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European  
Online  
Grooming  
Project\_

# Scoping Report

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Prepared for and co-funded by the European Commission Safer Internet Plus Programme

April 2010

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr Elena Martellozzo for help with the case file review and Charlotte Tompkins and Caroline Turley at the National Centre for Social Research for their input with the hypothetical model. We are also grateful to Dr Adriano Schimmenti, Stefano Cuilla and Justine Gwisch for undertaking stakeholder interviews and helping with literature review. We would also like to thank advisory group members Dr Ruth Mann and Dr Andres Hernandez for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this report. In addition, Evangelia Markidou at the European Commission for her support for the research. Finally, we are very grateful to the stakeholders across Europe who gave up their time to participate in the research.

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# 1. Executive Summary

- The sexual abuse of young people via the Internet is an international problem, a crime without geographical boundaries. Solutions both to perpetrators' use of the Internet and to the safety of young people online must be sought and will necessarily involve agencies working to protect young people at local, national and international levels. The police have suggested that an increasing number of online sex offenders are grooming young people online, using online social networks and internet chat rooms. Whilst a great deal is known about sex offender behaviour and there is an increasing body of pioneering work addressing those accessing indecent child images, little is known about online groomers and the way in which they select and engage victims.
- To this end, Action 3.1 of the Safer Internet Plus programme invited proposals for projects that aim to enhance the knowledge of the online sexual abuse of young people, with a particular focus on online grooming.
- Following a competitive tendering exercise, the European Online Grooming Project was commissioned. The research consortium is comprised of experts from across Europe, tasked with meeting the following overarching research objectives:
  - describe the behaviour of both offenders who groom and young people who are 'groomed' and explore differences (e.g. in demographics, behaviour or profiles) within each group and how these differences may have a bearing on offence outcome,
  - describe how information, communication technology (ICT) is used to facilitate the process of online grooming,
  - further the current low knowledge base about the way in which young people are selected and prepared by online groomers for abuse online,
  - make a significant contribution to the development of educational awareness and preventative initiatives aimed at parents and young people.
- The Project has three separate but interlinked phases. The first is a scoping project, the subject of this report. The second and third phases involve interviews with convicted online groomers across Europe and dissemination to professionals, parents, carers and young people respectively.
- The scoping project contained three elements, all which had the aim of maximising the potential of phase 2 and 3 of the research. As such, the scoping phase contained a review of the literature and policy context<sup>1</sup> and a review of convicted online groomers' police case files. The scoping phase culminated with 19 in-depth interviews with stakeholders across Europe. These professionals all had

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, J., Grove-Hills, J., Bifulco, A., Webster, S., Gottschalk, P., Caretti, V. & Pham, T (2010). European Online Grooming Project: Literature Review and Legislative Context. European Commission Safer Internet Plus Programme.

expertise in the behaviour of online groomers from either an investigative, treatment, technological or young person's perspective.

- The review of police case files and interviews with key stakeholders resulted in the development of hypothetical model of online grooming. This model, drawn on case file and stakeholder accounts will then be used as a framework to ask questions of online groomers in the next stage of the research. It is important to note that the phases of the model presented here may be subsequent to significant change following the interviews with convicted online groomers. As such, the model in this report should be viewed as a hypothetical framework for subsequent appraisal. It should not be interpreted as the definitive presentation of the process of online grooming.
- The hypothetical model has nine phases that encompass: vulnerability factors; grooming style; preparation and scanning; identity assumed 1; initial contact; identity assumed 2; desensitisation; offence maintenance and intensity; and finally, outcomes.
- Evidence from stakeholder accounts suggests that some offenders may be engaging with 30 to 50 young people at different stages of the grooming process at any one time, and that offenders tend to refine their activities on the basis of what had '*worked well*' in previous encounters with young people. Consequently, movement through different stages of the model of online grooming is neither unitary or linear, but rather, cyclical, involving a pattern of adoption, maintenance, relapse, and readoption over time.
- It was also evident that the actual process of online grooming may take minutes, hours, days or months. As such, online groomers remain at different phases of the model for various lengths of time according to a dynamic inter-relationship between their goals and needs and the style or reactions of the young person.
- In order to explain as well as describe online grooming, this report suggests that online grooming may be set within the context of three existing theories within forensic and social psychology. The first is Ward and Hudson's (1998) *self-regulation model of the sexual offence process*. The central premise of Ward and Hudson's theory is that different self-regulation styles, the internal and external processes that allow an individual to engage in goal-related behaviour, underpin the sexual offence process. The second is Suler's (2004) theory of the *online disinhibition effect*. This framework contains three dimensions that may also help develop understanding of online groomers' behaviour: dissociative anonymity; invisibility and dissociative imagination. Finally, the theory of *deindividuation* (Zimbardo, 1969) proposes that factors such as anonymity, loss of individual responsibility, arousal and sensory overload contribute to a state of deindividuation and behavioral disinhibition where established norms of conduct may be violated.

- It is important for all research to have an applied focus but even more so for this project, where the need for robust evidence is acute and the public safety message is clear. As such, stakeholders identified four core needs for the European Online Grooming Report. To provide strategies to aid detection and interviewing; further understanding regarding assessment and treatment needs; to raise awareness across the key groups outlined above; and finally, to avoid demonising the Internet per se.

## 2. Introduction

This report presents findings from the scoping phase of the European Online Grooming Project. The research was commissioned by the European Commission Safer Internet Plus programme and conducted by a collaboration that encompassed: Stephen Webster, National Centre for Social Research (NatGen); Julia Davidson and Julie Grove-Hills, Kingston University; Antonia Bifulco, Royal Holloway University of London; Petter Gottschalk, The Norwegian School of Management; Vincenzo Caretti, University of Palermo and Thierry Pham, University of Mons-Hainaut.

This chapter outlines the aims and objectives of the evaluation, the research design and methodology employed during the scoping phase.

### 2.1 Research Objectives

Action 3.1 of the Safer Internet Plus programme invited proposals for projects that aim to enhance the knowledge of the online sexual abuse of young people, with a particular focus on online grooming. Here online grooming is defined as the process by which a person befriends a young person<sup>2</sup> online in order to facilitate online sexual contact and/or a physical meeting with them with the goal of committing sexual abuse. To this end the European Online Grooming Project has the following overarching objectives:

- describe the behaviour of both offenders who groom and young people who are 'groomed' and explore differences (e.g. in demographics, behaviour or profiles) within each group and how these differences may have a bearing on offence outcome,
- describe how information, communication technology (ICT) is used to facilitate the process of online grooming,
- further the current low knowledge base about the way in which young people are selected and prepared by online groomers for abuse online,
- make a significant contribution to the development of educational awareness and preventative initiatives aimed at parents and young people,
- contribute to the development of online sex offender risk assessment and management knowledge.

### 2.2 Research Design

In order to meet this challenging set of objectives, the research programme involves three distinct but related phases. A scoping study; interviews with online groomers; and dissemination of awareness messages to key stakeholders. These stakeholders include policy makers, police officers, treatment providers, teachers,

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this report, young people are defined as those age 16 years or younger.

parents, carers and young people. The remainder of the report presents methods related to and findings from the scoping phase of the research.

## 2.3 The Scoping Phase

The aim of the scoping phase was to explore the background and context of Internet abuse in each partner country so that the research could be set in the current legislative and treatment context. However, alongside mapping the policy context, this phase also set out to ensure that the next stage of the research is of the highest possible quality and represents good value for money. As such, the scoping phase aimed to ensure that questions asked of online groomers will be based on the most up to date and comprehensive information available about these individuals.

To this end, the scoping phase drew on a combination of three distinct data collection approaches, described below.

## 2.4 Scoping Methods

### Literature review

Presented in a separate paper<sup>3</sup>, the key library sources for the literature review were the British Library and the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics. In particular, the joint JISC and ESRC funded International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS). Specific government, academic and agency sites were used such as EUKids Online at LSE, the Department for Children Schools and Families, Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre and the Internet Watch Foundation. In addition, the EU website was searched to supplement the contributions sent from the consortium partners from each country. Alongside the sourcing of published materials, there was also use of unpublished articles from, for example, the G8 Carolina Symposium 'Examining the relationship between online and offline offenses and preventing the sexual exploitation of children'.

### Review of police case files

Five case files were drawn from the United Kingdom Metropolitan Police High Technological Crime Unit and the Paedophile Unit. Four of the report authors (SW, JD, AB, JGH) read the case files and recorded the key points on a proforma, included in the Appendix. Each case was then discussed by the research team, with the conversation digitally recorded. Case file data was analysed using the Framework method, discussed in detail in the sections below. In table 2.4.1 the demographic and offence-specific characteristics of the case file sample are described.

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<sup>3</sup> Davidson, J., Grove-Hills, J., Bifulco, A., Webster, S., Gottschalk, P., Caretti, V. & Pham, T (2010). European Online Grooming Project: Literature Review and Legislative Context. European Commission Safer Internet Plus Programme.



**Table 2.4.1: Case file sample characteristics**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Age</b>	45	36	37	56	48
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White-British	White-British	White-British	White-British	White-British
<b>Occupation</b>	Professional	Professional	Skilled manual	Professional	Skilled manual
<b>Marital status</b>	Married	Married	Married	Partner	Married
<b>Access to children</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>No. own children</b>	1	2	1	1	1
<b>Exposure self on line</b>	No	Yes – photos & webcam	No	Yes – photos	Yes - webcam
<b>Images sent to YP</b>	3 adult movies	None	None	Yes	Yes
<b>No. indecent images seized</b>	510	259	Not specified	35	2
<b>Class of indecent Images</b>	1 to 5	1 to 5	2 to 4	1 to 4	1 to 3
<b>Travel to meeting with YP</b>	No	Yes	Yes, arrested nearby	Yes	No, stated no intention

### **Interviews with strategic stakeholders**

The stakeholder sample for the scoping evaluation was developed to ensure that all key professionals with expertise on the behaviour of online groomers were included. The report authors identified and recruited stakeholders in each country. Stakeholders were then approached by letter or email, outlining the aims and coverage of the scoping evaluation. This first contact was followed up by a telephone call to see if the stakeholder was willing to participate, and to arrange a convenient time for interview. There were no instances of stakeholders refusing to take part.

