through a dual process in which the participants are trying to make sense of their world, and in turn the researcher is trying to make sense of this (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). IPA aims to provide an understanding of the participants lived experiences. The lived experiences help understand how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. This approach involves a detailed examination as it explores personal experiences and is

concerned with an individual's personal perception in order to produce correlations (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Rationale

The qualitative research approach typically uses small samples rather than the large-scale samples of quantitative research. This approach is also interpretive, context specific, and centers on the verbal and visual rather than on the statistical-inquiry procedures. Qualitative research is about transferability, faithfulness, and dependability rather than reliability and validity. The rationale for qualitative research is that it provides organization and interprets the data without losing the richness and individuality of the responses. Qualitative research focuses on the study of issues in depth and detail tends to center on how people make meaning out of their experiences (Stuckey, 2013). This relationship can be understood by using a qualitative method specifically designed to look at the participants understanding their own experiences (Whittle et al., 2014b); IPA was chosen due to its two-stage interpretative process, this process focuses on understanding experiences from participants' point of view and creating themes through detailed analysis from critical questioning (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA is committed to examining topics that are complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden. This makes IPA an interpretative endeavor because humans are sense-making organisms, and in this process the researcher is trying to gain an understanding of the participant trying to make sense of what has happened to them. This is achieved through empathetic hermeneutics and questioning hermeneutics. Empathetic hermeneutics are involved with the desire to

get as close to the meaning of a text as possible by trying to understand it from within. Empathetic hermeneutics focus on what presents itself rather than what might be hidden. They seek to elaborate and amplify the meanings which are contained within a text. This involves making connections between its various attributes and noticing patterns. The aim is to gain a fuller understanding of what is being expressed rather than to find out what may be going on behind the scenes. Questioning hermeneutics seek to reveal a hidden meaning and in order to do this, the researcher needs to interpret the clues contained within the text. This means that surface meanings are not taken at face value but seen as signs which if read correctly will allow the researcher to access more significant latent meanings. In order to provide this, the researcher needs to have access to a theoretical formulation which provides concepts that can be used to interrogate the text. They are concerned with making sense of phenomena by pointing to invisible underlying processes and structures which generate them. IPA is most helpful because of the attention it gives to enabling participants to recount their full experience. This requires a high level of skill on the part of the interviewer. Also, the small sample size allows for the information obtained to be importantly grounded firmly in a close examination of what the participant has said. Therefore, phenomenological methods offer the best research tradition as it aims to offer insights into how a given person makes sense of a given phenomenon.

Other qualitative methods include ethnography, biography, case study, and grounded theory. However, none of those methods were suitable for this study.

Ethnography requires an observable social group, which did not fit within this study. The intent of this study was to gain understanding rather than generate a theory, which is why the grounded theory appropriate did not fit. Case studies offer an in-depth description of experiences; however, they do not look at underlying meanings of the responses as deeply as interpretative phenomenological analysis does. Lastly, the narrative studies will describe the experiences of the individuals as they unfold over time rather than describing the meaning of the experiences. Therefore, a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of adolescent sexual online grooming experiences from beginning of contact to end seemed to be the most appropriate choice.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher, I am the primary instrument for collecting data, as is the tradition in phenomenological research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I will be the one interviewing the participants in person and over Skype and the one analyzing the resulting data. The interviews are semistructured and the tradition of interpretive phenomenological analysis is followed throughout. I have no personal or professional relationship with the participants; therefore, no dual relationship boundaries were likely crossed. The research will not take place in an environment where I previously had an active role, nor there will be any incentives for participation.

In this study, the role of a qualitative researcher requires interaction with each participant to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of an adult who were groomed as an adolescent. Due to interaction, it is important that all personal views

are acknowledged and managed while performing the study; this will ensure that bias does not jeopardize the research. I plan on not responding to any questions emotionally, sticking to my script of questioning. I believe that my personal views regarding online sexual grooming will not affect the study. As I plan to personally prepare before each interview and focus solely on capturing experiences and the well-being of the participants. Understanding my bias and beliefs allows me to step back and objectify data collection and interpretation. One of my beliefs is that adolescents should be more open with family so that online abuse and grooming cannot happen. I will step back and realize that not everyone shares the same experiences or has the same parental guidance.

I initially began this study with the full understanding that this subject is an emotional one. Due to actual experiences, participants may have moments where they become emotionally responsive. Due to my professionalism, I will hope to show empathy and warmth to the participants to assist with the rapport building process. I will also have a journal where I will keep track of important side notes I feel will be important later on for coding purposes.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

For this study, a homogenous sample was used, as is recommended for interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2012). Homogenous sampling is a technique that ensures the samples consists of participants who share similar

characteristics or traits (Smith et al., 2012). This study focuses on participants who self-identify as female adults who were previously sexually online groomed as an adolescent.

The criteria used for participant selection consist of three factors: (a) Adult women who have previously experienced sexual online grooming as an adolescent, (b) The individual must show proof of identification that they are 18 years or older according to IRB standards, and (c) The individual had to provide consent that they agreed to share their experiences of being sexual online groomed. As defined in Chapter Two, grooming is defined as the process by which an adult establishes or builds a relationship with a child, either in person or using the Internet and related technologies, to facilitate online or offline sexual contact with the child (Laville, 2016). This criterion will be explained in my advertisement posted (see Appendix A) and conveyed in person.

Participants were interviewed according to the requirements on my advertisement (e.g. age requirements, and no physical sexual abuse). The population was reached through a personal ad posted on victim services Facebook page as well as Fairfax, VA victimized services for women through their message boards. The organizations cater to victimized women of all types and I will obtain participation of victims after an in-depth approval process. Selected participants will contact me through email or telephonically. Participants will be asked to sign and return a consent form. Once consent forms (see Appendix B) are received the interviews can began.

Interviews will display saturation. Saturation is considered to be reached when the data collection during interviews begins to reveal the same general patterns.

According to research, samples with few participants do not allow a full pattern to develop, whereas those with too many participants overwhelm the dataset and do not provide any additional patterns. Also, more participants does not equate to a more meaningful result (Smith et al., 2012). The minimum target sample was six participants, with a maximum of twelve, however my desired saturation will include twelve participants.

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Instrumentation

Data was collected through semistructured interviews in-person and via Skype. With participants' consent, the audio portion of the interviews was recorded for transcribing and later reference during the analysis phase. Semistructured interviews have been established as a data collection instrument for answering phenomenological research questions (Smith et al., 2012).

Questions were developed from current research concerning online sexual grooming from initial contact utilizing manipulation tactics. The format consisted of open-ended questions and preplanned prompts that offered a plan for data collection

while still retaining the flexibility required for good quality interviewing. The interviews consisted of rapport building questions to answer the research questions and prompts.

The questions are listed below.

The primary research question about adolescent experiences of sexual online grooming from initial contact to contact ending were answered with the following questions:

1. How would you like to refer to the person whom you met online? E.g. the man, the person, his name, etc?
2. How long would you say the relationship lasted? How long has it been since it has ended?
3. In your experience with online grooming, what was your age, and how did you experience his (the name that they may refer to him as) approach?
 - a. What encouraged you to give an unknown individual a response online?
 - b. What was your initial response to the unknown individual? How would you describe the response?
4. What were you looking for in this online relationship?
 - a. In terms of how close you felt in this relationship how does this

At what point did you become aware of your groomer's age? What effect did that have on you?

- a. In terms of how close you felt in this relationship how does this relationship compare to other relationships (e.g. family, friendships) you had at the time?

5. What made you happy from this relationship? What made you sad?
 - a. How did this relationship affect how you viewed yourself, in terms of positively or negatively, at the time? Now?
 - b. Did you feel threatened anytime during this online relationship? If so, how were you approached? How did that make you feel?
6. Did you at any point think that this online relationship was inappropriate? If yes, how did you realize this? How did that make you feel?
 - a. How would you say the relationship ended? What effect did that have on you emotionally? Then? Now?
7. Looking back, how do you think the “man” convinced you to engage in the online relationship with him? How do you feel about these “tactics” at the time? How do you feel about them now?

Content validity will be established as each interview question will be directly linked to one of the research questions. The flexibility of the questioning ensures that the data collection instrument will be sufficient to answer the phenomenological research questions (Smith et al., 2012).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

As the researcher, all participants were recruited through the Fairfax Women’s Center for Victimized Services. Flyers were posted inside the facility and participants were recruited through an online page on Facebook. Participants were required to email

me or call the contact number given. Once I received feedback from all (8) participants, I then provided consent forms and begin to set up meeting time slots. After full disclosure was given and consent forms were received, data collection begin. I began collecting the data through semistructured interviews that took place via Skype, an Internet-based communication service. I interviewed the participants over a Skype session that lasted no more than an hour. Once the interviews are completed, participants were debriefed (see Appendix C) and reminded about the intended use of the data. This debriefing was used to answer any questions the participants had about the study.

