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European  
Online  
Grooming  
Project\_

# Final Report – Executive Summary

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## Background

- The sexual abuse of young people via the Internet is an international problem, a crime without geographical boundaries. Solutions both to perpetrators' use of the Internet and to the safety of young people online must be sought and will necessarily involve agencies working to protect young people at local, national and international levels. Action 3.1 of the Safer Internet Plus programme invited proposals for projects that aim to enhance the knowledge of the online sexual abuse of young people, with a particular focus on online grooming.
- Online grooming is defined as the process by which a person befriends a young person<sup>1</sup> online to facilitate online sexual contact and/or a physical meeting with them, with the goal of committing sexual abuse.

## Aims

- The European Online Grooming Project research consortium is comprised of experts from across Europe and was tasked with meeting the following research objectives:
  - describe the behaviour of both offenders who groom and young people who are 'groomed',
  - describe how information, communication technology (ICT) may facilitate online grooming,
  - identify how young people are selected and prepared by online groomers for abuse online,
  - contribute to the development of prevention initiatives aimed at parents and young people.

## Methods

- The project had three separate but interlinked phases. The first was a scoping project that involved a literature review, review of police case files and interviews with key stakeholders. Phase 2 of the research involved in-depth interviews with 33 male offenders convicted of online grooming in the UK, Belgium and Norway. Online groomers' chat-logs were sourced from Italy. Phase 3 encompassed twelve focus groups with young people in the UK, Belgium and Italy. The aim of these groups was to understand young people's online behaviour in the context of the groomers' accounts, and explore young people's view of online risks and current safety initiatives. In addition, seven dissemination events were held with teachers, parents and professionals in Belgium, Italy, Norway and the UK in order to promulgate the key findings from the project.
- This report brings together findings from the main stages of the European Online Grooming Project - the in-depth interviews with online groomers, focus groups with young people, and dissemination events with key stakeholder groups. The scoping report and literature review have been published and are available for download at the project web-site<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this report, young people are defined as those age 16 years or younger.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.europeanonlinegroomingproject.com/>

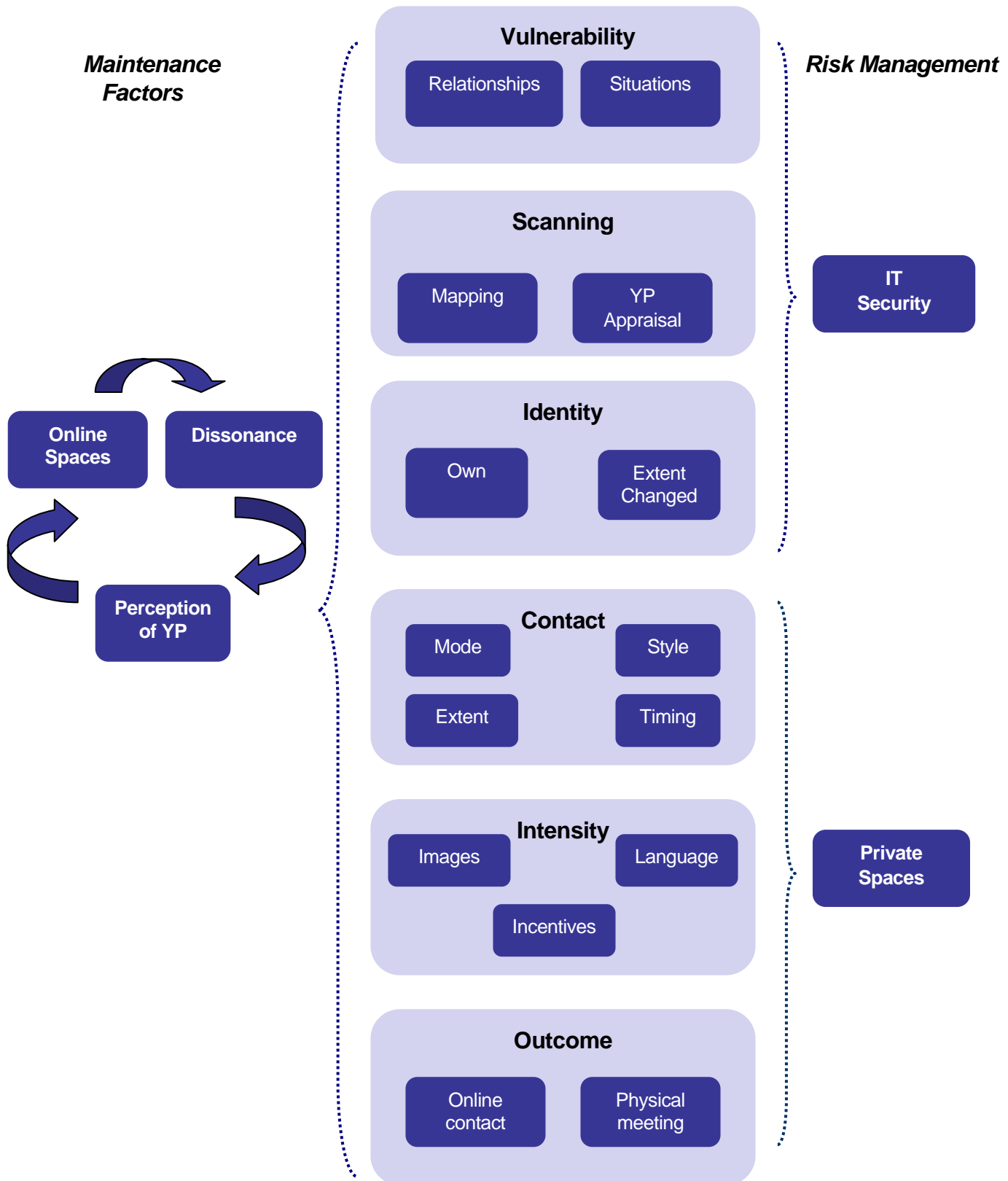
## Characteristics of Online Groomers, Technology and Websites

