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An Exploration of Youth Experiences in Chatrooms

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Masters in Forensic Psychology
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York

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Abstract

Internet predation of minors has increasingly become a focus of child abuse research and legislation. Concerns have arisen regarding “online grooming,” the ongoing process during which an adult offender prepares a child for sexual abuse by gaining emotional access to the child through an intimate online relationship. The present study provided one of the first comprehensive examinations of a victim's perspective of online grooming. Participants were 374 male and female college students at a public undergraduate institution who completed an online survey covering demographics, lifestyle factors, and experiences online of sexual solicitation or online grooming. Results showed that approximately 30% ($n = 75$) of the respondents reported chatting with adult strangers on-line when they were minors, with 66% ($n = 49$) of those reporting sexual solicitation from adult strangers. Moreover, 53% ($n = 40$) of those who chatted with adult strangers reported some involvement in an interpersonal online relationship that could be characterized as grooming. Very few respondents reported (12%; $n = 8$) meeting and engaging in sexual intercourse with an adult from an online chatroom when they were youth. Importantly, open-ended responses revealed that the experience of having sexualized conversations or romantic relationships with adults online has been normalized by children and adolescents. That is, the romantic overtures in these conversations were perceived by participants to be legitimate consensual relationships, even when those relationships led to physical sexual intercourse between an adult and child. The findings from the present study have significant implications for prevention of online sexual grooming by understanding the way in which young Internet users perceive potentially predatory communications and relationships with adults.

An Exploration of Youth Experiences in Chatrooms

Internet chatrooms offer unlimited communication with a vast and diverse population across the globe. However, the unbounded accessibility of the Internet is not without risks, and may perhaps aide those looking to target children online. Internet usage among children has steadily increased since 1992, resulting in high numbers of children currently engaging in online behaviors. American estimates suggest that close to 85% of children have access to home computers, (Child Trends DataBank, 2015), with between 62% and 97% of children aged three to seventeen years frequenting the Internet daily or weekly (Child Trends DataBank, 2015; Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi, & Kotler, 2010; UCLA Center for Communication Policy, 2003). These statistics suggest that familiarity with the Internet begins at an early age for the majority of American children, which raises concerns regarding the appropriate use of the Internet by children. In fact, children are in some cases accessing the Internet before they have formed the ability to differentiate between predatory and friendly Internet solicitation (Bryce, 2010).

Recent research indicates that concerns about children's use of the Internet and their potential to be exposed to inappropriate sexual content online are justified. According to a poll by the United Kingdom's (U.K.) National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty To Children, up to 40% of children in the U.K. have sent sexually explicit pictures or videos of themselves after receiving an online request (Child Exploitation and Online Center, 2013). Of these cases, at least 30% sent such images to someone they only knew online and had never met in-person. While United States statistics regarding the number of children who have sent sexually explicit pictures to solicitors are not currently available, 27% of online sexual solicitations experienced by American children are for sexually explicit pictures (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006) and research into the prevalence of sex offenders operating online has indicated that sexual solicitation of minors online remains a risk of youth Internet use. For example, one study of 2,828 European adult Internet users reported that 4.5% of adult Internet users solicited adolescents aged fourteen to seventeen for sex, while 1% of these users solicited children under the age of thirteen (Schulz, Bergen, Schuhmann, Hoyer, & Santtila, 2016). Of the solicitation cases reported, 47.5% resulted in sexual intercourse between the adult and the adolescent/child. The increasing anonymity and privacy

afforded by Internet and cell phone applications allows users to communicate without registering or providing even a mobile number to verify their identities (Foster, 2014). Not only does this anonymity facilitate predators posing younger users to lure children or adolescents into sexual relationships, but it also complicates and obstructs law enforcement investigations seeking to prevent the online predation of children. Taken together, there are increasing concerns about the rates of children who are being sexually solicited via the Internet, though research is still in the nascent stages regarding these online behaviors. Thus, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of victims' perspectives of online sexual solicitation. Specifically, the research aims to 1) examine youth Internet habits, 2) explore the prevalence of online sexual solicitation and online sexual grooming, and 3) describe the victim perspective of online sexual relationships that involve a minor and adult stranger.

Online Sexual Solicitation

Online sexual solicitation is the process of encouraging an Internet contact to discuss sex, engage in sexual behavior, or share sexual information about him or herself (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007). A study assessing youth Internet experience reported that one in five American youth ages 10-17 received sexual solicitation over the Internet (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000), with 12% of males and 27% of females in this age group reporting receipt of explicit sexual solicitation online (Ybarra et al., 2004). These solicitations can occur through any online platform that facilitates computer-mediated communication, although chatrooms and social media websites are common spaces where sexual solicitation of young people may happen (Durkin, 1997; Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014; Malesky, 2007). Importantly, at least 25% of youth who experience online sexual solicitation report distressing consequences resulting from the solicitation (Finkelhor et al., 2000), including feeling extremely afraid or upset (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001).

According to University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, very little research exists regarding the true number of children who are physically or sexually abused after receiving an online solicitation from an unknown stranger (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2007). One study of children experiencing sexual solicitation online found that only two out of 1,501 children met

with offenders that sexually victimized them as a result of online solicitation (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006), while Staksrud (2013) reported eight out of 1,604 total survey respondents indicated that they were physically hurt or abused by an adult they first met online. Notably, this statistic is limited to instances wherein children were physically harmed in such a way that they felt compelled to report it as abuse. It does not capture instances wherein minor children engaged in consensual sexual activity with an adult met online, which is legally defined as an assault, but may seem more ambiguous to the children involved. As sexual contact between a child and adult resulting from an online relationship may go unreported, the true number of sexual contact occurring from online predation directed at children is not currently known (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2007).

Importantly, online sexualized contact and conversations between an adult and a minor may be more than crude, one-off solicitations. Recent investigation into the process of online sexual abuse and exploitation has shown that sexual solicitation and sexual content are common methods used by sex offenders to manipulate minors into participating in sexual relationships. This process of manipulation, known as grooming, has, in some cases, been tied to cases of offline sexual contact and child sexual abuse.

Online Sexual Grooming

Grooming is defined as an ongoing process during which an offender prepares a child as well as his or her environment for sexual abuse by gaining emotional access to the child and obtaining compliance and secrecy from the child (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; van Dam, 2001). Grooming can occur in-person, wherein the offender is known to the child, or through online chatrooms or mobile applications, wherein the offender may develop an intimate relationship with the child while remaining a relative stranger (Craven et al., 2006; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013). In a legal context, the term “grooming” was first introduced in a 2003 United Kingdom legislative act, as a term to criminalize the preparation of a child for sexual abuse (McAlinden, 2006). A majority of grooming research over the past few decades has focused on defining and describing offline grooming techniques and behaviors (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2006). However, due to the development and enhancement

of Internet communication, online grooming has increasingly been the subject of research attempting to study characteristics and prevalence of online sexual groomers. The prevalence on online grooming remains unclear due to underreporting and methodological difficulties capturing the population of youth who have experienced grooming. In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that 2.1% of the cases reported to the police per year were related to online grooming (Gallagher, Fraser, Christmann, & Hodgson, 2006). Data from the Crimes Against Children Research Center suggest that approximately 20% of U.S. children are solicited by online groomers annually, and in 3% of cases, these solicitations involve requests for offline in-person meetings (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010).

Stages of Online Grooming. Most models of online grooming present three main stages, including victim selection, rapport building, and sexual content (Black et al., 2015; O'Connell, 2003; Staksrud, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). The first stage of online grooming is victim observation and target identification, in which the offender may visit chatrooms as an observer, examining victim conversations and profiles for selection of an optimal target (O'Connell, 2003; Staksrud, 2013). Offenders at this selection stage may be entirely silent and observational in the background of an ongoing chatroom, or they may actively browse users' chat profiles in search of information indicating easy victimization (Malesky, 2007; Staksrud, 2013). Research has revealed that adult online offenders actively seek out communication with minors whose screennames and/or profile information suggests youngness or interest in sexual conversation (Malesky, 2007). In a study of thirty-one convicted online sex offenders, an overwhelming majority (81%) admitted to frequenting chatrooms geared towards children as a preliminary selection method (Malesky, 2007). The decision to contact a potential victim was moderated by the child's apparent neediness for interaction, an ongoing online presence, which was suggestive of low parental oversight, a sexually explicit username, and age range, with younger children identified as more attractive victims. Further, victim selection may also be a more active interaction between the offender and the potential victim. Black and colleagues (2015) reported that assessment of the risks affiliated with grooming the child, such as asking potential victims about their parental supervision, their

location, their awareness of Internet dangers, and their living situation, often occurred early in a conversation. This proactivity allowed offenders to only allocate their time and effort to potential victims who demonstrated a low risk of discovery by parent or guardian and a willingness to share information.