There are currently no requirements for follow-up interviews, however the participants will be reached out to either telephonically or via email to review the summary of their interviews for accuracy and additional comments. This technique is called member-checking, and it helps to improve the accuracy and credibility of the study, as well as provide any clarification needed regarding responses to parts of the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Analysis Plan

The sole data collection technique was the semistructured interview questions used to answer the research question. The procedure for data coding was used to analyze the data. Each interview was analyzed as a single and complete data set following the interpretive phenomenological analysis and coding technique described by Smith et al. (2012). The four steps below were conducted with each interview transcript, followed by analysis of the relationship between the datasets.

The first step was to include immersing myself into the data. This included reviewing the interview transcripts numerous times. This was conducted to help the researcher understand the world of the participant, ensuring that the participant is the focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2012).

The second step was to include myself making initial notes on the transcript. While this step was considered to be the most detailed, it was also the most important because this step allows the researcher to examine the language and semantic content on an exploratory level. This is the stage where the researcher makes descriptive notes utilizing metaphors, and other notable word choices (Smith et al., 2012).

Step three was to identify emerging themes. I reviewed the initial notes and identified themes that were directly applied to the lived experiences of the participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis states that each interview needs to be analyzed separately before examining themes across the interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The fourth step was to identify connections between the identified themes. The fifth step was to repeat steps one through four with each of the interview transcripts. Each participant interview was analyzed separately and completed as described above.

The sixth step was to identify the patterns across all of the interview cases. The themes of each participant experience was analyzed to see how they related to one another (Smith et al., 2012). No software was used for this analysis process.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, trustworthiness is essential to evaluate the worthiness of the study. To establish trustworthiness, researchers also have to demonstrate credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study trustworthiness was used to verify multiple methods, prolonged engagement, member-checking, reflexive journaling, triangulation, thick description, and audit trail, which is discussed in more detail below. These methods help demonstrate the study's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is one of the key criteria in establishing trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Credibility is demonstrated when participants are able to recognize the reported research findings as their own experiences as the truth of how they know and experience the phenomenon. Increased credibility includes: prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks, and external audits.

Prolonged engagement. Prolonged engagement refers to investing sufficient time to learn about the population, gain trust, and test for any bias of the self or of the participants (Luba & Guba, 1985). The researcher is required to take the time to detect and account for any discrepancies that may come about just by being “an outsider” to the community and attend to overreactions that it may cause (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, I understood my victimized population and gained a little background

information from the initial telephone call. I gathered initial rapport questioning to obtain an understanding of their reality.

Reflexive Journaling. Reflexive journaling was used to help manage any researchers bias. The reflexive journaling also played a key role in the monitoring of developing constructions, which is considered to be critical in establishing credibility (Vicary, Young, & Hicks, 2016). My journaling served as a reference point so that I can establish patterns and any generated theories.

Triangulation. Triangulation is the use of two or more sources, methods, theories, and researchers to provide corroborating data and examine phenomena with as many perspectives as possible. Triangulation adds credibility by gaining confirmation and credibility to results. For this study, having several participants help produce triangulation.

Member checking. Member checking was used to assess the accuracy with which a researcher had represented participants by checking the findings and interpretation with the original respondents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After my interviews were concluded I put together themes and patterns that I recognized. After I sent the participants themes that I had generated from their interviews to ensure I captured their exact experiences correctly.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the results can be transferred to other contexts. Transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites readers of the research

report to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience (Shenton, 2004). To help enhance transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended using thick description, which is the process of providing a thorough description of the research context and the assumptions central to the study. I provided thick description by developing descriptive words that describe the experiences of female online grooming experiences. This helped support the development of themes and superordinate themes, from some of the words the participants may use. Also allow future researchers to develop themes according to my context.

Dependability

Dependability refers to stability of the data and inquiry processes (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Dependability of a research study is met if it can be demonstrated that the researcher was careful and no mistakes were made in conceptualizing the study, collecting the data, interpreting the findings and reporting results (Houghton et al., 2013). Morse (2015) states that dependability is attainable through credibility as well as through the use of triangulation, and the audit trail.

Audit Trail. An audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the beginning of a research project through the reporting of findings (Houghton et al., 2013). For this study, an audit trail was used to maintain the transcripts of the interviews, personal journal entries, and all other notes related to the research process (Smith et al., 2012). This allows my dissertation committee to review the raw data and readers or other researchers to review the analysis process.

Confirmability

Confirmability will also be established. Confirmability refers to the substantiation of data, meaning that the data and interpretation are accurate and true. This was achieved by providing a chain of evidence, such as through the audit trail, that can attest to the fact that the data can be traced back to the original sources and that the data synthesis process used to reach conclusions can be confirmed (Mertens, 2014).

Ethical Procedures

Walden University IRB approval was required and obtained prior to beginning the data collection, in addition to approval from the participants. The advertisement to participate in this study will be placed on a private Internet page designed from online grooming victims as well as flyers in a public victim assistance program unit. After approval from a victimized services foundation. The respondents who qualify will be sent a consent form.

The participants will be explained to about confidentiality and what the limitations are this can be found along with consent forms (see Appendix B). I made clear the limits of confidentiality while discussing my obligation to protect the participants right to privacy. Participants were informed that Virginia law lists several exceptions to the limits of confidentiality including where there is reasonable suspicion that there is a danger of violence to others, as well as there is a reasonable suspicion to child abuse (Bersoff, 2014). Participants were also notified that due to the limits of confidentiality, I

am required to call and file a written notification to public office officials or the authorities. The participants were reminded verbally at the beginning of the interview and also the obligation to protect the participants rights to privacy. Before the interviews were conducted it was important the participants understand the confidentiality shall not be broken except in these exceptional circumstances.

While interviewing I was aware that there is always a possibility of psychological distress, especially due to the nature of this experience. Some participants may experience negative moods, stress, and anxiety due to the taxing nature of being interviewed and disclosing personal details about their experiences. During this study participants understood that they had complete control over when, where and how they responded to the interview questions. I ensured I verbalized this at the beginning and at the end of my interview to ensure they understood, and they felt as if they had total control over their responses and provided them with contact details of services for support. To minimize privacy concerns, the participants will chose a location where the interview could take place and cannot be overheard or observed.

The audio of the interviews were recorded. The recorded files only contained name for referencing later when coding. Participants disclosed their personal experiences with sexual online grooming. Only the researcher knew the participants identities and every effort was made to protect the identities of the participants. The dissertation paper will not include participants names to limit risk of identity exposure. No participant experienced any form of distress during the interview, the audio recording did not have to

be paused and time to recover and gain control emotions. The consent forms were the only form to contain identifying information. All emails were password protected. The data will be kept for an allotted time of five years after the dissertation and safely destroyed all data contained thereafter. Other potential ethical issues were considered for this study, but seemed unlikely to occur, as the researcher I had no conflict of interests, and no incentives were used.

Summary

In chapter three, the proposed study was described in detail. The chapter opened with description of the research tradition and rationale, which was followed by a description of the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument, as well as a detailed outline of the methodology for recruitment, participant selection, and data analysis. Finally, the methods to address trustworthiness were described, followed by any perceived ethical issues.

Chapter 4: Current Study

Introduction to Current Study

Offenders who groom children usually have different goals. Regardless of the goal, victims can experience a range of manipulation styles. Manipulation techniques utilized throughout the grooming process can vary considerably and are likely to incorporate both physical and psychological grooming to sexualize the child (Whittle et al., 2014b). While a variety of previous research pinpoints the process of online grooming as a sequential process that is multifaceted and complex in manipulation styles, an increased understanding of the subtleties within the grooming process is imperative in order to improve prevention and intervention techniques (Briggs et al., 2011).

This research will help understand the effects manipulation tactics have on victims during online grooming, the impacts the tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the online relationship (Whittle et al., 2014b). The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of female survivors of online sexual grooming from initial contact to contact ending. The study also sought to inform adolescents on how self-esteem may have impacted their choice of acceptance as well as if manipulation tactics were easier to be established because of self-esteem. Guided by the theoretical framework of Mark Leary and colleagues (2002) Sociometer Theory, I obtained the data by conducting interviews with female survivors of online sexual grooming.

