

# It Is Not Your Fault, Tell Someone: Case Studies of Young Women's Experiences of Online Grooming in England

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## Abstract

This research study aimed to explore how young people experience cybercrime, with the study being inductive. Thus, the type of crime(s) emerged from the convenience sample and so happened to be online grooming of young women. Using the case study method, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with young women who were ages 12 and 16 (at the time of the study) with in-depth information provided for each case. The data were then triangulated between the research team and the Victim Service who co-created the study (including materials) and co-produced the manuscript. This method of triangulation also occurred to ensure the similarities and differences identified in the discussion. Similarities included that both young women had a trusted adult to tell and that they were not to blame. Differences occurred with the police involvement as well as contradictions in the advice of 'just block them'. This study calls for better school-based interventions and police response using actual case studies for training and education. Suggestions for future research are further explored and include more tailored quantitative projects, further case studies and other qualitative methods, and a standardized curriculum for safety that can be devised with the Victim Service. Most importantly, if online grooming occurs, this is not because the individual has done something wrong or deserves it, rather they should tell an adult and seek help to end the behaviour.

## Keywords

Justice, online grooming, victim protection, victimization, young women

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## Introduction

Technology has become an ingrained part of society, which has brought about a series of new crimes now committed through the internet. Generally speaking, these new crimes are often referred to as 'cybercrimes'. There is a lack of consensus within the literature on how cybercrime or online crimes are operationalized, however, it is acknowledged at a basic level that it can occur to an individual. The internet also provides many more ways in which offenders can interact with potential victims, providing enabling factors and removing many obstacles to contacting a potential victim.<sup>3</sup> Young people in particular are highly engaged with technology and the internet, with Instagram being the most popular medium used followed by Snapchat and Facebook.<sup>4</sup> Whilst there are data available from the Office of National Statistics, this looks at young people 16–24, missing data captured on younger adults. This includes how the pandemic has influenced the perspectives of young people's online usage. In particular, anxiety and depression have increased among young women during 2017–2020, and whether this is related to the increased use of the internet during the pandemic requires further study.<sup>5</sup>

There are a range of risky behaviours young people are susceptible to online, which could lead to young people individually experiencing cybercrime. This can include the receiving of sexual messages, communicating with strangers online (which potentially leads to meeting offline), data misuse and cyberbullying.<sup>6</sup> There are several additional ways whereby a young person can be impacted by cybercrime. These can consist of hacking, grooming or identity theft. Social networking sites (SNS) have been used in several ways to facilitate the sexual exploitation of young people. Researchers have found that in the United States, approximately 2,322 arrests were made for sex crimes against minors, in which SNSs<sup>7</sup> were used as the platform of preference to commit the crime.<sup>7</sup> With SNSs<sup>7</sup> having a significant involvement in the sexual exploitation of young people, it is important to include information on using SNSs safely when educating young people on the risks that make them susceptible to cybercrimes. Although international research has shown that sexual harassment is only one form of cybercrime, with violent threats and slander being more common in 15-to-30-year-olds surveyed in Finland, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom,<sup>8</sup> the experience of reporting cybercrimes

<sup>3</sup> David Smahel et al., *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries*. EU KIDS Online, Oct. 2, 2022, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/eu-kids-online/reports/EU-Kids-Online-2020-10Feb2020.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Statista, *Social Media Sites or Apps Used by Children in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2020*. Stastica, Oct. 2, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/415138/social-media-usage-among-children-uk/>.

<sup>5</sup> Office of National Statistics. *Social Networking by Age Group, 2011 to 2017*. ONS, Oct. 2, 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetand-socialmediausage/adhocs/007401socialnetworkingbyagegroup2011to2017>.

<sup>6</sup> Smahel et al., *supra* note 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kimberly J. Mitchell, *Use of Social Networking Sites in Online Sex Crimes Against Minors: An Examination of National Incidence and Means of Utilization*, 47(2) J. ADOLESC. HEALTH. 183 (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Matti Näsi et al., *Cybercrime Victimization Among Young People: A Multi-nation Study*, 16(2) J. SCAND. STUD. CRIMINOL. CRIME PREV. 203 (2015).

also has been found to be problematic, with Leukfeldt and colleagues<sup>9</sup> documenting that adults impacted by cybercrime in the Netherlands felt their needs as a survivor of cybercrime were not often met. Furthermore, they typically felt dissatisfied with the response from the police when reporting the crime. The police response has yet to be explored in terms of young people and cybercrime, and it is of interest to the research team to see whether young people who have experienced cybercrime have similar perspectives as adults with regard to their experiences of reporting the crime.

## Literature Review

Moving from an international landscape to the European context, across 11 European countries (including the UK), 81% of children reported using their smartphone every day to access the internet.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it would appear, the majority of young people in Europe are susceptible to risks that come with using the internet. The report further found that within the space of a year, 25% of children aged 9–16 reported feeling ‘bothered’ or ‘upset’ by something that happened online, such as viewing sexual content, online bullying or aggressive behaviour, or technical problems. It was also found in the report that 11% of young people have experienced the misuse of their data in a number of ways, ranging from being scammed for money, having their phone tracked and having their accounts hacked. In a report produced by the British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 4% of primary school children and 5% of secondary school children were reported to have received or been shown a naked or semi-naked image or video from an adult, and 2% of primary and secondary school children reported sending a naked or semi-naked image of themselves to an adult (Bentley et al., 2019). In addition to being susceptible to cybercrime, young people can also be perpetrators of cybercrime. Adolescents who score high on social and operational digital skills also possess the skills required to become a perpetrator of cybercrime.<sup>11</sup> In addition, young people possess the characteristic required of hackers by demonstrating curiosity over technology and being highly computer literate.<sup>12</sup> Adolescents, then, have a complex level of involvement in cybercrime from both a perpetrator perspective and/or as someone impacted by cybercrime. Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that the socio-cognitive immaturity associated with adolescence might have important implications for adolescents and perpetrating and/or victimization of cybercrime.

