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Young Adult Perceptions of Internet Communications and

the Grooming Concept

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Abstract

Research of young people shows a lack of understanding of the term grooming in online communications and that internet risks are taken because internet literacy is poor for this group. However, limited research has investigated the perceptions of young adults in this context. The aim of this study was to understand young adults' perceptions of risk, their internet behaviours and understanding of the grooming concept. Further, to understand the types of risk behaviours young people engage in online, whether they perceive these behaviours as risky and what implications this has for vulnerability to negative experiences. An examination of internet communication perceptions and the grooming concept focused on ten young males and females aged between eighteen and twenty-three. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at open access youth organisations in the North West of England, UK and the duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. The data was transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis. Emergent themes were; a) grooming as a concept, b) virtual lives, and c) perception of risk. The findings concur there is limited understanding of the term grooming but that explanations may not be simply be confined to literacy. Risks being taken online were not always perceived as risky. Recommendations include the need for a more nuanced definition of the term grooming and that more information is available to children and caregivers. Further work should focus on younger participants' perceptions of grooming in order to address wider issues, together with a focus on risk-taking behaviours amongst other vulnerable groups.

Introduction

Over the past 10 years the internet has placed itself at the forefront of communications with 39.3 million internet users recorded in the United Kingdom in 2015. Further, that 92% of 16-24-year olds admitted to spending their internet time on social media (Office for National Statistics, 2015) and that young people in general spend a third of their leisure time on devices (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Thus, young people are more inclined to communicate via the internet and most of their arrangements, whether social or formal, are made via social media. Such sites are appealing to children as they are advertised glamorously and according to The Economist (2019) greater numbers of children have an internet addiction. However, children are not always aware of the potential dangers.

Defining grooming

The Cambridge dictionary (see www.dictionary.cambridge.org) defines grooming as 'the criminal activity of becoming friends with a child, especially over the internet, in order to try to persuade the child to have a sexual relationship' However, to complicate matters other dictionary definitions include 'washing or cleaning yourself or someone else' (see www.macmillandictionary.com). This diversity demonstrates the inconsistency with the definition and understanding of the term, so much so that the criminal act of grooming has only recently been recognised as a crime. According to Ost (2004), in 2003, the sexual grooming of a child was recognised in Section 14 of the Sexual Offences Act (see www.legislation.gov.uk) and is now recognised by the judiciary. Nevertheless, Mcalinden (2006) argues that there is a 'lack of settled meaning' of the term and that the area continues to remain under-researched. In 2017, in England & Wales, UK sexual communication with a child was made an offence. However, grooming is usually thought of as relevant to the

internet and does not therefore always consider that most abuse is carried out by somebody known to the victim and, moreover, this initial phase is unlikely to be carried out online.

Kierkegaard (2008) states that advances in technology benefits sexual predators, giving them the ability to engage with unsuspecting children. The internet holds copious amounts of information and with social media sites progressing it's easier to attempt to 'groom' children (see Gillespie, 2002) giving increased opportunities for sexual exploitation. Child sexual exploitation is defined as a 'type of behaviour in which children are sexually exploited for money, power or status' (see www.NSPCC.org). In 2013, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Service (CEOPS) received 18,887 reports relating to child sexual exploitation; 192 of these individuals were arrested - of which 790 children received protection and safeguarding (see www.CEOP.police.uk). As a term, sexual exploitation seems more commonly understood compared to that of grooming. However, 'grooming' is a widely used concept yet remains inconsistently defined. For example, online grooming is when someone builds an online relationship with a young person and tricks them or pressures them into doing something sexual (Childline, 2019). Similarly, offline grooming provides opportunities to build relationships (see Black, Wollis, Woodworth & Hancock., 2015). Online grooming however enables relationships to be built more quickly through regular contact via instant communication techniques, unless the parties know each other.

Although there is a limited amount of research, the literature that is available tends to focus on offenders and in particular, offender behaviour. For example, the grooming strategies of offenders and whether child sexual offenders feel empathy (Black, et al., 2015; Webster & Beech, 2000). Studies on perspectives of grooming appear to be rare, however one study carried out by Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis and Beech (2015) did compare victim and offender perspectives of grooming and child sexual abuse. The researchers found that victim and offender perspectives of the sexual elements of the relationship varied and

throughout the interviews victims and offenders regularly gave different answers to the same question. For example, victims gave different accounts of how initial contact took place. Whittle et al. (2015) suggest that this could be because the victims felt like they were in consensual relationships and therefore they were unaware of the manipulation and deception that took place at the beginning and throughout. In relation to the limited research on perspectives, in particular young people at risk, it is clear research into young people's perspectives and their risk-taking behaviours is required. More recently, Villacampa and Gomez (2016), in their study of 489 secondary school students in Spain, challenged the view that widespread use of communication leads to increases in child grooming behaviour and therefore exacerbates risk.