The research question for this study was: What are the female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending? This chapter aims to discuss the current study. The setting of where the study took place will also be discussed, in addition to the participant demographics and the data collection process. Finally, the data analysis process will be presented, followed by the study results.

Setting

The interviews took place over Skype, and I used my private home office. The participants reported to be in the privacy of their own homes in front of their webcams. No interruptions occurred during the web-based interviews.

The research did not take place in an environment where the researcher previously had an active role, nor were there any incentives for participation. There were no known extraneous conditions present that may have influenced participants or their experiences during the interviews, that would likely impact interpretation of the study results.

Demographics

The participants consisted of eight adult females ($N=8$) who self-identified as survivors of sexual online grooming and reported to never have been physically sexually abused. The average age of participants was about 16.5 years old. One of the participants was Caucasian and seven were African American.

All participants concluded many reasons for ending the online relationship with their groomers. Four of the participants concluded that they left their groomer alone voluntarily. P(2) left her groomer because he asked for money, P(6) and P8 after they

found out about his age, and P(7) because she had to block him in order for him to leave her alone. Only one participant states that she had to involuntarily leave her groomer. P(5) stated that her mother caught her talking with someone online, and this was the reason for not keeping contact with her groomer. Two of the participants stated they left their groomers due to finding out about their significant other, and one of the participants, P(1), stated that her groomer actually stop contacting her after she would not fulfill his demanding requests. Data was collected through via semistructured interviews that took place over the Internet using Skype. Each interview was given a one-hour time slot but was generally conducted within the timeframe of 30–45 minutes, depending upon the length of the participant responses. After participant consent was given (see Appendix B), the audio portion of the interviews was recorded for later reference during the analysis phase. No video recording took place.

Data Collection

I began data collection for this study receiving approval from Walden University IRB. Recruitment flyers were sent out to sexual victimization centers in the Virginia. The organizations had already agreed to post my recruitment flyer up in their facility. Potential participants contacted me via telephone as well as through my Walden University email address. I assessed each participant to ensure that they met all the inclusion criteria of being a female survivor victim of sexual online grooming. After each participant signed and returned the consent form, I began to schedule dates and times for the interviews. I also utilized snowball sampling, where at the end of the interviews, I

asked the participants to share my contact information with any other female survivors whom they might know and would possibly like to share their experience. Prior to contacting the participant for interviews, I emailed each participant a list of contact names and telephone numbers for agencies that would be of assistance to them if needed (see Appendix C).

Participants consisted of a total of eight female survivors of sexual online grooming. Seven of the women were African American and one was Caucasian. I reached data saturation after the eighth interview. Each of the eight participants were interviewed and responded to the open-ended semistructured questions and follow up questions. Although each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes, interviews were completed around 30-45 minutes, based off of the length of the participant responses. Before each interview, I went over demographic questions and the informed consent with each participant. All participants agreed to be audio recorded.

All participants were interviewed using a digital voice recorder. Immediately after each interview was complete. I uploaded the interview to my password-protected computer. After each interview was completed, I worked on transcribing the interviews, breaking the interviews down by sentence in their simplest form. Once I had gained all eight participants and transcribed all eight interviews, I uploaded the transcripts to my password protected computer and started to look for common themes and codes. The USB drive, audio tapes, and transcripts, and all other relating documents were locked in

the drawer of a filing cabinet in my home office and I am the only person with access to the material.

After the data transcription process, I carried out member checks by emailing each participant a copy of their transcript for them to double check for accuracy and completeness, and to see if there were any errors in my interpretation. All participants responded indicating they were satisfied with the accuracy of transcripts. I used the process of member checking to help improve accuracy, credibility, and validate the research.

Variations in Data Collection

There were a few variations from the original data collection plan. Although the original plan was to gather a total of twelve participants, data saturation was reached with the eighth participant. The variation did not affect the integrity of the data collected. Six participants is an adequate number for an IPA study based on its idiographic nature (Smith et al., 2012).

Another variation from the original plan was the duration of each participant interview. I had originally planned for the duration of each participants interviews to last for a duration of 60 minutes for each participant interview. However, interviews were usually done between 30-45 minutes. The only reason I could state for the interviews being shorter would be due to individual responses. Individuals wanted to tell their experience and they described their experiences swiftly, in great detail, and concisely.

Data Analysis

The data and themes appeared to reach saturation with the eighth participant. The understanding of experiences of female survivors of online sexual grooming was drawn from the in-depth semistructured interviews of the eight women. Overall, the analysis process produced five main themes with 25 subthemes.

All data was analyzed and coded according to the interpretative phenomenological method as outlined by Smith et al. (2012). Per this method, each interview transcript was analyzed individually, and then all transcripts were analyzed together to view the relationship between the datasets.

Analysis commenced by first immersing myself into the data, where I reviewed the interview transcript several times to ensure the participant was the focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2012). This additionally helped get a more thorough sense of each participant and their response style.

The second step was to make initial notes on the transcripts. Initially, all note-taking procedures and anything that stood out as I went over the transcripts were noted on the transcripts with another color pen. After that, the notes were transferred into electronic spreadsheet to help manage the data more effectively. While this was the most time-consuming step, it was also the most important because it allowed me to examine the language and semantic content on an exploratory level. Descriptive notes created during this step of analysis were based on the face value, as well as on the participants use of metaphors, pronoun choices, and other notable word choices (Smith et al., 2012).

Step three was to identify emerging themes. The initial notes were reviewed to identify any themes that most directly apply to the experiences of the participants. Interpretative phenomenological analysis dictates that each interview be analyzed separately before examining themes across the interviews (Smith et al., 2012). The fourth step was to identify any connections between the identified themes. These strategies helped bring the themes together and map them to help with the analysis process.

The fifth step was to repeat steps one through four with each of the interview transcripts (Smith et al., 2012). The sixth and final step was to identify the patterns across all of the interview cases. The themes of each participant's experiences were analyzed to see how they related to one another. Five major themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. These themes included: attention-seeking, friendship only, feeling of being understood, betrayal, relationship closure (awareness). From these five main themes, 24 subthemes emerged (see Table 1).

Table 1

Themes and subthemes

Relationship Seeking	Belonging	Feeling of Being Understood	Betrayal	Relationship Closure (Awareness)
Feeling of excitement	Intense conversations	Showing good listening skills	Feeling stupid	Feeling thankful
Feeling of being beautiful	Staying entertained	Being able to communicate well	Feeling weird keeping conversations private	Feeling naive vulnerable
Feeling of a emotional attraction	Normalcy	Feeling of being a trustworthy person	Feeling "lame" not knowing things	
Feeling of feeling loved	Feeling of being popular	Being happy	Feeling deceived	Feeling insecure
				Disclosure of age made the individual aware
				Disclosure of significant other made the individual

aware

Demands made from
groomer

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases relate to any deviation of information or data that is found in one interview but not found in others and does not relate to the phenomena under investigation (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). There were no contradictory results or discrepant cases found in this study.

Evidence of trustworthiness

According to Smith et al. (2012), phenomenologists view verification and standards as largely related to the researcher's interpretation. To verify data in this study, procedures used included member checking and reflexive journaling. This verification technique allowed for an external check on the research process by asking questions about the research process and the findings.

In this study, trustworthiness was verified using multiple methods, including prolonged engagement, member-checking, reflexive journaling, triangulation, and audit trail. These methods demonstrated the study's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility was demonstrated when participants recognized the reported research findings as their own experiences as the truth of how they knew and experienced the phenomenon. After the interviews were transcribed, the participants were provided an emailed summary of their responses and themes to ensure their views had been properly captured. This additionally helped to provide any clarification that was needed regarding responses to parts of the interview. After member checking with the participants, reflexive journaling was done where constructed themes and codes were developed to gain a more in-depth understanding of descriptions of how each participant described their experiences.

To meet prolonged engagement, time was spent expressing warmth and building rapport with each participant prior to asking the interview questions. Reflexive journaling was used to help manage any researcher bias. This journal served to annotate initial impressions of each data collection session, any patterns that appeared to emerge, and any generated theories (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

To support the development of themes and superordinate themes, the exact words of the participants were used, which allows the reader to judge the transferability of findings this provides a rich and thick description of participants lived experiences. Thick description was added by recording subjective explanations and meanings provided by the participant.

Dependability

Dependability refers to stability of the data and inquiry processes (Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013). Essentially, the more consistent the researcher is throughout the entire research process, the more dependable the results are. To show dependability, an audit trail was used to maintain the transcripts of interviews, personal journal entries, and all other notes related to the research process such as any scrap paper that was used to take interview side notes on.