It has been widely noted in theoretical frameworks that adolescence is a period of life in which risk-taking behaviours increase, including online risky behaviours.<sup>13</sup> This is partly driven by an increase in sensation seeking combined with an immature ability

<sup>9</sup> Erik R. Leukfeldt et al., *Exploring the Needs of Victims of Cyber-dependent and Cyber-enabled Crimes*, 15(1) VICT. OFFENDERS. 60 (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Smahel et al., *supra* note 1.

<sup>11</sup> Smahel et al., *supra* note 1.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Aiken et al., *Youth Pathways into Cybercrime*. Middlesex University, Oct. 2, 2022, [https://www.mdx.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/245554/Pathways-White-Paper.pdf](https://www.mdx.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/245554/Pathways-White-Paper.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Smahel et al., *supra* note 1.

to self-regulate.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, sensation seeking has been linked with risky online behaviours that could leave adolescents more susceptible to cybercrime, with higher levels of sensation seeking in adolescents linked to greater exposure to harmful online content,<sup>15</sup> receiving sexual messages online<sup>16</sup> and with the willingness to interact with strangers online and to meet these strangers offline.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, two aspects of adolescent egocentrism could be further linked to online risky behaviour: the personal fable (or the egocentric belief that the adolescent is more special than is the case) and the imaginary audience (or the egocentric belief that the adolescent is the special focus of other's attention, even if this is not the case).<sup>18</sup> First, both the imaginary audience<sup>19</sup> and the personal fable<sup>20</sup> have been linked to greater self-disclosure by adolescents on social media, and it could be argued that greater self-disclosure could lead to greater vulnerability online. But more seriously, higher levels of personal fable and imaginary audience have been linked to higher online risk-taking behaviours in adolescents, with risky online behaviours (as measured with a questionnaire) including accepting friend requests from strangers on social media and sending nude photos and videos of themselves to strangers online.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the above theoretical insights are socio-cognitive features of typical adolescent thinking that could leave the adolescent especially vulnerable to cybercrime.

Overall, there would appear to be minimal research in the area of cybercrime and young people in the UK and England, which needs to be addressed. Whilst the quantitative research demonstrates that young people are susceptible to a range of online crimes, additional qualitative research is required to further understand exactly how cybercrime is experienced by young people, and to balance the over-reliance on quantitative methods. An in-depth understanding, which can occur through the use of qualitative methods, would help to better shape and inform education surrounding online safety for young people, as well as ensure the support received meets the needs of those impacted by the crime. To elicit in-depth responses and to allow a discussion of a range of cybercrime to emerge naturally from the data, the research question was exploratory and asked, how do young people in England experience online crime?

<sup>14</sup> SARAH-JANE BLAKEMORE, *INVENTING OURSELF: THE SECRET LIFE OF THE TEENAGE BRAIN*, 3 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Nikol Kvardová et al., *Who Is Exposed to Harmful Online Content? The Role of Risk and Protective Factors Among Czech, Finnish, and Spanish Adolescent*, 50(8) J. YOUTH ADOLESC. 2294, 2294–2310 (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Sonia Livingstone & Anke Görzig, *When Adolescents Receive Sexual Messages on the Internet: Explaining Experiences of Risk and Harm*, 33 COMPUT. HUM. BEHAV. 8 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Vojtěch Mýlek et al., *Factors Influencing Interactions Between Adolescents and Unknown People from the Internet: Findings from Five European Countries*, 114(2) CHILD. YOUTH SER. REV. 105038, (2020).

<sup>18</sup> David Elkind, *Egocentrism in Adolescence*, 38 CHILD DEV. 1025 (1967).

<sup>19</sup> Marina Kremer et al., *Development as an Explanation for and Predictor of Online Self-disclosure Among Dutch Adolescents*, 9(2) J. CHILD MEDIA. 194 (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Drew P. Cingel et al., *Exploring Predictors and Consequences of Personal Fable Ideation on Facebook*, 28 COMPUT. HUM. BEHAV. 28 (2015).

<sup>21</sup> Maša Popovac & Lee Hadlington, *Exploring the Role of Egocentrism and Fear of Missing Out on Online Risk Behaviours Among Adolescents in South Africa*, 25(1) INT. J. ADOLESC. YOUTH. 276 (2020).

## Method

The research was qualitative, using interviews to collect data with young people from 12 August 2020 to 20 January 2021 to form the case studies. The research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and the research had to move from face-to-face to being conducted online via the parent's Skype for business (Case 1) or WhatsApp for business (Case 2), depending on the young person's preference and needs. The research team kept the recruitment open until August 2021 in anticipation of having one more participant, however, the individual originally identified declined the interview in the end. The decision was, then, made with input from the Victim Service to end recruitment and begin writing up.