In-depth interviews were conducted with nineteen strategic stakeholders from the United Kingdom, Italy, Norway and Belgium. Researchers explained how study findings would be reported before the interviews commenced. The voluntary nature of the research was also emphasised, and the interview only began once the participant had indicated that they were happy to proceed by signing a consent form. The interviews were digitally recorded and carried out using a topic guide. The topic guide covered the key themes likely to be relevant in the interviews and helped to ensure a systematic approach across different encounters and countries. The interview questioning was responsive to participants' own experiences, attitudes and circumstances and participants' contributions were fully explored to allow as detailed an understanding as possible. The topic guide used in the scoping interviews is included in the Appendix. Table 2.4.2 displays the occupational characteristics of the sample.

**Table 2.4.2: stakeholder sample information**

Country	Stakeholder Number	Role
United Kingdom	1	Sexual offender treatment specialist
	2	Internet safety expert
	3	Police – overt investigator
	4	Police – covert investigator
	5	Young people treatment specialist
Norway	1	Young people treatment specialist
	2	Police – overt investigator
	3	Sexual offender treatment specialist
	4	Sexual offender treatment specialist
Italy	1	Police – national prevention co-ordinator
	2	Police - overt investigator
	3	Public prosecutor
	4	Information technology expert
	5	Police - overt investigator
Belgium	1	Police – human trafficking prevention
	2	Police - overt investigator
	3	Police - overt investigator
	4	Police - overt investigator
	5	Police - overt IT investigator

## 2.5 Qualitative Analysis

The case file and interview data was analysed using Framework (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), a systematic approach to qualitative data management developed by NatCen. This involved a number of stages. First, the key topics and issues which emerged from the research objectives and the data were identified through familiarisation with the transcripts. An initial analytical framework was then drawn up and a series of thematic charts or matrices were set up, each relating to a different thematic issue. The columns in each matrix represented the key sub-themes or topics and the rows represented the individual interview participants. Data from each interview transcript was summarised into the appropriate cell and was grounded in participants' own accounts. The final stage of analysis involved working through the charted interview data in detail, drawing out the range of experiences and views, identifying similarities and differences, developing and testing hypotheses, and interrogating the data to seek to explain emergent patterns and findings.

## 2.6 Coverage of the report

This report brings together findings from the case review and stakeholder interview stages of the scoping research. The next chapter describes a hypothetical model of online grooming and sets this within a theoretical framework to facilitate testing when convicted online groomers are interviewed. Verbatim quotations from staff are used. In order to preserve participants' anonymity, quotations are referenced only by participant country (e.g. Norway) and by role (e.g. Police). The final chapter of the report describes the strategic and operational benefits desired by stakeholders in subsequent phases of the European Online Grooming Project.

## 3. Understanding Online Grooming

The widespread use of the Internet in the educational and social lives of young people is a relatively new behaviour. Consequently, it is only within the last decade that law enforcement and scientific communities have attempted to understand and address the challenge presented by men who have taken advantage of the Internet 'boom' to groom young people for sexual purposes. However, it is challenging to develop a robust evidence base in five to ten years, and this explains the dearth of literature about the motivations, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of online groomers. To this end, the overarching aim of the European Online Grooming Project is to make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge. In doing so, the work will help policy makers, police officers, treatment providers, carers and young people behave in the most effective way to manage the risk presented by online groomers.

This chapter represents the project's first step towards contributing robust evidence. The first section briefly describes two theories that may help professionals understand online groomers' behaviour in the context of a model of online grooming. The chapter then describes a nine hypothetical nine-phase model developed from the review of police case files and accounts of stakeholders working with online groomers, young people or within the Internet industry. Within each phase of the model, the key research questions for examination in the next stage of the project are also set out.

It is important to note that the phases of the model presented here may be subsequent to significant change following the interviews with convicted online groomers. As such, the model in this report should be viewed as a hypothetical framework for subsequent appraisal. It should not be interpreted as the definitive presentation of the process of online grooming.

### 3.1 Developing a model of cognition, affect and behaviour

The design of effective interventions for online groomers and awareness programmes to reach policy makers, teachers, carers and young people requires an understanding of how online groomers behave, their barriers and enablers to change, and what influences their behaviours in general. From the accounts of stakeholders working with online groomers and young people across Europe, it is clear that these offenders' behaviour is dynamic, multi-faceted and complex. As such there are two key advantages of setting online grooming within a model. Firstly, it allows professionals to have a clear, coherent overview of different types of online groomer behaviour encountered by people working in this area. Secondly the model presents a series of hypotheses that may be tested at the next stage of the research when convicted online groomers are interviewed. However, for models to have optimum impact it is important that they describe as well as explain behaviour. As such, three theories that may assist

professionals to understand online groomers' behaviour in the context of the hypothetical model have been considered.

The first of these is Ward and Hudson's (1998) *self-regulation model of the sexual offence process*. The central premise of Ward and Hudson's theory is that different self-regulation styles, the internal and external processes that allow an individual to engage in goal-related behaviour, underpin the sexual offence process. Two styles of goals are discussed; approach and avoidance. Approach goals concern the successful attainment of a state or situation and involve approach-focused behaviours. For example, an individual tailoring their online profile page in order to attract the interest of a particular young person. In contrast, avoidance goals involve the reduction of a particular state whereby attention is focused on negative information signalling failure rather than success. An example here may be an online groomer who masturbates to their collection of indecent images of children in order to suppress the desire to contact a young person online. Intrinsically linked to approach and avoidant goals are three self regulation styles. The first, underregulation, refers to individuals who may behave in a passive or disinhibited manner. Misregulation describes the misplaced effort to avoid offending due to a lack of knowledge about the impact of the response selected, as in the example above. Finally, individuals who consciously think out a sequence of behaviours in order to commit an offence do not show emotional under regulation or dysregulation as a feature of their offending and thus form a third group. For these individuals their emotional state is likely to be positive and they do not see their behaviour as particularly problematic.

In addition to setting the sexual offence process in the context of self-regulation theory, Ward and Hudson's seminal paper also suggests that comprehensive models of the sexual offence process should encompass three further features:

- the integration of cognitive, affective and behavioural factors that underpin the sexual offence,
- a demonstration of the dynamic nature of the sexual offence that accounts for the various phases or milestones of the offence process, and,
- identification and description of the psychological mechanisms that drive and inhibit the relapse process.

Moving away from theories specific to sexual offending, Suler's (2004) *online disinhibition effect* contains three dimensions that may also help develop understanding of online groomers' behaviour. The first dimension, **dissociative anonymity** refers to the Internet providing people with the opportunity to separate their actions from their real world identity, making them feel less vulnerable about opening up. Suler argues that individuals believe that whatever they say or do online cannot be directly linked to the rest of their lives. Consequently individuals do not have to own their behaviour by acknowledging it within the full context of who they really are.

**Invisibility** refers to the online individual not being physically seen, with many people unaware that the individual is there at all. Suler suggests that invisibility gives people the courage to go to places and do

things that they otherwise would not. Although there is clear overlap with anonymity, Suler suggests that with the user physically invisible the disinhibition effect is amplified. That is, unlike in face to face interaction, invisible individuals do not have to worry about looking or sounding foolish and do not have to attend to other accepted conversational norms indicating displeasure or disinterest such as a frown or shake of the head.

Finally, **dissociative imagination** refers to the belief that the online persona along with online others live in a make-believe dimension, separate and apart from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. Here individuals dissociate online fiction from offline fact, whereby online life consists of games, rules and norms that do not apply in actual living. As such, Suler suggests that once the computer is turned off and daily life returned to, individuals believe they can leave that online game behaviour and their game-identity behind.

Finally, clinicians that have worked online groomers suggest that this group of sexual offenders are susceptible to the social influence of other groomers and like-minded individuals in cyberspace. That is, this online “community” appears to shape the thinking patterns and beliefs of online groomers, eventually influencing the degree and rate of their behavioral disinhibition online. Therefore, it may be that it is not just the deindividuating characteristics of the Internet, (dissociative anonymity, invisibility, and dissociative imagination) that have an influence on the groomer, but also the actual “community” of sexual offenders. That is, the online groomer’s social identification with and “immersion” in the community of like-minded individuals in cyberspace may further influence his behavior through a process of deindividuation. The **theory of deindividuation** (Zimbardo, 1969) proposes that factors such as anonymity, loss of individual responsibility, arousal and sensory overload contribute to a state of deindividuation and behavioral disinhibition where established norms of conduct may be violated.

### 3.2 Hypothetical model of online grooming

The nine phases of the hypothetical model of online grooming developed from the first phase of the current study are described in the sections below. This model will then be used as a framework to ask questions of online groomers in the next stage of the research. As such, the phases of the hypothetical model presented here may be subsequent to significant change following the interviews with convicted online groomers. The model described below should not, therefore, be interpreted as the definitive presentation of the process of online grooming.

Evidence from stakeholder accounts suggests that some offenders have up to 200 young people on their online friends lists at different stages of the grooming process at any one time, and that offenders tend to refine their activities on the basis of what had *‘worked well’* in previous encounters with young people. Consequently, movement through different stages of the hypothetical model of online grooming is neither unitary or linear, but rather, cyclical, involving a pattern of adoption, maintenance, relapse, and readoption over time. Additionally, the actual process of online grooming may take minutes, hours, days or months. As such, online groomers remain at different phases of the model for various lengths of time

according to a dynamic inter-relationship between their goals and needs and the style or reactions of the young person.