- Online groomers are not a homogenous group in terms of their demographic and offending characteristics. Scores on Full Scale Intelligence Quotient (FSIQ) standardised tests were high, with a FSIQ score of over 110 common. The current offence of online grooming also tended to be the first conviction for the sample.
- Limited education or training in ICT *was not* a barrier to achieving a sophisticated understanding of computing and the Internet. Learning was developed at the workplace and/or by covertly watching the behaviour of family members online. Desktop computers, laptops as well as gaming consoles were all used to facilitate online grooming. The map of sites and chat-rooms accessed by participants encompassed: **social networking sites; instant messaging; online dating/romance; image exchange; and sexual abuse sites**. Finally, the extent of some groomers' activity meant being online for four to six hours (outside of work) a day.

## Features of Online Grooming

- Six features of online grooming were identified alongside two important concurrent factors: offence maintenance and risk management. Movement through the different features of online grooming was neither unitary nor linear. Instead, it was cyclical and involved a pattern of adoption, maintenance, relapse, and readoption.
- The process of online grooming was described as taking minutes, hours, days or months. Consequently, online groomers remained at different behavioural points for various lengths of time according to a dynamic inter-relationship between their goals and needs, and the style, needs or reactions of the young person.

# The Features of Online Grooming



## Vulnerability

- The men described event(s) that made them vulnerable and low and so triggered their underlying goal or desire to contact and groom a young person. **Situational factors** included being made redundant from work, or losing their home. There was also the breakdown of **interpersonal relationships** such as a partner or spouse leaving the offender, or an argument with a friend.

## Scanning

- Some men did not immediately begin to groom the first young person they encountered online. Instead, some offenders scanned the online environment to make an 'informed' decision about who to approach for sexual contact. Scanning encompassed *being in online spaces* where young people meet to identify the nature of different conversations and what friends were saying about other young people in the forum. Scanning also involved *appraising the characteristics* of particular young people online. Three types of appraisal emerged: **virtual-sexual**-interpreting the screen name or forum tag; **idealistic/romantic**-looking for young people who would be good in a 'relationship'; and **physical characteristics**-using images of the young person to identify whether they were physically developed enough to warrant potential online contact. In contrast to those scanning, there were also men who did not hide an immediate and explicit desire for sexual contact with young people.

## Identity

- Online identities were shaped to present the men positively to young people. There were men that described making '**minor**' **changes** to their identity such as changing their name, age, marital status or using a younger (perhaps more attractive) photograph of themselves. Some men made these minor changes to their identity based on unsuccessful previous attempts at contact. There were also people that made **major changes** to their identity. Here changes went beyond amending age or name, and could involve pretending to be a young girl or woman. Some offenders also talked about using multiple concurrent identities online, and switching between them to maximise the opportunity of contact. Finally, there were online groomers that did **not change their identity** before or during their online encounters with any young people. Alongside listing legitimate details, some men were also explicit about their sexual interest in young people. That some of these men went on to develop contact with young people raises important questions about the vulnerability of some young people online.

## Contact

- Contact with young people online was made and sustained in four ways.

## Mode

- **Forums and chat-rooms** were used for text communication that continued until the encounter with the young person ended, or escalated into a physical meeting. Alongside text chat, some offenders

also described using **webcams**<sup>3</sup> as a key part of their offending behaviour. Webcams reinforced, strengthened and maintained grooming by bringing some offenders' fantasies to life. **Phones** were used to contact young people and were described as being a more immediate and intimate method of contact. Finally, **online game platforms** were used by some men that were attempting to groom young boys. Grooming via game platforms helped to reinforce the *fantasy* aspect of offending behaviour and gave the men *credibility* in the eyes of the young men being approached.