Confirmability

Confirmability was also established to show that the data and interpretations were accurate and true. Confirmability was also demonstrated through reflexivity, or reflexive journaling. Things recorded in my reflexive journaling were descriptive wording by breaking sentences down to a common form such as; Participant #7 states, “He was always asking for things I wasn’t comfortable with doing and I felt very vulnerable”. The key factor of this sentence was the discomfort of his request and the vulnerability it brought upon the individual. Providing a chain of evidence, such as through an audit trail, that included transparent data descriptions of how I worked from individual codes to themes this can attest to the fact that the data can be traced back to the original sources and the data synthesis process used to reach conclusions can be confirmed (Mertens, 2014).

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand sexual online grooming processes and experiences from the perspective of the individual participants. Interviews were conducted via Skype. The interviews consisted of seven inquiries developed to respond to the research question: What are the female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending?

All participants sampled were from Virginia sexual assault centers and online message boards where advertisement was placed. After consent was provided, each participant was allotted a one-hour time slot for the interview, which was generally conducted within the timeframe of 30-45 minute, depending upon the length of the participant responses. The audio portion of the interviews was recorded.

Seven question were asked of each of the seven participants. Significant statements about sexual online grooming were parceled out from each of the participant responses. These questions were derived from the broad question underlying this study: After rereading the text of each participant transcript thoroughly, five themes were identified based on the research questions and participant replies: attention-seeking, friendship online, feeling of being understood, betrayal, relationship closure (awareness). In order for a theme to be identified, I determined that a majority of responses endorsing a particular theme could determine its appearance in the study.

Research Question 1: What are the female adolescent experiences in online grooming from beginning to contact ending?

Theme 1: Relationship Seeking: When the participants discussed their experiences with sexual online grooming, they revealed that most of them were connecting with strangers online for some form of attention-seeking. Participants described their attention-seeking behavior as “happy” and “excited” that someone had contacted them and was interested in getting to know them. Especially an online friendship, because many individuals their age was communicating online. When describing their attention-seeking behavior, the following subthemes emerged from the data: feeling of excitement, feeling beautiful, mutual attraction, feeling loved, feeling cared for.

Subtheme 1.1: Feeling of excitement

All eight participants reported the feeling of being excited due to having a spontaneous online relationship. P5 stated, “I felt excited because someone wanted to talk to me. He was cute that’s why I responded to him, I just kept responding to his questions because he was saying everything I wanted to hear.” P8 expressed, “My initial response was exciting and a little cautious and I responded by letting him know that I was into him.” P3 explained, “after 3 months he disclosed that he was 24. He lied and I felt bad because he was exciting and I was having fun.” All the participants are trying to portray their enjoyment for the relationship. They express their interest for the relationship with the use of the word excitement. Also P3 states she felt bad, in this quote she is portraying that the fact that she knew her groomer was being deceiving, now she no longer had anything to be excited about with him.

Subtheme 1.2: Feeling of being beautiful

All eight participants also reported that their experience online with their groomer made them feel beautiful during their sexual online grooming experience. Most described their feeling of feeling beautiful by having someone's constant attention. P1 stated, "the tactics that he used was just, send me pictures of your chest, backside, you're very beautiful, I can't wait to meet you. Don't send your face if that's going to make you feel some type of way. I feel as if he knew what he was doing at the time." Feeling beautiful also came from the groomer's verbal responses, P3 stated, "I was 17 years old and I experienced the approach by social media (Myspace). He messaged me and told me I was beautiful, I responded with thank you, and told him he was handsome also." P4 stated, "I felt wanted and felt very good, and at some point of time I felt as if I needed him throughout the relationship." Participants are describing how well they felt in this online relationship. They express their feeling with describing how their groomer describes them or how they feel about the treatment from their groomer.

Subtheme 1.3: Feeling of an emotional connection

The common feeling of a mutual attraction was also another sub-theme that arose in many of the participants. P1 reported, "I wanted the attention, he was good looking and he sent me a picture. We were only trying to get to know one another, and after a week he told me he trusted me." P2 stated, "I was looking for friendship in this online relationship, he was a great listener and did great better than anyone else at the time, and I felt loved by him." P3 reported, "I was only looking for someone to talk to and vent to and disclose my emotions, it felt good, every day, all through the day, having a special

connection with someone you can talk to about anything. Someone who understands me. I was having fun.” P8 states, “I was looking for a boyfriend, someone to talk to. I felt close to him.”

Subtheme 1.4: Feeling of feeling loved

Participants described the feeling of feeling loved by their groomer. P1 stated, “The feeling of wanting to be wanted by a man is what made me happy about the experience. The attention, the drama, something to talk about, something interesting because really nothing was going on back then.” P2 stated, “I felt loved by him, he was a great listener and he did great better than anyone else at the time.”. P5 states, “I was looking for someone to love me, he liked to take things slow and just talk. He wanted to meet me in person, he knew what I liked and things that I wanted to do.” P6 states, “I honestly thought I had found Mr. Right.” P7 stated, he was very persistent, when I told him to leave me alone, he did not, so I ended up falling for him.” Participants are describing how special and loved their groomer made them feel. The participant’s express their experience with the wonderful feeling their groomer gave them by using the word “loved”.

Theme 2: Belonging. Another theme revealed that participants were only looking for friendship when establishing a relationship online; creating subthemes such as intense conversation, feeling of being entertained, normalcy, and popularity. Belonging comes from the participants description as to how alive and lively the relationship made them feel.

Subtheme 2.1: Intense conversation

Intense conversation was indicated for participants regarding the amount of time the individuals spent communicating with one another. P2 states, “We were always online with each other because he was a great listener and we enjoyed talking to one another. P3 states, “It felt good, every day, all through the day, having a special connection with someone I can talk to about anything.” The intensity of the conversations between the two represents the amount of time throughout a normal day that the two would spend time communicating with one another. The intensity of the conversation stemmed from the feeling of belonging and having a friend who understood them.

Subtheme 2.2: Staying entertained

The feeling of excitement was what kept a lot of participants in continuous conversation with their groomers. P5 reported, “I felt excited because someone wanted to talk to me. He was cute that’s why I responded to him.”. The participant explains the reason for keeping in constant contact with her groomer, in basic terms the individual is saying that she had someone whom interested her and he kept her attention, also she felt excited about the fact that she could keep someone’s attention as well.

Subtheme 2:3 Normalcy

Normalcy was a part of the relationship description of participants when describing the online relationship. P4 stated, “I responded to the normal Hi, how are you”, I felt as if I was dealing with a lot so I responded to the individual, I responded with thank you, and he kept asking questions.” P3 states, “He never asked to meet up

with me, just a phone friendship, never a question of meeting in person, the relationship never seemed inappropriate.” P2 stated, “I never felt threatened, I didn’t feel as if the relationship was inappropriate at all. Even after he had disclosed his age after 3 months.” P6 states, “He was very nice and he said I reminded him or someone from his high school, I asked for his name and I thought that was a part of normal conversation.”

Subtheme 2:4 Feeling of being popular

The theme of popularity was expressed by a couple of the participants. A theme that was created out of peer influences. P8 stated, “I felt excited because I knew friends who were doing it, so I wanted to do it because my parents kept me so sheltered at home so the Internet became my friend.” P4 states, “At the time it was a very cool thing to do, I knew plenty of people that were doing it, now I feel lame because after I realized it wasn’t the thing to do.”

Theme 3: Feeling of Being Understood.

Another theme was encountered while interviewing participants, which was the feeling of being understood by their groomers. Most participants described their online relationship as having someone whom they could talk to and would hear them out.

Subtheme 3.1: Showing good listening skills

Listening skills were encountered a lot when describing the good characteristics of their groomer. P2 states, “He was a great listener and he did great better than anyone else at the time. I felt loved.” P3 stated, “I was only looking for someone to talk to and vent to, to disclose my emotions. It felt good, every day, all through the day, having

someone who understood me. He never asked to meet up, just a phone friendship, never a question of meeting in person.” The participants are describing their appreciation for someone who listened to the feelings they needed and wanted to have expressed. This exercising of good listening skills really made the participants feel appreciated.

Subtheme 3.2: Being able to communicative well

Strong communication was amongst a characteristic that was described when describing the process between the groomer and themselves. P6 states, “He was very well spoken and very polite. He was very nice.” P5 states, “I just kept responding to his question because he was saying everything I wanted to hear.” The participants are describing their groomer’s ability to know when and how to respond to all of the conversations that were discussed with their groomer. The ability to communicate well is why they wanted to continue the relationship.