The Lead Senior Researcher (ADW) worked in partnership on the study with the Victim Service, who have many years of experience working with crime victims, and who have a special caseworker working specifically with young people. Due to the sensitive nature of the crimes, the research team did not directly approach any young person for participation as the research team could not determine their well-being to participate: researchers were not aware of any individual's case and how the crime had affected them. Members of the research team also avoided approaching service-users' guardians directly so as to not place any undue stress on the guardian to agree to their child's participation. The Victim Service notified the guardians of those eligible that there was a study being conducted on young people's experiences of online crime and asked them if they would like their child to take part. If so, the guardian was provided with an information sheet that contained the name of the Lead Senior Researcher (ADW) so any questions could be answered, or further information provided. The Deputy Head of Service or Children and Young People Caseworker from the Victim Service (who have appropriate trauma-informed training) would, then, approach the young person to see if they would be interested in taking part, ensuring their participation would not re-traumatize them and (if participating) by supporting them through each stage of participation (other than the interview). The support from the Victim Service prevented the repetition of any detailed account of the crimes that occurred, with the interview schedule being co-created with the Victim Service for this reason. However, their needs assessment would be revisited with the young person and their guardian throughout the research participation and after they were discharged from the service.

If the young person and their guardian were interested, the Deputy Head of Service (PR) or Children and Young People Caseworker (EF) would then introduce them to the Lead Senior Researcher (ADW). After the child and guardian were introduced to the Lead Researcher (either virtually or over the telephone, depending on the needs of the young person), they would be able to go away and discuss the information sheet, consent and assent form together with their worker from Victim First. One participant used their online camera during this meeting and the other spoke to the researcher over the phone in advance to make them more comfortable during the interview and to build rapport. The worker from the Victim Service would then collect the forms for the research team, after it was agreed that the young person was a good candidate for the research project.

Once the forms were received electronically, the interview was arranged. This was done at a time when the young person was available and when the young person could have both a trusted family member and their Victim Service worker available (in case they felt at any point in the interview they could benefit from additional support). Before the interview began assent was again received verbally from the young person and consent from their trusted support person, who would be nearby throughout the interview. Post interview, the Victim Service would contact the young person to check on them for extra measures of well-being and provide support if necessary. Neither of the two interviewees had any safeguarding concerns from the Victim Service at the follow-up point.

The research used convenience sampling and included the first young people whose guardians agreed that their child can take part in the study, with assent from the young person, and who met the inclusion criteria. Two young women with parental consent to participate came forward, and (as previously stated) recruitment was stopped as no new cases were presented for several months. As the research was exploratory and inductive, to understand the experience of young people, the original sample age range was between the ages of 11 and 16, who had experienced any type of cybercrime, with ages of participants listed below. The research team found that the young women who were willing to participate in the study both ended up being impacted by online grooming. All interviews were audio recorded for the purpose of transcription. No video was used or recorded during the interview, but as mentioned above the young women were allowed to meet the researcher and turn on their video during this time.

## **Procedure**

Case studies are an accepted approach to understand the complex ‘mega-systems’ that have existed in health services research since the 1960s, as case studies have the ability to be employed flexibly. It is an appropriate method to use when the interview data are rich and concrete, with case studies being used if the study is exploratory and is led by discovery.<sup>22</sup> In this study, the main interview questions were grouped around the loose domains of background, support, police involvement and justice, which emerged from conversations with the Victim Service. Due to the nuances of case studies, they are often not presented in the same fashion from one study to the next. This study used an instrumental approach, which is used to answer the research question of an unexplored phenomena and advance theoretical understanding that is applicable to real-life scenarios. Whilst there are two case studies, they were each presented in their own right, ensuring a holistic approach, with the researchers then looking for commonalities and differences. Researcher triangulation is also used in case studies, where additional researchers are asked to comment on whether there is rich enough detail or if the link to the

<sup>22</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Enhancing the Quality of Case Studies in Health Services Research*, 34(5 Pt 2) HEALTH SER. RES. 1209 (1999).

literature appears to be valid.<sup>23</sup> Members of the research team, therefore, read the cases and either provided additional detail or identified points where further detail was required; all links to literature in the discussion were also closely explored.

## Ethics

Ethical considerations were made in reference to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018), Practice Guidelines (2017) and Code of Human Research Ethics (2nd edition, 2014). Considerations were made to respect the dignity of participants by understanding that empathy would be required when conducting data collection due to the power dynamic between the interviewer and the research participants, and the individuals being survivors of crime. This is also important given the sensitive nature of the interviews. A high level of professionalism was ensured through competency: the research team included experts in victim support, qualitative research, adolescent development and cybercrime. The responsibility of the research team included awareness of the duty of care to research participants. As such a Disclosure and Barring Service check was obtained for the Lead Senior Researcher (ADW) who would have direct contact when interviewing participants. The integrity of the research team is an important part of the study and has been incorporated within the research design. The study, as mentioned, was co-created with a local Victim Service to avoid researcher exploitation and to ensure an accurate, unbiased representation of victims' experiences. The Victim Service suggested that the best way to conduct the interviews was online and that non-monetary rewards (such as a certificate and campus tour) would be more appropriate incentives for participants to thank them for taking part. However, the motivation for participating for each of the young women was to warn others and help them be safe online. The research team also had training that follows the BPS practice guidelines, which included experiences with safeguarding children and adults. Training was also completed on the Equality Act 2010 and the Data Protection Act (GDPR, 2018). Considerations were further made in relation to risk to both the research participants and the researchers. The consent forms, audio recordings and transcriptions were password protected and uploaded onto the University's Figshare account, which is a secure cloud storage system. Guardians were also informed that they could withdraw their child's participation during the interviews at any time without providing reason and for up to 72 hours after the interview occurred. The information sheet was written in a language that the young person and their guardians could understand. Special considerations were made to obtain written consent from the guardian of the child prior to the interview commencing, with the young person providing verbal assent online. Consent was also provided to recruit participants through the Victim Service. Confidentiality has attempted to be maintained by providing participants with pseudonym initials to create an additional level of

<sup>23</sup> Nerida Hyett et al., *Methodology or Method? A Critical Review of Qualitative Case Study Reports*, 9(1) INT. J. QUAL. STUD. HEALTH WELL-BEING. 23606 (2014).

anonymity during transcription and publication. Further resources were provided on the participant information sheets in case the child's guardian or young person would like additional support after participating in the study, in tandem with reminding them at the end of the interview that they can also contact their support worker from the Victim Service. To reiterate an important point, none of the young women nor their guardians reported any distress during or after the interviews. Ethical approval was granted by De Montfort University and REF 3402. The below extracts have been amended and this is indicated by brackets to improve flow.