### Extent of contact

- The number of young people online across time zones meant that some men had sexual conversations with dozens of young people concurrently. In contrast, some online groomers were very particular about whom they spoke to. For those groomers speaking to a number of young people, keeping on track with multiple conversations was a challenging task. To manage this, some described strategies such as logging conversation histories on Excel spreadsheets, or using other coding schemes to monitor conversation 'progress'.

### Style

- A 'typical' grooming approach was not always used. The identity of some men online was denoted by a picture of their flaccid penis as their avatar or a profile name such as *PussyLicker69*. Here limited conversation and an instant sexual request/act characterised these approaches. For those men that did not make instant sexual requests, a deliberate process of *gentle socialisation* was described. Here the approach was tailored to meet the needs of the offender and/or the perceived needs of the young person and encompassed three styles. **Complimentary** (using language to explicitly flatter the young person); **mentor** (presenting themselves as somebody to discuss and solve the young person's problems); **experience congruence** (approaching young people that shared similar interests or life experiences). In addition, some adopted a style of text to present themselves favorably. This included using *text-type* ('*Hi gorgeous hope to cu l8r*') and *emoticons*<sup>4</sup>.

### Timing

- Online groomers talked about spending seconds, minutes, days, months and even years talking to young people. For those offending quickly, the Internet has speeded up the process of child sexual abuse. That is, the anonymous, disinhibiting properties of the Internet are allowing offenders to behave in a sexually explicit way, at a speed that would be almost impossible to replicate face-to-face with a stranger offline.


### Intensity

- Online groomers intensified contact using three desensitisation techniques.

### Visual

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<sup>3</sup> A webcam is a video capture device connected to a computer or computer network. Their most popular use is for video telephony, permitting a computer to act as a videophone or video conferencing station. This can be used in messenger programs such as Windows Live Messenger, Skype and Yahoo messenger services.

<sup>4</sup> An emoticon is a textual expression representing the face of a writer's mood or facial expression. For example, :), :(, and :D. They have now been replaced by pictures such as 

- Visual desensitisation involved sending young people adult-pornography and/or indecent images of children. Where online groomers talked about a gradual process of offence intensity and escalation, images were used to instigate sexual discussion. Use of images also intensified the abuse process for the offender. For example, it was not uncommon for some offenders to describe masturbating to ejaculation whilst discussing images with young people.

### Language

- Running concurrently to visual desensitisation, some men created further process momentum by using language to encourage and reassure the young person. Here a ‘*sexual test*’ was given to young people that could involve an explicit or subtle **sexual discussion**. The choice of approach was influenced by how the young person was presenting online. For example, a young person’s provocative screen name could be used to introduce sexual topics. Where there was nothing to indicate a sexualised young person, sex was more subtly introduced. In addition, competitions to masturbate to ejaculation or telling sexual jokes helped promote **sex as entertainment**.

### Incentives

- The incentives described were either **gifts** or **threats**. **Gifts** included topping up mobile phones, providing new phone handsets, sending webcams to young people, and offers of cash. Providing gifts to young people as part of the sexual offence process is also a common tactic used by men who sexually offend offline.
- There were two forms of **threat** described by some offenders. The method selected depended on whether the groomer wanted the young person to begin sexual contact, or continue behaving sexually. *Where the young person had not yet acted sexually*, there was an example of one offender hacking into the computers of young people to encourage them to act-out sexually. *Where the young person had been behaving sexually online*, some offenders also talked about making explicit threats to encourage the young person to continue. For example, threatening to make public indecent images of the young person.

### Outcomes

- For some online groomers, being able to continue to collect images and engage with young people in a sexual way was the desired outcome - a meeting or any longer-term contact for these offenders was not the goal driving their offending behaviour. However, there were also accounts of a physical meeting between the young person and offender as the final outcome. Meetings were held in hotels, car-parks, parks, bus stops, and the offender or young person’s bedroom. Meetings could take place on a single or multiple occasions with the same young person.