Subtheme 3.3: Feeling of being a trustworthy person

Trustworthiness was another trait that participants stated. They felt like they could trust their groomers with important information. P8 states, “I felt close to him, I had met someone whom did not judge me.” P1 states, “He would say things like send me a picture of your chest, backside, you’re very beautiful, and I can’t wait to meet you. If you feel bad you don’t have to include your face...” He would say things like that to make me feel comfortable and trust him.” The participants are describing the ability to trust their groomer’s with information. Being able to tell their groomer’s information and them not

having to be scared of the individual sharing or using the information against them. That is what made the participants feel as if their groomer was trustworthy.

Subtheme 3.4: Being Happy

The feeling of being happy was expressed throughout the interviews. The participants described their experience with their groomer's as an interesting and fulfilling experience. That is up until they found out the individual was being dishonest with them. P1 states, "The feeling of being wanted by a man is what made me happy by the experience. The attention, the drama, something to talk about, something interesting, because really nothing was going on back then." P3 states, "He was entertaining and I was having fun. I was just having fun but I would not do something like that again."

Theme 4: Betrayal.

The feeling of betrayal was another emotion that was encountered by participants. Participants describe the feeling of feeling betrayed by their groomer after they found out that the individual had been lying to them for quite some time

Subtheme 4.1: Feeling stupid

The feeling of feeling stupid was encountered quite often in the interviews. Participants felt as if from their experience once they knew of all the things that they were being told was lies and betrayal they felt negative about that experience. P1 states, "I don't know why I keep going on knowing that I don't feel comfortable with things, she stated that maybe the drama, the attention, the feeling of actually having something going on is why I continue to stick around. It made me feel stupid." She also stated, "I felt

stupid, I felt like a weirdo because I should've had the courage to tell him no about things I did not like." P7 states, "He was always asking for things I wasn't comfortable doing and I felt very vulnerable, insecure, and stupid. I could tell he preyed on my insecurities."

Subtheme 4.2: Feeling weird keeping conversations private

The feeling of feeling weird was also encountered. This theme was encountered due to the participants feeling odd continuing a relationship that someone wanted to keep private. P1 states, "I felt stupid, I felt like a weirdo because I should've had the courage to tell him no about things I did not like." P2 stated, "He asked me for money to meet up with him, I knew then that something wasn't right. I felt as if he was trying to play me, and he never wanted anything from me except for money." Participants here describe their emotions by stating that they felt bad for the individual wanting to keep their relationship/conversations private.

Subtheme 4.3: Feeling "lame" not knowing things

The feeling of the participants feeling "lame" was another feeling that participants tended to express. Participants would describe the feeling of lame as not knowing what was going on at the time but later realizing and feeling like they were tricked. P4 states, "At the time it was cool, now I feel lame because I realized it wasn't the thing to do." P7 states, "When he started talking sexual, then I knew something was wrong and I felt a little lame like he wasn't even my age." P5 stated, "Never believe people, you need to know for yourself, because at the end of the relationship I felt lame when it was over."

Subtheme 4.4: Feeling deceived

The feeling of deceit was encountered plenty of time throughout the transcripts. Participants stated they felt as if the experience was being built around lies. P8 stated, “I felt sad when I realized he was lying because I was young and I thought everyone was telling me the truth then.” P3 states, “I thought I had someone who understood me, but I would catch him in several lies. When I found out he was lying I was upset because I thought he was entertaining and I was having fun.” P2 states, “We were talking for 3 months and after that he told me his age, I felt betrayed. I realized that everything was being built around a lie and he was only trying to get money out of me.” P5 states, “I would recommend to anyone to always be careful when you’re young and going online because people will lie.”

Theme 5: Relationship Closure (Awareness). Relationship Closure and awareness was another theme that was encountered at the end of the interviews. Participants described the end of their relationship with their groomer as being aware of what tactics were being utilized in order to achieve what it is their groomer really wanted. Most participants found out that their groomer was being deceiving whether it was from withholding additional information from them such as a relationship or not coming forth with their age.

Subtheme 5.1: Feeling thankful

The feeling of being thankful was expressed from a lot of participants. Participants expressed their gratitude for how the relationship ended in many ways. P8 states, “Since then I have no interest in going online and trying to attempt any

relationship online.” P6 states, “We came to a decision that the relationship was not meant to be and it didn’t have no effect on me. I felt as if the relationship was exactly what I wanted then and I also feel this way now.” P4 states, “I feel thankful because it could have gone a total different way. I also know now and would never do anything like that again.”

Subtheme 5.2: Feeling naïve

The feeling of feeling naïve arose out of the interviews. The feeling of being naïve arose from not be aware of what was going on at the time. This was made known by their groomer’s showing them many signs, and the adolescents ignoring them. P5 states, “I was naïve and looking for love and I learned that I needed to take time and not look online.” P1 stated, “I felt stupid and I felt like a weirdo because I didn’t have the courage to tell him NO.”

Subtheme 5.3: Feeling vulnerable

Many participants described the feeling of being vulnerable with their groomers. Feeling vulnerable was described as a feeling of them not being in control. P2 states, “In the end, everything was built around a lie and he was only trying to get money out of me.” P7 states, “He was always asking for things I wasn’t comfortable with doing and I felt very vulnerable when he started talking sexual, I knew the relationship was inappropriate because guys my age did not talk that way. I eventually had to block the man in order for him to leave me alone.”

Subtheme 5.4: Feeling insecure

Many participants described the feeling of being insecure. Participants expressed their insecurities many ways such as. P7 states, “I was very insecure and I could tell that he preyed on my insecurities.” P4 states, “I felt as if I needed him throughout the relationship.” P1 states, “I met him on an AOL chatroom, talking to people were awkward for me because I was over-weight and I wanted some attention. Being overweight at 17, I felt very negative about that. I don’t know why I continue to go on knowing that I don’t feel comfortable, maybe it’s the drama, the attention, having something going on.” The participants are describing their illusion for the need of their groomer. The participants describe this need through feeling insecure or feeling as if they didn’t think they were good enough for the actual relationship. P4 stated she felt as if she needed him, the thought of thinking you need someone is stating that she didn’t feel safe and secure emotionally without the relationship.

Subtheme 5.5: Disclosure of age made the individual aware

Disclosure of age is what made some participants end the online relationship. P6 stated, “three months into talking online I found out about his age, it had no effect because we were only talking for a short time. Shortly after we came to a decision that the relationship was not meant to be and it didn’t have no effect on me.” P8 states, “I wanted to end it after I found out about his age, he went along and it ended well.” Participants groomer’s disclosed their age with them and that immediately made them aware that they did not want to continue the relationship. P6 stated that her groomer was 21, when she realized that she knew that she no longer wanted to continue a relationship

with anyone that was over age, that no longer made her feel comfortable. P8 states that her groomer was 24 years old. When her groomer disclosed that information she immediately informed her groomer she no longer wanted the online relationship.

Subtheme 5.6: Disclosure of significant other made the individual aware

Disclosure of significant other was another theme that emerged as to why the online relationship ended. P3 states, “The relationship never seemed inappropriate until he explained that he had a girlfriend for three years that I never knew about.” P4 states, “I never felt as if the relationship was inappropriate until his wife messaged me explaining that he was actually 26 and asking me a lot of questions. I went to a therapist because I felt as if I needed someone to talk to. It ended after his wife reached out to me.” The participants described this feeling of finding out their groomer had a wife as shocking. The participants thought that their groomer was being truthful with them and would have never guessed that their groomer’s had other relationship due to the time being spent with them online.

Subtheme 5.7: Demands made from groomer

The disclosure of demands also was another theme that emerged from the participants. Participants stated that they ended the relationship due to demands from their groomers. P2 states, “He asked me for money and to meet up with him. I knew that something wasn’t right and to never contact him anymore.” P1 states, “He started coming off as if he was going to move me to New York, he proceeded to ask for a picture of my backside. I said no. He began to use manipulation by saying he wanted a woman who

would do things like that. Then he asked for a picture of my face. Then he asked for my phone number. I felt as if he was forcing his self on me sexually on the phone. After we had phone sex I wanted to cut it off. He would tell me things like you're a child, either you're going to meet me or not. If I did not respond to him he would type over and over like 100 times, where are you, where are you, repeatedly. At that time I cut it off I felt like the guy was pressed." The participants convey their emotion of how the demands of the relationship became to overwhelming as to how the groomer was expecting much more than what they were willing to give. Due to the demands of the relationship being a much more stringent task, the relationship had to end either by their groomer or by themselves. P1 groomer ended the relationship because she did not want to fulfill his request, however P2 ended the relationship because she was not willing to give her groomer money.