Risk taking and internet usage in young people

According to Livingstone (2008) risk taking behaviour on the internet arises from poor internet literacy, naïve displays of identity and sharing personal information. Young people may not be aware of their privacy settings on social media sites and could therefore be unaware that what they decide to share on their social media is not just shared with their friends but also with the public. Similarly, young people use the internet to express themselves and post pictures to express their identities. Maczewski (2002) found that young people obtain feelings of power and freedom from the internet and use it as a way to explore who they are. Most young people are not aware that when they post an image online it becomes public property and that subsequently they have little or no control over what happens with the data onwards. Furthermore, it is very difficult, even almost impossible, to have an image removed from the internet especially if it has been shared or downloaded (see www.thinkuknow.co.uk).

In addition to posting images, young people are increasingly turning to the internet for answers on important sensitive topics, such as sexual relationships, and this leaves them vulnerable to being incorrectly informed, cyber-bullied or groomed. Evers, Albury, Byron and Crawford (2013) state that young people turn to the internet for information on sexual health as they find it more suitable than any other method. Further, the young person cannot assess whether this information is correct, potentially building incorrect representations of sex and relationships, potentially leaving themselves vulnerable to grooming methods. As a result, the internet is increasingly being used for child sexual exploitation and grooming.

According to Williams, Elliot and Beech (2012) it is very difficult to identify sexual grooming taking place, especially if it is done via the internet. The researchers state there are three stages to online grooming: 1) *rapport building*, 2) *sexual content*, and 3) *assessment*. It is argued that groomers plan the process in careful detail to build a relationship in order to gain trust. Following the trust building stage, the person then moves to the sexual content stage. For example, this might begin with suggestive online chats followed by sexual chats leading to events such as arranging to meet or sharing sexually explicit photographs. According to Williams *et al*, (2012), the trust building stage is the most crucial stage for groomers.

Trust is the key to building relationships, and it is usually trust that determines the continuation of that relationship. Erikson (1959) created a theory of psychosocial developmental stages which all adult relationships are said to be built on. Trust is first. If this stage is satisfied, then the individual can continue to the next stage successfully. According to Eiser and White (2005) people tend to have higher trust in those who are seen as knowledgeable, similar and transparent, which suggests younger people and children might trust people based on these three traits. In addition, groomers online can take advantage of these influences and thereby create opportunities to manipulate trust. Similarly, older

groomer's offline can manipulate factors in order for the receiver to perceive them as knowledgeable, similar to them and honest. From a psychological perspective, it is apparent why some individuals would not perceive grooming as abusive and how, in turn, this can make young people and children more vulnerable when online and lead them to becoming at risk of being groomed.

The reality of individuals not perceiving grooming as abuse transmits an incorrect message to vulnerable young people. Perry and Alvi (2011) argue that victimisation of an individual can have an impact on the community the individual is embedded. Furthermore, the researchers state that the harm and the message caused extend to the victim's community and can normalise behaviour. In the context of this study, young people, as a community, spend much time on social media speaking to people that they do not know. Further, they may know other young people who have progressed to more advanced stages than just talking with strangers online; normalising behaviour. Such messages extend to the community of young people and potentially generates space for vulnerabilities to emerge when young people engage in online communications with the consequence of creating division in the relationships that take place between grooming and sexual abuse.

As stated by Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2007), when people talk about child sexual abuse they do not often think about sexual grooming in the same context. Sexual abuse could be considered as a more *forced* behaviour whereas grooming is more manipulative and exploits children into thinking that the 'relationship' is what they want; that is, and could be viewed as, more *consensual*. It may seem difficult then to understand that grooming lies in the same category as child abuse. As grooming can be difficult to identify (i.e., as the receiver) young people do not necessarily perceive grooming as an issue for them and may thereby engage in greater risk-taking behaviours. Davidson (2011) states that the abilities of the internet make it an attractive grooming place for groomers and possibilities are endless.

According to Davidson there are chat rooms where groomers can discuss their interests with other groomers, and which provide potential perpetrators with opportunities to share information and successful grooming methods. For example, other research, has found that online groomers use a selection of techniques to manipulate young people (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech & Collings, 2013). In their paper it was found that groomers use flattery, bribes and even threats to forge a relationship with young people and this is enabled by the young person's desire to engage in behaviours on the internet not necessarily considered *by them* as risky. Whittle *et al.* (2013) suggest that people display online identities that differ from real life and this is significant when considering the grooming process. For example, an online identity which displays perceived vulnerability or sexualisation is seen as a motive for a groomer to contact that particular person. Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis and Beech (2013) studied the manifestation of grooming and the psychological effect on victims. The researchers note that the negative impact of grooming can manifest in the form of self-harm and depression and these victims may subsequently receive negative feedback from family and friends. It is suggested that the more vulnerable the victim is prior to grooming the more impact this had on them, both internally (i.e., self) and externally (i.e., the world).