### Phase 1: Vulnerability Factors

The literature regarding contact sexual offences is clear that such behaviour does not happen out of the blue, but instead is triggered by something or someone (Proulx et al, 1999). Online grooming does not seem to be dissimilar here so, in the first phase of the model, there is some form of event that makes the online groomer vulnerable. This then appears to trigger the offender's underlying goal or desire to contact and groom a young person. From the case file review that contained interviews between police officers and online groomers at the time of arrest, two broad types of vulnerability factors were described by offenders. The first was **situational factors** and included the motivation to go online and contact young people in order to escape from or help mediate a range of marital problems. For example, one groomer in an interview with the police described how his relationship with his wife did not involve any sexual intercourse and so he went online in an attempt to satisfy his sexual needs. This type of response by online groomers resonates with Ward and Hudson's (1998) concept of underegulation, in that the offender is failing to control emotions regarding his relationship with his wife and instead goes online to seek gratification.

In contrast to situational factors, the second set of vulnerability events are associated with the offender's ability to effectively **self-manage**. As such the category was associated with events such as *feeling lonely when away from family*, *being addicted to the Internet and online chat*, or *driven by the desire to act out a fantasy life or identity online*. The final example regarding fantasy online speaks to Suler's concept of dissociative imagination. Here, these online groomers may believe that a virtual environment allows them to leave behind social norms and rules, thereby giving them permission to contact and groom young people online. The extent to which dissociative imagination is associated with intact or dysfunctional self-regulation is open to conjecture and will be explored further in the next stage of the research that involves interviews with online groomers.

#### Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:

- develop further the map of vulnerability factors
- what emotions and cognitions are associated with the different factors
- to what extent do these factors always instigate the desire to go online
- develop a map of strategies individuals may use to exit the model at this phase
- the range of timescales between different factors and moving to phase 2 of the model

### Phase 2: Grooming Style

Sexual offenders are not a homogenous group (Marshall et al, 1999) and the same may be said of online groomers (O'Brien & Webster, in press). As such, experiencing a vulnerability factor results in the individual adopting a grooming style that may be a conscious or unconscious decision, but that *is* associated with an underlying goal and self-regulation style. From the interviews with stakeholders working with online

groomers or young people, two overarching grooming styles emerged. These encompassed **targeted / planned** and **opportunistic**.

Turning first to targeted / planned actions, irrespective of the stakeholders role and country within which they were working, the view amongst professionals was that some online groomers planned their behaviour to a greater or lesser extent. Underpinning this belief was the idea that it would be almost impossible for some online groomers to attract young people and skilfully move conversations towards sex and / or a physical meeting without some forethought.

*You know, if they're arranging to meet, then they're obviously going to have to in their mind how they're going to do that and how is that going to work (UK SH3 - Police)*

*I think grooming is planned out in advance. In my opinion, they have a very precise game plan (Belgium SH4 - Police)*

It seems sensible to suggest that online groomers who are acting in accordance to plans or behavioural scripts are adopting approach goals. The extent to which they are what Ward and Hudson (1998) term *approach-explicit* (systematic planner involving intact regulation) or *approach-automatic* (more impulsive and underegulated) is unclear and requires further work in the next phase of the research.

In direct contrast, professionals also described an opportunistic style of online grooming. As will be illustrated in subsequent phases of the hypothetical model, stakeholders sometimes talked about this behaviour as less subtle and sophisticated with little or no attempt being made to mask an explicit desire for sexual contact with young people. In fact, it is questionable whether it is appropriate to call such an opportunistic approach 'grooming', as no real victim socialisation takes place. Turning again to Ward and Hudson's (1998) theory, it seems intuitive at this stage of the research to explain opportunistic groomers behaviour in the context of approach-automatic offending. This will be further explored in the next stage of the study along with the following questions.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- ascertain whether there are other grooming styles in addition to targeted / planned and opportunistic
- to what extent do some online groomers stay within a targeted / planned or opportunistic style, or do they move between the two
- the extent to which adopting a grooming style is a conscious choice and the factors associated with each decision

**Concurrent Phase: Offender Maintenance**

Adults with a sexual interest in young people can be in little doubt that the general public finds such behaviour abhorrent. Offenders themselves may also be disgusted or unsettled with their sexual attraction towards young people but feel that they do not have the strategies or will to resist such urges. Given the view

of society towards sexual offenders and the negative emotions some offenders associate with their thoughts about young people, it is likely that online groomers will need to motivate themselves and to some extent, give themselves permission to continue grooming. This suggestion resonates with the theory of deindividuation (Zimbardo, 1969), where a loss of individual responsibility can contribute to a state of deindividuation and behavioral disinhibition. Consequently, established forms of conduct may be violated.

From the accounts of stakeholders interviewed and the review of police case files, online groomers' offence maintenance or deindividuation occurred in three, interlinked ways.

**Sexual offender forums and websites:** The literature regarding offline sexual offending is replete with descriptions of 'associations' that have attempted to promote the sexualisation and abuse of young people. For example, the *North American Boy Lovers Association (NAMBLA)* produced newsletters that offered encouragement to sexual offenders. These associations now tend to publicise their agenda online, with the key advantage for the online groomer being that they can access information **anonymously** from home. In the analysis of online groomers' case files, websites mentioned by offenders included *Cherry Popping Daddies*, *Teenagers and Kinky Kids* and *School Girls Central*. Stakeholders interviewed from across Europe described the purpose of such websites as offering tips, encouragement and potential tactics for the online groomer. Professionals were however uncertain about the extent that these sites were used to construct or consolidate a network or ring of online groomers. This will be explored further in the next stage of the study.

**Indecent images of children:** The use of the Internet by sexual offenders to trade and develop collections of indecent images of children is a well documented concern (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Quayle, Vaughan & Taylor, 2007; O'Brien & Webster, 2007). Unsurprisingly, stakeholders described indecent image collections as a key aspect of online groomers' modus operandi. The number of images on an individual machine was discussed as ranging from a few up to one million, with content from posed pictures of children to the sadistic abuse of young people. However, what is less clear from both the scoping interviews and broader literature is the sequencing of image collections and online grooming. That is, are images sought once the online grooming process is initiated, or, do online groomers begin their offending careers looking at images and then move towards online contact? The next stage of the research will offer the opportunity to explore and test these ideas.

**Offence supportive beliefs** refer to the maladaptive beliefs and distorted thinking that play an important role in facilitating or justifying contact sexual offences (Maruna and Mann, 2006). From the accounts of stakeholders and police case files a wide range of distortions were also evident amongst online groomers. These encompassed the following broad categories:

- Powerful Internet - *feeling addicted to the Internet, overwhelmed by and powerless to the Web.*
- Role-play – *'it's not really me online; I was certain that it was another man messing about; I would never actually force myself on a child.'*



- Sexual Children – *‘the young person is not saying no; they could have stopped it if they wanted to; young people online would not talk as they do if they did not want sexual contact’.*
- Educational – *‘I’m teaching them about sex’.*

Although the description of online groomers maintenance processes have occurred concurrently with phase two, it is important to note that the hypothetical model proposes that maintenance continues throughout the remaining seven phases of the grooming encounter, with all three strategies drawn upon at different times to a greater or lesser extent.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- understand the role of networks and websites in maintaining the grooming process
- describe the sequencing of image collections within individual offence patterns
- explore the role of images in the grooming process from a cognitive, affective and behavioural perspective
- map in full the range of offence supportive attitudes
- explore the nature and extent of associations between maintenance strategies and particular online grooming behaviours.

**Phase 3: Preparation and Scanning**

Once an online grooming style is adopted, with offending attitudes and behaviours reinforced or maintained, stakeholders described a period where the individual begins to prepare for the grooming encounter. For those groomers with a targeted / planned style, a preparation phase seems the logical next step. However, professionals spoke with far less certainty about the extent of preparation conducted by opportunistic offenders. In fact, it could be suggested that the opportunistic group may just be the ‘planning’ group who are using a new method. That is, some offenders may feel that there is little point wasting time grooming when they can simply just ask a willing child to meet. In the next stage of the research, interviews with convicted online groomers will explore offender’s previous and current grooming styles in order to address this question.

However, to ensure conceptual clarity in this report, description within this phase of the hypothetical model refers only to online groomers with a targeted / planned style.

When preparation for grooming was discussed, the sense amongst stakeholders was that young girls were more likely to be targeted than boys. Reasons for this beyond broad hypotheses regarding the different developmental stages of adolescent girls and boys were not evident. The issue therefore warrants further attention in the next stage of the research. Nevertheless, regardless of gender, professionals working with either online groomers or young people discussed two actions working in parallel at the preparation phase. These were the online assessment of a young person’s vulnerability, conducted using a range of ‘data collection’ techniques.

Turning first to the assessment of vulnerability, stakeholders working with groomers or young people described three dimensions of susceptibility.

**Sexual vulnerability:** contained a range of features or markers attended to by the online groomer. For example, one participant working with young people in the UK described the persistent online use of sexually explicit language by one female client. The continuous use of explicit language was described by a police officer as *red flags to groomers preparing for contact* so the potential implications here are clear. In addition, innocent conversations about sexual topics on social networking sites and pictures of young people in a state of undress were also seen as key vulnerability markers by police officers and Internet experts from across Europe.

Irrespective of the nature of sexual vulnerability amongst young females, some stakeholders felt that this behaviour was underpinned by two features. The first was naivety amongst young people that they are safe in their bedroom, and so can behave online in any way.

*.....they are thinking, 'I am sitting here in my bedroom, what can possibly go wrong' (UK, SH5, young person specialist)*

The second concerns the desire to be taken seriously as a sexually mature person.

*.....they appreciated being taken serious, they (the online groomers) give them compliments that they are grown up, so the child will get confirmation of being somebody and a grown up (Norway, SH1, young people expert)*

Unfortunately, this desire to be seen as mature may also reinforce the offender's maintenance process. That is, they can convince themselves that they are the right person with the right skills to see the young person as a sexual adult. Therefore, this merging of a young person's online sexual behaviour with the groomer's aims provides the offender with a clear incentive and angle on which to match and mirror their initial approach to the young person.