Summary

The sample for this study consisted of eight adult females who self-identified as female survivors of online sexual grooming. Throughout the interview process, several themes emerged to answer the research question. Positive feelings, belonging, feeling of being understood, betrayal, relationship closure (awareness). These themes all represent the emotions expressed when interviewing the participants. After transcriptions and re-reading journal entries, I devised a set of themes according to the word choice used by the participants, looking for re-occurring word usage to develop patterns. The themes that emerged were a set of themes that was portrayed from all eight participants. All the

subthemes that came after the main theme were different sentences that each participant stated however they were broken down into the appropriate categorical theme.

Chapter five provides an interpretation of the results, strengths, limitations, implications for social change, recommendations, and conclusions. It also includes an explanation of how the findings of this study can influence social change as well as the results it may have for researchers. Finally, the limitations of the study are discussed, as are how the distinctiveness of this study can contribute to move the field forward.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this study, I conducted interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore and understand the lived experiences of female survivors of online sexual grooming. Previous studies examining experiences of online sexual grooming focused on outlining a specific process for online grooming and determining different manipulation tactics used by predators. The aim of this phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of female survivors of online sexual grooming from initial contact to contact ending.

From my analysis of the interview data, I identified five main themes and 23 subthemes. The five emergent themes were: relationship seeking, belonging, feeling of being understood, betrayal, relationship closure (awareness). Examining the female survivors of online sexual grooming, I was able to obtain a better understanding of what they encountered throughout their experiences. They relayed their feelings of how their groomers made them feel through discussions, comments, and requests. The results from the eight semistructured interviews showed shared patterns of relational emotions between all eight survivors of online sexual grooming. Most participants stated they felt positive initially in the relationship, however with the closing of the relationship most participants were aware that they were being manipulated in some way. This chapter will discuss the findings of this study in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2,

limitations of the study, recommendations for further studies, implications for social change, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

The literature review for this study identified that previous researchers had focused on processes, manipulation tactics, and the timespan of sexual online grooming. For this reason, I chose to explore the lived experiences of survivors from initial contact to contact ending. The findings of this study both confirm and expand on the knowledge regarding survivors' experiences of online sexual grooming.

Each participant in this study described feelings such as: relationship seeking, belonging, feeling of being understood, betrayal, and relationship closure (awareness). However, perceptions of self-esteem at the time of contact played a major role in awareness, such as feeling naïve, feeling vulnerable, feeling insecure. Data from the study participants showed that female survivors of online sexual grooming start off positively. However, at the end of most of the relationships discussed by the participant, most of the participants stated that they had become aware that their groomer was manipulating them through different tactics such as betrayal.

Participants in this study frequently mentioned feeling excited and happy when engaging in intense conversations. There is a link between positive feelings, belonging, and relationship-seeking. Previous researchers state that the addictive use of social media was reflecting the need to feed the ego and how online communication enhances an

adolescent feeling of having a satisfactory number of communication partners to interact with (Aydin & Sari, 2011).

Feeling acceptance and belonging is very important in the adolescent stage whether it is acceptance through members, friends, family members, mates, or acquaintances (Leary, 2015). Perceived acceptance or rejection tends to affect how a person will interact with others for future relationships. Talking to individuals online could be used as a developed biopsychological mechanism used to apprise individuals of their threats to acceptance (Leary, 2015).

Participants in this study describe being happy, good communication, and normalcy frequently throughout their lived experiences of online sexual grooming. P1 describes the feeling of wanting to be wanted by a man is what made her happy by the experience. P8 describes the experience of feeling excited because she knew friends that were doing it. P6 describes her experience as feeling positive about the situation. P5 describes her experience as feeling excited because someone wanted to talk with her. He was saying everything she wanted to hear. Friendship-seeking online can be correlated to positive feelings and belonging. These relationships are measured by a person's sociometer that determines an individual level of self-esteem. Self-esteem affects a person physically, mentally, and emotionally. Self-esteem can also affect who becomes more susceptible to manipulation tactics during online sexual grooming (Van Outysel et al., 2016). Social media is believed to enhance adolescent feelings that one has a

satisfactory number of communication partners by simply logging on and establishing contact with known and unknown individuals online (Van Outysel et al., 2016).

Study participants experienced substantial amounts of betrayal due to perceived emotional connections. For instance, participants describe their experiences of betrayal in the online relationship based on their groomers' use of deceit and a feeling of confusion towards the end of the relationship. Evidence suggests that sexual online grooming experiences include measures of acceptance through manipulation (Van Outysel et al., 2016).

Interpretation 1: Seeking Friendship Online

Participants in this study considered their online experience to be a relationship. This perception of being in a relationship shows that survivors form some form an emotional connection to their online relationships (Black et al., 2014). In the current study, participants experienced mutual attraction through conversation and the feeling of excitement with their online groomers. When they were approached online and given attention, they stated that they felt good. The fact that the individual expressed interest whether it was through conversation and language. Survivors enjoyed the conversations and wanted to continue them, thus forming a relationship. My research findings tie into other research where victims' descriptions of their groomers are expressed with adjectives such as flirting, dating, romantic, or in love (Greene-Colozzi, 2017).

When participants were approached online and groomers showed interest, the individuals felt excited and the expressed interest made the them want to continue the

relationship through online friendship. Whether the online relationship seeking was due to not being fulfilled in offline relationships or not, the individuals went online to chatrooms and used online media to for the purposes of seeking conversation or continued friendship. Once the individuals were contacted with such an offer, the individuals replied and this friendship made them happy. They were happy because someone online expressed some form of interest toward them and was looking for some form of online friendship as well. This finding ties in with previous research which indicated that victims of sexual online grooming tended to confide in their offenders about problems and find emotional support out of the relationship, thereby establishing a certain level of trust (Whittle et al., 2014).

Groomers also may to reach out online to adolescents for acceptance of someone; hence, they too are relationship seeking. Grooming however tends to be very diverse according to personalities of the offender, and the individual they are grooming. Most grooming is accomplished through conversations and deception (Whittle et al., 2015). In this current study, participants explained how the groomer used manipulation through conversation, because this is an adolescent whom the groomer is conversing with. The fact that the individual is holding conversations with an adolescent expresses the fact that manipulation is being utilized. However, because the adolescent is not aware of the groomer's age, the participant is manipulated through conversation. Although the participants were unaware of the groomer's age with whom they were speaking, they

expressed that the mutual attraction through conversation is what kept them feeling as if the groomer cared and shared a genuine connection with them.

Interpretation 2: Feeling of Belonging

Another finding in this study revealed that the participants felt as if they were being normal or a part of something that everyone was doing. This finding not only adds to previous research, but it also extends on the participant felt throughout this experience. Several participants throughout this study expressed feelings of intense conversations, staying entertained, normalcy, and feelings of popularity. The description the feelings that the online relationship made them feel wanted, normal, and alive. This is similar to previous research, where victims describe effects of the relationship online as addicted to contact, relieving boredom, feeling good, building trust, and wanting to talk more (Whittle et al., 2013). These are all feelings similar with feeling normal within a relationship and a sense of understanding, establishing identity within the youth (Whittle et al., 2014). Previous research also utilizes the word “normal” as describing relationships with their abuser about general things such as discussing mutual interest, and confiding in each other about problems within their life (Whittle et al., 2014).

One participant describes their experience as feeling excited because she knew friends that had online friendships. Previous research states that online communication give youth increased life satisfaction in the form of self-esteem, well-being, social support, belonging to friendship groups, and reduced feelings of loneliness (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). This relates to how the participants felt about their groomers through

the online sexual grooming process. They all insinuate that the relationship made them feel excited, happy, and the individual made them feel as if they were a part of something normal, connecting and formulating friendships.

Interpretation 3: Manipulation through Betrayal

Another theme that arose and is very much so in context with previous research is participants described the feeling of being controlled through deceit. Previous research states that grooming involves the psychological manipulation with the goal of establishing an emotional connection with a child in order to lower the child's inhibitions (Davis, 2016). According to the interviews, each participant described how they were manipulated and how, when they realized what was happening, they felt betrayed by the groomer. All participants described the feelings of feeling stupid, naïve, weird, the feeling of not knowing something toward the end of the relationship. During this stage of the online relationship, the participant describes when they find out that they are being deceived in this relationship. This expands on previous research which states that compliance is gained from the victim through manipulation (Whittle et al., 2014b).

All of the participant experiences insinuate something different about each participant's experience however what they all have in common is that the groomer was definitely using deceit in order to maintain a relationship with the individuals.