## **Results**

### *Case Study 1*

CB was 12 years of age and enjoyed her trampoline. Her interview was shorter than the second case study as her mother was present for support upon request, and at times she turned to her mother to help her answer the interview questions. This was important to note as it shows the interdependency needed at this age to feel confident in sharing her experience. CB reported that she started to get messages on WhatsApp from this 'random guy', who wanted pictures of her 'upper area [chest]'. She had her 'nanna [grandmother]' and her 'mum [mother]' for support when the crime happened.

After the crime occurred, she described how it affected her day-to-day behaviour. It was 'always playing on [her] mind' and she could not get back to normal. The Victim Service provided her with a caseworker, and she explained that the benefit of this was that she could meet the caseworker in a safe environment (e.g., school). Therefore, CB did not have to go into charity, which at her age seemed overwhelming. CB liked that the caseworker came to school so they could talk. CB felt that this support was adequate. CB further explained that any education that could have come from school would not have prepared her to prevent the crime, as it was someone messaging her (not her messaging someone else), who was not a friend of hers on social media. She did say her school provided education on how to stay safe online, though as stated she said this would not have prevented the crime.

The best advice she received was not to hide or feel embarrassed by [the crime] and that you should tell people what is happening. CB told her mother as soon as the man messaged her asking for sexual pictures, and her mother then blocked the person from messaging her. They also got her a new phone with a new phone number. The problem was that he somehow got her new number and he was not blocked on the new phone. He was then able to message her again, and so her mother blocked him yet again. CB said 'mum [mother]' was a 'really good' source for support. Overall, she did not feel she had received any 'bad advice' during her experience with the sexual text messages she was receiving.

When asked what advice she had for other young people to stay safer online, she said (reiterating her previous best advice), 'Not to keep it [the crime] in and



tell people straight away, [and] don't talk to strangers block them right away.' When asked what justice would look like for her, CB had a long pause, and in a defeated tone, she said, '[I am] done with it really, so I don't think it [the crime] will really get justice.' They had turned to the police, the three of them, but she explained that the police were no help. The police she explained, 'never really bothered coming out', even after her mother had reported it over the phone. The police said someone would be in touch and then no one ever got in touch, even though CB had the messages on WhatsApp and the man's phone number (the number was given to the police when she reported the crime). It was CB's mother's actions and the service's actions that stopped the messages when the police did not get involved. However, she did feel the support from her family and the Victim Service was enough to help her feel safe. The Victim Service she felt provided enough support through school, but she and her family felt defeated by the lack of police response, and they did not want the service to support them to follow up the incident further with the police. She said the blocking worked well though, with the Victim Service also providing CB and her mother technical support with this, and as stated the contact had stopped now.

CB said she used to use other platforms like Instagram, but she did not use them anymore as that is how she now feels safe. To end on a positive note, she was asked what social media she now enjoys, and she reported she only used the internet to play games. She enjoyed playing the games and said she shares a laptop with her 'mum' to play games. She was using the laptop mostly for schoolwork due to the quarantine from COVID-19 taking place in the UK. When asked if she was using the internet more due to the pandemic, she was still using e-mail, and this was her school e-mail used to receive correspondence from the school. She felt safe using the internet for school after the negative experience.

## Case Study 2

DH was 16 years of age. She was not at school at the time of the interview, staying home most of the time due to the pandemic. Despite her bad experiences online, she seemed confident in wanting to help others stay safe online and was able to laugh throughout the interview. This was mainly because she saw the interviewer as a 'dinosaur [old]' who did not understand how social media worked, sometimes leading to laughter when being asked how the different mediums worked. The interviewer assured that DH felt comfortable throughout the whole interview, reminding her that she could be as vague as she wants to, to help ensure this. She was groomed online by a man in his 30s–40s, who she had been speaking to for 2 years online, prior to reporting him to the police. However, at the time they began to talk, he said he was 16–18 years of age.

When DH reported the grooming, she said at the time that she felt supported by her boyfriend, his mother, and once it was reported, she also felt supported by the local Victim Service. When asked if there was anyone else who could have been of help at the time, DH said 'Not really, I like to keep that stuff [the crime] to myself so I don't think anybody else would be able to help.' She preferred

one-to-one support, and she did not like going between different people when receiving support. This suggested she felt a level of shame or embarrassment in talking about the online grooming. DH had originally wanted to skip the question asking her to explain in her own words a surface level of what happened (as to not re-traumatize DH), which the interviewer allowed. But as DH began to talk more, she opened up. Her thoughts and feelings about the incident were described as 'lucky', as she felt it could have ended much worse. This was because she had made plans to go 'meet up' with the man she thought was her age. She again said she was 'lucky' for emphasis that she did not go meet up with him, and that not meeting him was what kept her safe. She was asked what about the person made her feel like meeting up was not the best decision. She replied that at the same time she was talking to the man trying to groom her, her partner and her began to get back into a relationship (after they had been separated). She left the groomer to his 'own devices' as she did not think that speaking to two potential partners was a nice thing to do, showing a good understanding of healthy relationships.