Risk models

Turner, Kasperson, Matson and McCarthy *et al* (2003), talk about vulnerability and its relationship to the exposure of hazards. In the researchers' risk-hazard model they describe vulnerability as the extent to which someone experiences harm due to the exposure to a particular hazard. It is described as the relationship between perturbation (i.e., worry) and stressors, and the vulnerability of the person. According to this theory, vulnerability has three components; 1) entitlement, 2) coping through diversity, and 3) resilience. People who have low resilience, experience diversity and who have less entitlement socially and economically are more at risk of being vulnerable. These three components, combined with repeated

exposure to hazards, can cause heightened worry and stressors. Young people, who could be considered to be aligned to the three components of vulnerability and are regularly exposed to internet communications with strangers, may thus be placed at a heightened risk of being groomed.

Similarly, Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon and Davis (2003) developed the pressure and release model in relation to natural disasters. However, this theory can be applied generally to vulnerability and hazard exposure. Wisner *et al.* argue that a disaster occurs because of two opposite forces (e.g., in this case, young people and the internet) which can generate vulnerability on one side. The model explains how the opposing forces are fighting for dominance creating conditions where one side becomes more vulnerable. This can result in a natural disaster, or in the case of the topic in this study, a young person placed in more optimum conditions where exploitation can take place. However, like the risk-hazard model, there needs to be vulnerability in place for this to happen; thus, it is not prescriptive that the outcome will always be a negative one. However, the models demonstrate that vulnerability and exposure in given communication contexts is a key factor in young people becoming victims of grooming. In turn, this can cause long term psychological effects and increased chance of re-victimisation.

Psychological effects

The psychological effects on victims can manifest in different ways and it can take many years to come to terms with. In an account described by Berson (2003) the victim had suffered five months of sexual abuse and the psychological implications caused the victim to require psychiatric hospitalisation following suicide attempts. Clinical observations of child sexual abuse victims have shown depression, low self-esteem and sexual dysfunction (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). In addition, Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, *et al*. (1992) found there

was a difference in the manifestations of abuse victims between males and females, both internally and externally. For example, men showed disturbed adult sexual functioning and women displayed a catalogue of issues including homosexual experiences and depression. The researchers listed a number of manifestations for long-term effects of abuse; including sexual disturbance, anxiety and fear, depression, suicide, re-victimisation, and personality disorder. It is evident that the wider impacts are potentially severe and for this reason alone more research into asking about and understanding young people needs to be undertaken.

Situating grooming

As noted earlier, one possibility is that online grooming is much more achievable than offline grooming and often goes unnoticed, especially as most young people today use social media on a daily basis. The internet is the preferred method for child sexual offenders as behaviour can go undetected and perpetrators have greater opportunity to deceive the victim (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004). Similarly, these types of behaviours can take place in the home of the victim whilst online, and often in the presence of parents and caregivers who are less aware of the situation. It is highly likely that even the most vigilant caregivers can overlook it (O'Connell, 2003). Taking into account the above, the question remains as to what these young people experience and why individuals continue to engage in risk taking behaviours, such as for example, posting inappropriate images on social media.

Grooming is an escalating issue, the success of which is made easier by continual advances in technology and media applications that help facilitate the process. On examination of the research, there is paucity in the knowledge base that relates to young adult perceptions of grooming and internet communications. Previous research has largely focused on victims and offenders and does not consider young adults engaging in risk taking behaviours and the potential consequences. This paper therefore is interested in the broad

research question: Whether young adults do engage in risk taking behaviours and, if so, can some of the reasons be determined? In consideration of this the study will attempt to shed light on how young adults perceive internet communications and, in particular, the concept of grooming.

Method

Participants

Ten participants over the age of eighteen consented to take part in the study, three female and seven males aged between eighteen and twenty-three ($M = 19.70$, $SD = 1.90$). The participants who took part were all frequent and established members of three different youth organisations in the North West of England, UK. The study was conducted in accordance with British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) and necessary approvals were granted. Originally, the study intended to source younger participants, however, the timeline and obtaining ethical clearances for this sample was challenging. Therefore, the exemptions from the study were participants outside of the stated age range, participants who did not attend a youth facility and participants who could not give informed consent. Due to the nature of the study, safeguarding procedures were put in place to protect the young people. The researcher ensured participants understood what was expected of them and that they were content to take part. No pressure was applied to answering questions and they were given time to provide responses. Regular breaks were afforded and the right to withdraw was made clear. Following the interview, participants were offered support from a youth worker and counsellor if they felt it necessary and helpful. Participant identity remained anonymous. Participants were however informed that if they

disclosed something that the researcher felt put them or someone else in danger, then that information would need to be passed to the line manager of the facility.

Design

In order to gain rich data, semi-structured interviews using open ended questions and prompts were used as these allowed participants to tell the researcher information they chose to share and enables participants to provide as much or as little information as they wish and is considered the most appropriate method for this topic and participant group. The interview guide included questions such as; *Have you heard of the term grooming? Tell me what type of conversations do you have on the internet? Do you feel that you can trust the people you meet online? Do you feel that you take any risks?* and, *Do you use chat rooms?* The interviewer was very familiar with rules of communication because of training as a youth worker and experience of talking to young people about sensitive topics. The supervision of the project was also undertaken by an expert in forensic communication and interviewing; additional training was undertaken where required. The analytical strategy used for the qualitative data was thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA has six stages of analysis: familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report; this approach was followed in the analysis of the data.