Despite the focus here primarily being on young girls, some stakeholders were clear that where boys were sexually vulnerable, this tended to focus on their sexual identity. Here, young boys who discussed their sexuality, feelings about other boys or the process of 'coming out' on specific websites were seen as particularly susceptible to an approach. Consequently, some professionals had experienced online groomers targeting these young boys on the premise of 'educating' them about their sexuality.

**Cognitive:** There were two facets to cognitive vulnerability discussed during the interviews. The first was in regard to some young people being *'intrigued by the idea of contact with an older man'*. The consensus amongst professionals working with young people tended to be that such intrigue was underpinned by a risk-taking thinking style.

*(in a Swedish study of grooming) most of the young people had what she (the author) calls self-destructive behaviour. They go online and they are asking, they know what they are doing....taking risk (Norway, SH1, young people expert)*

*...it blows my mind to know that there are more and more young girls out there who know they're chatting with a grown man. Paedophiles need to hide their age less and less, it's becoming less and less necessary for them to say they're 12 years old; they might say they're 39 instead of 45. More and more, young girls are chatting with grown men even if they know that they're way older than them. (Belgium, SH3 police)*

The second aspect of cognitive vulnerability was in relation to young people with low self esteem. Here some stakeholders described experiences of young people discussing feelings about their physical presentation. For example, a young person talking to a peer about how they *'feel ugly'* was described as exactly the sort of topic that presented the opportunity to commence grooming.

**Social:** The overarching feature of social vulnerability was a sense of emotional loneliness amongst some young people online. This manifested in two ways. First, young people who did not tend to talk to many other peers online or become regularly involved in discussion topics were perceived as vulnerable to grooming. In some ways this is congruent with the literature about contact sexual offending, whereby sexual offenders will tend to target the child that appears isolated or in the 'out-group' amongst peers.

The second feature of social vulnerability was in relation to the young person's relationship with their parents or carers. For example, stakeholders from across Europe identified online accounts of problems at home as a key vulnerability marker for online groomers. That is, the online groomer recognises that the young person may crave some empathy, attention or feedback from an adult. Consequently, the groomer uses this information to make an opening approach to the young person that resonates and is engaging. In phase 5 below we outline in detail the process of groomers ensuring their initial approach matches the vulnerability markers exhibited by the young person.

Looking at the styles of vulnerability described above, it seems likely that theories of online disinhibition and self-regulation may help explain these behaviours. For example naivety regarding safety and anonymity online may relate to feelings of **invisibility**. Similarly, the online risk taking of young people may be associated with **underegulation** and so on. As such, the final part of the European Online Grooming Project will look to empower young people by raising awareness about the reasons behind and potential implications of their behaviours.

Of course, it is possible for young people to be vulnerable to grooming across one or a number of the dimensions described above. However, the key feature underpinning groomers' behaviour here was what one Italian police officer described as *"an assessment of just how much the young person is willing*

to disclose online". As such, the next sections describe the methods used by online groomers to conduct a vulnerability / disclosure assessment.

Stakeholders discussed three broad methods which groomers used to gather the necessary information about the young person they wanted to contact. The first involved scanning personal **blogs**<sup>4</sup> for information that could be used to make a legitimate and credible first contact. Alongside the reading of blogs, professionals also talked about groomers conducting covert observations of **online chatter** about a young person or people. These observations were conducted in forums such as *MSN* and *Hi Five*, with the overarching objective of finding out what sort of things the individual was prepared to discuss online, and / or the type of information other young people discussed about the individual targeted. Here stakeholders felt that online groomers were particularly interested in conversations of a sexual nature in order to use the information to create a credible approach personally, or via an alias. In addition, online chatter also facilitated an assessment of the extent the young person may be sexually disinhibited or 'active' before contact is made.

The final method used by online groomers was profile pages on **social networking sites**<sup>5</sup> such as Facebook and MySpace. Here online groomers were again assessing the extent of disclosure made by the young person and the sort of comments that their friends also made. However, the key advantage for the offender was that they also had a picture of the young person so were able to target individuals who had characteristics that matched their personal preferences (hair colour, ethnicity, body size and so on). A further advantage of social networking profile pages at the preparation phase was that the risk of harm was skewed towards young people and away from the online groomer.

*...(offenders) don't go out anymore, they don't run the risk of some observant parent or dog walker thinking, what's that guy doing, it's a bit odd, 'cause they are working alone. They may be married and they may have a family but that persona is completely separate. There'll be a different email, it'll be something the family don't know about so they are working very solitarily, so they have no risk of being reported by an observant individual (UK SH4, police)*

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- explore why girls are primarily targeted – key dimensions
- understand the full map of young person vulnerability dimensions
- how do online groomers know where to look for initial information
- what are the groomers thoughts and feelings when they are assessing young people
- what maintenance activities is the online groomer conducting at this phase
- what are the strategies used to attempt to exit the offence process at this time
- extent that planning exists amongst opportunistic groomers

<sup>4</sup> A blog is a type of website usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries.

<sup>5</sup> A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services.

#### Phase 4: Identity Assumed - 1

With the online grooming encounter prepared for and the young person's vulnerability assessed, stakeholders discussed working with some online groomers who assumed an identity prior to the first contact. According to stakeholders, this behaviour was underpinned by the desire to engage the young person by using a persona that will best meet the needs or vulnerability factors assessed at Phase 3. From the stakeholder interviews and review of case files, two forms of identity masking emerged. The first involves changing **individual characteristics** such as the online groomer's age or physical appearance. This could be carried out using text, images or both methods. In addition, some online groomers would shape their identity to include engaging interests such as fashion, modelling, particular television programmes, and genres of music.

In contrast, stakeholders also talked about some online groomers adopting **other identities** with more extreme changes to their individual characteristics. Again the overarching motivation here was to present an engaging, safe and trustworthy profile to the young person. As such, some men assumed the identity of a female online who could be either the same age or a different age than the groomer. For example, one case file reviewed involved an adult man who presented as a young female adolescent. Here the motivation to use the adolescent profile involved safely introducing the concept of sex to the young female.

The vast number of young people online presents a significant number of potential grooming opportunities. In response to this, stakeholders talked about some online groomers using a number of other identities concurrently.

*I've got suspects at the moment who have four identities.....they've created two identities of 13 year old girls and two male, and what this guy has done is absolutely plan it to make sure that he can have backup. He'll have one on Yahoo! Messenger, one on MSN. Why? Well, you can't be on two MSN at the same time but you can be on others, so he can actually be two people (UK SH 4 - police)*

The scale and range of identities adopted by groomers is not certain. However, what does seem clear is that constructing one or a range of online aliases requires some degree of forethought and so may be most relevant to the planning pathway of the hypothetical model. In addition, the theories described earlier may also help explain aspects of this behaviour. First dissociative anonymity may allow online groomers to dissociate their online actions from their real-world behaviours. This may then allow some online groomers to ask sexual questions as a young person that they would not feel comfortable as an adult. Second, in terms of self-regulation, individuals who adopt viable aliases may well be approach-explicit offenders with intact self-regulation and clear, well defined goals.

It is important to note however that stakeholders interviewed across Europe were clear that in some cases, the online groomer made no attempt to change their offline identity when they were online. That is, the individual would present online as a 41 year old professional with a sexual interest in young

people. To some extent this style of presentation seems more akin to the opportunistic under-regulated and impulsive groomer but requires further testing at the next stage of the research.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- how identities are initially constructed by individuals – planning and research
- the extent online identities are refined over time – evidence bases for such refinement
- the steps taken to log and manage the use of multiple identities across multiple contacts with young people
- the cognitive, affective and behavioural maintenance strategies used when constructing and selecting an online alias

### **Phase 5: Initial Contact**

At this phase in the process the online groomer makes the first contact with the young person. Methods of contact described by stakeholders included desktop and laptop computers, webcams<sup>6</sup>, game platforms with Internet capacity such as the PlayStation 3 and mobile telephones with and without Internet capability. Once online, popular sites described for contact were Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, Hi Five, MSN and Yahoo messenger. It was clear from the scoping interviews that online groomers used a variety of contact methods at different times and the rationale for this behaviour is discussed in the next section below.

With the young person assessed and contact methods selected, stakeholders felt that there were two overarching objectives of an initial approach for groomers with a targeted / planned style. To present the young person as unique and the groomer's identity as the individual who can meet those unique needs. For example, if at phase 3 the groomer has a feel for a vulnerable cognitive state linked to feeling ugly, some stakeholders described how the groomer may post flattering remarks about the young person such as “*you're really pretty, you have great eyes*” or “*you look great in your school photo.*” On the other hand, if an online groomer has a sense of sexual vulnerability at phase 3, they may adopt a young girl's identity at phase 4 in order to initiate what would appear to be an innocent sexual conversation at phase 5.

*If a groomer pretends to be a girl of the same age, it won't be long before he asks: “Tell me, have you ever masturbated? How does it work? What is it you feel when you do that?” With time, the conversation revolves more and more around sex. (Belgium, SH3 police)*

Although phase 4 above described some online groomers using up to four pre-developed identities concurrently, these aliases life-stories were not perceived to be static. Instead, within a particular identity, some groomers were felt to have the capacity to quickly and effectively adjust responses or interests during initial contact and thereafter in order to remain attractive to the unsuspecting young person. This behaviour further supports the hypothesis that online groomers with a targeted style may have a series of well developed approach goals and very intact self-regulation.

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<sup>6</sup> A webcam is a video capture device connected to a computer or computer network. Their most popular use is for video telephony, permitting a computer to act as a videophone or video conferencing station. This can be used in messenger programs such as Windows Live Messenger, Skype and Yahoo messenger services.

Alongside meeting the needs of a particular young person via a range of identities, professionals also felt that initial contact could be engaging, credible and sustain further conversations in the future if the correct language was used.