When she had left him to his 'own devices', he continued to try to message her. He created another Snapchat and Instagram account and she felt that 'he wouldn't leave [her] alone.' DH had met the individual in question virtually on Snapchat as part of a 'shout out' (which could be a video or a picture) from a friend of a friend. During a 'shout out' on your story anyone can 'swipe up' and anybody who has an account can be added, if they have the app. She explained that anyone can see it and swipe up on it and then share it on their stories, meaning it can be viewed by people not within their friends list, who can in turn open a chat with those sharing the stories. The individual in question had made contact with her through someone else's Snapchat story that was a friend. When he would not stop harassing her, DH reported the individual in question to her boyfriend. Her boyfriend had, then, told his mother. And his mother had phoned the police because DH was not going to say anything, with DH saying that 'people usually don't speak out about it so I wasn't about to go say, Oh, this [crime...] happened and I need help.' She felt 'lucky' her boyfriend's mother had known to call the police, as she was a government worker and had safeguarding training. After reporting him to the police, DH found out the groomer was older than 16–18. The groomer, then, had to go to court. When the police went to take the individual in question's laptop from their home address, they reported that there was no teenager at that address. It was instead a man, his wife and young daughter who were residing at the address.

DH had positive interactions with the police, saying they were 'really helpful', particularly the male officer assigned to her case. But when witness care (who goes on DH's behalf to court) had not updated her (or her guardian) and instead left it up to the officer to inform her, DH said this was not the correct practice. This showed that DH had knowledge and basic comprehension of the judicial system at a young age. The officer emailed or called to update on any new information. This included the court case, which was still active at the time of the interview. She explained further what the process was after she had reported the adult man posing as an adolescent male. An officer came to her house, asked her questions and took her phone for evidence. Then a detective was assigned, and he was the person who saw out the rest of the case. The court case was nearly over at

the time of interview, and the individual was soon to receive a sentence, which DH said would not be longer than two years, and she seemed doubtful that he would receive the full time. When talking about whether two years was a long time, DH said 'It is a long time for someone to serve, but maybe sometimes it's not enough.'

Through the Victim Service, she had been assigned a case worker who contacted her every two weeks, which she thought was better than every week. Sometimes the conversation was long, and other times the conversation was light, but she did feel like just having the person there was helpful. She especially appreciated the continued contact, 'Even if it's about random stuff [meeting] was much better than not really talking to anyone.' When asked if there was anything she wished she knew now that would have been helpful back then, DH said knowing the signs and red flags. She explained a key tip she learned was whether they use the same language as young people, as young people talk quite differently than someone older. She had further advice she thought other young people might benefit from, specifically, 'the way they will spell certain words, or [...] they send you photos but it may not necessarily be the face and [they] talk to you every day. And they will [...] be there constantly. And if you [haven't] seen that face, then, like, don't speak to them. Because at the time, I didn't think it was odd that he didn't send photos of his face, but I'd send him like selfies all the time [pictures of me]. But now that I do know, it's not right.'

The only environment where she felt unsupported was school. DH explained that for the first two years at her school, there was a counsellor. But the school had to let her go, and is why she found them unhelpful as the replacement counsellor did not have the training to support her. In her own words, 'They weren't trained as well as they should have been.' She did have another important message to share with other young people, and she said this was the most helpful piece of advice, 'the best advice was that it wasn't my fault, no matter what happened, it wasn't [because] of me, it's because of him and what his mind was like', suggesting there was a level of shame or embarrassment that came with online grooming. DH was further asked (if she did not mind sharing) who gave her that advice, 'It was kind of myself. And then like everybody just telling me like it [wasn't] your fault. Like, it wasn't because of you. So I kind of listened to myself and other people that it wasn't my fault that he did what he did.' As it is important DH's words are used in context, the further advice she had to keep other young people safe included, 'Make sure to check names on other social medias, see if they're actual people and not catfish [fake profiles]. And see like how old they actually are and educate themselves on like the warning signs and the red flags and don't add a lot people or like add them back when you think, Oh, I may know them, but you don't.'

The interviewer mentioned that this must be difficult with all the pressure on young people to have a good social media presence, with the need for likes, to which DH responded to also be wary of people who want a lot of attention.

On the other hand, she had received some bad advice, and this was 'Just to block him, just block him. I think that's the worst advice, just block him. Sometimes it works, but sometimes it doesn't. And to just ignore him and mute the message is [effective] but [...] they still get around [these safety measures].' For DH to have justice she explained

he needed to apologize to her what he has done, acknowledge the ‘hate he has caused [her],’ how much hurt he has caused his friends and family when they find out what he had done, the damage he had caused between them and DH for his own gratification’, and that he has a child (a daughter) he is supposed to look after. One important thing for DH to feel that she had justice, she acknowledged could not happen ‘And I think it’d be like [I] get to see what he actually looks like, to put a name to a face, but I know I can’t do that.’ This is understandable as his online persona was fake, and she was told by the police she would never see his real face. From the police perspective, this was for her own protection. To ensure the interview ended on a positive note, there was a discussion of the different American television shows DH liked to watch as the interviewer (ADW) was American.