Following the selection of a victim, offenders embark on rapport building, the next stage of grooming, in which a relationship is established between the child and the adult. The ensuing communication between offender and victim often follows a pattern of sharing and intimacy during which the offender manipulates the child to disclose personal information by creating an illusion of mutual trust and affection (O'Connell, 2003). Williams and colleagues (2013) reported that offenders often attempt to diminish the age gap between their online persona and their victim to establish rapport, either elevating the child to an adult status or mirroring linguistic or semantic habits presented by the child. To further solidify rapport, offenders express an invested interest in the hobbies, likes, and dislikes of their grooming victim, professing similar preferences and emphasizing commonalities between them. Finally, rapport is enhanced through interchanging themes of conditional positivity, in other words, the offender showers flattery and affection on the child, and negativity, wherein the offender implies that the child risks damaging the relationship by not complying with the offender's conversational cues (Williams et al., 2013). This flattery may be integral to both the establishment and maintenance of the rapport. According to one study, flattery was a common and important component of rapport building, with 89% of offenders using flattery as a method of obtaining and retaining their victims' attention (Black et al., 2015).

Subsequently, the establishment of rapport and a relationship is followed by the next stage of grooming, in which sexual content is introduced. Williams et al. (2013) described a variety of offender techniques for introducing sexually explicit language into the conversation, including masking it as advice, pairing it with fantasy or role-play, or mentioning it in conjunction with another topic. Following the initial introduction of sex into the conversation, the offender seeks to maintain the child's compliance with sexual content, while pushing the child's comfort boundaries and escalating the intensity of the sexual content (O'Connell, 2003). Finally, offenders may suggest exclusivity, often by promising a

romantically exclusive relationship with the victim (O'Connell, 2003; Whittle et al., 2014), which allows the solicitation and sharing of sexual content under the guise of a caring and intimate "adult" relationship

Online versus Offline Grooming. It has been suggested that both Internet-based offenders and offline offenders engage in similar stages of grooming, with a main difference being offense methodologies presenting during victim selection (Malesky, 2007; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013). Offenders functioning in cyberspace, for example, select their victims less based on physical appearance of the child and more based on the child's perceived youth and naiveté, which may be indicative of the victim's compliance, submissiveness, and ability to be manipulated (Malesky, 2007). Unlike offline offenders, who tend to target one child at a time, online offenders can frequent several chatrooms and engage in conversations with more than one child at once, thus increasing their chances of finding a vulnerable and compliant victim (Briggs et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the unique circumstances of communicating in a virtual environment may facilitate the compliance of victims. According to the theory of computer mediated communication (CMC), the anonymity and physical distance provided by Internet relationships motivate increased disclosure of personal details (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006), as communicators experience the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). Through a combination of factors, including anonymous and invisible presence, lack of real-time pressure, dissociation between online and real-world personas, and undefined levels of authority allowed by cyberspace, online disinhibition engenders greater liberality of personal disclosure about thoughts, emotions, and private information (Suler, 2004). These effects likely contribute to a victim's willingness to trust a sympathetic online contact with intimate details, furthering the process of online grooming and allowing the offender to progress his or her goals of sexual exploitation or abuse (Staksrud, 2013).

Recent research into the conversation techniques and characteristics of offenders attempting to groom children in chatrooms revealed that this labor-intensive grooming process might actually be accelerated online (Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017). Through an examination of 100 chatroom transcripts, results showed that on average, the offenders examined in this study broached the subject of

an in-person meeting within three days of beginning a conversation with a child victim (in reality, an adult volunteer posing as a child). In the vast majority of cases, the offender introduced sexualized conversation during the first day of chatting, sometimes within the first thirty minutes of the conversation. This suggests that the transition from friendship to an exclusive and sexualized relationship can occur over a very short period of time, enhancing the risk that vulnerable children experiencing the effects of online disinhibition will be further pressured into compliance by the pressure of a quick and intense personal relationship.

Victim Perspective of Online Sexual Grooming

Notably, very little research has investigated the victim perspective of online sexual solicitation and grooming other than to report the prevalence, often through telephone-interviews with children, which necessitate prior parental consent. Of the few studies that have examined victim reports of online grooming, most use a qualitative method to intensively study the experiences of a small number of victims. Whittle and colleagues (2013) interviewed eight young victims of online grooming referred to the study through police and described similar grooming themes as those experienced by victims of in-person sexual grooming, including secrecy and a sense of being lied to, flattery and excessive positivity or kindness, and a sexualized relationship (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2013). These themes are congruent with the rapport building and sexualization stages of online grooming outlined by Williams and colleagues (2013), wherein offenders use flattery, conditional positivity and the threat of negativity, and the promise of romantic exclusivity to establish a relationship with the child and reinforce sexual content.

Despite these insights into the victim experience and prevalence of online grooming and sexual solicitation among youth, this remains an area in need of empirical exploration due to the small samples reported in most studies. Internet predation of children has increasingly become a focus of child abuse research and legislation. Recent cases highlight the extreme, worst-case scenarios associated with online predation of children. For example, the 2016 abduction and murder of thirteen-year old Nicole Lovell by an 18-year old man she met through the instant messaging application “Kik” was a tragic reminder that children remain vulnerable to online solicitation despite augmented safeguards and instructions on

Internet safety (Stolberg & Perez-Pena, 2016). This case, which represents one of the rarer instances in which a child was abducted and killed by an online contact, has renewed public concern about online child predation and emphasized the need for continued research into the prevalence rate of children receiving sexual solicitation online, as well as the need for exploration into the youth perception and experience of online grooming, in order to better understand how children and adolescents perceive their experience online, and thus gain insight into the process of online sexual victimization.

The Current Study

Past literature on online solicitation and online grooming has shown that these types of crimes may affect a large number of young Internet users, causing emotional distress or in some cases leading to in-person sexual contact. Importantly, there is a dearth of research exploring the victim's perspective of online solicitation and sexual grooming behaviors, despite literature suggesting that a high number of minors may experience sexual solicitation online. Thus, the present study expanded upon current literature describing the prevalence of online sexual solicitation and grooming through an examination of self-reported Internet behaviors and experiences via an online survey. Specifically, we aimed to identify the prevalence of sexual solicitation and grooming, and to quantitatively examine victim's online experiences, with emphasis on the process of online grooming.

Previous research in this area has used a small sample size and only utilized cases referred through law enforcement; thus, the current study sought to collect a large sample of college-aged adults who reported using the Internet to talk in chatrooms as youth. Furthermore, because online grooming is a complex process that might not be apparent to the victim, the survey asked questions about behaviors and experiences related to online grooming rather than directly asking if participants had experienced grooming. These behaviors and experiences included: chatting with adult strangers online, experiencing sexual solicitation online, and having an emotional or romantic relationship with an adult stranger online. Additional questions related to participant chatroom habits, such as inclusion or exclusion of personal information on a public profile, sharing pictures, as well as the types of chatrooms frequented and the amount of time spent chatting.

Specific study aims were: 1) to retrospectively examine the youth Internet habits of a large population of urban college students; 2) to describe the prevalence of sexual solicitation and online grooming experiences; and 3) to explore the victim perspective of these experiences. It was hypothesized that chatting with strangers and receiving sexual solicitation online would be endorsed by a majority of participants. Furthermore, online grooming and in-person sexual contact with an adult met online were each hypothesized to have low reported frequencies based on previous findings (Gallagher, Fraser, Christmann, & Hodgson, 2006). The study aim related to describing victim perspective of the grooming experience constituted hypothesis-free, exploratory research, as this area of online grooming has not been well examined in previous research. The study will shed light on how young people perceive and respond to sexual solicitation and online sexual grooming, providing valuable insights for preventing online sexual predation through proactive strategies aimed at reducing victim risk and educating both children and adults about safe Internet practice.

Method:

Procedure and Participants

This study used an online survey, *Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms*, which was developed for the purpose of this study, to measure participants' online sexual solicitation and grooming experiences during childhood and adolescence through questions related to Internet and chatroom activity. To reduce response bias, the study aims were described to participants as seeking to describe youth experiences in chatrooms. The survey was hosted online through SurveyMonkey.com, an online-based survey software, and eligible participants were allowed to proceed with survey completion following online signature of an informed consent form and confirmation that they were 18 years or older. Following submission of the survey, participants were debriefed and awarded research credit for their participation.

Participants were 374 (83 male and 228 female) college students who chose to be part of the research participant pool at a public undergraduate institution in a large urban location. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 38 years ($M = 20.5$). Participant race/ethnicity varied, with 54% identifying as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 164$), 12.8% identifying as Black or African American ($n = 38$), 11% identifying as Asian ($n = 33$), 22% identifying as White ($n = 65$), less than 1% identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native ($n = 1$), and less than 1% identifying as Pacific Islander ($n = 1$).