*If he hopes to communicate, he's got to speak the same lingo. If they don't communicate the same way, if the groomer isn't familiar with the language the kid uses, it just isn't going to happen (Belgium, SH3 police)*

An example of credible communication amongst groomers with a planned / targeted style is the use of text-type. Here words within sentences are abbreviated, with letters sometimes replaced by numbers. The case file review revealed one online groomer that consistently used text-type when communicating with the profile page of a 14 year old girl, for example, 'Hi gorgeous hope to cu l8r'. In addition to text-type, some online groomers also used other imagery to communicate with young people. These tended to be emoticons<sup>7</sup> and further helped underpin an authentic first contact.


In stark contrast to these well crafted, engaging and sometimes seductive approaches, the opportunistic groomer was described as tending to not hide his explicit request for sexual contact at this phase. For example, one police officer in Norway described these approaches as occurring within two seconds and involves a question about the young person's sexual interest in older men followed by an offer of sex. There was also evidence of this behaviour from the review of police case files. Here one online groomer's profile page picture was a photo depicting his flaccid penis. He would then approach young people to explicitly ask for sex. Although the extent of under-regulation and online disinhibition here seems clear, it is also possible that this strategy may be a self-regulated rational choice. That is, the individual may have the strategy of approaching one hundred young people in the hope that just one will agree to contact. This will be explored further in the next stage of the research.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- the extent that some offender have preferred modes of contact and the features underpinning mode selection
- methods used by online groomers to research current communication styles amongst young people
- whether any style of communication are piloted before use in a live grooming encounter
- the thoughts and feelings associated with behaviours at phase 5

### Concurrent Phase: Risk Management

The literature regarding the modus operandi of offline sexual offenders describes the adoption of a range of risk management strategies (Wakeling, Webster, Moulden & Marshall, 2007). The scoping research indicates that risk management techniques are also prevalent amongst the behaviour of some online groomers. The overarching aim is to facilitate greater process control for the online groomer by moving the

<sup>7</sup> An emoticon is a textual expression representing the face of a writer's mood or facial expression. For example, :), :(, and :D. They have now been replaced by pictures such as 

young person from a public forum to private online or offline space. This then provides less opportunity for the young person to be distracted or warned by online peers / friends, chat-room moderators and less chance of detection by the police. To this end, stakeholders described some online groomers attempting to elicit from young people a private email address, postal address or mobile telephone number in order for the grooming encounter to continue with the chance of detection by the authorities and/or significant others minimised.

Alongside moving the grooming process from public to private settings, three other broad risk management strategies were described by stakeholders.

**Language:** The Internet industry has made a range of attempts in order to keep young people safe online. One of these allows parents or carers to set filters on a young person's computer to stop or block explicit language or images being used or sent online. To bypass this issue, some online groomers ask if young people are 'active' rather than if 'they have had sex'.

As technology develops, such as the introduction of mobile phones with full Internet capacity, deploying robust risk management strategies becomes far harder for parents and carers. For example, one stakeholder from Belgium described how parents / carers were once advised to keep a young person's computer in a public place so that the adult can observe the online behaviours. As such, online groomers watching the young person's environment via webcams see and hear an appropriate adult nearby. However, this advice was now felt to be completely redundant as the young person more often than not essentially has a computer in their pocket. In the next chapter we will describe how lessons drawn from this research will be applied in practice.

**Hardware and logistics:** When online groomers register and use one legitimate email address, personal address and name with one Internet Service Provider (ISP), the chances of identification, and arrest by the authorities increase. This is due to the ease in which police forces can track and trace illegal activity online. Consequently there was evidence in the scoping study of online groomers managing this risk by using multiple ISPs, multiple proxy servers<sup>8</sup> and up to seven laptops.

**Authenticity checks:** As publicity surrounding Internet sex offending increases, so does awareness of the techniques some police forces adopt to convict offenders. For example, a UK television channel recently broadcast a programme that described in detail the online undercover work of the Metropolitan Police Paedophile Unit<sup>9</sup>. Although this publicity helps raise awareness of online offenders, it may also help groomers adapt their behaviour in response to the threat from law enforcement agencies. For example, some police stakeholders in Belgium and the United Kingdom discussed how in an undercover conversation with an online groomer, they had been asked to show themselves on a webcam to prove that they were an

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<sup>8</sup> A proxy server is a server that acts as an intermediary for requests from clients seeking resources from other servers. The main aim of proxy servers is to keep machines behind it anonymous and help to bypass security / parental controls.

<sup>9</sup> [www.itv.com/presscentre/tocatchapaeodophile/wk39/default.html](http://www.itv.com/presscentre/tocatchapaeodophile/wk39/default.html)



adolescent girl. In addition, officers attempting to infiltrate networks of online offenders also talked about being asked to upload indecent images of children in order to prove their authenticity. For both these examples, it is challenging for the police to respond in a way that does not alert the online groomer to the acute risk of arrest.

Whether an online groomer is using one or all of these risk management strategies, it seems intuitive to suggest that they are using well thought-out **approach behaviours** and goals with **intact self-regulation**. Such rational behaviour therefore presents a challenge for law enforcement agencies and so will be explored further in the next stage of the research.

However, it is important to note that not all online groomers were perceived by stakeholders as adopting risk averse behaviours, as discussed by one stakeholder from Norway.

*...you have those people who naively think there is no risk involved. I have had several of those clients. They don't even dream that their activities will be disclosed and don't understand that they are putting their whole future highly at risk. Often this applies to people without any other criminal background. There is a risk for a long stay in prison, but they act as if this risk does not exist. So this group has deficiencies in not being able to assess the risk of their own activities. (Norway, SH4, offender treatment expert)*

Again Suller's theory of **invisibility** as a facet of online disinhibition may explain such risk naive behaviour. On the other hand, online groomers with no risk management strategies may be acutely aware of the personal risk their behaviour presents, but are so **underegulated** that risk management strategies are not at the forefront of their functioning. The next stage of the research offers the opportunity to test these theoretical explanations further.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- further develop the map of risk management strategies
- understand how strategies are researched and refined
- the extent different strategies may be used at different times
- the cognitive, affective responses when using risk management strategies
- for those with limited or no risk awareness, the rationale for this behaviour.

## **Phase 6: Identity Assumed - 2**

Throughout the sections above, a hypothetical association between online groomers with a targeted / planned modus operandi and an Approach-Explicit self-regulation style has been suggested. Perhaps the clearest support for this hypothesis exists at phase 6, when some online groomers switch from the identity of a young girl or woman, to one that is either their own or with similar characteristics, such as an adult male but younger in age. During the grooming process, this behaviour appears to be underpinned by the nature of the online groomer's final desired outcome. Specifically, whether the groomer wants to physically meet and have sex with the young person.

To illustrate the process of identity switching, the review of police case files contained one online groomer who used the identity of a young woman (Jane) to contact and engage the profile of a young girl (Sarah). In the initial contact phase, a conversation about sex between Jane and Sarah takes place. During this discussion, Jane introduces her other friend Bob into the discussion. Bob is described as a charming guy who would who 'would love to show Sarah all she wanted to know about sex.' Jane then says that she will pass Sarah's details to Bob so they can talk some more and perhaps meet up. Consequently, the online groomer then contacted Sarah as Bob, whereby he talked about wanting to take pictures of her and then requested oral sex.

In a further example of this process, a UK police officer described how he was monitoring an online conversation between a female young person and an online groomer posing as a woman. Here the conversations involved a discussion of fashion and slowly moved towards the groomer's desired outcome of a physical meeting at a shopping centre. The premise of the meeting was that the woman and the young girl would go shopping together. However, in this case, the identity switch did not take place either physically or virtually. Instead, the groomer approached the child in a shopping centre car park and told the young girl that the woman would be along in a minute as she was using the toilet. With the circumstances of the meeting validated by the groomer, an offer to 'wait for the woman in the groomer's car' was made. In the next stage of the research, the complex process of managing and assuming multiple identities will be explored further as follows:

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- understand how groomers know when the time is right to assume another identity
- map the thoughts and feelings associated when a different identity is assumed
- explore whether groomers who use fake identities always try and switch, or do they maintain a case by case approach to the process
- explore the range of maintenance strategies used at this phase
- ascertain whether those groomers who are switching identities can conduct this behaviour when grooming more than one young person concurrently. If so, explore the techniques used to keep track of conversations and offence progress.

### **Phase 7: Desensitise**

In the literature regarding offline sexual offences against children, offender's attempts to get the young person used to the idea of sex, nudity and sexual contact is well documented (Marshall et al, 1999). The key motivation for this behaviour is that subsequent sexual requests by the offender will not seem unsettling or out of the ordinary to the young person. There was also evidence of desensitisation from online groomers, described in the interviews with stakeholders from across Europe and the review of police case files. Two forms of desensitisation emerged that encompassed images and language.

**Visual:** The process of online desensitisation encompassed sending young people explicit images and films. Across Europe, stakeholders agreed that sending adult pornography was a recurrent tactic amongst online groomers. The method to deliver the image or film was not however consistent. For example, there were

reports of some online groomers sending adult pornography as a clearly labelled attachment. On the other hand, the review of police case files illustrated that one online groomer hid his adult pornography attachments behind emoticons. That is, when a smiley face emoticon was clicked in the conversation, the young person would be played files of adults kissing, female masturbating and male ejaculating. The use of a smiley caricature to initially mask pornography may be to 'help' the young person make the association between a smile and a sexual act. This however warrants further exploration during subsequent stages of the study.

Alongside adult pornography, the sending of child abuse images or films was also described by some stakeholders. The rationale here was to normalise child abuse and so stakeholders talked about images being sent that depicted the child 'smiling' whilst being abused. However, not all stakeholders had seen evidence of such behaviour. Police officers in the UK were particularly adamant that they had not experienced this either when investigating or working undercover against online groomers. Whether or not child abuse images are sent to young people, the use of pornography to desensitise is further evidence of planned approach-explicit behaviour with intact regulation.

In contrast however, the final dimension to visual desensitisation involved the groomer sending explicit images of him. This could entail pictures or videos of the penis or the online groomer masturbating and ejaculating. By sending an image of them masturbating, the online groomer appears to be making no attempt to subtly mask their actual intentions. Therefore, it may be that these offenders are adopting an Approach-Automatic style that is characterised by impulsivity, less careful planning and underregulation.