Materials and Procedure

Consent for the study was gained from a senior manager for youth by providing information about the study as well as the ethical approval form. The line managers at the youth facilities gave consent to interview members. The researcher works as a youth worker at one of the facilities used and therefore already had connections with the youth service and has significant experience of working with young people.

All participants were recruited by a member of staff at the youth organisation they attend. Potential participants were given brief explanation as to the nature of the research and asked if they would consider taking part. If they agreed they were then asked to read the participant information sheet which fully informed them of the study details and the process involved. If the participant still wanted to take part, they were asked to sign a consent form and reminded that they had the right to withdraw at any time and that data would remain confidential. One to one interviews took place in a designated private area.

An Olympus Dictaphone was used to record the interviews and when the participant was ready, recording started. The researcher read out the beginning of the interview schedule which contained information and instructions about the interview process. Participants were asked again if they were happy to continue. Once the participant was ready, the interview commenced. The researcher asked questions in the order presented in the schedule and used prompts if required to elicit further information on any given topic. The interviews varied in time as the participant was free to answer the questions in as much or as little detail as they preferred (however, in reality no interview lasted longer than thirty minutes). The participant was thanked, and the interview was brought to a close. Following the interview, the participant was debriefed by the researcher and informed that if they wished to know the outcome of the study then they could contact the researcher directly to obtain more information. This process was repeated with all participants. The interviews were then transcribed using Microsoft Office and thematic analysis was performed on the data.

Ethical approvals were obtained from the University's Ethics Committee. In accordance with ethical protocols anonymised transcripts and recordings were stored on the University's secure database.

Findings

Consideration was given to the most appropriate method of analysis for the data and TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as the analytical method because the research aimed to gain insight into the particular emergent themes and patterns that surround a young adult's internet usage and perception of risk. The thematic analysis allowed the interviews to be analysed as a whole data set and it enabled recurrent and significant themes to be extracted for interpretation. In accordance with the method recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) the analysis following the following broad structures including six stages: a) becoming familiar with the data, b) generating initial codes, c) searching for themes, d) reviewing themes, e) defining and naming themes and f) then producing the report. These initial six stages were performed across all transcripts. Whilst becoming familiar with the data, the interviews were read through several times to familiarise with the content. Any relevant words or concepts were highlighted, noted and commented on. Following this stage, initial codes were identified and collated into a mind-map of emerging concepts and themes. Significant themes were grouped together, and superordinate and subordinate themes generated. Three emergent superordinate themes were identified: 1) *grooming as a concept* (sub-themes; misunderstanding of grooming and seeking information about grooming); 2) *virtual lives* (sub-themes; socialising virtually, and curiosity about others); and 3) *perception of risk* (sub-themes; risk taking behaviours online, and changes to the perceptions of risk through maturity. The themes are illustrated in Table 1, and a more detailed consideration of these follows.

Table 1: Young adult perceptions of internet and the grooming concept

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate themes
1. Grooming as a concept	a) Misunderstanding of grooming
	b) Seeking grooming information
2. Virtual lives	a) Virtual socialising
	b) Curiosity about others
3. Risk perception	a) Risk taking behaviour online
	b) Changes to perception of risk through maturity

THEME 1: Grooming as a Concept

Grooming as a concept was found to be a significant theme because none of the participants shared a unified understanding of the term grooming. In its basic form the term means to befriend a child in order to prepare and persuade them into having a sexual relationship (see www.dictionary.cambridge.org). The expectation of understanding is that it is an activity involved in sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child. Most participants reflected the general 'gist'; however, some were not as confident in their responses.

a) *Misunderstanding of grooming*

Each participant was asked what each of them understood by the term grooming. One participant replied;

> "*Erm, isn't it where people say they're one person and then they're not ...*" (p.5, ln 94).

Another said;

"*...Being friendly and stuff, just like people trying to get close to you and stuff*" (p.8, ln 104-105).

Participant 7 was confused as to how somebody could be groomed online;

"*See I don't know how you'd groom someone online*" (p.7, ln 128).

Clearly, these utterances convey some confusion around the meaning of grooming to these particular participants. In contrast, three of the older participants who attended a youth facility, and where they had been able to create a drama piece on grooming, were given the opportunity to research the topic. This familiarisation seemed to allow these young people to become more aware of the term grooming and the dangers and associated risks involved in the process. For example, one participant commented;

"*We've just done a whole piece on grooming and I know about it now coz I've gone back and researched it*" (p.2, ln 140-141).

The older participant's meaning of the term grooming was the most similar to the meaning of the term, however, it remains they do not share a unified meaning. For example, participant 3 states;

"*...Speaking in conversations with people...who is younger or slightly disadvantaged...trying to get that person's way...*" (p.3, ln 110-112).

And another participant states,

"*Befriending somebody... online or face to face...gift giving and attention and love and things like that and building up that trust and then using that trust and those gifts to gain something from it*" (p.4, ln 112-115).