Measures

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms. The online survey aimed to measure the three study objectives of Internet habits, experiences of sexual solicitation and online sexual grooming, and victim perspective of online grooming. It was comprised of eight sections which included 1) demographics, 2) childhood experience, 3) childhood trauma, 4) Internet/chatroom experience, 5) profile information, 6) conversations with adult strangers, 7) online grooming experience, and 8) in-person meetings with adults met online. See Appendix B for the complete survey.

Internet Habits. Internet and chatroom experiences were measured through questions assessing youth Internet access, their online chat habits, and parental supervision. These questions sought to capture

information about types of Internet sites frequented, tendency to share pictures or personal information on public profiles, and experiences chatting with adult strangers.

Experiences of Online Sexual Solicitation and Grooming. Online sexual solicitation was measured through questions pertaining to the frequency and content of sexualized conversations with adults, including when such conversations occurred and what type of sexual content was shared or received by the participant. Because online grooming may not be apparent to those experiencing it, the survey did not directly ask participants about their experiences with adults who groomed them. Rather, online grooming was assessed through questions related to the stages of grooming, including information sharing, flattery, plans for the future, and secrecy. Finally, participant perspective of online grooming was assessed through questions investigating their perceptions of their interactions with adult strangers in chatrooms. These questions attempted to obtain information related to the stages of grooming, particularly rapport building, by querying how the participant characterized the relationship, whether the participant experienced flattery, had similar interests and hobbies to their adult contact, and considered the relationship to be romantic and exclusive.

Demographic Information. Participants were asked various historical and demographic questions related to childhood activities, trauma, and home environment. These questions included inquiries about the participants' age, childhood household, caregivers, childhood activities, and trauma.

Data Analysis

Participants were allowed to select more than one response for most questions, and thus data were analyzed as the frequency of answers rather than the comparison of different responses to each question. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were examined to determine the overall range of experiences of chatting with strangers, sexual solicitation, Internet activity, and lifestyle and social variables.

Results

Internet Habits

Access, Types of Sites, and Supervision. Participants were first asked about their Internet and chatroom habits, such as Internet and computer access, amount of parental supervision of chatting, and types of chatrooms frequented. The vast majority of participants reported having access to the Internet during childhood and adolescent years, defined as during elementary, middle, and high school years (95%; $n = 294$), with only 5% ($n = 18$) of respondents reporting no Internet access. Of those who had access, many reported having access to a private computer connected to the Internet or a computer shared with siblings or parents (Table 1). Slightly more half of the respondents talked to strangers of all ages online or on cellular phones during childhood and adolescence (56%; $n = 174$). The most frequently reported chatroom subcategory was social media, such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. Gaming chatrooms and anonymous chatrooms were the second most commonly reported subcategories, including messaging sites such as: AOL Instant Messaging (AIM), Kik, Tinder, Yahoo, Chat Roulette, Club Penguin, Xbox Live, MSN Messenger, Omegle, and Skype (Table 2). Approximately half of respondents (52%; $n = 131$) reported that their parents never supervised online activity, with 39% ($n = 99$) reporting occasional supervision and 8% ($n = 23$) reporting frequent or usual supervision. Supervision strategies included imposed time limits ($n = 91$), observation of online activities ($n = 60$), history checks ($n = 33$), password protected logins ($n = 27$), site restrictions ($n = 25$), and tracking/cookies ($n = 14$).

Types of Chatroom Contacts. Further, the survey addressed the ages and familiarity level of chatroom contacts, specifically soliciting information about experiences chatting with adult strangers in chatrooms. Most respondents chatted with age-matched peers, both strangers and friends (87%; $n = 218$). Approximately one-third (30%; $n = 75$) of the respondents who used chatrooms on their computers and/or cell phones reported chatting with adult strangers online. The average age at which respondents began chatting with adult strangers was thirteen years old, with a range of eight to seventeen years old.

Times In Online Chatrooms. Respondents were next invited to comment on the times of the day and times of the year during which they tended to converse with any type of contact, familiar or stranger, in online or mobile chatrooms. Evening (66%; $n = 166$) and afternoon (57%; $n = 145$) were most often endorsed as common times to talk online, although 32% of respondents ($n = 81$) went into chatrooms late at night. The times of year most often reported for frequenting chatrooms and mobile sites were the summer, from July to August (71%; $n = 178$) and the winter, from December to February (63%; $n = 157$).

Respondents were further asked to specify what times of day and times of year they went into chatrooms and conversed specifically with adult strangers, as opposed to friends, relatives, or age-matched peers. Morning and daytime were the least common times of day for chatting with adult strangers (8%; $n = 6$, and 15%; $n = 11$, respectively). A majority of respondents (74%; $n = 55$) chatted with adult strangers in the evening between the hours of 6 PM and 11 PM, and/or late at night between the hours of 11 PM and 5 AM (54%; $n = 40$).

Profile Information, Pictures, and Sharing. Out of 233 respondents, 33 (14%) reported using their true first name and/or last name in their profile. Only four respondents reported using sexually suggestive usernames (e.g., whysoohot1, sxybabygurl, sexypunkie, sexybivamp). Most respondents (64%; $n = 163$) included pictures on their profiles, with a large percentage reporting non-sexual self-pictures (95%; $n = 154$). Pictures of respondents looking sexy and/or pictures of themselves looking older than in reality were uncommon (respectively, 15% [$n = 24$]; 13% [$n = 21$]). The majority of respondents (65%; $n = 163$) did not share personal information on their public profiles. Those who did share personal information reported sharing age, gender, sex, self-pictures, relationship status, and favorites, i.e. books, movies, bands, etc. (Table 3). The information shared by most respondents on their profiles was not inaccurate or misleading, though 34% ($n = 85$) recalled that they lied about something on their chatroom profile. The most common lie was related to age, with 87% ($n = 74$) of the eight-five respondents who reported lying endorsing a lie about false portrayal of age on their profiles. Geographic location was the second most commonly endorsed lie (46%; $n = 39$).

Experience of Sexual Solicitation

Prevalence. Of seventy-four respondents who experienced any sexual solicitation online, 66% ($n = 49$) were solicited by an adult stranger for sexual contact during online chatroom activity. Over half of the seventy-six respondents (53%; $n = 40$) reported that the sexual solicitation occurred during an ongoing conversation between the participant and an adult stranger, as opposed to the previously mentioned 66% who were immediately solicited at first contact.

Content. The type of sexual contact varied, but common topics reported by the thirty-seven respondents who provided information for this section included discussing the types of sexual acts that respondent had performed with current or former partners (68%; $n = 25$), discussing the types of sexual acts that the adult stranger had performed (54%; $n = 20$), discussing fantasized sexual relations between the respondent and the adult stranger (54%; $n = 20$), the adult stranger calling the respondent "hot" or "sexy" (86%; $n = 32$), and the adult stranger sending sexualized videos (65%; $n = 24$). Ten respondents (27%) reported sending sexual photos and videos of themselves to an adult stranger with whom they were conversing.

Experience of Online Grooming

Prevalence. Sixty-seven respondents out of the entire sample recalled engaging in an ongoing online relationship with an adult stranger (21%). Respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses regarding why they chose to chat with the adult (Table 4) as well as their perception of why the adult stranger chose to contact them (Table 5).

Grooming Behaviors. Out of sixty-seven respondents, many reported knowing a variety of personal information about the adult strangers with whom they were conversing, including name (79%; $n = 54$), age (84%; $n = 57$), location (72%; $n = 49$), and interests (60%; $n = 41$). Respondents shared information with the adult stranger, including name (75%; $n = 51$), age (69%; $n = 47$), and interests (53%; $n = 36$). Few respondents chose to share information about their friends (18%; $n = 12$), family situation (21%; $n = 14$), favorites (26%; $n = 18$), and/or the names or details about important people in their lives (7%; $n = 5$). More than half the respondents (68%; $n = 47$) recalled receiving flattery from the adult

stranger with whom they were conversing, most of which centered on complimenting the respondent's personality characteristics (92%; $n = 44$), maturity (65%; $n = 31$), and intelligence (71%; $n = 34$). Respondents indicated that the adult strangers with whom they conversed mentored them about life (48%; $n = 33$), school (25%; $n = 17$), and relationships (34%; $n = 23$). The majority of respondents (74%; $n = 51$) reported having similar likes, dislikes, and interests as the adult stranger with whom they were conversing. Marriage (13%; $n = 9$), having children (10%; $n = 7$), and running away together (8%; $n = 6$) were uncommon conversation topics discussed by respondents and adult strangers. Of sixty-nine respondents, 17% ($n = 12$) reported that the adult stranger with whom they had an online relationship expressed interest in meeting the respondent's family and friends, while a majority of respondents reported hiding the relationship from their families (62%; $n = 39$). Open-ended answers provided some insight into this decision and a sample of these responses is provided in Table 6.