## Offender Maintenance and Risk Management

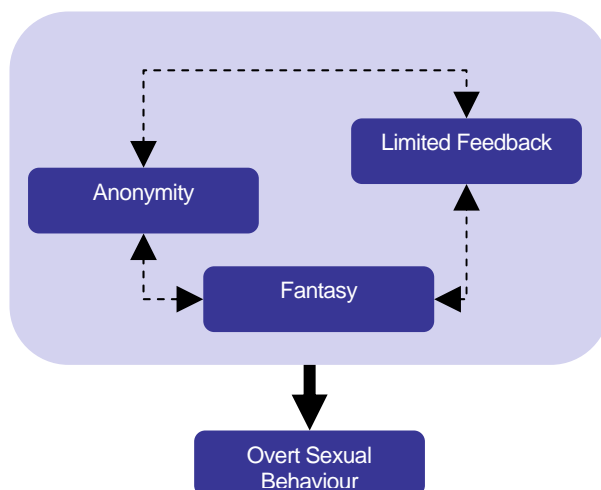
- Given the view of society towards sexual offenders, and the negative emotions some offenders associated with their thoughts about young people, some online groomers needed to motivate themselves and to some extent, give themselves permission to continue grooming.

## Maintenance

- Offence maintenance occurred in three, interlinked ways.

### Online environment

- Although low self-efficacy (offline) was described by some online groomers, the Internet was a place where some men could socialise with **confidence**. Influencing this confidence was the extent of potential opportunities to offend and how the Internet provided the men with the opportunity to separate their online self from their real world identity. The online environment was also a place where some men felt more alive or **stimulated**. Here the mundane aspects of life were described as being mitigated by the excitement of going online and behaving in a way that was not possible in the offline world. Some groomers also talked about being **addicted** to the Internet, where feeling tense and almost obsessed with the need to go online was a recurrent theme. Finally, the **disinhibiting** properties of the Internet helped to *maintain* online grooming offending behaviour as set out in the figure below:



- **Anonymity:** some men used the anonymous nature of the Internet to maintain and escalate their offending behaviour.
- **Fantasy:** running concurrently to anonymity is the belief that the offending behaviour was part of a fantasy life.
- **Limited Feedback:** a lack of visual interaction meant some men did not have to attend to accepted conversational norms indicating displeasure, such as a frown or shake of the head.
- **Overt Sexual Behaviour:** the final feature of disinhibition maintenance was influenced by the previous three and so allowed the men to normalise their sexual behaviour online.

### Dissonance

- Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort of holding conflicting cognitions simultaneously. Three features of dissonance were evident. The first was the influence of **adult and child images**. Adult pornography use was a recurrent theme, with some users searching for adult models that were 18 or



19 years old, but looked younger - labeled and marketed as a 'barely legal' category. Collections of indecent images of children ranging from none to collections in excess of 20,000 were also described by some men. Indecent images were sourced from commercial sites; swapping or trading with other adults; or from mainstream file-sharing sites. The *relative ease in which illegal content could be sourced* was an important maintaining feature - some talked about viewing pornography and indecent images as a normal part of their life. The *scale of indecent material* available online also had a bearing on some behaviours - with so much material online to view, groomers do not feel isolated or 'different' viewing the content. As well as maintaining or supporting online sexual offending, for some online groomers viewing adult pornography and indecent images of children was discussed as having a role in *escalating deviant behaviour* by:

- **Saturation:** some men did not become so easily aroused when masturbating to a particular type of image. Consequently they moved from images they saw as mild to material that was ever more explicit and thus arousing again.
  - **Denial of harm to child:** the features of some images were focused on to justify and continue offending, such as those showing the young person smiling.
  - **Fantasy:** indecent images helped 'bring to life' the young person being groomed online. For example, one participant talked about asking a young person to describe themselves in detail so he could quickly match that description to an indecent image. The image was then used during masturbation whilst concurrently chatting to the young person
  - **Demand fuelling status:** as well as meeting individual needs, there was also kudos and credibility in being a provider of indecent image material. In turn, this made some individuals feel important and so want to create and share more images of abuse.
- The second feature of dissonance that helped to maintain online grooming was **online chat**. This took place in 'labeled' venues for men (i.e. *Cherry-Popping Daddies*) with a sexual interest in children and young people. Such explicit labelling helps to reinforce the idea that this behaviour is legitimate and acceptable. The second type of area for chat was unstructured Newsgroups<sup>5</sup> or ad-hoc discussions with other men on message boards.
  - The third feature of dissonance was **offence supportive beliefs**. These are the maladaptive beliefs and distorted thinking that play an important role in facilitating or justifying sexual offences. A wide range of distortions were acknowledged by the men that encompassed: *harm reduction views* - by not physically meeting or touching a young person the behaviour was less harmful; *socio-affective*

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<sup>5</sup> A Usenet newsgroup is a location, usually within the Usenet discussion system, for messages posted from many users in different locations. Newsgroups are technically distinct from, but functionally similar to, discussion forums on the Internet. Newsreader software is used to read newsgroups.

*reasons* - here low self-efficacy underpins the reasons given to justify offending; *external locus of control* - the sense that some men felt addicted to, or trapped by the Internet.