Further to this, participants were also asked whether they thought other people understood what the term grooming meant. There was a mixed response to this question; however, the majority of answers showed inadequate understanding. For example;

"*The younger generation, they know of it but they don't know what it is and how dangerous it is*" (p.3, ln 225-226), and "*...some people have to an extent they know what it means but younger people don't I don't think*" (p.5, ln 259-260).

Participant 9 believes that if somebody is groomed it is because they are mis-informed;

"*...if someone was to get groomed then they weren't very well educated on the matter*" (p.9, ln 140-141).

Moreover, participant 5 portrayed an interesting perception of the term grooming;

"*...they think arr it's just grooming, but if you say it in a different way, then it would be different*" (p.5, ln 232-33).

The latter comment suggests that the word 'grooming' is misunderstood and not taken very seriously. For example, the participant refers to the word 'as if' it does not sound serious and therefore will not be interpreted as serious by others. In light of this misunderstanding of grooming participants suggested ways they would like to be educated on the matter.

b) *Seeking grooming information*

Participants spoke about the information that they would like to receive about grooming. All participants felt the information should be available to both children and caregivers. The main type of information that was thought to be beneficial surrounded the signs and symptoms of grooming. For example, one participant suggests;

"...a workshop or a talk to explain what the sign are, how to spot the signs" (p.3, ln 37-38), and similarly participant 7 suggests; *"...how to see if you are being groomed coz people could generally think that this person like really likes me...there should be something to tell the difference if they are genuinely mean it or ..."* (p.7, ln 433-435).

Other suggestions that came from the interviews included information sheets;

"Like a little sheet to say what to watch out for" (p.1, ln 236-237).

Participant 10 stated there was not enough information around when he was younger and that he has only learnt about grooming and the dangers of the internet since he has become older;

"...stuff I've picked up and stuff my mum taught me" (p.10, ln 277-278).

He suggests that awareness should be taught to children just leaving primary school when they are becoming aware of the internet for social interactions;

"... kids may be coming to the end of primary school and start of secondary schools when they are starting to get their mobile phones and start using the internet ..." (p.10, ln 308-310).

Participant 9 held a similar view;

"...start in high school, maybe the end of primary school" (p.9, ln 153).

It is evident that the age of using social media is becoming lower and the gap in educational strategies is leaving the potential for children to be more vulnerable to grooming methods and at a much earlier age. It is also apparent that sufficient information on grooming is lacking. Social media plays a vital role in children's lives, as illustrated in the theme that follows, and it is worrisome that children are not being made aware of risks earlier. The importance of

interaction by social media is illustrated in the second theme; virtual lives.

THEME 2: Virtual lives

A virtual life was identified as a theme because all participants socialised through social media (i.e., Facebook) to make plans and interact with others. Similarly, when participants socialised offline, the plans were made online. This theme is significant as it is a significant part of the participants' lives, and who they are.

a) *Virtual Socialisation*

All participants admitted to using social media and all participants used Facebook on a regular basis;

> *"Every day, far too much"* (p.4, ln 39).

Except participant 8 who used it less than daily;

> *"Less"* (p.8, ln 55).

One reason participants used social media was for efficient communication with friends;

> *"It's fast communication between friends"* (p.9, ln 51).

And for making plans;

> *"Me and my friends have a big group chat that we make plans in"* (p.2, ln 68-69).

Other participants used social media to socialise with family that live away;

> *"I've got family in America and stuff like that, so I usually see them and stuff on it"* (p.2, ln 67-68).

Importantly, participants rarely used telephone calls and the preferred method of communication was through social media chats, such as WhatsApp;

>"We use WhatsApp…there's like ten of us in it so we can all make plans" (p.2, ln 79-80).

However, when asked about telephone calls, participants stated that this method was generally used with family members;

>"With family it's mainly text messaging or phone calls, with friends its mainly social media" (p.10, ln 63-64),

and

>"I don't really talk to my family but erm phone calls usually" (p.5, ln 63).

It is clear most socialising is carried out via social media. Participants appear to use it to make plans, browse sites, and stay in touch with family. The majority of participants also admitted to looking at other people's social media profiles to find out information about each other.

b) *Curiosity about others*

Participants admitted to using social media out of curiosity about others.

One participant found social media sites interesting because he could find out about other people around the world;

>"You can see what other people are doing in the world" (p.6, ln 68-69).

He also liked finding out their interests;

"…see what's going on and what other people like doing and you can catch similar interests" (p.6, ln 69-70).

When asked what he liked about the social media sites, participant 8 stated;

"People's business" (p.8, ln 57).

Other participants used it to find out information about friends;

"…I know the person and I'm finding out when their birthday is" (p.3, ln 54-55) and

"…if I've like just met someone…check to see if they know anyone, I know…" (p.1, ln 89-90).

And to find out about arguments between friends;

"If I know someone's had an argument with someone…I go on their Facebook and see if anyone's put anything up" (p.7, ln 76-77).