Physical Sexual Contact with Adult Strangers. Out of sixty-nine respondents who reported engaging in an online relationship with an adult stranger, twenty-nine respondents (30%) met that individual in person. Sexual intercourse occurred in eight cases (12%). One respondent indicated that the sexual intercourse was not always consensual; the other seven respondents reported consensual intercourse in all instances. Respondent age and adult age at the time of intercourse were not reported, although respondent ages when the online relationship began ranged from 9 years to 17 years.

Victim Perspective of Grooming.

When invited to describe the nature of their online relationship with the adult stranger, respondents endorsed "flirting/dating" (39%; $n = 24$), "sexually driven" (31%; $n = 19$), and "nurturing/mentoring" (29%; $n = 18$) (Table 7). Only seven out of sixty-one respondents endorsed "romantic/in love". In most cases, the adult stranger first mentioned the idea of having a romantic or sexual relationship with the respondent (92%; $n = 45$). Very few respondents classified the adult stranger with whom they had an online relationship as aggressive (8%; $n = 5$), moody (15%; $n = 10$), or angry (9%; $n = 6$), although 27% of respondents ($n = 18$) found the relationship to be manipulative (e.g., "don't you want me to be happy?"). Of sixty-seven respondents, 21% ($n = 14$) felt that they were being deceived

at some point in the relationship. Only 17% of respondents ($n = 11$) reported feeling unsafe during their online relationship with the adult stranger, and even fewer respondents (9%; $n = 6$) reported being threatened or blackmailed by the adult stranger. The majority (87%; $n = 55$) reported that the online relationship had ended before this survey was taken. No respondents reported criminal justice involvement following the termination of the relationship.

Discussion

This study asked college-aged students to recall their experiences as youth entering online or mobile phone chatrooms, including experiences of receiving sexual solicitation from adult strangers or engaging in romanticized relationships as youth with adult strangers. Specifically, this study aimed to describe the Internet habits of participants, explore the prevalence and experiences of sexual solicitation and online sexual grooming, as well as examine how participants perceived the experience of online grooming. Importantly, this study used a large sample of participants, allowing for a more accurate snapshot of the rate of online sexual solicitation and sexual relationships with adult strangers that may have met the criteria for online grooming in an average young adult population by accessing a previously unexamined sample of youth who may have experienced online sexual solicitation or grooming, but did not disclose or report the experience to authorities.

Internet Habits

Internet access was reported among 95% of participants, and more than half of these participants went onto chatrooms. Results further indicate that over one-quarter (approximately 30%) of participating undergraduates used their access to Internet and mobile phone chatrooms to engage in conversations with strange adults when they were children or adolescents. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that 31% of teenagers regularly responded to messages from adult strangers online and further added them to a “buddy list” of contacts (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006).

While many of these messages from adults may be benign, the fact that some children and adolescents willingly engaged in conversations with strangers suggests a lack of online safety education and risk awareness among these youth. Moreover, the majority the conversations reported in the current study occurred in the evening or late at night, when parents or guardians were less likely to be monitoring or overseeing Internet activity, as well as over summer or winter months, when school is not in session. This implies a circumvention of parental supervision or monitoring of Internet activities, potentially obstructing efforts put in place by parents or guardians to restrict access or observe their children’s online

communication. Thus, despite 39% of participants reporting that their parents at least sometimes monitored Internet activity, 74% chatted with strangers in the evening and 54% chatted with strangers during late night hours, both of which are times when children and teens are likely to be left on their own.

Additionally 30% of participants reported that they used cell phones rather than computers or laptops to access chatting sites. Cell phones are increasingly mobile, “smart” and connected to the Internet, and understood to be personal devices, contrasted to computers, which may be shared among family members. For parents, monitoring cell phone Internet access is a vastly more difficult task than monitoring a stationary computer, as many children and teenagers have cell phones on their person constantly in order to maintain contact with parents and friends. Further, many of these conversations took place on social media and anonymous platforms. This finding is notable because despite attempts by social media and chatroom sites to improve transparency and accountability of users, these platforms are generally unpoliced and solicit very basic information about users that can easily be fabricated. In the present study, 71% of participants talked to strangers through Kik, which has been identified as one of the problem chatroom applications because it does not require a telephone number and assures anonymity. Importantly, anonymity plays a significant role in the online disinhibition effect, which can contribute to online grooming by dissociating the real-time consequences of chatting with adult strangers online from the experience, encouraging false and accelerated intimacy, and normalizing inappropriate behaviors, such as sexual solicitation.

Experience of Sexual Solicitation

An important objective of this study was to investigate the prevalence of sexual solicitation experienced by youth who enter online chatrooms and talk with adult strangers. Of those who chatted with adult strangers when they were children or adolescents, 66% reported some form of sexual content or sexual solicitation in the course of their conversations. Participants who further engaged in a conversation (52%) after receiving sexual content from an adult stranger may have been motivated by a need for attention or a release from boredom and loneliness. Malesky’s (2007) study of convicted sex offenders found that perceived neediness for interaction was an important factor in the decision whether

to contact a child for sexual grooming, suggesting that offenders are aware that socially isolated and lonely children will have a greater dependency on the rapport inherent in the grooming process and thus be more likely to engage in sexualized conversations. Indeed, in the current study, loneliness and boredom were frequent response themes in open-ended questions querying participants' motivation for chatting with adult strangers. This loneliness and need for interaction may be a risk factor for youth receiving sexual solicitation; not only are lonely or bored children likely to be browsing chatrooms and seeking to talk with strangers to alleviate their boredom, but their need for interaction and attention may be apparent to their chat partners, including potential predatory groomers.

In a majority of cases, the sexual content related to the participant, such as asking the participant about past sexual experiences (68%). This finding is congruent with O'Connell's (2003) study of online offender strategies, which suggested that the sexual stage of grooming may focus exclusively on the child and is presented as mentorship rather than solicitation. Inquiring about the child's past experiences enables the adult to encourage sexual experimentation and sexual discussion under the guise of helping the child understand and accept his or her sexuality and desires. In the context of online grooming, this type of child-focused sexual solicitation helps to reinforce the perspective that the relationship is mutual and romantic as opposed to exploitative and dangerous.

Experiences of Online Grooming

Because online grooming can occur rapidly and insidiously, many children and adolescents may not perceive it happening, and retrospectively, may not be aware that they experienced sexual grooming at all. Thus, this survey did not directly ask participants about experiences of online grooming; rather, participants were invited to indicate whether they had experienced particular behaviors, such as information sharing, pictures exchanges, flattery, shared interests, manipulation, and interest in family or environment, which have been empirically associated with grooming stage of rapport building (Williams et al., 2013). These behaviors were considered in the context of the participants' longest ongoing conversation with an adult stranger with whom they felt they had a personal relationship.

Rapport. Information-sharing and emphasis on similarities are two integral components of the rapport building stage of the grooming process, as they help to establish friendship and exclusivity between the child and adult (Williams et al., 2013). Thus, to measure rapport, this study asked participants to comment on the amount of information they knew about the adult stranger with whom they chatted, the amount of information that the adult knew about their lives, and whether the adult had similar likes, dislikes, and interests to the participant. Williams and colleagues (2013) found that offenders engaging in the sexual grooming of a child reinforced rapport by mirroring the likes, dislikes, and hobbies of their victims, and indeed, in 74% of the cases examined in this study, participants reported having similar preferences and hobbies as the adult. Notably, likes and dislikes (62%) and hobbies (58%) were among the most commonly shared pieces of information that participants included on their chatroom profiles, and therefore, this information was publicly available to the chatroom community. When invited to provide an open-ended response regarding why the adult stranger initiated a conversation and relationship, many participants believed that the adult chose them due to interest commonalities as well as their (the participant's) maturity, physical attributes, or personality attributes (Table 9). This suggests that the adult strangers may have used public profile information and flattery to help encourage the perception that they share the child's interests and progress the grooming process into the next stages.

Flattery. Flattery, which can serve as a bridge between the rapport-building stage of grooming and the introduction of sexual content, was frequently reported by participants. In conjunction with interest similarities and semantic mirroring, flattery helps to enhance unconditional positivity in the relationship, which can then be contrasted with conditional negativity when the offender wishes to make the child comply with sexual requests. Although moodiness, anger, and aggression were infrequently reported by participants, almost 30% of participants indicated that the adult stranger behaved in a manipulative manner during chats (for example, persuading the participant to comply with a request by asking “*don't you want me to be happy?*”). This type of manipulation introduces a sense of conditionality in the relationship, such that the child is reinforced with affection and positivity for obeying a command, and with hostility or withholding of affection for expressing reluctance or disobedience. Further, many

offenders sexualize a conversation starting with flattery or supposedly innocent questions about the child's sexual history, and eventually introduce explicit fantasy-oriented content about sexual intercourse between the child and the adult groomer. Sexual flattery (i.e., being called sexy or hot) was commonly reported by participants (86%) in the present study, although cybersex, sharing of pornography, and sexualized conversation about future intercourse were endorsed by at least 10% of respondents.