## **Discussion**

The above case studies provide in-depth details of the accounts of two young women, both of whom experienced online grooming. The above findings suggest that there were several positive avenues of support, such as the Victim Service coming into school and the advice the young women had about not being ashamed and telling someone what is happening. There were also some contradictions, such as the advice to just block someone that worked for one case study but not the other. Distinct differences emerged as well, particularly in the police response, where the police only became involved in one of the case studies but not the other. The findings will be discussed in relation to the literature on online grooming in terms of conceptualizing the term and how online grooming behaviours manifest, the control/support in place, ending the behaviours and theoretic advancement inclusive of predictive factors. Tangible suggestions are made for future research with special consideration given to the advice these young women had to help keep other young people safe online.

### ***Conceptualizing Online Grooming Behaviours***

The definition of online grooming includes manipulation and control, in which an individual exploits someone to maintain and defend their position of power, with social media applications being the medium of choice.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, as young people now use social media to actively increase their friendship circle this provides the opportunity to be contacted by groomers, and it has been noted that not all groomers utilizing social media are caught.<sup>25</sup> This echoes the groomer from Case Study 1, in which the police did not investigate, despite the groomer’s telephone number being known. At the beginning, grooming is non-sexual and then progresses

<sup>24</sup> Libby Ashurst & Anne-Marie McAlinden, *Young People, Peer-to-peer Grooming and Sexual Offending: Understanding and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour Within a Social Media Society*, 62(4) *PROBAT. J.* 374 (2015).

<sup>25</sup> Joris Van Ouytsel et al., *Social Media and Risk: Sexting and Grooming*, *MEDIA PSYCHOL.* 1 (2020).

to sexual behaviours, as part of the deception of the adult predator, whose aim is to create a close bond that facilitates sexual advancements that are intended to dangerously lure young women.<sup>26</sup> And in these case studies, the young women were asked for either sexual photos or for an in-person meeting. Online grooming is also referred to as ‘cyberexploitation’, and the case studies fit the patterns reported in this research: the groomer was first focused on building relationships but then progressed to conversations of a sexual nature that included behaviours that were controlling, aggressive and/or coercive.<sup>27</sup> The current literature is overrepresented by cases in which the groomer is part of a larger organized group,<sup>28</sup> whilst this paper looks at the under-represented cases where young women were groomed by one man who was not part of an organized group (as far as the researchers were aware).

In a comprehensive European project involving the UK, Italy, Norway and Belgium, the authors explain that isolating children online for grooming is easier than in person; with one in 11 teenagers at risk on average, and with groomers often using incentives to entice their (typically young and female) victims.<sup>29</sup> In this study, the young women did not mention receiving any incentives from the groomers other than their attention, which ended up being unwanted. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 in the UK has made it illegal to contact children with the intent of grooming;<sup>30,31</sup> however, in one of the case studies the police did not get involved and in the other the young woman felt she was not going to receive justice for the crime, despite the case being live with the Crown Prosecution Service. Research has shown that a police officer can have an impact on the victim’s experience of the abuse. Officers who set expectations early, listen attentively not promoting myths, keep the individual informed of any on-going case and have special training in online grooming can have a positive impact on the young person.<sup>32</sup> In the first case study, as mentioned, the young woman was ignored by the police, potentially negatively impacting on her recovery, but in the second case study the officer followed the best practice advice. Further interviews and longitudinal research are needed with survivors who the police did not get involved with to see the long-term impact. In addition, there is more research needed on how officers can prevent online grooming from occurring in the first place using information that provides them the ability to

<sup>26</sup> Ilene R. Berson, *Grooming Cybervictims: The Psychosocial Effects of Online Exploitation for Youth*, 2(1) J. SCH. VIOLENCE 5 (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Elaine Chase & June Statham, *Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in the UK—A Review*, 14(1) CHILD ABUS. REV. 4 (2005).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Salter & Selfa Dagistanli, *Cultures of Abuse: ‘Sex grooming’, Organised Abuse and Race in Rochdale, UK*, 4(2) INT. J. CRIME JUSTICE SOC. DEMOCR. 50 (2015).

<sup>29</sup> Julia Davidson et al., *Online abuse: Literature review and policy context*, European Online Grooming Project (Oct. 2 2022, 10:00 AM) <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/22523/european-online-groomingprojectliteraturereview.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> The National Archives, *Sexual Offences Act*. The National Archives, Oct. 2, 2022, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/contents>.

<sup>31</sup> Elly Hanson, *The Impact of Online Sexual Abuse on Children and Young People*, in ONLINE RISK TO CHILDREN: IMPACT, PROTECTION AND PREVENTION 97 (2017).

<sup>32</sup> Phillip Gilligan, *Turning it Around: What Do Young Women Say Helps Them to Move on from Child Sexual Exploitation?* 25(2) CHILD ABUS. REV. 115 (2016)

reflect on the online groomer's behaviours.<sup>33</sup> These case studies could be used by officers to understand, using reflection, how to prevent online grooming with more case studies needed for there to be enough evidence for officers to reflect upon.

### *Additional Support*

School education was considered inadequate to identify grooming behaviours in the case studies, with previous research suggesting that school education needs to draw on interactive simulations of case studies,<sup>34</sup> such as the ones provided in this research. This finding was confirmed by Pashang and colleagues,<sup>35</sup> whose research identified schools as the key space/place where cyberexploitation occurs. And like the participants in their study, our case studies suggest that schools do not have the needed expertise to provide effective support. Using actual case studies is something that has been requested from those impacted by online grooming,<sup>36</sup> with requests that there be a standardized curriculum for schools in the UK.<sup>37</sup> Future interventions may use these case studies as examples in any virtual interactive simulation intended for school education.