### Perceptions of young people and behaviour

- The final feature of online maintenance involved the online groomers' perceptions of young people. These perceptions were underpinned by: *how the young person looked online* - whether the young person was physically developed, looked mature for their age, or was 'just under' the legal age of consent for sexual activity; *how the young person behaved online* - young people who posted sexual pictures, used sexual language about themselves or other people, were seen as sexually mature and willing for chat.

### Risk Management

#### Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) logistics

- The use of ICT was adapted by some men to manage the risk of detection. These steps included: using **multiple hardware**, for example, purchasing a laptop or smart-phone for the sole purpose of offending that was then hidden to avoid probation monitoring. **Multiple ISP addresses** and multiple proxy servers<sup>6</sup> were also used to hide the actual location of the offender. **File labelling and storage management** encompassed changing file extensions of indecent images; filing indecent images in a hidden hard drive, directory or folder; and using external devices to store indecent material.

#### Conversation management

- Having a chat in any open space was described as risky so some online groomers asked for the **private email address, postal address or mobile telephone number** of the young person. The **language** used in some encounters was also tailored to minimise the risk of detection and so encourage the young person not to disclose the abuse.

#### Offending location

- Some online groomers picked young people and meeting locations far away from their own homes so they were less likely to be recognised in a new environment. This behaviour was particularly pronounced amongst the groomers from Belgium and Norway. However, not all online groomers adopted risk management behaviours. For some individuals, their view was that they were not doing anything wrong and so there was no need to hide their actions. This is explored further in the next part of the summary that presents three types of online groomer.

### Typology of Online Groomers

- Three types of online groomer were identified across eight behavioural dimensions. These dimensions were whether the offender: had any previous convictions for sexual offending; used their own or another identity; the nature and extent of indecent image use; if they contacted other offenders online; the type of offence-supportive beliefs described; the speed of contact made with

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<sup>6</sup> A proxy server is a server that acts as an intermediary for requests from clients seeking resources from other servers. The main aim of proxy servers is to keep machines behind it anonymous and help to bypass security / parental controls.

young people; how contact was made and sustained; and the outcome of the offence (online offending and/or offline meeting).

### Intimacy-Seeking

- Men in this group did not have any previous convictions for sexual offending. They had offence supportive beliefs that involved seeing contact with the young person as a *'consenting relationship'*. As such, they did not change their identity in any way as they wanted to be liked for who they were. They did not get involved in other online behaviours that indicated to them, and others, that they were sexually offending. Consequently these men did not have any indecent images of children and they did not have any contact with any other sexual offenders online. This group spent a significant amount of time talking to the young person online before meeting to develop or further the *'intimate relationship'*.

### Adaptable Style

- These men tended to have previous convictions for sexual offending against children. They had offence supportive beliefs that involved their own needs and seeing young people as mature and capable. Unlike the group above, they did not discuss the encounter in terms of a 'relationship'. Some men had indecent images of children but these were not significantly large collections. They also tended not to have significant contact with other sexual offenders online. *The key feature of men in this group is that they adapted their identity and grooming style according to how the young person presented online, and reacted to their initial contact.* Contact developed quickly or slowly, depending on how the young person responded to the approach. Risk management was a feature for this group with hidden folders and sometimes extra computers/phones that could be used for online grooming.

### Hyper-Sexualised

- These men were characterised by extensive indecent image collections of children and significant online contact with other sexual offenders. Some men also had significant collections of extreme adult pornography. They adopted different identities altogether, or had an avatar picture that was not of their face but their genitals. Contact with young people was highly sexualised and escalated very quickly. Their offence supportive beliefs involved 'dehumanising' young people. They tended not to personalise contact and so did not tend to use the phone to groom young people. In this group, meetings were less prevalent than the adaptable and intimacy seeking groomers. Some of these men also had previous convictions for having indecent images of children.

## Young People Online

- From the behaviour of online groomers and their accounts of young people online, it was possible to note the characteristics of victims. However as this was second-hand information it may be open to distortion, although evidence from the Italian chat logs provided some substantiation.

## Typology of Young People Victimised

- A categorisation of victims was developed indicating those ‘vulnerable’ and those ‘risk takers’.