Furthermore, regardless of the relative innocuousness of flattery using words such as "sexy" and "hot," it should be emphasized that participants were reporting this type of communication between underage children and adult strangers who were, in most cases, aware that they were corresponding with a child.

Exclusivity. Intriguingly, more participants described their relationship with the adult stranger as flirting/dating than as sexually driven or romantic/in-love, suggesting that the adult strangers are potentially responding to the maturity level of their child contact. In their study examining the thematic stages underlying sexual grooming, Williams and colleagues (2013) reported that offenders often mimic the language of their child contacts in order to appear closer in age and/or maturity to the child and strengthen rapport. Developmentally, children and adolescents are likely to be more amenable to the concept of dating a partner, as opposed to becoming sexually active or getting married, and the data reported in the current study reflects this. Only 19% of participants were mentored by the adult stranger about sex; 13% discussed marriage with the adult stranger; and 10% discussed having children together. Receiving mentorship or advice about relationships, school, and life, however, was more frequently reported, suggesting that these age appropriate subjects were used by the adults to help create a rapport with the child. In 92% of cases, the adult stranger first suggested engaging in a romantic relationship with the child, similar to Winters et al.'s (2017) findings that adult groomers, instead of their child contacts, tend to initiate a relationship online (Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017).

Physical Sexual Contact and Long-Term Consequences. As the long-term goal of sexual grooming is often a physical, sexual relationship, participants were asked to discuss the results of their online conversations and/or relationship with the adult stranger. Sexual intercourse was anticipated by participants in only 16% of cases, and occurred in eight cases out of a total of 314 surveyed participants.

This frequency was slightly higher than expected: Staksrud's (2013) examination of online sexual grooming reported that eight out of 1604 surveyed children met a stranger in-person, with whom they had connected online, while Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor (2006) reported that only two out of 1,501 surveyed youth were sexually assaulted by a stranger met online. A key difference between these previous findings and the current study may lie in terminology used to describe and define the nature of the sexual relationship. The two cases described by Wolak and colleagues' *Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-1*; 2006) were severe enough to be reported to law enforcement, and thus may constitute the extreme consequences of online grooming. Cases in which adolescent or teenaged youth meet young adults over the age of eighteen for the purpose of anticipated sexual intercourse are more likely to go unreported to law enforcement or parents, despite whether the intercourse is consensual when it occurs, or whether the experience results in trauma.

Victim Perspective of Online Sexual Grooming

In the current study, respondents who reported having an online dating relationship with an adult stranger in their youth appeared to normalize the nature and outcome of the relationship, despite the fact that it involved an underage child and unknown adult. Only two respondents indicated negative outcomes as a result of the relationship ("*emotional issues, depression; fear of online chatrooms*"), and although most respondents hid the relationship from their families (62%), very few reported feeling unsafe, threatened, or deceived during the relationship. Most participants (71%) did not describe their adult contact as aggressive or moody, and furthermore, the majority (92%) did not perceive that they were ever manipulated or blackmailed by the adult. It is possible that none of the participants who were in an online relationship with an adult stranger were manipulated or blackmailed into a sexual relationship. However, an alternative possibility may be that these participants were unable to perceive or understand both the inappropriateness of the relationship and the strategies that the adult employed to encourage compliance. Additional research is needed to clarify which of these possibilities is more likely, although notably, in either case, there remains the implication that these adult offenders are employing sophisticated methods to groom young Internet users.

Furthermore, these results suggest a surprising sense of ambiguity among youth about appropriateness and safety of such online relationships with adults, especially given the relatively high prevalence of youth who experienced sexually explicit solicitation from their adult chatroom contacts. While this normalization and consequential ambiguity towards online relationships with adult strangers may be due to increasing comfort and familiarity with the Internet among youth, it nevertheless remains a safety issue. Children and adolescents who are desensitized to receiving sexual overtures online may become more susceptible to skilled or aggressive grooming strategies that couch sexual content in positivity and friendship.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the conclusions of this study were somewhat limited by the use of retrospective self-report to measure prevalence of sexual solicitation and grooming. Participants were college undergraduate students over the age of eighteen who were required to recall their experiences as youth, and thus the study relied on respondent memory recall. Thus, the results must be considered in the context of these limitations, as both self-report and remembered data are vulnerable to certain response biases, such as social desirability bias or any number of the various memory biases that have the potential to impair recall. However, a retrospective analysis was necessary for the study aims due to the difficulties involved in accessing and obtaining parental consent for minor research subjects; in the scope of this project, which was conducted as fulfillment of Master's thesis, collecting data from children and adolescents under the age of consent was not an appropriate objective given the time constraints of the thesis. Nevertheless, future and ongoing projects with similar study aims would likely benefit immensely from accessing middle and high school aged children to achieve an accurate and current snapshot of how youth are interacting with strangers in chatrooms, and whether young people today have a similar perspective on online relationships with adult strangers as the older participants in this study. As with much self-report research, any collected data from a survey study will be subject to the potential confounds of subjectivity and response bias, however, despite these limitations, the online

questionnaire method introduced by the current project effectively obtained the desired amount of responses without burdening participants with lab visits or telephone calls.

Implications and Future Directions

This study provided one of the first comprehensive examinations of an experiential perspective of online grooming by looking at a large undergraduate population in which a majority of participants engaged in Internet chatroom discussions with strangers when the participants were below the age of 18. Previous research has focused solely on qualitative description of small, non-diverse samples of individuals who had experienced online grooming, or on assessing youth Internet usage via telephone survey. This study accessed a large and diverse young adult population through an online survey that could be completed at the participant's leisure by providing an easy-to-use and familiar survey format. Results suggested that the experience of having sexualized and romantic relationships with adults has been normalized by children and adolescents in chatrooms. Further, romantic or emotional overtures resulting from these conversations are perceived by youth to be legitimate consensual relationships, even when those relationships have led to physical sexual intercourse between an adult and the child. This troubling trend suggests that some children and adolescents may lack the ability to differentiate between predatory and innocuous adult conversations.

To continue investigating this phenomenon, future research should seek to identify specific risk and protective factors related to the risk-taking behavior of chatting with adults and engaging in a conversation with an adult founded on sexual solicitation. Certain lifestyle factors, such as little to no parental supervision of Internet activity or lack of involvement in extracurricular activities, may be tied to participation in online chatrooms or risky chatroom behaviors like talking to strangers. Importantly, these factors would be susceptible to intervention should research indicate that they are related to increased probability of chatting with strangers or responding to sexual solicitation. Participants in the present study indicated that boredom was a popular reason to frequent chatrooms and talk with strangers, and furthermore, the majority of chatroom interaction with strangers occurred during the summer months. This implies that children who are uninvolved in activities during school vacations may be drawn to

online chats and relationships for entertainment. This trend should be investigated, as increasing youth involvement in summer or winter vacation activities is an actionable intervention to reduce online victimization. However, such interventions may be limited in terms their accessibility to children of low socio-economic status or children living in remote and rural areas. Thus, it is further recommended that additional research investigate differences in the three domains examined in this study (Internet habits, experiences of sexual solicitation and online grooming, and victim perspective) according to geographic location, urbanicity, and socio-economic status.

Furthermore, smartphone Internet access has skyrocketed in the last decade, with 75% of adolescents reporting private cell phone ownership and between 27 and 37% of adolescents having access to the Internet through their cell phones (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; The Nielsen Company, 2009). This privatized access to the Internet introduces a greater risk that teens and adolescents could be exposed to predatory or explicit content on a personal device rather than a shared computer, rendering useless current Internet safeguards, such as tracking cookies or site restrictions. Indeed, a recent study found that adolescent with Internet access on their smartphones were more likely to report receiving sexual solicitation online, as well as having physical sexual intercourse with a stranger met online (Rice et al., 2015). Additional research is thus required to continue examining how many youth are using their smartphones to access applications that allow them to chat with strangers, and whether these conversations are likely to result in sexual solicitation or grooming. Should further research support the trend suggested by these findings by demonstrating a connection between cell phone Internet access and online sexual solicitation and contact, this could indicate that a transition is necessary from policies oriented towards computer Internet safety to policies aimed at improving cell phone Internet safety and security.