Researchers have found that components of friendship formation comprise stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation, and emotional security

(Whittle et al., 2014b). Doing this friendship forming stage victims and groomer's are exchanging information about themselves and everyday activities in which the groomer is most likely concealing information like age, and many more to continue this friendship formulating stage. According to previous research doing this stage over half of the abusers are lying to the victims about their true age, as well as some groomers even send unknown youth photographs to conceal identity (Whittle et al., 2014). For two individual's the deceit was from not disclosing outside relationships however with another individual the age factor is when she wanted to end the relationship. So, in line with previous research, compliance was still gained through betrayal. However, now we see why the relationships tends to end as well, due to the perpetrator actually revealing the betrayal or the victim finding out that their groomer was lying to them about other hidden issues not necessarily because of the groomer's age.

Interpretation 4: Awareness of Betrayal brings Closure

Another finding that added to the study which was actually a takeaway for this current study was finding out that awareness of betrayal from sexual online grooming brought closure. Several participants described the end of the online grooming experience as being thankful, feeling naïve, feeling vulnerable, insecure, and overwhelmed from demands. Although there hasn't been any study that has examined what brought about an end of the online grooming process there are many commonalities of feelings expressed from what is known thus far about the sexual online process emotionally. The common utilized grooming experiences by victims stay constant with previous literature such as

manipulation through conversation, deception, intense contact, secrecy and many more. Previous literature also supports the notion that sexual online grooming process is different for each individual (Whittle et al., 2014). Also tying into this study supports the notion that not one of the participants met with their offender's offline support the continuous notion that not all online groomer's are contact driven (Whittle et al., 2014).

This finding was added and what brought the study to answer the primary research questions of: what are the experiences of female survivors of sexual online grooming from initial to contact ending. Not all contact ending was due to betrayal however what all the participants endings did have in correspondence with each other is that the awareness of betrayal whether the online contact was for egotistical reasons, the participants age, or the groomer's plan to obtain something more than what the participants may have wanted. All participants were well aware of that their groomer was lying to them and manipulating them in some form in order to gain compliance with what they intended. This happens to be in direct reflection with previous research findings supporting the notion that in online grooming, the friendship/relationships that are formed online, the victims are aware that they are being abused in some form and that manipulation techniques are being utilized. The techniques utilized align with current literature, utilizing manipulation through conversation, deception, sexualization, intense contact, kindness, flattery, secrecy and many more adjectives were utilized to describe effects of tactics and how victims become enmeshed in the relationship (Whittle et al., 2014b).

No previous study has covered the process of online sexual grooming from initial contact to contact ending. Many studies have discovered that there is a process in online grooming, also that manipulation tactics are being utilized, as well as the effects of manipulation tactics on victims. However, this study covered initial contact with offender as well as why contact ended. The victims understanding that they were manipulated and betrayed in some form by whatever the perpetrator disclosed is what brought about closure to the participants and also why the contact ended. A lot of participants state that they walked away from the experience knowing a little more about online friendships, and manipulation tactics utilized by unknown online individuals. Some took away from the experience that they never wanted to experience another online relationship, some took away that they were thankful because the experience could have ended badly, some walked away aware of their insecurities and what they needed to work on to improve and the enhancement of themselves. However, all participants would say that understanding the deception of their online groomer's is what they took away from this experience. Understanding why contact ended is an important part in the sexual online grooming process in order for there to be a complete process.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Mark Leary et al.'s (2002) Sociometer Theory. They proposed that humans have evolved to include a psychological meter or gauge which monitors the degree to which others value and accept them. The individual's level of acceptance by others is a determinant of self-esteem, how the victim

will determine future relational value and themselves (Leary, 2002). Social cues are important for the individual to be aware of in friendships, social support, group memberships, social influence and romantic bonds (Weisbuch et al., 2009). Researchers state that an important function of self-esteem is to guide individuals to approach social relationships based on their perception of their social value. This could include talking to strangers, sexual behavior, sharing personal information with strangers, and meeting online contact offline.

This ties into this current research study because from the results themes developed summarize the online relationship with themes like relationship seeking, belonging, and the feeling to be understood. Also, descriptive words were utilized like vulnerable, naïve, insecure. These are all words describing their feelings toward themselves and how they felt at the time. Through feelings such as these state that combined weight of vulnerability, the need for validation, and a desire to compare themselves with peers forms a perfect storm of self-doubt (Christofferson, 2016). The pressure to be perfect, impress peers may lead adolescents to experiencing anxiety and depression. Social online media edited feeds can mask serious issues behind pretend perfection making social media the best source of connection and belonging to a particular social group, clique, or interest and letting go of this new channel of communication no longer becomes an option (Christofferson, 2016). Researchers have also stated that young people who have experience problems with family and social isolation were especially particular to being vulnerable online (Noll et al., 2013).

Throughout this study, self-esteem relating to social value and acceptance was highlighted as a reason why participants are vulnerable online. Throughout this study we can see that self-esteem and relationship forming is a very important part of adolescent identity formation. Most participants describe establishing a friendship online as the feeling of feeling beautiful, loved, attention, happy, excited, and many more. Throughout these many adjectives of describing their online relationship this lets us know that a sense of belonging and someone to take interest in them is critical. According to previous research adolescents who were more susceptible to online grooming were more frequent to demonstrate a risk behavior, poorer psychological health, poorer relationships with parents and lower self-esteem (Jonsson, Fredlund, & Svedin, 2019). Even at the end of the relationships, the feeling of vulnerability and many more words were used when discussing what betrayal felt like. They expressed that they relied on the individual for the feelings of excitement, happiness, and many more. According to (Jonsson et al., 2019), emotions shift attention, having trust taken away from the individual whom they thought was trustworthy can lead to anxiety and depression. This time of development is important so when they found out they were being betrayed it wasn't a good feeling knowing this because this affected the individual's emotionally and some even psychologically.

Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-esteem and self-identity. The addictive use of social media was reflecting a need to feed the ego and peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on social media has been used as a way to

maintain, protect, and enhance adolescent's self-esteem (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

Participant 3 stated "I was only looking for someone to talk to and vent to and disclose my emotions, it felt good, every day, all through the day, having a special connection with someone you can talk to about anything". Consistent with this theory, this finding suggest that peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on social media was used to feed the ego, and to help maintain, protect, and enhance the individual's identity/self-esteem.

Limitations of the Study

Another limitation relates to the duration of each participant interview. During each participant interview I made every effort to build rapport with the participants so that they would feel more comfortable talking to me about online sexual encounters. Still, participants were sparse with their responses or hastily tried to get through each question without elaborating. I believe this was due to the fact that the time in between from when it occurred and the time from when the experience was being told had a substantial gap they conveyed their experience quickly. Participants' reluctance to not elaborate on interview questions could have impacted the depth of the data obtained from them. The victims' excitement to tell their stories could have made them tell only the important parts or the emotionalized/traumatic parts of their experience instead of every detail experienced. As indicated as normal, previous research indicates that the more severe responses of traumatic experiences indicate continuous distress without periods of relative calm or rest and intense intrusive recollections that continue despite a return to safety (Samhsa, 2014).

Another limitation was the population included in this study only included women from the state of Virginia. To make the study have more generalization to the entire country I would suggest conducting this study as a quantitative study to see if these findings are generalizable.

Throughout the study, I attempted to remain neutral. Interpretative phenomenological research acknowledges the researcher as an instrument within the study, and recognizes that each researcher will approach their study with ideas, knowledge, and biases formulated from their own experiences. As a researcher I brought to this study personal experiences of relationship forming online as well academic knowledge as a psychology doctoral student. So how, I asked interview questions and subsequently interpret the data might be different from another researcher with different background, because another researcher with a different background might have different emerging themes and subthemes.

Recommendations for Future Research

I conducted this study to bring awareness of the lived experiences of female survivors of online sexual grooming. I would recommend further studies focus on complete processes and experiences of sexual online grooming from the perpetrators stance to gain a full understanding of why they seek relationships online. In this study I focused on experiences of female survivors of online grooming from initial contact to contact ending fulfilling the gap identified by Whittle et al. (2014b). However, the reason that I recommend obtaining full experiences from the groomers from initial contact to

contact ending is because with captured detail and in depth understanding of victim's experiences. I think a successful merge between the two would be if you examine the relationships between both of them victim responses and groomer responses in order to fulfill the entire process of sexual online grooming from initial contact to contact ending from victim and offender perspective.

I would also recommend not just focusing on female survivors opening the population up to male survivors as well. I would recommend male survivors to understand this online experience in totality to encompass both men and women. Although most reported are from women, men do account for a certain percentage of online grooming, however many behaviors are written off as boys being boys (Lenhart, 2015). Further research is needed to explore the experiences of sexual online grooming from initial contact to contact ending from female and male survivors.