Participant 2 stated that she asks about people's day, receives pictures and makes plans;

"Planning things or asking like how your days been.…my friends have had kids so it's sending pictures of the baby" (p.2, ln 107-109).

Participant 7 enjoyed having a laugh with friends on social media;

"I'm on a few group chats and it's all like banter or just jokes and stuff" (p.7, ln 95-96). Another talked about advice from friends; *"…we just talk about nonsense really…Who's been horrible…lots of boyfriend advice"* (p.4, ln 87-90).

This theme demonstrates how easy it is for children to access information about people from all over the world and social media allows them to be vulnerable to speaking to strangers,

including groomers. However, participants who took these kinds of risks did not perceive them as risky for a number of reasons, such as, they had not met them in person.

THEME 3: Perception of risk

Perception of risk was identified as a theme because it varied across the interviews. Participants who stated that they did not take risks showed risk taking behaviour in discussions during the interview, suggesting that their risk perception differed from others. Upon asking the participants what constitutes risky behaviour, many referred to sharing information online and meeting up with strangers. For example;

> *"People asking for information about you, like name and where you live and stuff"* (p.8, ln 136-137). One participant talked about his friends' interactions with stranger's online; *"...they've started talking to a person...built up a friendship online and they've come to trust them"* (p.1, ln 176-177).

Most of the risks demonstrated by the participants were associated with social media usage and online chat forums.

a) *Risk taking behaviour online*

Participants engaged in a variety of risk-taking behaviours online. However, when asked if they took risks, six participants said that they did not. For example, in response to the question, do you take any risks? The participant answered;

> *"No, no"* (p.8, ln 134).

Three participants said that they took minimal risks, for example;

"...I do take risks but not high enough to put myself...in severe danger" (p.3, ln 148-149).

Nevertheless, another participant did admit to taking risks;

"...sometimes..." (p.6, ln 202).

Throughout the interview, questions were asked to identify risk taking behaviour online and the risks identified were either focused around chat rooms or meeting strangers online. Participants did not share any information beyond Facebook profile information. For example;

"...on my Facebook profile it's got my age and it says I'm from..." (p.10, ln 107).

Six of the participants use chat rooms, for example;

"Use them with friends" (p.8, ln 155).

Participants used the chat rooms to have fun and for entertainment;

"...just to entertain myself..." (p.5, ln 119).

And;

"...we thought it was dead funny" (p.7, ln 279).

Not all participants viewed this behaviour as risky because they could see the other persons face; suggesting that the use of webcams means that they can trust that stranger and be confident they can identify if individuals are lying or not;

"...I can see what they look like, so I know they're telling the truth" (p.6, ln 285).

And;

"...you can see the person then, so you know if they are being truthful or not" (p.10, ln 180-181).

Some of the participants build up online friendships with the strangers that they met on the internet.

"Greg...he was from Canada...we spoke to him for ages..." (p.7, ln 315-323).

And;

"...did start speaking to someone off it...from...the Philippines...I skyped her...spoke to her a few times..." (p.6, ln 243-245).

One of the participants met up with people from the internet;

"...once I've known them...for a while...if I can trust them then yeah id meet them...sometimes I go on my own..." (p.6, ln 191-196).

Participant's perception of truthfulness is informed by whether they can see the person that they are speaking to. Participants appeared to understand the risk of being deceived by a false identity. However, they failed to recognise the potential for a stranger to lie to them. Thus, so although the risk was recognised, the perception of risk was limited. For example, seeing the person on a webcam confirmed the truthfulness of the individual without taking into consideration other potential risks that may occur; such as, elements of grooming – which in these cases, is significant in understanding the participant's perception of risk. Nevertheless, some of the risk's participants took were when they were younger and 'mis-informed'. Participants conveyed this idea during the interviews which is discussed in the sub-theme below.

b) Changes to perception of risk through maturity

The sub-theme was evident across more than half of the interviews. Participants admitted to risks they took when they were younger – and that they would not take now. The main reasons that came across were maturity and knowledge;

"Obviously like stuff coming out in the news and plus being older and being smarter and knowing what could happen" (p.10, ln 205-206).

And;

"I came here...and did drama...I got to learn about...the risks...I learnt how to enjoy myself safely..." (p.4, ln 177-180).

Participants admitted to other risks such as;

"...like drugs and things like that I guess..." (p.5, ln 180).

And;

"I did like hang around on street corners and stuff..." (p.2, ln 201).

Participant 3 admitted to sharing personal information;

"...when I was younger, I was a bit naïve and I would put personal information out there..." (p.3, ln 159-160).

And participant 7 took risks online;

"There was always dirty old men...doing that to the camera and we'd be laughing our heads off thinking it was dead funny...that's disgusting...we were only eleven or something stupid..." (p.7, ln 286-292)

And offline;

"...when I was younger, I used to walk through the park at night...when I was

drunk...on my own..." (p.7, ln 229-230).

Throughout this theme it is clear that risk taking behaviour and the perception of risk varies significantly between participants.

General Discussion

The analysis revealed three superordinate themes related to the research question: How do young adults perceive internet communications and in particular, grooming?