Research has also shown that the police officer can have an impact on the victim's experience of the abuse: with officers who set expectations early, listen attentively, aim not to promote myths, keep the individual informed of any ongoing case, and who have special training in online grooming have a positive impact on the young person.<sup>38</sup> However, in the first case study, the police did not get involved. Whilst in the second case study, the young woman felt she was not going to receive justice for the crime, despite the case being live with the Crown Prosecution Service. In the first case study, as mentioned, the young woman was ignored by the police, potentially negatively impacting on her recovery. Although in the second case study, the officer did follow the best practice advice. Further interviews and longitudinal research are needed with survivors, who the police did and did not get involved with, to see any potential long-term impacts of police involvement and whether there are associated differences in recovery. In addition, there is more research needed on how officers can prevent online grooming from occurring in the first place, using information that provides them the ability to reflect on the online groomer's behaviours.<sup>39</sup> These case studies can

<sup>33</sup> Andy Williams, *Child sexual victimisation: Ethnographic stories of stranger and acquaintance grooming*, 21(1) J. SEX. AGGRESS. 28, 28–42 (2015).

<sup>34</sup> Jane Reeves et al., *Children and Young People's Vulnerabilities to Grooming*, CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOOD. 119 (2018).

<sup>35</sup> Soheila Pashang et al., *The Mental Health Impact of Cyber Sexual Violence on Youth Identity*, 17 INT. J. MENT. HEALTH AD. 1119 (2019).

<sup>36</sup> Helen Whittle et al, *Victims' voices: The impact of online grooming and sexual abuse*, 1(2) UNIVERS. J. PSYCHOL. 59, 59–71 (2013).

<sup>37</sup> Helen Whittle et al., *In Their Own Words: Young Peoples' Vulnerabilities to Being Groomed and Sexually Abused Online*, 5(10) PSYCHOL. 1185 (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Helen Whittle et al, *Victims' voices: The impact of online grooming and sexual abuse*, 1(2) UNIVERS. J. PSYCHOL. 59, 59–71 (2013).

<sup>39</sup> Andy Williams, *Child Sexual Victimisation: Ethnographic Stories of Stranger and Acquaintance Grooming*, 21(1) J. SEX. AGGRESS. 28 (2015).

be used by officers to better understand online grooming, and perhaps aid further reflection as to how to prevent online grooming; the more cases reported, the wider the evidence base available for police.

### *Stopping the Contact from Online Groomers*

After ending online grooming, the young women in the case studies mirrored previous research,<sup>40</sup> in which they show a developed, increased knowledge and were, therefore, more informed of online grooming. The main advice from the victims in this study was: to not feel ashamed, as being groomed is not their fault and that they should tell an adult. Further, both of the young women were grateful, knowing it could have ended worse. Such as in case study two, where the victim was arranging to meet the male groomer offline. In case study 1, CB also took the protective measure of withdrawing from social media. A 'consequential distrust' of technology has been identified in previous literature with adults who have experienced cyber harassment.<sup>41</sup> However, in this case, CB continued to use the internet for gaming instead of social media, which is more in line with findings from Pashang et al.,<sup>42</sup> who also reported the withdrawal of internet use by emerging young women from social networks or daily activities after being groomed. This withdrawal, whilst being presented as protective in this case study, is also suggested to be linked to further isolation or disadvantage by Pashang and colleagues.<sup>43</sup>

These case studies for the most part also go against some of the comments made by practitioners, in which they feel grooming occurs to more affluent young people who have their own smart devices.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the young women in this study shared their smart devices (e.g., laptops, tablets, etc.) with family. Although they did have their own personal mobile phones to access the internet (even if the mobiles were supposedly for family contact only). Additionally, research suggested that the younger generation are more digitally inclined and able to get around parental functions that prevent them from accessing sites, as well as falsifying ages to use social media, and deleting or hiding messages and internet history.<sup>45</sup> And the first case study certainly documented that the young woman used some social media that would not be accessible for her age. Although the young woman from the second case study would not benefit from parental functions as she was 16. Regardless of age of use, the young women were able to stop the contact from the groomer by going to a trusted adult and the Victim

<sup>40</sup> Lyniece Lewis, *Experiences in Online Grooming from Initial Contact with Offender to Relationship Ending*, May 2020, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

<sup>41</sup> Francesca Stevens et al., *Cyber Stalking, Cyber Harassment and Adult Mental Health: A Systematic Review*, 24(6) CYBERPSYCHOLOGY BEHAV. SOC. NETW. 2152 (2021).

<sup>42</sup> Pashang et al., *supra* note 31.

<sup>43</sup> Pashang et al., *supra* note 31.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Melrose, *Twenty-first Century Party People: Young People and Sexual Exploitation in the New Millennium*, 22(3) CHILD ABUS. REV. 155 (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Ian Rivers, *Cyberbullying and Cyberaggression: Sexualised and Gendered Experiences Explored*, in BULLYING. 31 (2013).

Service. According to Pedersen,<sup>46</sup> online grooming is not about creating a moral panic or to instil a fear of crime when young women have some freedoms using the internet without parental control. However, the consequences of online usage needs to be explored further with researchers aiming to be robust, considering the unintended harms of having to withdraw from the internet, as well as any other negative impacts on the young person.