Conclusions

Online communication and relationships have the potential to greatly facilitate and promote positive social interaction. However, the availability of such technology to young children and the presence of predatory entities in cyberspace complicates and confounds the benefits of Internet-mediated

interactions, necessitating continued research into the risk factors and consequences associated with children accessing online and mobile chatrooms. The current study suggested that chatting with strangers online is a common habit among youth, and that those children who do chat with strangers report frequent sexual solicitation as well as normalization of ensuing sexual or romantic relationships with adult strangers. Fortunately, education and intervention may disrupt this normalization, hopefully decreasing the likelihood that youth who actively chat with strangers will engage in sexualized conversations with adults, and thus disrupt the grooming process.

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Appendix A

Tables

Table 1

What kind of computer/Internet access did you have during elementary, middle, and high school?

Type of Access	N	%
Private Computer	103	33
Shared with Siblings	60	19
Shared with Parents/Siblings	102	33
Restricted/Shared with Family	23	7
Used a Friend's or Relative's Internet	2	6
No Computer/Internet Access	18	6

Table 2

What types of Internet sites did you use to chat with people online?

Type of Site	N	%
Anonymous chatroom	72	23
Chatroom requiring registration	47	15
Chatroom specific to age-group	57	18
Gaming chatroom	94	30
Social media chatroom	203	65

Table 3

What information did you share on your profile?

Information	N	%
Age	79	87
Sex	67	74
Location	26	29
Gender	82	90
Pictures of myself	78	86
Likes/dislikes	57	63
Hobbies	53	58
Relationship status	58	64
Family environment	8	9
Favorites	57	63

Table 4
Why did you chat with adult strangers?

Boredom	Loneliness	Curiosity/Thrill-seeking	Peer Pressure	Gaming
boredom. Didn't have much spare time. When i do I will engage in conversations.	boredom, loneliness, etc.	for entertainment	i was naive and my friend talked me into talking with the person	I was playing video games with them and we needed to verbally coordinate.
I was young and bored.	I was depressed and lonely	For entertainment.	My friends were doing it	To share information on what to do during weekly events in mobile app games.
boredom, loneliness, etc.	I was alone and wanted to befriend someone who didn't know my flaws.	I was curious and the fact that it was socialy unacceptable made it seem fun	My friends were doing it	It was part of an online video game.
I was bored and wanted to have an interested conversation	I did not really have friends. I was lonely. I felt as though nobody understood me.	For fun	It was funny to tell my friends about, and sometimes it was good to get some advice.	
I was bored and decided to find new ways to interact with people	Because i was lonely at home and because i wanted to talk to someone who could understand me.	I was curious.	Was hanging out with friends at the time, thought it would be funny.	
I wanted to meet different people, was bored.	To escape reality	Was hanging out with friends at the time, thought it would be funny.		
Out of pure boredom or loneliness.	Because I was lonely, and it was a fun thing to do! I met other people with common interests etc.	I wanted to meet people, make new friends		
boredum, I just felt they had more experiences in life and more insight	I knew it was bad but since I'm an only child and was always home alone, IMVU was my getaway.	Because I was curious and it was fun		
I was bored and lonely	I liked the attention	It was and is engaging.		
Boredom, good advertisement for the websites, etc.				

Table 5

Do you know why this person chose you to converse with in the chatroom?

We both had accounts on crunchyroll and fanfiction, and we were both fans of each other's work.	I was playing video games with them and he needed to converse and coordinate with someone.	He was looking for a hookup but we both got emotionally attached.
based on my location and my hobbies	Because we are in the same guild in the game.	Because they wanted sex
We had common interests	Gaming	Looking for sexual content
engaged in conversations about sports.	It was part of the online game	
Yes because we're from the same country	We would play call of duty on the Wii lol.	

Table 6
Why did you hide the relationship from your family?

taboo	It wasn't anything serious	The way we met and our age difference is an issue for me.
it was all stuff i shouldn't have done in the first place. nothing serious	wasnt important enough to share	because of age difference
Because it would not be accepted by my family	It wasn't a relationship	Age difference, wasn't an actual relationship
They didn't like me talking to strangers online	It was an online chat there wasn't much to explain.	too young for that
i was aware it was inappropriate. I was not supposed to be in chatrooms	parents have got divorced themselves, there not much thing about relationship I can learn	I was 16 at the time and not allowed to date.
Because like it's embarrassing to me to tell them	it wasn't a relationship	
they wouldn't approve	it wasn't important	
My parents would have a fit if they found out I was speaking to strangers and tried meeting up with them as well.	Online relationships aren't as serious	
I know it was inappropriate.	Never occurred to me to share this information with them.	
I knew if my parents knew I met him online they would make me cut him off.	was personal	
They tell me not to be on social media	Because it wasn't even a relationship	
Parents didn't know I was in chatrooms, didn't want them to know about the secret friend.	my business	
This woman was a total stranger, so I knew my family would punish me.		
My parents would not have allowed me to continue to talk to him.		
They would not approve and I would've gotten in trouble for it.		
i was scared to get in trouble		
I wasn't supposed to be using a chatroom anyways.		
they wouldn't understand and would try to break us up.		
at the time my parents didn't know I had Facebook		

Table 7

How would you describe the nature of your relationship?

Nature	N	%
Romantic/In love	7	11
Flirting/Dating	25	41
Nurturing/Mentoring	18	30
Sexually Driven	20	33
Normal/Platonic	12	20

Appendix B

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Demographic Information

1. What is your current age?

2. What is your gender?

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- White

Other (please specify)

4. What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Transsexual

Other (please specify)

Childhood Experiences

5. What best describes the household were you raised in?

- Two-parent
- Single-parent
- Non-parent guardian
- Foster care/multiple guardians

Other (please specify)

6. Did your primary caregivers have any of the following concerns?

- Serious medical issues
- Mental illness/psychiatric concerns
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- None of the above

Other (please specify)

7. What kind of occupation did your mother hold when you were in elementary school? Select all that apply.

- Full Time Employment
- Part Time Employment
- Unemployed/Disability/Stay-at-home parent

Other (please specify)

8. What kind of occupation did your mother hold when you were in middle and high school? Select all that apply.

- Full Time Employment
- Part Time Employment
- Unemployed/Disability/Stay-at-home parent

Other (please specify)

9. What kind of occupation did your father hold when you were in elementary school? Select all that apply.

- Full Time Employment
- Part Time Employment
- Unemployed/Disability/Stay-at-home parent

Other (please specify)

10. What kind of occupation did your father hold when you were in middle and high school? Select all that apply.

- Full Time Employment
- Part Time Employment
- Unemployed/Disability/Stay-at-home parent

Other (please specify)

11. What was your average family income when you were in elementary school?

- Under 50K annual income
- 50-80K annual income
- 80-120K annual income
- Above 120K annual income
- I don't know

12. What was your average family income when you were in middle and high school?

- Under 50K annual income
- 50-80K annual income
- 80-120K annual income
- Above 120K annual income
- I don't know

13. Did you experience any childhood abuse (before the age of 18)?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

14. Select all that apply

- Physical abuse (physical injury, like bruising or fractures, caused by punching, kicking, beating, burning, biting, or other forms of violence)
- Sexual abuse (forced or coerced sexual contact for the gratification of an older person or adult, including exposure, fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, penetration of the vagina or anus by a finger, penis or any other object, suggestive behavior or comments, exploitation, which can occur in-person or online)
- Emotional Abuse (repeated verbal abuse, including attacking self-esteem, withholding affection and attention, prohibiting socialization)
- Neglect (failure to provide for basic needs, like food, clothing, education, or medical treatment)

Other (please specify)

Sexual Abuse

15. If sexual, how old were you when the abuse occurred?

16. If sexual, who committed the abuse?

- Biological parent
- Step-parent
- Friend
- Family Friend
- Uncle/Aunt
- Grandparent
- Sibling
- Step-sibling
- Cousin
- Other relative (please specify in comment box below)
- Teacher
- Coach
- Babysitter
- Community activity group leader(like Scouts, Big Brothers - please specify in comment box below)
- Religious activity group leader(like youth group, church outings - please specify in comment box below)
- Stranger (someone known for less than 24 hours)

Other (please specify)

17. If sexual, what time of year did the abuse occur? Select all that apply

- Winter (December-February)
- Spring (March-June)
- Summer (July-August)
- Fall (September-November)

18. If sexual, what time of day did the abuse occur? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

19. In what location did the abuse occur? Select all that apply

- At my home
- At another person's home
- At my school
- At an after-school program (i.e. sports, band, theater, etc.)
- At another location (please specify in comment box below)

Other (please specify)

20. Who else, besides the abuser, was in the location at the time that the abuse was occurring? Select all that apply.

- No one
- Biological parent
- Step-parent
- Friend
- Family Friend
- Aunt/uncle
- Grandparent
- Sibling
- Step-sibling
- Other relative
- Babysitter
- Teacher
- Coach
- Community activity group leader (like Scouts, Big Brothers - please specify in the comment box below)
- Religious activity group leader (like youth group, church outings - please specify in the comment box below)
- Stranger (someone known for less than 24 hours)