**Language:** Running concurrently to visual desensitisation, some online groomers created further process momentum by also using language to reassure the young person. In some cases the statements made by groomers are directed at the vulnerabilities of the young person. For example, if a child has said online that they do not feel loved, stakeholders described online groomers showing pornography whilst typing 'I can love you like this' or 'I can love you the most'. Again, the concept of the offender matching and mirroring their approach has relevance here. As such, the young person is encouraged to associate their need for affection with an explicit image, which is concurrently reinforced by the groomers 'language of love'. Additional normalisation strategies described by stakeholders included groomers describing abuse as 'education about sex' or a 'safe thing to do'.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- understand how groomers know when the time is right to desensitise
- map the thoughts and feelings associated when desensitising
- explore the process of selecting which combination of images or language to use
- explore the range of maintenance strategies used at this phase
- ascertain whether groomers have ever sent child abuse
- understand further the use of emoticons

## Phase 8: Offence Maintenance & Intensity

Up to this point in the model, some online groomers have masked their true intention in a range of ways. However, with the young person desensitised, the stakeholder interviews and case file review appeared to demonstrate two behaviours working concurrently to continue and intensify the interaction. In turn this helped move the process close to the desired final outcome.

The first collection of behaviours is conducted in order to **continue the grooming process** and ensure that there is no logistical reason for the young person not to keep in contact with the offender.

*Mobile phones recharges may help maintain contact with the victim. An online groomer apparently does these kinds of presents as a simple favour. He tells the victim he just wants to see her happy, that ten Euro are a little thing for him and that he won't be calling her every day. (Italy SH4 – Internet expert)*

Alongside sending phone credits, there were reports of other gifts being offered to young people. For example, one police officer in the UK talked about how working undercover he had been sent a new mobile telephone. Sending such a gift serves a number of functions for the groomer. First, it allows conversation and grooming to be continued one-to-one. Second, it renders process risks such as parental checks of a young person's phone redundant. That is, the parent may not know that the child has the new handset. Third, it motivates the young person to continue contact on the premise that further gifts may follow.

Aside from telephones, there were other 'gifts' sent to young people that on the face of it look like an incentive but in fact kept the grooming process moving forward. Here some stakeholders talked about young people being sent a webcam to use on their computer. With the webcam accepted and installed by the young person, it then becomes more difficult for them to resist subsequent requests to appear online, either clothed or in a state of undress. In addition, stakeholders who had been working undercover using the identity of a young girl also discussed being sent underwear by groomers. Related to the rationale behind sending webcams, with the underwear accepted by the young person, it perhaps becomes more difficult for them to turn down a request to show the groomer 'how they look in their new clothes'.

The second collection of behaviours serves more to **explicitly incentivise** the young person to continue contact. However, these 'incentives' may be delivered in either a subtle or hostile manner. Subtle behaviours include the sending of cash or other gifts. Stakeholders felt that underpinning these actions is the belief amongst groomers that some young people are not particularly affluent. As such, it is engaging and attractive to be sent money. It may also help the young person feel special or unique, two key vulnerability factors identified earlier in the hypothetical model.

In addition to hard currency or gifts, the review of case files also showed that some online groomers used language that could make the young person feel sorry for them and actually present the offender as the

victim. For example, when discussing the potential for sex with the young person, some groomers made statements such as 'I know this is wrong but I just can't help it' and 'I hope you don't think I am being rude but I really like you'.

In stark contrast, hostile incentives were unsurprisingly harsh and delivered to leave the young person in little doubt regarding the consequences of not continuing contact or acceding to sexual requests.

*The groomer gradually increases his control on the victim, who doesn't really realize it. An example of this control is the online blackmail: I remember a Roman young girl seduced on chat by a groomer who started to recharge her mobile phone, as a normal favour a friend can do another one. He then started asking her to send him pictures of her bare-breasted and then with only her underwear on. When she refused to give him pictures of her totally naked, the groomer had enough photos to blackmail her (Italy SH4 – Internet expert)*

The blackmail techniques described in the quote above were delivered in a range of ways but all contained the threat of disclosure. For example, some young people were threatened with images of them naked being posted on social networking pages, or school websites. In other cases, the threat involved sending explicit images of the young person to the email addresses of their online friends or peers. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the threat of disclosure alone is a powerful motivation for young people to continue contact. However, coupled with the young person's feelings of responsibility or guilt that they may have 'accepted gifts' or 'let this happen', the online groomer is in a strong position to move forward to their desired final outcome.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- map the full range of methods used by online groomers to continue and intensify the offence process
- understand how risk decisions are taken before money, clothes or technology are sent to the young person
- explore the conscious or unconscious use of 'self as victim' language
- map the thoughts and feelings associated with this phase
- understand the maintenance strategies used at this phase
- explore the potential for cross-over between use of subtle and threatening incentives
- explore whether the online groomer sees any risk in threatening the young person and how they decide the optimum time to do so

With the preparation, set-up and maintenance strategies in place, the outcomes phase is reached. For some young people, this may be the first time they realise that they are not being seen as unique, educated, grown-up, loved or cared for. However, the online groomer has manipulated the young person in such a way that it is now very challenging for them to not carry out sexually explicit requests. From the scoping research conducted, these requests took two broad forms.

The first involved **continuing with contact** whilst having to agree to a range of sexually explicit requests. These requests contained both online and offline contact such as talking about sex with the groomer on the telephone or being asked to masturbate in front of a web-cam. In phase 7 desensitisation techniques such

as sending pornography films were described. From the review of police case files there appeared to be some similarity between the nature of the pornography sent to young people and the sexual requests subsequently made. For example, one online groomer sent the profile of a young girl a film showing an adult woman masturbating. This offender then went on to ask the young person to masturbate in front of a webcam whilst online. This nature and extent of this association will be explored further in the next stage of the research.

The second category of request involved a **physical meeting** between the online groomer and the young person. Meeting requests could be made with the purpose of sexual contact clearly explained. In such circumstances, meetings were sometimes set up at the young person's house when the parents were not at home. In other cases, the young person agreed to meet the online groomer at a neutral venue such as a café. When contact was established, the young person and the online groomer could then travel to a private venue such as a hotel.

The interviews with stakeholders also demonstrated that a physical meeting could also be arranged under the guise of other more innocent activities. For example, one police officer in Belgium described a case where the young person travelled to a meeting in order to go to the museum – completely unaware of the groomer's real intentions. Similarly, in phase 6 above the case of a young girl travelling to a meeting to 'go shopping' was described. Whether there is a subset of online groomers who never disclose or act out their true intentions until a meeting is occurred is open to conjecture. This and the following questions will be explored further in the next stage of the research.

**Key questions / issues for the research interviews with online groomers:**

- explore whether outcomes of online contact or physical meetings are mutually exclusive
- map the thoughts feelings and behaviours at the outcomes phase
- understand the maintenance strategies used at this phase
- explore whether any attempts to abort a meeting and control the behaviour are made
- map the self-talk and feelings when the outcome behaviours are realised

This chapter has described a hypothetical model of online grooming and attempted to set these behaviours in the context of existing theories within forensic and social psychology. The phases in this hypothetical model will be evaluated and refined following interviews with convicted online groomers. The interviews with stakeholders were not just about furthering an understanding of online grooming. Rather, they attempted to map stakeholder's operational aspirations for the largest pan-European study of online grooming to date and are described in the next chapter of the report.

## 4. Applying the research to practice

The European Online Grooming Project is the most comprehensive and in-depth study of online grooming to date. The size of the project and multi-disciplinary nature of the consortium therefore provides a unique opportunity for the research to meet the needs of professionals working strategically and operationally to tackle the problem of online grooming. This chapter begins by setting out the tangible benefits that stakeholders articulated they wanted to get from the project. It then provides a summary of key lessons the research team can take from the scoping stage into the next stage of the research. The chapter concludes by outlining the key milestones for the remainder of the project.

### 4.1 Strategic and Operational benefits

The economic and social cost of offline child sexual offending is well documented and far-reaching. Costs on a similar scale may also be relevant to online offending given the extent of the problem. Recent data from UK CEOP indicates that a significant number of young people have been approached or sent illegal content online. It is therefore vital for the European Online Grooming Project to deliver tangible benefits that can empower policy makers, police forces, treatment providers, carers and young people to effectively manage the challenge. This need was articulated by one stakeholder who recognised the potential for the research to enhance cross-agency and border knowledge and effectiveness:

*I would also like to find out about the experiences of other colleagues as well. To obtain more details on the profile of this sort of abuser across Europe to help us work well. (Belgium SH4 - Police)*

In the interviews at the scoping phase, four core needs were identified for the next phase of the project and subsequent reports. These encompassed:

#### **Strategies to aid detection and interviewing**

Police officers from across Europe were unanimous in the view that little is currently known about the process of online grooming. Consequently, during investigations and in arrest interviews, some officers talked about learning new information and techniques whilst investigations were live. Although this practice can be helpful to further the body of knowledge, there was a sense amongst the police interviewed that having time to reflect on robust research evidence and develop best practice before investigations began would be most beneficial. As such, officers identified three broad areas of benefit to investigations.

**Understanding hardware and software developments:** some officers talked about computer technology developing faster than they can keep up with. However, there was a clear sense that some online groomers had a very good grasp of developments in computer hardware and software, and so were currently 'ahead of

the game' in some investigations. For example, officers in Norway and the UK talked about how the recent move from stationary computers to portable devices presented investigation challenges. These involved the impact on investigations when attempting to monitor the use of multiple static and portable machines. In addition, there was also interest in finding out more about how the use of different hardware may shape different grooming strategies during the offence process. Similarly, whether there is a difference in the response of young people according to the mode of hardware contact made.