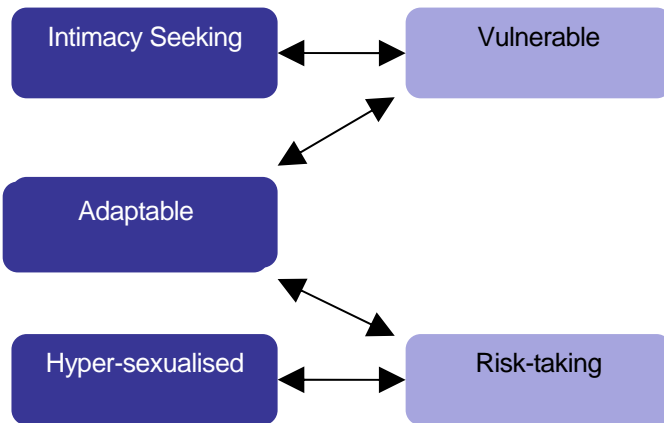
Vulnerable victims	Distinguishing themes	Risk-taking victims	Distinguishing themes
Need for attention and affection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> </ul>	Disinhibited, seeking adventure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outgoing</li> <li>• Confident</li> </ul>
Relationship with parents and home lives difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological disorder(s)</li> <li>• Concurrent sexual abuse</li> </ul>	Young people (and offender) feel they have control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complicit and consenting to sexual contact</li> </ul>
Seeking ‘love’ online - believe they have a true relationship with groomer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offender as ‘mentor’</li> <li>• Self-disclosure and joint problem solving</li> </ul>	Less known about family, but less confident on meeting than online.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offender re-assessment on meeting</li> <li>• Introverted or immature at meeting</li> </ul>
Resist disclosure - want to continue the relationship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loyalty</li> </ul>	Open to blackmail due to apparent ‘complicity’ – own behaviour used as evidence of cooperation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non disclosure of abuse, threats and computer intrusions</li> </ul>

## Matching Grooming Style with Young People

- We can only speculate upon links between the style of online groomer and young person at this time. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that it is exactly this meshing of the characteristics which helps explain the specific dynamics observed during online grooming. A framework was developed on the hypothesis that for at least a proportion of the interaction, some ‘**matching**’ was at play between groomer and victim profile. What is meant by matching is the aligning of grooming style with victim profile, with a view to maximising the likelihood of contact, and fulfilling the groomers need, whether for more intimacy, or more sex.

## Offender Type

## Victim Type



More information needed on

- Psychological profile
- Attachment/vulnerability
- Disinhibition/regulation
- Context and protective factors

- The *'intimacy-seeking'* groomer seems likely to match with the vulnerable victim, since both want intimacy and both mistake the online interaction for a real romantic relationship. Both seem needy in terms of confidence and support, and both want to continue the interaction over a long period and to make it exclusive. The *adaptable groomer* can develop his style to meet the needs of either type of young person. The *hypersexual* groomer is likely to interact with the risk-taking young person, given their attraction to the use of sexual screen names, and use of sexual chat. Both seem to want the adventure of an online sexual interaction, and are open about wanting sex.

### Resilient Young People

- From the accounts of online groomers, there was evidence of resilient young people that refused to engage online. The key features of young people's resilience (from offenders accounts and the academic literature) were the ability to: recognise risk and fend off any approach they consider 'weird', understand safety messages, feel confident about rejecting advances and informing others, coming from more secure backgrounds. The groomers did not particularly show annoyance at conversations ending abruptly, nor did they feel rejected. The anonymous nature of the online interaction meant that there was little sensitivity to rejection.

### Young People Online: Focus group data

- Twelve focus groups were conducted across the UK, Italy and Belgium with young people age 11 – 16 years. The aims of this phase of the research were to understand: the nature and extent of Internet use; young peoples understanding and awareness of online safety; their experiences,

behaviours and strategies to stay safe online; social networking behaviours; their knowledge and attitudes regarding online groomers; their attitudes to online safety awareness advice and training.

### Nature and extent of Internet use

- Time spent online ranged from 5 minutes to 6 hours as a maximum. The older group age 14-16 spent longer online which is consistent with literature about online behaviour in the teenage years. Personal computers (PCs) and personal laptops were used during the week for searches related to homework. At weekends more time was spent social networking and, in the case of the older group, this was conducted from their mobile phones rather than PCs or laptops.
- There was both congruence and incongruence between online groomers' behaviour and young people's current use of the Internet. For example, some online groomers used **online gaming platforms** to make contact with young boys. In the focus groups there were no examples of girls using gaming consoles to go online. **Webcams** and **MSN** were also described by the groomers as a popular mode of contact; however, young people indicated a more limited use of this hardware and forum. These different patterns could be explained by the retrospective nature of the online groomers' interview accounts and how technology is evolving. Finally, the online groomers tended to take interactions to private spaces where possible. Young people described **where they used the Internet** as a matter of convenience and expediency; however, the bedroom did seem to be the preferred location and was influenced by the need for privacy.