Other (please specify)

21. How long did the abuse last, from the first time it happened to the last time it happened?

- Only occurred once
- A few days
- A few weeks
- A few months
- Over a year
- Several years

22. What types of after-school activities were you involved in during elementary school? Select all that apply

- None
- Sports (competitive or club teams)
- Music/theater (i.e. band, orchestra, chorus, theater, set design, etc.)
- School clubs (i.e. student council, art club, debate team, political or social club, etc.)
- Volunteer activity (i.e. community, hospital, elder or child care volunteering)
- After-school job
- Other (please specify)

23. What types of after-school activities were you involved in during middle school? Select all that apply

- None
- Sports (competitive or club teams)
- Music/theater (i.e. band, orchestra, chorus, theater, set design, etc.)
- School clubs (i.e. student council, art club, debate team, political or social club, etc.)
- Volunteer activity (i.e. community, hospital, elder or child care volunteering)
- After-school job
- Other (please specify)

24. What types of after-school activities were you involved in during high school? Select all that apply

- None
- Sports (competitive or club teams)
- Music/theater (i.e. band, orchestra, chorus, theater, set design, etc.)
- School clubs (i.e. student council, art club, debate team, political or social club, etc.)
- Volunteer activity (i.e. community, hospital, elder or child care volunteering)
- After-school job
- Other (please specify)

25. What types of activities were you involved in over summer or winter vacations during elementary school? Select all that apply

- None
- Sports (competitive or club teams)
- Music/theater (i.e. band, orchestra, chorus, theater, etc.)
- Summer/winter camp
- Volunteer activity (i.e. community, hospital, elder or child care volunteering)
- Summer/winter job
- Other (please specify)

26. What types of activities were you involved in over summer or winter vacations during middle school? Select all that apply

- None
- Sports (competitive or club teams)
- Music/theater (i.e. band, orchestra, chorus, theater, etc.)
- Summer/winter camp
- Volunteer activity (i.e. community, hospital, elder or child care volunteering)
- Summer/winter job
- Other (please specify)

27. What types of activities were you involved in over summer or winter vacations during high school? Select all that apply

- None
- Sports (competitive or club teams)
- Music/theater (i.e. band, orchestra, chorus, theater, etc.)
- Summer/winter camp
- Volunteer activity (i.e. community, hospital, elder or child care volunteering)
- Summer/winter job
- Other (please specify)

28. Generally, who was around the house when you came home from school? Select all that apply

- No one
- Sibling(s)
- Step-sibling(s)
- Biological parent(s)
- Step-parent(s)
- Friend
- Family friend
- Aunt/uncle
- Cousin
- Grandparent
- Other relative (please specify in comment box below)
- Babysitter
- Other (please specify in comment box below)

Other (please specify)

29. If the abuse occurred in your house/the abuser's house, what room did it occur in? Select all that apply.

- Bedroom
- Kitchen
- Dining room
- Bathroom
- Office
- Living room
- Attic
- Basement
- Garage

Other (please specify)

30. During elementary, middle, and high school did you ever abuse drugs or alcohol?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

31. Check all that apply

Drugs

Alcohol

Other (please specify)

32. During elementary, middle, and high school were you ever bullied?

Yes

No

33. During elementary, middle, and high school were you ever charged with a criminal offense?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

34. Check all that apply

Violent offense (i.e. assault, murder, sexual offense)

Non violent offense (i.e. theft, drug-related offense)

Other (please specify)

35. During elementary, middle, and high school did you ever receive any mental health diagnoses?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

36. Select all that apply

- Mood disorder (ex. major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder)
- Psychotic disorder (ex. schizophrenia)
- Anxiety disorder (ex. obsessive compulsive disorder, phobia, generalized anxiety disorder)
- Personality disorder (ex. antisocial personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder)
- Developmental disorder (ex. ADD/ADHD, developmental delay, autism spectrum disorder)
- None

Other (please specify)

37. Do you have any current mental health diagnoses?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

38. Select all that apply

- Mood disorder (i.e. Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder)
- Psychotic disorder (i.e. schizophrenia)
- Anxiety disorder (i.e. Obsessive compulsive disorder, phobia, generalized anxiety disorder)
- Personality disorder (i.e. Antisocial personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder)
- Developmental disorder (ADD/ADHD, developmental delay, Autism spectrum disorder)
- None

Other (please specify)

39. What best describes your social life during elementary, middle, and high school?

- Lots of friends
- Small close friend group
- One or two close friends
- Friendly acquaintances/classmates, no close friends
- Very few friendly acquaintances/classmates, or no friends

40. Were you home-schooled or cyber-schooled?

- Yes
- No

41. Did you experience any kind of severe trauma during elementary, middle, or high school?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

42. Select all that apply

- Death of parent, sibling, extended family, or close friend
- Sexual assault
- Physical assault
- Serious personal injury or illness
- Illness or personal injury of a close family member

Other (please specify)

43. What kind of computer/Internet access did you have during elementary, middle, and high school?

- Private computer
- Shared with siblings
- Shared with parents/siblings
- Restricted/shared with family
- Using a friend's or relative's internet
- No computer/internet access

Other (please specify)

44. Did you have a cell phone during elementary, middle, and high school?

- No
- Yes, elementary school on
- Yes, middle school on
- Yes, high school on

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Chatroom Experience

45. Did you ever talk to strangers online or on your cell phone before the age of 18?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

46. What types of Internet sites did you use to chat with strangers online?

- Anonymous Internet chatrooms
- Chatrooms requiring registration
- Chatrooms specific to my age group
- Gaming chatrooms
- Social media chatrooms
- Other

47. What was the name of the chatroom you used to talk with strangers online?

48. Did you ever use your mobile phone to chat with strangers in online chatrooms before the age of 18?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

49. What types of mobile phone applications did you use to chat with strangers?

- WhatsApp
- GroupMe
- Line
- WeChat
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Snapchat
- Skype
- Kik
- MessageMe
- Google Hangout
- IMessage/FaceTime
- Viber

Other (please specify)

50. What were the ages of the people you conversed with? Please select all that apply

- Peers my age
- Older peers (still under 18)
- Younger peers
- Adults (over 18)

Other (please specify)

51. What time of year did you generally go onto chatrooms? Select all that apply

- Winter (December-February)
- Spring (March-June)
- Summer (July-August)
- Fall (September-November)

52. What time of day did you generally go onto chatrooms? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Online Profile Information

53. What was your username?

54. Did you share information on your profile?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

55. What information did you share on your profile? Select all that apply

- Age
- Sex
- Location
- Gender
- Picture of myself
- Likes/dislikes
- Hobbies
- Relationship status
- Family environment (who you lived with)
- Favorites (food, music, books, movies, school subjects, etc.)

Other (please specify)

56. Did you share pictures of yourself on your profile?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

57. What types of pictures of yourself did you share? Select all that apply

- Pictures of myself as I normally looked
- Pictures of myself looking older
- Pictures of myself looking sexy
- Fake pictures (of other people)
- Pictures of myself that were edited

Other (please specify)

58. Did you lie about anything on your profile?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

59. Select all that apply

- Age
- Sex
- Location
- Gender
- Appearance (used another person's picture)
- Likes/dislikes
- Hobbies
- Relationship status
- Family environment (who you lived with)
- Favorites (food, music, books, movies, school subjects, etc.)

Other (please specify)

60. Did your parents supervise your online activity?

- Yes, usually
- No, never
- Only sometimes

61. How did your parents supervise your online activity? Select all that apply

- Time limits
- Tracking/cookies
- Site restrictions
- Observed online activity in person
- Checked history after online activity
- Had password protected login

Other (please specify)

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Conversations with Strangers

62. Did you converse with adults strangers in online or mobile phone chatrooms?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

63. How many adult strangers did you engage in conversations with?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- More than 20

64. Did any adult strangers attempt to engage you in online sexual contact in chatroom (but did not result in a conversation?)