Lastly, I would recommend using these themes to conduct a quantitative study. The study could examine the themes to see if they are relevant to a representative sample of adolescent girls who have been groomed.

Implications for Social Change

Online sexual grooming has been impacting adolescents and teenagers for a decade. This current study has shown the complete process of online sexual grooming from female survivors' perspective from the initial contact with their groomer's to contact ending. A few implications for positive social change based on the findings of this study are proposed.

Social change can occur by implementing online training for law enforcement personnel in online sexual assault cases. In the case of dialogue a class could be developed specifically for online grooming specializing in online dialogue utilizing known victimized dialogue. This could lead to social change by law enforcement officials everywhere understanding victimized dialogue for sexual online grooming purposes. These dialogue strategies could possibly keep the perpetrator engaged enough to where more cases could be solved simply by law enforcement officials establishing proper adolescent dialogue in order to catch a perpetrator. Also, another element of positive social change idea is for sexual assault centers to visit local high schools and middle schools and inform them on the importance of self-esteem and make them aware of online predation through online services or through informational brochures. From the responses given from many participants about friendship and going online looking for friendships and boyfriends. According to findings in this current research as well as previous studies relationship forming and a sense of belonging are a must in order for adolescents to development the necessary positive self-esteem that's needed in order to have fulfilling lasting relationships (Whittle et al., 2013). The feeling of belonging was a main feeling encountered by most of the participants. This expresses that fulfilling relationship are definitely needed and not only needed youth also need to know how to go about obtaining such relationships in order to establish that type of fulfillment needed.

Conclusion

In the current study, I used interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore experiences of eight female survivors of online sexual grooming. The evidence showed that all individuals experiences included relationship seeking, a sense of belonging, and relationship closure (awareness). The findings from this study revealed that why adolescents may be open to creating friendships online there are major signs that could reveal sexual online grooming instead of genuine relationship seeking. These findings also show that by sexual online grooming adolescents are affected psychologically during the process. This is confirmed by existing literature which revealed that due to the adolescents and teens not being psychologically/cognitively mature, sexual online grooming could affect future relationships in the future for the individual. Studies that have been concerned with short and long term outcomes associated with child sexual abuse covers a range of potential future outcomes.

However due to this current research study, I have suggested a couple of future implications to include for positive social change. They include courses for law enforcement personnel on online sexual grooming dialogue from known dialogue of victims, as well as sexual assault centers visiting middle schools and high schools and distributing brochures on sexual online grooming predation. There were many key findings from the study such as seeking friendship online, feeling of belonging, manipulation through betrayal, and awareness of betrayal bringing closure. These findings could help tackle problematic areas include affecting one's mental health and

functioning, behavioral outcomes, interpersonal and social outcomes, educational outcomes, and physical health and brain development (Cashmore & Shackel, 2018). As a scholar for change, I believe this research can help move society toward becoming more aware of what happens online and how adolescent relationships are very important. Also, this could potentially help government agencies as well pin-point online sexual predator

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Appendix A: Recruitment of Participants Flyer

Survivors of Sexual Online Grooming

I am interested in interviewing participants in a research study about understanding the lived experiences of females who have experienced online sexual grooming. The study is also intended to help identify processes of sexual online grooming from initial contact to contact ending. My name is Lyniece Lewis and I am a doctoral student of Psychology at Walden University. I am conducting this study for my PhD dissertation.

The intent behind this study is to gain an understanding of female experiences of online grooming from initial contact to contact ending. This will help provide themes from the responses of participants to understand what tactics are being utilized while online, which could help adolescents know what to look for when being sexual online groomed as well as professional staff with pin-pointing processes to online sexual grooming from a victim's stance.

Participant's shared experiences will help me understand how the individuals experienced their online relationship and what encouraged them to start contact and end contact. Your experiences will be able to provide an understanding to youth who browse the Internet looking for friendships, what things should become red flags or become spotted as manipulation tactics in forming online relationships.

For those interested in participating, the interviews will be conducted using free

Internet-based software (i.e., Skype) to help build rapport. The interviews will take no more than an hour. Your identity will be protected so any data collected and reported will be anonymous.

You may be eligible to participate in this study if you can answer YES to all of these questions:

- I am a female who is 18 years or older.
- I am a survivor of adolescent sexual online grooming
- I have never been physically sexually abused

I will send you more detailed information on the study along with a consent form that will require your signature. Once the consent forms are received, we will setup a time for the interview.

Appendix B: Recruitment of Participants

Consent Forms

You are invited to take part in a research study about understanding the lived experiences of females in sexual online grooming from initial contact to contact ending. I am inviting adult females who are survivors of adolescent online sexual grooming to take part in this study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

I, Lyniece Lewis, a doctoral student at Walden University, am conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine how victims of sexual grooming experience offenders’ manipulation tactics on them. The focus of this study is on initial contact with offenders to contact ending. The findings can be used to pin-point processes to online sexual grooming from a victim’s stance in understanding what encouraged them to engage in contact and how contact ends.

Additionally, the results will help inform adolescents on how self-esteem may have impacted their choice of acceptance online and what tactics are being utilized to gain control.

Procedure:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview using free internet-based software (i.e., Skype) or face-to-face.
- The interview will take around an hour.
- The audio of the interviews will be recorded and later transcribed to help with the analysis.

Here are some sample questions:

- What were you looking for in this online relationship?
- What made you happy from this relationship? What made you sad?

To ensure accuracy, I will reach out to you after the interview, so you can verify the interpretation of your responses is correct. This will be done via email and will also allow me to address any questions or concerns you may have.

Privacy:

Reports coming out of this study will not share the identities of individual participants. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also will not be shared. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by limiting any demographic details to those that will not risk identity exposure such as age and name. The participants will receive a number identification and all data related to them will be saved under that identification. Any emails will be copied to a word processing file with all identifying information removed and will be password protected. All word processing

and electronic files will be password protected and saved on an encrypted removable storage drive. When not in use, the drive will be locked up in a file cabinet in the researcher's home office. The data will be kept for the allotted time of five years, as required by the university, and then the drive will be reformatted, safely destroying all data contained on it.

Limits of Confidentiality:

While privacy is of utmost concern, there are limitations under law. The law lists several exceptions to the limits of confidentiality including where there is a reasonable suspicion that there is a danger of violence to others, as well as where there is a reasonable suspicion of child abuse. This means that if one of these exceptions is met, it is my duty to report it to the necessary law enforcement services.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time until data analysis starts. The researcher will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether or not they were selected for the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the participant's discomfort that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, or becoming upset. Being in this study will not pose risk to your safety or well-being.

There are likely no direct benefits to participants, however there may be some

benefits to the adolescents who browse online looking for friendships as well as professional law enforcement agencies. The results of the study can provide an understanding to inform adolescents on how self-esteem may have impacted their choice of acceptance as well as if manipulation tactics were easier to be established because of self-esteem. The results will also give adolescents red flags to spot manipulation tactics online.

Payment:

There is no payment or incentive for participating in this research study.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 612-312-1210. Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, "I consent."

Sources of Support:

There is always a slight possibility of psychological distress and some participants may experience negative moods, stress, and anxiety due to the taxing nature of being interviewed and disclosing personal details about their experiences. If you feel as though

you need some extra support, please contact the services below:

- Virginia Tech-The Women's Center
- The Genieve Shelter
- YMCA Sexual Assault Center (Counselor of Sexual Assault)
- Women's Center in Fairfax

Appendix C: Debrief

Debrief Form

Thank you for your participation in a research study about understanding the lived experiences of females who have experienced sexual online grooming. This form is part of a process called “debriefing” which serves as a reminder of the details of the study as well as provides support information in case of distress.

I, Lyniece Lewis a doctoral student at Walden University, am conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand the effects of offenders’ manipulation tactics on victims during online grooming, the impacts the tactics have on victims upon initial contact, and what influences the adolescent to end the relationship.

Contacts and Questions:

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 612-312-1210.

Member Checking:

Upon completing the transcription of the interview, I will be contacting you via email with a summary of your responses. This will provide you with an opportunity to ensure your views have been properly captured, as well as to provide

any clarification that is needed regarding responses to parts of the interview.

Please print or save this form for your records.

Sources of Support:

There is always a slight possibility of psychological distress and some participants may experience negative moods, stress, and anxiety due to the taxing nature of being interviewed and disclosing personal details about their experiences. If you feel as though you need some extra support, please contact the services below:

- Virginia Tech-The Women's Center
- The Genieve Shelter
- YMCA Sexual Assault Center (Counselor of Sexual Assault)
- Women's Center in Fairfax

Thanks again for your participation.

Lyniece Lewis