### Online safety

- Three **risk awareness** themes emerged from the group discussions. First, was the concept on **non-disclosure** and encompassed people not sharing information about their private life to strangers, or meeting people they do not know (stranger-danger). In schools where there had been no safety awareness, some young people (particularly those from the 'vocational' education stream) talked about meeting someone under particular circumstances. For example, if they were attractive. Second were risks to the **health of their computer and thus the young person**. Here, getting hacked and/or people taking control of webcams to spy on them were discussed. The final category is labelled '**no knowledge**' as some young people were unable to articulate any awareness of risk.
- **Risk-management strategies** for the young people meant having settings to 'private', not giving out phone numbers or addresses and specifically not giving out passwords. It appeared that much of the online safety practice had been learnt 'by doing' rather than through explicit advice. This was particularly evident where there had been no awareness training in school. Sources of unstructured learning tended to be from siblings and parents.

## Social networking - Facebook

- The popularity of Facebook was striking and virtually all young people used the site. Where Facebook was not used, it was because the young people were not yet old enough to access the site.

### Adding friends

- Facebook friends ranged from 50 to 1000. Irrespective of the actual number of Facebook friends, a sense of **competition** to have more friends underpinned this aspect of Facebook behaviour. Here there were examples of some young people adding friends they had not met. Despite the competition influencing how friends are added to Facebook, some safety messages are getting through. That is, the pressure and competition to have many friends was discussed by one of the older girls as a concern about younger children using the Internet.

### Profiles and privacy settings

- Some young people had their **profile settings** on 'public'. This meant anyone using the Internet can access the page and discover personal details about the young person. These young people tended to come from 'vocational' education streams. For those that had their settings on 'private', influencing this behaviour were safety awareness sessions in school, or parents that were aware of safety issues and also users of Facebook. There were also some young people in this group who talked about having good awareness, but had not yet put the learning into practice.
- Acceptable **profile content** was name, gender, birthday, 'information about your life', and the name of the town lived in. In addition, some young people used profile names such as 'Squiggle' or 'JackiesGirl'. Given that some profiles were public, and some online groomers scan profile information to target particular people - this is risky practice. The information seen as not suitable to post on profiles was personal addresses and phone numbers. When 'relationship status' on profiles was discussed, there was a difference between the countries in terms of the type of information posted. This behaviour was not mentioned at all in the UK groups, but did feature in the Belgium and Italian groups. Given some online groomers perceive young people as mature and ready for contact, openly disclosing relationship status has safety implications.
- **Fake single or multiple profiles** on Facebook were also discussed. Here young people developed multiple profiles in response to safety risks and so posted different information on each profile according to who they expected to view the page.

## Awareness and Perception of Online Groomers

### Awareness of grooming

- In some cases the word 'groomer' was an unfamiliar term. When definitions were established, descriptions of online groomers tended to be stereotypical depictions of old, unattractive or 'sick' people. These attitudes suit some online groomers' approach if they present themselves attractively.

### Perceptions about approaches

- The range of responses reflected understanding of how groomers may socialise with young people and attempt to relate to the young person by wanting to learn more about them. The information gathered from young people was encouraging as they show that some safety messages about the type and style of approach are being understood.

### Approaches received, appraisal and actions taken

- Some young people shared experiences of receiving inappropriate approaches. In fact, an approach by some that they judged as 'suspicious,' seemed to be an almost expected experience. The **identity** and **escalation** features of online grooming were the point when young people became aware of a potential risk. Here, not trusting someone referred to persistence by the 'stranger' trying to communicate. Some young people also described men that made fast sexual contact with explicit sexual behaviours. Beyond general suspiciousness of some approaches, the style of language used by online groomers was discussed as a key identifying marker of risk. For example, clumsy attempts at shorthand, excessive use of emoticons were all described as signs of a 'fake approach'.
- Young people's responses to an approach covered three themes. **Immediate action** - consistent blocking of messages or ignoring inappropriate requests. **Risky behaviours** - keeping strangers phone numbers and continuing to chat online until things seem suspicious. **Extent of disclosure** – a common feature across boys and girls accounts was they deal with things alone and doing so was not much of a problem. Boys in particular tended to be more resistant to the idea of telling anyone about inappropriate online approaches, girls tended to tell a friend. There was some resistance to telling parents or carers, influenced by a fear that their computer privileges would be removed.

### Attitudes to Safety Training

- The **style or approach of the training provider** distinguished attitudes to safety training. In Italy all training seemed to be welcome, in the UK, some young people wanted to relate to the provider. This did not necessarily mean the provider needed to be someone of a similar age, but people who liked Facebook. There was a sense that some parents were fearful of Facebook, and so some young people were sceptical about the advice the parent gave. Therefore an open and balanced delivery does seem to **influence the credibility of the message**. Some younger girls in the sample had been put-off Facebook (temporarily) and other social networking sites on account of earlier safety awareness initiatives. Ultimately this is not helpful given that not all online interaction is going to be