Grooming as a concept addressed the young person's perception of the term and what participants considered it to mean. As Mcalinden (2006) argues, there is 'lack of settled meaning' that surrounds the term grooming, and this was evident from the interview data. In summary, all participants had different ideas of what they thought the term meant; though the older participants, who had engaged in topical work on grooming, shared a better understanding. All participants felt that there should be more awareness for children and caregivers to inform them of, and reduce their vulnerability to, grooming. They also stated that this information needs to be available much earlier than it currently is and should coincide with when children are starting to use social media. The tools represent a significant part of their lives and this was demonstrated in the theme virtual lives.

Virtual lives demonstrated how much of the participant's time was spent on social media and how much of their lives were conducted online. Maczewski (2002) states that young people use the internet to explore who they are and to express their identities and it is assessment of these identities that groomers use in order to choose their victims. Participants admitted to using the internet to access information about their friends and about people from

all around the world making it possible for them to come into contact with and start talking to a groomer. Some of the participants had built up friendships with strangers on the internet and even met up with strangers, demonstrating, that in this study sample at least, the participant's perception of risk is poor.

Indeed, *perception of risk* demonstrated an unclear understanding of what constitutes risk. Participants were found to be in conflict with their statements. For example, by stating they did not take risks; though each demonstrated significant risk behaviours. Livingstone (2008) concludes that young people take risks online because they have poor internet literacy; that is, a misunderstanding of internet safety settings, and because they naïvely display their identities and personal information. This information can be freely accessed by strangers and be used as a tool to manipulate the individual using techniques (see Whittle *et al.* 2013). Participants did admit however that they take fewer risks now that they are older. This is mainly due to increases in knowledge and greater levels of maturity.

The emergent themes throughout the interviews indicated that the young people have learnt about risks throughout their teenage lives, through maturity and knowledge. Their perceptions of grooming and online interactions are varied and similarly their perceptions of risk. A key factor in the findings presented in this paper is that all participants were over eighteen years of age and most of the significant risks were taken when they were younger - suggesting that awareness of the problem needs to be available at a much younger age. The differences in knowledge base was also a key factor in the outcomes; participants who were older and had engaged in grooming workshops generally took less risks and had a better understanding of what grooming was and what is was about. The paper therefore demonstrates how important it is for children to be educated on the grooming concept and dangers of using the internet; particularly as it is seems clear from previous research that the internet is the preferred method for groomers (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson,

2004) and young people spend a third of their leisure time on devices (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

Lack of education, knowledge and understanding enhances vulnerabilities when using the internet. The risk-hazard theory (Turner *et al*, 2003) has relevance to the three themes identified. Lack of knowledge of online activity and the dangers that can potentially surround it heightens vulnerability for young people who find and/or present themselves in that situation. If young people do not understand grooming and sexual exploitation then, as shown in this paper by a number of responses, they may not see situations as risky. Young people admittedly spent a large amount of time communicating on the internet; therefore, increased exposure to the hazard raises the likelihood of individuals being targeted for grooming. Moreover, young people claimed that they knew what a risk was, despite risk taking behaviour being clearly demonstrated elsewhere in their narratives. Thus, not understanding risk impacts on a keen ability to stay safe online.

However, the young people in this study did not find themselves victims of grooming. The pressure and release theory (Wisner *et al.*, 2014) suggests that young people may be vulnerable because they do not understand the risks of the internet and there are online groomers who attempt to win advantage using this vulnerability. The theory argues that one of the opponents will defy the other which potentially causes a disastrous situation, in this case the potential for sexual exploitation. In addition, vulnerability is multifaceted; therefore lack of knowledge alone is not the only factor in the risk of sexual exploitation. The majority of the young people in this study stated that they were not clear on the term grooming but that they understood about the potential risks of the outcome of speaking to strangers online. Given this, grooming is clearly a misunderstood term and it is therefore difficult for victims and wider communities to detect in a timely fashion.

Previous research also suggests that online grooming is much harder to identify. O'Connell (2003) notes the online grooming process often goes unnoticed, even by members of the family. Some of the participants who were interviewed were quite young (for example, Participant 7 was age 11) when they were engaging with strangers on the internet and this often went undetected by the people they lived. Young people's desire for risk taking behaviours on the internet because it is 'funny' or 'entertaining' makes them vulnerable to online grooming or being exposed to sexually explicit material at a young age. Some of the participants admitted to doing just that. Having these somewhat incorrect representations of what is acceptable sexually can lead to inappropriate and/or negative representations of sex and relationships for later life (Evers *et al.*, 2013). The poor representations young people acquire leaves them more vulnerable to grooming as they are misinformed of what a positive, healthy relationship looks like. One key aspect of grooming is manipulation. This element can lead the victim to the belief that they have chosen to engage; making the lines of consent blurry, making the grooming process very complex, and to reiterate, at times difficult to identify.