**Groomers' research techniques:** as we have set out in the previous chapter, the sense amongst police officers was that a degree of planning underpins online grooming behaviour. Therefore, to aid investigations and interviews, officers talked about wanting to know more about how online groomers developed the ability to 'effectively groom' young people. There were two aspects discussed in relation to this knowledge gap. The first involved finding out more about how online groomers know what hardware, proxy servers, and email accounts to use in order to manage or **minimise the risk of detection**. The second aspect related to the need to understand more about how online groomers know how to **communicate credibly with young people**. In the previous chapter we have set out how some online groomers used emoticons and text-type to engage young people. As such, there was a wish to learn more about how groomers learn and develop a range of communication techniques that are engaging and credible to young people.

**The impact of images:** In the online offending research literature, the interaction between indecent image use online and / or physical contact is a key question that currently remains unanswered. It was therefore unsurprising that stakeholders wanted the European Online Grooming Report to shed more light on the nature and extent of any interaction between image use and online grooming. From the perspective of investigations, robust information about the bearing of indecent image use was felt to help officers to know more about when to effectively intervene with an arrest. For example, whether the use of indecent images at different phases of the maintenance process is the marker of an increased likelihood of offline contact or offence escalation. Regarding arrest interviews, police officers talked about how some online groomers deny that they have a sexual interest in young people despite having a number of indecent images on their computer. Consequently, greater knowledge about the role of images in the grooming process was felt to help empower police to ask intelligent and appropriate questions during initial interviews.

### **Understanding assessment and treatment needs**

During the last decade, mental health professionals have had to begin to face the challenge of treating sexual offenders who have used the Internet to facilitate or commit their sexual offences. Despite this, relatively little is known about the characteristics and treatment needs of individuals who commit such offences (O'Brien & Webster in press). Many of the existing studies of Internet offenders have tended to focus on their behavioural characteristics and so tend to describe rather than explain the process of online grooming. Consequently, stakeholders from across Europe were united in the view that a key contribution of the current research would be to enhance understanding of the psychological functioning of this population.



In turn, this was perceived to help ensure that assessment and treatment approaches had the optimum impact.

*I want to understand how online grooming activity is connected to other kinds of risk activities and offensive activities and what are the underlying dynamics in the grooming process as such, what part of the grooming process is different in the big picture. As a therapist I'm concerned with the underlying motivation. What is it that propels these people to commit these acts? If we want to help them and avoid abuse in future, we need to understand this. (Norway SH4 – Treatment Provider)*

*You want to understand as a treatment provider what made him want to do it, what enabled him to do it, what triggered it, what maintained it, all that kind of thing. At the moment a lot of the research isn't very helpful as internet offenders are often split in to two groups and compared without people thinking how valuable is this and what does it explain. Often I get journals with an internet paper. I get halfway through and I think it's not really going to tell me anything. (UK SH1 Treatment Provider)*

The lack of consistent and robust evidence meant that stakeholders described a diverse range of treatment practice with Internet Sexual Offenders. For example, in Norway, interventions were described as not structured and involved individual conversations between the therapist and the offender. Another Norwegian stakeholder talked about the position in Denmark where intervention approaches centred on frontline prevention. To this end, hotlines for offenders to call if they feel at risk were described. The UK has a similar system, the *Stop It Now*<sup>10</sup> initiative. From a UK perspective, there was also diverse practice described during the scoping interviews. This focussed on two interlinked dimensions; **programme content** and **treatment group composition**, both of which presented challenges for treatment providers. Taking content, the new phenomenon that is online sexual offending meant that until relatively recently, online groomers would be placed in treatment groups with offline offenders and rapists. Stakeholders felt that this was challenging as online offenders would disengage, arguing that the content was not relevant to them. Consequently, one UK stakeholder described development of the *The Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme* (i-SOTP) (Hayes, Archer & Middleton, 2006). Although there is some emerging evidence that the i-SOTP may be effective, creating a treatment group explicitly for one type of sexual offender was felt to create the potential for offender / offence type collusion. In fact, this is one of the reasons that 'traditional' sexual offender treatment groups tended to comprise both child molesters and rapists. With online grooming, the sophisticated and technical nature of the offence means that this collusion challenge could be heightened for therapists.

*And also sharing technical tips, because that's where it does become problematic because they could, potentially, if they wanted to, share a technical tip in front of me and I wouldn't even know they were doing it. (UK SH1 Treatment provider)*

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>

Therefore, the overarching need from an assessment and treatment perspective was for the research to help to understand and explain online groomers' behaviour in order to empower professionals to develop and use the most effective assessment and treatment interventions.

### **Raising awareness across key groups**

In the previous chapter we have set out a model that clearly illustrates the risks that online groomers can present to young users of the Internet. Consequently, stakeholders from across Europe were united in their desire for the study to raise awareness amongst key groups that include: policy makers, Internet Service Providers, carers and young people. With regard to young people, it was here that some stakeholders felt that there was a specific need for adolescent Internet users. That is, the model of online grooming has described some adolescents as consciously participating in risky behaviours online. As such, some stakeholders felt that there was a need for this group to be made aware, in a credible way, of the potential risks associated with their behaviour:

*I'm really concerned about prevention because I see a lot of things out there. If there's one thing I feel really strongly about, it's prevention programs for kids. They're a good thing because kids need to be protected from paedophiles. But when we ask (adolescents) who this type of prevention is for, they say it's intended for younger kids. That's the problem (Belgium, SH3 - Police)*

### **Avoid demonising the Internet**

Related to the awareness raising initiatives described above, the final need identified involved taking steps to ensure that the Internet is not seen as a completely harmful place. Underpinning this view was the fear amongst some stakeholders that the research may install a sense of fear in parents and young people that leads them to believe all Internet use will be dangerous. Instead, it was felt important that the research did what it could to retain balance in the debate. That is, on the one hand raise awareness but not to the extent that young people feel that they are at risk of a sexual approach every time they log on.

Regarding the management of online groomers, effective relapse prevention interventions for offline sexual offenders have moved from a situation where the advice was always to avoid risky situations. Instead, offenders are encouraged to develop approach goals, which involve a positively-focused orientation, focussed on creating a "good life" (Mann, Webster, Schofield & Marshall, 2004). Given that the European Online Grooming Project will inevitably raise awareness about online groomers' Internet use, some stakeholders were keen that this risk awareness does not translate into policy decisions that meant convicted online groomers were automatically banned from future Internet use.

*We've always had this question about a man who goes to a nightclub and follows a woman home and rapes her. Well what do you do, do you stop him going to nightclubs? Do you say that he can't go out at night? We'd say of course not. Do you stop him talking to women? No, what you want is for him to have safe, happy, respectful relationships with women. And if you didn't want him to go to nightclubs*

*or go out at night or talk to women then you may as well leave him in prison, but actually what we're saying is that's not necessary, the men are capable of change, they're capable of managing their lives differently but it's about them believing its possible. So, I think that just as I wouldn't say to a rapist 'ok your relapse prevention plan involves never speaking to a women after dark', personally I think it's impractical to say to an Internet offender your relapse prevention plan involves you never using the Internet. (UK SH1 - Treatment Provider)*

## **4.2 Next steps**

The sections above present a challenging set of needs and objectives for the European Online Grooming Report. However, this scoping report and the model of online grooming therein presents the first step in meeting the challenges presented by stakeholders. The next phase of the research will take place throughout 2010 and involve in-depth interviews with a cohort of convicted online groomers. Following detailed analysis of this dataset, 2011 will see the research team conducting widespread dissemination of good practice prevention messages across Europe to policy makers, police officers treatment providers, teachers, parents, carers and young people. This will ensure that the research has the chance to offer practical messages that enable young people to effectively manage risks associated with the Internet, and online groomers the opportunity to understand and change their behaviour using effective treatment interventions.

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## 6. Appendices

## 6.1 Case file analysis proforma



co-funded by the European Union



**POG: Case file review scoping template:**

Reviewer name: -----

Date of review: -----/-----/-----

Case jurisdiction: -----

Case identification: (site code<sup>11</sup>/rater initials/case number)

**Offender demographics (age, marital status, previous sexual offence convictions, other convictions, current sentence; victim preference)**

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<sup>11</sup> NatCen 001; KU 002; UMH; 003; BI 004; ROME 005

Overview of the offence (single encounters or multiple / concurrent grooming; victim(s) age; victim(s) gender; method of contact: website, chat-room, game platform name; other ICT used; operates alone or part of a network)

Identity assumed and language used (adult own; adult other; child known; child other; how learnt to behave Online; aspects that made him 'credible')



**Contact specifics (time of day, method, frequency, consistency of contact method – features underpinning any variation – managing risk; sustaining victim interest)**

**Outcome (physical contact, webcam behaviours, verbal contact, victim rejection; key implicit and explicit features underpinning ‘unsuccessful’ and ‘successful’ encounters with young people; time between first contact and final outcome)**

**Victims perception of the encounter (what made it real, normal, unsettling – code for implicit and explicit features of the account)**

**Presentation in police interview (extent of openness discussing grooming, motivation for the behaviour, aspects minimised, ownership of the behaviour, congruence with victims account)**

**Other reviewer notes**

## 6.2 Stakeholder interview topic guide



## Understanding the process of online grooming

### Stakeholders Topic Guide

**Research Aim:**

To gather a strategic overview of the current policy, operational, and treatment position regarding the management of online groomers in order to inform the development of robust research instruments

**Research Objectives:**

- understand the current legislative context
- describe the techniques used by online groomers to target and maintain contact with children and young people
- map the barriers and facilitators to interviewing online groomers
- identify the stakeholders aspirations for the research

*As this is an exploratory study, we wish to encourage participants to discuss their views and experiences in an open way without excluding issues which may be of importance to individual respondents and the study as a whole. Therefore, unlike a survey questionnaire or semi-structured interview, the questioning will be responsive to respondents' own experiences, attitudes and circumstances.*

*The following guide does not contain pre-set questions but rather lists the key themes and sub-themes to be explored with each group of participants. It does not include follow-up questions like 'why', 'when', 'how', etc. as it is assumed that participants' contributions will be fully explored throughout in order to understand how and why views, behaviours and experiences have arisen. The order in which issues are addressed and the amount of time spent on different themes will vary between individuals and according to individual demographics and dynamics.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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*Aim: to remind the participant about the aims of the study, the consortium and funder, explain how the interview will be conducted, and how the data collected will be used.*

- Introduce self and organisation
- Reiterate the aims of the study and interview
  - independence of organisation from EU
  - review topics to be covered
  - recording of interview, data storage and DPA issues
  - confidentiality
  - how findings will be reported
  - length of interview – 1 - 1.5 hours
- Definitions
  - remind participant that we are focussing on men who have groomed online, not those who ‘just’ exchange images (although groomers may also do this)
- Any questions?