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

65. How many different adult strangers attempted to engage you in online sexual contact in chatrooms (but did not result in a conversation)?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- Over 20

66. Did you ever converse with strangers you believed were other children/adolescents/teens who were later revealed to be adults?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

67. How many strangers you believed were children/teens, who were later revealed to be adults, did you converse with?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- More than 20

68. At what age did you start talking with strangers in online or mobile chatrooms?

69. How often did you go onto online chatrooms to talk to strangers?

- Less than once per month
- Once per week
- Once every few days
- Once or twice per day

70. What was the longest, ongoing chatroom conversation you had with a stranger you met in a chatroom?
(This would consist of several chats with the same person)

- Less than one day
- One day to six days
- One week to one month
- Over one month to six months
- Over six months to one year
- More than one year

71. What time of year did you talk with strangers in online chatrooms? Select all that apply

- Winter (December-February)
- Spring (March-June)
- Summer (July-August)
- Fall (September-November)

72. What time of day did you talk with strangers in online chatrooms? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

73. Why did you engage in online or mobile phone chatroom conversations with strangers?

74. Did you ever send pictures or videos of yourself to a stranger you met in a chatroom?

- Yes
- No

75. Who initiated the picture exchange (who asked for the picture to be sent)?

- I did
- The other person did

76. How many times did you exchange pictures?

- 1 time
- 2-5 times
- 6-10 times
- More than 10 times

77. What types of pictures did you exchange? Select all that apply

Pictures of friends/family/events

Non sexual self pictures

Sexual self pictures

Other (please specify)

78. Did you ever receive pictures or videos of a stranger you met in a chatroom?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

79. Who initiated the picture exchange (who asked for the picture to be sent)?

- I did
- The other person did

80. What types of pictures did you exchange? Select all that apply

- Pictures of friends/family/events
- Non sexual self pictures
- Sexual self pictures

Other (please specify)

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Sexual Content with Adult Strangers

81. Did you experience any online sexual content from an adult stranger you met in an online chatroom?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

82. Select all that apply

- Sexual conversation about you (discussing who you have had sexual relations with, what sexual contact you have done before, etc.)
- Sexual conversation about the other person (discussing who they had sexual relations with, what sexual contact they have done before, etc.)
- Sexual conversation about you and the other person (what sexual activities you would do together)
- Sent sexual photos/videos of myself
- Received sexual photos/videos of the other person
- Sexual flattery (calling you sexy, hot, etc.)
- Plans to meet and have sexual contact
- Cybersex (mutual masturbation)
- Sharing of pornographic links, videos, pictures

Other (please specify)

83. How many different adult strangers attempted to engage you in online sexual contact in chatrooms?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- More than 20

84. How many different adult strangers did you actually engage in sexual contact in online chatrooms?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- More than 20

85. On average, how long did it take for an adult stranger to introduce sexual contact into an online conversation?

- Under one minute
- One minute to 30 minutes
- 31 minutes to an hour
- One hour to one day
- One day to one week
- One week to one month
- One month to one year
- Over one year

86. What was the longest conversation that you had with an adult stranger who engaged you in online sexual contact in a chatroom? (This would consist of several chats with the same person)

- Less than one day
- One day to six days
- One week to one month
- Over one month to six months
- Over six months to one year
- More than one year

87. What was the shortest conversation that you had with an adult stranger who engaged you in online sexual contact in a chatroom? (This would consist of several chats with the same person)

- Less than one day
- One day to six days
- One week to one month
- Over one month to six months
- Over six months to one year
- More than one year

88. What time of day did you engage in sexual conversations with strangers? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

In-person Meetings with Adult Strangers

89. Did you ever meet an adult stranger in person that you had initially met in a chatroom?

Yes

No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

90. How many different adult strangers did you meet in person after initially meeting in a chatroom?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- More than 20

91. Did in person sexual contact occur with any of the adult strangers you met in a chatroom?

- Yes
- No

92. How many different adult strangers you met in a chatroom did you have in person sexual contact with?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- More than 20

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

93. Was the sexual contact consensual?

- Yes (in all instances if multiple occurrences)
- In some, but not all
- No

94. What type of in person sexual contact occurred?

- Vaginal intercourse
- Anal intercourse
- Oral sex
- Vaginal and penile touching
- Kissing

Other (please specify)

95. What time of year did the in-person sexual contact occur? Select all that apply

- Winter (December-February)
- Spring (March-June)
- Summer (July-August)
- Fall (September-November)

96. What time of day did the in-person sexual contact occur? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

Grooming

For the following questions, please answer them based on the adult you spoke to the longest if you had multiple conversations.

97. What was your age at the time of the conversation with the person?

98. What was the gender of the adult?

- Male
- Female

99. How old was the adult?

- 18-22 years old
- 23-26 years old
- 27-30 years old
- 31-40 years old
- 41-50 years old
- 51-60 years old
- Over 60 years old
- I don't know

100. What was the person's username?

101. Do you know why this person chose you to converse with in the chatroom? Please specify

102. How would you describe the nature of your relationship? Select all that apply

- Romantic/in love
- Flirting/dating
- Nurturing/mentoring
- Sexually driven
- Other (please specify)

103. Who first mentioned the idea of having a romantic/sexual relationship?

- I did
- The other person did

104. How soon into your conversation did you or the other person mention having a romantic/sexual relationship?

- Under one minute
- One minute to 30 minutes
- 31 minutes to an hour
- One hour to one day
- One day to one week
- One week to one month
- One month to one year
- Over one year later

105. Did you speak on the phone?

- No
- Only once
- A few times (2-4)
- Regularly (once a week)
- Frequently (more than once a week)
- Daily

106. Did you speak over text?

- No
- Only once
- A few times (2-4)
- Regularly (once a week)
- Frequently (more than once a week)
- Daily

107. When did you generally speak with the other person? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

108. How much information did you know about the other person? Select all that apply

- Name
- Age
- Location
- Job
- Family (i.e. married, had children, lived with parents, etc.)
- Hobbies
- Interests
- Education
- Goals
- Favorites
- Names/details about important people in his/her life
- None
- Other (please specify)

109. How much information did the other person know about you? Select all that apply

- Name
- Age
- Location
- Friends
- Family (i.e. siblings, lived with parents, etc.)
- Hobbies
- Interests
- Education
- Goals
- Favorites
- Names/details about important people in your life
- None
- Other (please specify)

110. Did the other person ever flatter you?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

111. How did the other person flatter you? Select all that apply

- Complimented my personality
- Complimented my maturity
- Complimented my intelligence
- Used pet names (i.e. baby, honey, sweetie)
- Other (please specify)

112. Did the other person mentor or teach you about sex?

- Yes
- No

113. Did the other person mentor or teach you about life?

- Yes
- No

114. Did the other person mentor or teach you about school?

- Yes
- No

115. Did the other person mentor or teach you about relationships?

- Yes
- No

116. Did you and the other person have similar likes, dislikes, and interests?

- Yes
- No

117. Did you talk about getting married?

Yes

No

118. Did you talk about having children together?

Yes

No

119. Did you talk about running away together?

Yes

No

120. Did the other person want to meet your family and friends?

Yes

No

121. Did the other person ever behave in the following manner towards you? Select all that apply

Moody

Angry

Manipulative (i.e. "don't you want me to be happy?")

Aggressive (i.e. used threats, called you negative names, criticized you)

None of the above

122. Did you ever feel that you were being deceived by the other person?

No

Yes (please specify)

123. Did you ever feel unsafe during your relationship with the other person?

Yes

No

124. Did the other person ever threaten or blackmail you?

Yes

No

125. Did you hide the relationship from your family?

No

Yes (please explain why)

126. Did you hide the relationship from your friends?

No

Yes (please explain why)

127. Did you ever have an in-person meeting with the other person?

Yes

No

128. How did the in-person meeting take place? Select all that apply

- I travelled to meet him/her at his/her house
- S/he travelled to meet me at my house
- We met in another location chosen by him/her
- We met in another location chosen by me
- Other (please specify)

129. Did you anticipate having sexual contact, such as sexual intercourse, as a result of your relationship?

- Yes
- No

130. Did sexual contact occur?

- Yes
- No

Online Experiences of Youth in Chatrooms

131. On how many different occasions did sexual contact occur?

- 1 time
- 2 times
- 3 times
- 4 times
- 5 times or more

132. Was the sexual contact consensual?

- Yes (in all instances if multiple occurrences)
- In some, but not all
- No

133. What type of sexual contact occurred? Select all that apply

- Vaginal intercourse
- Anal intercourse
- Oral sex
- Vaginal and penile touching
- Kissing
- Other (please specify)

134. What time of year did sexual contact occur? Select all that apply

- Winter (December-February)
- Spring (March-June)
- Summer (July-August)
- Fall (September-November)

135. What time of day did sexual contact occur? Select all that apply

- Morning (before school, approx. 6am-8am)
- During school hours (approx. 8am-3pm)
- Afternoon (after school, approx. 3pm-6pm)
- Evening (before going to bed, approx. 6pm-11pm)
- Late night (after going to bed, approx. 11pm-5am)

136. Did your relationship end?

- Yes
- No

137. Why did the relationship end? Please explain.

138. Was there ever any criminal justice involvement?

- No
- Yes (please explain any charges or resulting conviction)

139. Were there any long term consequences of this online relationship? (For example, any medical problems, emotional or psychiatric issues, etc.)