

Press Release

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STUDY REVEALS COMPLEXITY OF ONLINE GROOMING PROBLEM

Findings from a study of convicted online groomers will be discussed today at an event attended by the social networking industry, the Metropolitan Police, government departments and leading children's charities. The study, the European Online Grooming Project, has been conducted by the National Centre for Social Research, Kingston University and universities in Belgium, Italy and Norway. Results will be presented by lead researcher Stephen Webster from the National Centre for Social Research and Professors Julia Davidson and Antonia Bifulco, from Kingston University.

Early results from the study challenge several myths about the way offenders select and groom their victims and present new challenges to all those working at the front line of this public health issue. They show that not all offenders behave in the same way, and that there are at least three distinct types of groomer, which researchers have labelled "Distorted Attachment", "Adaptable Offender" and "Hyper-Sexual".

Lead researcher of the project, Stephen Webster, comments:

"This new evidence sounds an urgent warning that even more needs to be done to help young people stay safe online. The adoption by social networking sites of a panic button and the work being done to raise young people's awareness of online risk is excellent, but this research tells us that taking a 'one size fits all' approach is no longer enough. We want the launch of these findings to mark the start of a new phase in how we respond to this issue."

The three types of online grooming behaviour identified in the study of offenders are:

"Distorted Attachment": This type of groomer thinks he is in a romantic and consenting relationship with the young person he is grooming. Contrary to traditional assumptions about online grooming behaviour, this style of offender in the sample did not use indecent images of children and doesn't try to hide his identity. This type of groomer tends to spend a long time socialising with a young person online, getting to know them before arranging a meeting in real life'.

"Adaptable Offender": This type of groomer can use lots of different identities online, and adapts his style of grooming depending on the character, presentation and circumstances of the young person he is in contact with. He views the people he is

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grooming as sexually mature and may or may not use indecent images as part of the grooming process. He won't necessarily attempt to meet his victim(s) in real life.

“Hyper-Sexual”: This type of groomer is engaged in sharing and acquiring extensive numbers of indecent images of children. He will be in touch with other sexual offenders online, but tends to have little or no interest in meeting his victim(s) in real life. This type of groomer will probably use different identities or a sexually explicit profile name and photo. The offending style of these groomers tends to be characterised by fast contact with the young person.

Researchers argue that key to tackling the problem of online grooming is addressing the dis-inhibiting effect of the online environment on groomers *and* young people.

Stephen Webster comments:

“We need to face up to the fact that the online environment dis-inhibits young people as well as adults, and that young people are behaving in a sexual way much earlier on than they used to. The evidence is telling us that some young people are unwittingly playing into the hands of online groomers, by choosing sexual profile names and acting in a sexual way with people who they meet online.”

Professor Antonia Bifulco, a lead researcher in the project from Kingston University, said:

“Young people need to be educated about what constitutes appropriate behaviour online, building on the work being done by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre and Childnet. One of the concerning findings was the extent to which young people use sexual screen names and photos of themselves. They often don't realise these will be available across cyberspace and remain there for a long time acting as a magnet for groomers.”

Professor Julia Davidson, fellow lead researcher, added:

“This is a growing public health problem, and we need co-operation between criminal justice services, internet providers and educators to work together to stem the proliferation of online grooming. The UK is leading the way but we need European-wide legislation because the internet has no geographical boundaries.”

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The researchers will now host workshops with young people, parents and teachers to develop recommendations for how education about online safety can be improved in light of the findings from the European Online Grooming Project.

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Notes to the Editors

1. The European Online Grooming Project is being conducted by a consortium of researchers from Kingston University, Université de Mons (Belgium); Università degli Studi di Palermo (Italy); Norwegian School of Management (Norway). It was led by the National Centre for Social Research.
2. The National Centre for Social Research, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).
3. With more than 25,000 students, Kingston University is the largest provider of higher education in South West London, offering an extensive range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes both in the United Kingdom and overseas. The University is renowned for teaching excellence, has established itself as a growing force in research and is a pioneer in e-learning. In its most recent University league table, The Sunday Times praised Kingston's record for teaching quality for positioning it "among the best in the modern university sector". The University boasts a raft of modern facilities. Three new buildings have opened as part of a £123 million investment programme.
4. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 36 convicted online groomers from prisons in the UK, Belgium, Italy and Norway. All of the offenders interviewed were male.
5. Focus groups with parents, teachers and young people will take place between March and May 2011. An annual report will publish in June 2011 and the final report will publish in December 2011.

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6. You can find out more information about the European Online Grooming Project at <http://www.europeanonlinegroomingproject.com/>

Contact:

Emma Cutting

Communications Manager - National Centre for Social Research

E: emma.cutting@natcen.ac.uk

T: 0207 549 9563

To interview Professor Julia Davidson or Professor Antonia Bifulco, please contact the Kingston University Press Office on 0208 417 3023 or email press@kingston.ac.uk