## 2. BACKGROUND AND LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

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*Aim: to explore the stakeholders background and involvement in working with sexual offenders and online groomers, to understand the current legislative context within which online groomers are managed.*

- Current position / job title
- Nature of role
  - main responsibilities (specifically regarding Internet offenders)
- Other previous roles that involved contact with sexual offenders (probe for policy and / or frontline practice expertise)
- Current legislative context regarding online grooming
  - sentencing:
    - types
    - length
  - treatment regimes (probe for differences between custody and community)
    - how are groomers treated
      - single vs. group treatment
      - model of change adopted (CBT, psychoanalytical etc)
      - specific Internet treatment courses or mixed in with ‘contact offenders’
  - extent this helps the management of online groomers
    - adequacy of sentences and treatment provision
    - what, if anything, needs to change regarding the management of online groomers

## 3. ONLINE GROOMERS MODUS OPERANDI

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*Aim: to understand how online groomers behave by mapping the range of behaviours groomers use to contact and meet young people. Here we are interested in understanding the different types of equipment groomers use to contact young people, the language they use, the process of victim selection, whether they work alone or in groups and how consistent their behaviours are over time and with the same and different victims:*

**INTERVIEWER NOTE:** It is important to explain to stakeholder that we are interested in understanding the full range and diversity of behaviours. This information is key to help us understand the different ways in which groomers behave so we can ask intelligent questions during the groomer interview stage of the study. For each of the subsections below we are looking to gather as much detail as possible.

*Ask the participant to think about the different types of online groomers they have encountered in the past 12 months, the equipment they used, how they behaved, approaches to young people that were 'successful' or 'unsuccessful'. In the course of the participant mapping groomers' behaviour, it will also be important to probe for motivations to use particular methods or behave in different ways.....*

#### **Hardware or equipment used (here we are trying to map the range of ICT groomers utilise)**

- Information, Communication, Technology (ICT)
  - Internet
    - different types of websites (Bebo; Facebook; MySpace etc)
    - chat-rooms (different types of forums where young people meet)
    - web-cams (purpose, one way or two way)
    - email exchange and instant messaging
    - other image exchange (describe the types of images sent to young people as part of the grooming process)
  - Telephone
    - type of phone used (landline, mobile – probe for rationale for selection of phone 'type')
    - calls made between young person and groomer (probe for frequency of call where relevant)
    - texts sent between young person and groomer
    - photo and video messaging
    - nature and extent of any images sent by groomer and / or young person
  - Game platforms (the nature and extent that online gaming is being used as a victim access method by groomers).
    - Playstation 3
    - X-Box
    - Wii
    - Other

#### **Preparation for grooming (here we are looking to explore the extent to which groomer research online behaviours before contacting young people)**

*In the experience of the stakeholder.....*

- extent to which groomers prepare for online encounters

*If preparation is a factor.....*

- map different types of sources offender use to research online environments and young peoples' behaviour.

#### **Online presentation (here we are exploring the range of ways that offenders present themselves to young people online and the motivation for different styles of presentation)**

- Extent that offender assumes their own or another identity and rationale for selection of a particular identity:
  - own adult identity
  - another adults identity
  - young persons identity
  - other gender
  - altering identity presented to same young person (e.g. switch from female to male etc.)
- Language used to groom young people (probe for and get examples of):
  - adult language – non sexual

- romanticised
- adult language – sexual
- young persons language
- slang or buzz words used
- text type (i.e. abbreviating words: four weeks = 4 wks)
- communication types (emoticons)
- how knowledge about the different styles of language and signs (smiley's etc) is acquired by the groomer

**Victim selection and encounter management (to explore the range of different features that underpin who young people are targeted for grooming and how the range of encounters are managed and sustained)**

- how are young people selected for approaches
  - what are they key markers that are identified by groomers
    - language of the young person (probe for examples here)
    - online profile / behaviour of the young person (probe for the specific types of information that young people are 'giving away')
    - extent to which young people selected mirror offenders 'fantasy' / images
- how are contacts managed and escalated
  - probe for the different strategies offenders use within contacts
    - time taken for language used to become explicitly sexual
  - *if appropriate or a meeting is the objective*: how do the contacts develop towards a physical meeting over time
    - types of persuasion – coaxing, reassurance, threats
    - extent of openness / honesty from groomer about what the physical meeting will entail
    - extent of openness / honesty from groomer about their identity - age
- extent payment is made to young people to maintain contact – probe for:
  - amounts paid
  - cash or other gifts
- what makes a young person 'ready' for contact escalation and movement towards a physical meeting

**Location, frequency and timing of online encounters (here we are trying to understand the physical and temporal features underpinning online groomers behaviour)**

- range of grooming locations – probe for:
  - home
  - office
  - other (including more public locations such as internet cafes)
- how are locations selected – probe for:
  - privacy
  - low risk
  - other
- what is the range of total number of contacts made to different young people
  - what features underpin the use of few or many contacts
  - extent of multiple concurrent contacts
- when do contacts occur (probe for)
  - range of different times
  - features underpinning particular times selected
    - school hours
    - when parents away from home
    - safeguarding their own privacy
- duration of individual online contacts
- elapsed time between online contacts – intensity of contact
  - over what length of time in total
- time between contact and physical meetings
  - features underpinning short and long grooming behaviours
- location of physical meetings and rationale for choice



**Individual or groups (here we are looking to see the extent to which offenders groom alone or as part of a broader network, or both)**

- extent individuals operate individually
  - what features underpin the solo approach
- what do groups 'add' for groomers – probe for:
  - added 'expertise'
  - encouragement
  - normalise the behaviour
  - additional potential victims
- how do groups form (in person, online)
- how are they maintained
- how do individuals find out about them
  - key issues for membership – privacy, trust
  - how are these criteria judged

*Having mapped the specific behaviours, the following sub-sections ask the participant to take a 'step-back' and reflect on broader features of the online grooming process.*

**Consistency of hardware and behaviours (here we are looking at the extent to which offenders are consistent with different young people or whether tactics are tailored or amended for different young people)**

- Map the features that underpin consistency or diversity of approaches
  - to get and maintain the interest of the young person
  - risk management
  - offender type
  - child characteristics (age, gender etc)
  - other

**Risk management (the extent to which online groomers are risk aware)**

- what are the range of risks the groomers identify
- how do groomers perceive risks
- range of risk management strategies adopted – probe for:
  - different Internet Service Providers
  - hacked into others' accounts
  - fake identities used
  - multiple log ins used
  - multiple hardware sources
  - other strategies encountered

**Contact offending and online groomer crossover (here we are looking to understand whether there is any association between being a contact offender and online groomer and the extent to which one behaviour may influence the other)**

*In the experience of the stakeholder.....*

- extent to which grooming is a separate behaviour or associated with other contact sexual offending

*If separate.....*

- features making online grooming distinct from other offending

*If associated.....*

- order of behaviours
  - online grooming first then other contact offences managed and commissioned offline
  - other contact sexual offences managed and commissioned offline and then online grooming

- what makes offline sexual offenders move into online offending
  - extent and ease of potential victim access
  - low risk
  - other
- role of abuse images in the facilitating the desire to groom online
  - where accessed
- what are the key features that differentiate different types of groomers that are important to cover in our sample

*Any other behaviour not covered in the sub-sections above*

#### **4. INTERVIEW PRESENTATION**

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*Aim: to understand how online groomers behave in interview to help the research team learn lessons for future groomers fieldwork*

**Ask the participant to think about the groomers they have interviews in either an arrest, research or treatment context.....**

- How did you approach the interview
  - punitive style of questioning
  - collaborative approach
- What dictated the approach used
  - experience
  - training
  - operational guidance
  - type of groomer – probe for identifying markers at presentation
- Same approach every time
  - what underpinned diversity of interview styles
- Groomers response to offence-specific questions (key section for us to prepare for our fieldwork)
  - extent of their openness
  - aspects minimised
  - dominating or controlling behaviours during this section of the interview
  - denial
  - consistency in presentation throughout the interview
  - extent groomers are different to interviewing ‘offline contact’ sexual offenders
  - turning the interview back on the interviewer
- Any other issues to consider
  - gender
  - location of interview

#### **5. ACCESSING THE SAMPLE**

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*Aim: To gather information about the best way to locate and access a sample of online groomers for interview **NOTE: this section will not be relevant to all stakeholders interviewed***

- Nature of any existing sample frames of potential groomer participants
- Location of potential participants
- Effective approaches to gain informed consent
- Gatekeepers / governance processes that require negotiation

- Timing associated with these processes

## 6. ASPIRATIONS FOR THE STUDY

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*Aim: To explore the stakeholders aspirations for the research and how it can have most applied value to them, their colleagues and organisation*

- What are the key things that you need to know about online grooming
- How could the research influence your practice
- What are the most useful ways of hearing about research findings
- Views on the project website
  - content
  - language
  - updates
- Other closing comments

**AT THE END OF INTERVIEW THANK PARTICIPANT FOR THEIR TIME. REITERATE THAT THE INTERVIEW WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL. TELL THEM THAT THEY ARE WELCOME TO CONTACT MEMBERS OF THE STUDY TEAM TO ASK QUESTIONS AT A LATER DATE IF THEY WISH. EXPLAIN NEXT STEPS FOR THE STUDY. PROMOTE WEBSITE FOR MORE INFO ON STUDY**