Grooming is a serious and dangerous process and the term in and of itself does not reflect or convey this seriousness. It is evident that young people misunderstand the severity of the term grooming because, as illustrated in this paper, they do not relate it to the latter part of the process which results in potential for sexual exploitation or sexual abuse. Craven *et al.* (2007) argued that people do not put grooming in the same category as sexual abuse because the lines of consent are unclear, and that grooming can be perceived as the preparatory stage of sexual abuse. Indeed, participants in this study did not refer to sexual abuse as an aspect of grooming. Young people appear to see grooming and sexual abuse as two separate entities and it is argued here that these need to be conjoined to demonstrate the potential severity of the whole process. In addition, Ost (2004) states that the sexual grooming of a child was only

added to the Sexual Offences Act in 2003 and that grooming solely is not an offence unless it results in a meeting. It is not surprising therefore that young people do not see it as a concern, particularly as recognition and legal clarity is lacking. Moreover, because of the manipulation that takes place in grooming some young people are not even aware of what is happening to them. Taking into consideration all of the evidence, it poses the question; would more people understand grooming and take it more seriously if it was called something else?

In light of this, the term suggested here is '*sexual manipulation*' with a definition of '*the befriending of a child (via the internet or in person) with the purpose of manipulation and preparation to take part in sexual activity either with or without consent*'.

Current terminology does not amplify the severity of grooming. In addition, the young adults who took part in this study did not know what the word 'grooming' actually meant. Grooming has multiple definitions; from brushing your hair to child sexual exploitation – thus, understandings of grooming will vary. Similarly, as highlighted in this paper, the term grooming and the term child sexual exploitation present as independent elements. It is argued here that the terms need to coexist in order that children and young adults realise grooming behaviours represent a preparatory stage, and it is possible that this could result in child sexual exploitation. Because grooming and child sexual exploitation is complex and vast in the activities and techniques that take place, it is imperative to create a definition that grasps the complexity of the subject. This paper takes a step forward in that process.

Any research is not without its limitations. The age range of the participants was higher than the researcher would have preferred. Participants took fewer risks at the time interviews took place and the indication from the research findings is that most of their risk taking took place when they were young teenagers. This is a significant point as the risks participants spoke about were reported retrospectively and therefore it is possible some of the

information may not have been as accurate as it could be (i.e., recall bias). Moreover, their perception of risk was, on average, different from when they were younger. Therefore, their accounts may have been clouded by maturity. As a consequence, the data may not have been as authentic as it could have been. Further limitations of qualitative research can include interview bias and a subjective explanation of the findings. Despite these potential limitations the research has revealed insight into risk perception online aligned to this age group. Further research nevertheless should concentrate on younger teenagers who are potentially involved in risk taking in the moment; this would allow for rich first-hand experiences.

It is apparent that there is limited research on the concept of grooming and a clearer social understanding of the term is sought. Therefore, it is recommended that further research is carried out on the understanding of grooming and the *processes* leading up to sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation. For example, interviewing victims about the events leading up to the abuse and ascertaining the reasons why they became victims and what steps could be taken to prevent it. This research focused on young adults over eighteen years of age and it became evident that risk taking behaviours online had decreased compared to when they were younger. As a result, it is recommended to extend this work to include interviews with younger teenagers in order that insight might be gained into their perceptions and investigate how they contrast to the older group represented here. Outcomes can then be compared with existing data to ascertain the perception of risk due to maturity and age. Finally, research that would complement this study is that which explores online risk taking behaviour and vulnerability amongst the LGBT community. Such work would be beneficial to help understand whether different populations of young people have similar experiences on the internet and whether they are at more or less risk of grooming and other negative outcomes which stem from the internet. It is possible that different interventions could be developed relating to different youth populations.

Importantly, the development of new information giving sessions should (as suggested by the young people in this study) focus on the preparatory stages of exploitation and abuse through age appropriate sessions with children aged 10-12 with follow up sessions throughout the teenage years. Such sessions should include information on how to keep safe online, a clear understanding of what grooming is, and what signs and symptoms to look out for. Other recommendations include; information sessions for caregivers, leaflets on the signs and symptoms of grooming, and clear instructions on what to do if you think that you or somebody else is being groomed utilising, for example, helpline numbers. The researchers are currently working on the development of these aspects. In addition, on the basis of the findings they study hopes to consider target and prevention programmes that can educate young adults and their caregivers to keep them safer from grooming and sexual exploitation. A key message from these findings is that young people appear to be desensitised to the potential dangers of online communications and have demonstrated that they engage in risk elements of this type of communication. It is important for professionals to keep this in mind as the current methods of safeguarding young people from online abuse appear flawed.

In conclusion, the study showed young people have a lack of understanding of the term grooming and limited knowledge of the grooming process. As such they appear to engage in risk taking behaviours online; although risks appear to decrease with age and maturity. Integrated risk models should be considered in the identification and measurement of risk in the context of online and media communications. Grooming could also be examined by other research methods (e.g., quantitative studies) and increasing interview samples in order to address potential limitations. Indeed, further research is necessary to illuminate and clarify the term grooming and online risk taking amongst teenagers to probe the ever emergent and dangerous concept that is grooming.

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