### *Theoretical Development and Predictive Behaviours*

The fact that the young women in this research were adolescents could also be of relevance, as previous research has demonstrated that increased risk taking<sup>47</sup> and adolescent egocentric ideations like the imaginary audience and personal fable<sup>48</sup> can leave adolescents at increased risk whilst online. Previous research has shown that increased sensation seeking in adolescence has been linked to online risk taking, including the willingness to interact with strangers online and to meet them offline,<sup>49</sup> which mirrors case study two. In case study 2, the young women communicated online with a stranger (the groomer) for two years before almost agreeing to meet him offline. However, it should be remembered that the methodology of this research does not enable the establishment of a causal link between increased adolescent sensation seeking (or the imaginary audience and personal fable) and the behaviours in either case study. Future research should aim to establish any link, using the scales readily available that measure sensation seeking, imaginary audience and personal fable to better understand how these factors might be important factors in the online grooming of adolescents.

There are also predictive factors to being a victim of an online groomer, which include being a female, using the internet, poor interpersonal relationships, having poor parental relationships and poor social support.<sup>50</sup> Besides being female and using the internet, this was not the case in these case studies. In fact, in the case studies both young women had a trusted adult to turn to. And these trusted adults, then, took actions to prevent the grooming from occurring, which was a key protective factor in both cases. The protective factor of having good familial relationships has been documented in other research studies.<sup>51</sup> Although contrasting previous findings, even though the two young women in the current research reported good relationships with a trusted adult, this did not make them less susceptible to online grooming. Specifically, it has been discussed how in both case

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Pedersen, *UK Young Adults' Safety Awareness Online—Is It a 'girl thing'?* 16(3) J. YOUTH STUD. 404 (2013).

<sup>47</sup> Nikol Kvardová et al., *Who Is Exposed to Harmful Online Content? The Role of Risk and Protective Factors Among Czech, Finnish, and Spanish Adolescent*, 50(8) J. YOUTH ADOLESC. 2294 (2021).

<sup>48</sup> Popovac & Hadlington, *supra* note 19.

<sup>49</sup> Mýlek et al., *supra* note 15.

<sup>50</sup> Helen Whittle et al, *Victims' voices: The impact of online grooming and sexual abuse*, 1(2) UNIVERS. J. PSYCHOL. 59, 59–71 (2013).

<sup>51</sup> Helen Whittle et al, *Victims' voices: The impact of online grooming and sexual abuse*, 1(2) UNIVERS. J. PSYCHOL. 59, 59–71 (2013).



studies the young women were not groomed from larger organized groups, and there were no incentives provided other than attention. Further research on how to predict the behaviour of this under-researched group of individual groomers is needed to understand the risk to young people. It has also been mentioned that officers should be doing more to prevent behaviours. Schools can play an important role as well, providing yearly education to young people using young people's voices to be relatable. Any predictive factors should be used with caution but should be shared with pupils. Furthermore, there is a need for education and awareness in the public health sector, including the training of health professionals.<sup>52</sup> A standardized curriculum could be created with a victim service, who were labelled as 'invaluable' in this research, as well as with other health professionals. The risk factors could also potentially be revisited using structural equation modelling and other advanced psychometrics.

### Limitations

It is important to note young women are overrepresented in the literature and that young boys rarely report the abuse.<sup>53</sup> However, as this study employed opportunistic sampling techniques, it only recruited young women. Although these young women, who were brave enough to come forward, should have their cases shared to keep other young people safe online, future research should make a concise effort to involve the experiences of young men who have survived online grooming. Personality factors, such as narcissism, are considered risk factors for young women to be groomed online, whilst different risk factors, such as empathy and extraversion, are cited for young men.<sup>54</sup> This study did not use a personality scale, such as the NEO Five Factor Inventory used in previous research, to measure the personality of young women. This is a point for further research. Grooming techniques can also lead to significant impacts on the psychological functioning of young women, such as issues with empathy and attachment.<sup>55</sup> This study did not aim to re-traumatize the young women and therefore no questions were asked to elucidate a response of psychological functioning (e.g., anxiety), but this could be explored further using quantitative scales so as to not re-traumatize young women in interviews by asking them in-depth information on their mental health.

<sup>52</sup> Pashang et al., *supra* note 31.

<sup>53</sup> Nicole Henry & Anastasia Powell, *Technology-facilitated Sexual Violence: A Literature Review of Empirical Research*, 19(2) TRAUMA VIOLENCE ABUSE 195 (2018).

<sup>54</sup> Montserrat P. Hernández et al., *The Risk of Sexual-erotic Online Behavior in Adolescents—Which Personality Factors Predict Sexting and Grooming Victimization?* 114 COMPUT. HUM. BEHAV. 106569 (2021).

<sup>55</sup> Peter K. Smith et al., *Cyber Safety for Adolescent Girls: Bullying, Harassment, Sexting, Pornography, and Solicitation*, 26(5) CURR. OPIN. GYNECOL. OBSTET. 360 (2014).

## **Conclusions**

This study used two case studies to better understand young people's experiences of cybercrimes, and in this incident, both case studies in this research involved young women who had been groomed online. This paper intends to better understand the experience of a modest number of case studies of young women who were impacted by online grooming. This study supports the call for officers needing specific training for online grooming using actual case studies to allow them to update their preventative behaviours to protect young people online and calls for better education in schools that is standardized. These case studies are unique in that they provide suggestions that young people with a good social support system can still be victims of online grooming and that the groomers were individuals not organizations. Overall, this study suggests there is a need for additional research to revisit predictive factors. And whilst both young women have survived the incidents that could have been much more harmful, they did not feel they would get justice with further research needed on how young people can get the justice they feel is appropriate for the crime. It is also important for other young people to know they are not to blame and to not be ashamed but talk to a trusted adult, which was the advice provided by both young women.

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