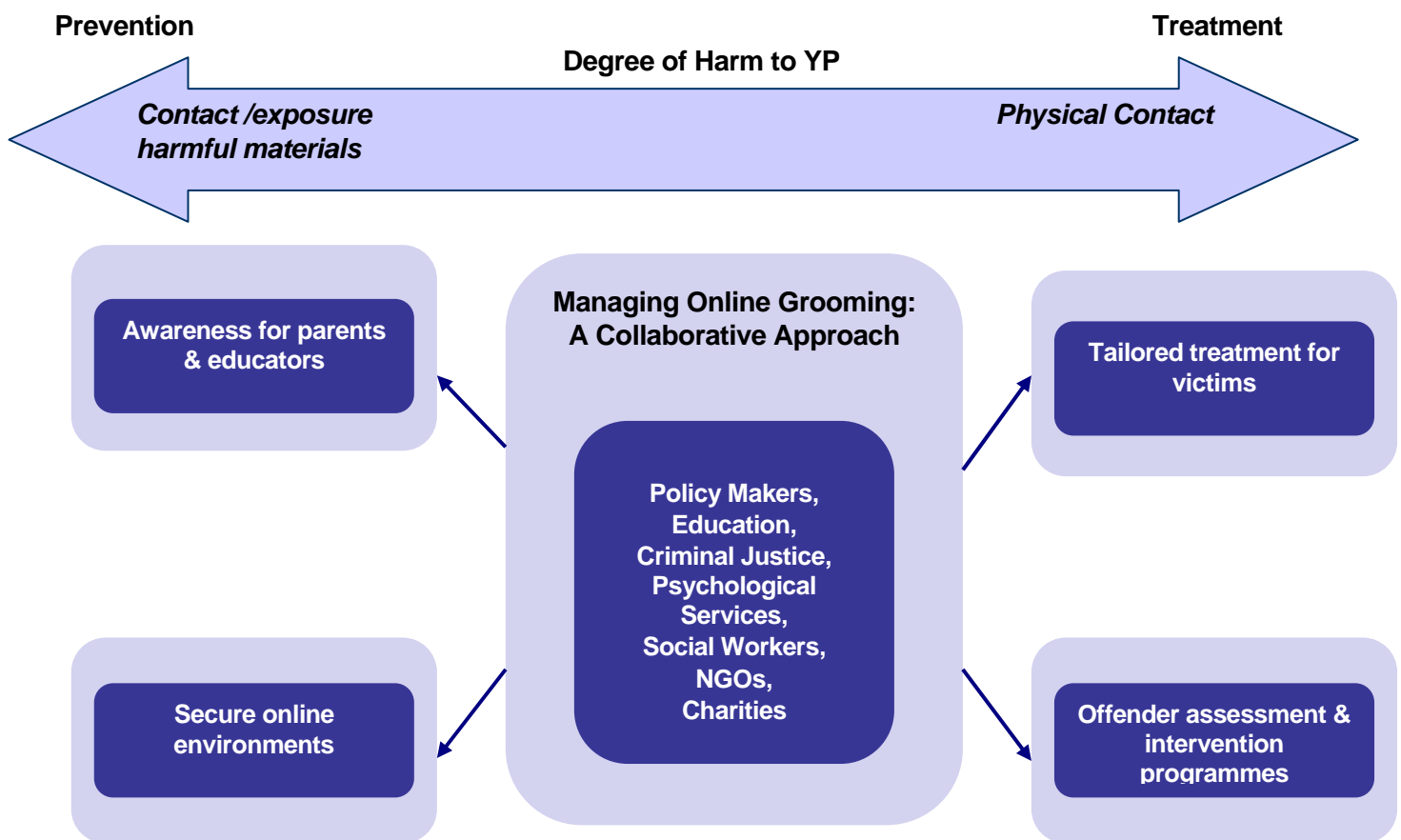


harmful. The young people were clear that **education programmes need to target younger children**. The suggestion here was that the younger children are more vulnerable precisely because of their desire to get online and their **competitiveness** to have as many friends as possible.

## Implications: Applying the Research to Practice

### Safety initiatives in a public health model

- The potential scale of victimisation of children or young people online makes the issue one of public health, given the population base of potential victims and the damaging impact on children's mental health and even physical health following abuse initiated online.



### Public protection and intervention packages

- Safer Internet Programmes have led to much greater provision of information and awareness across Europe. However lack of awareness about online risk is still a problem. From this research with online groomers and young people, gaps in safety campaigns were identified regarding the **content of messages** and **how they were delivered**.

## Content gaps

- Some young people still have **no knowledge** about online risks
- Some young people did not understand the term '**grooming**'
- There is mixed awareness with regard to the **benefit of private profile pages**
- Descriptions of online groomers tend to be **stereotypical perceptions** that do not mirror reality
- There is limited awareness of how some offenders **scan the online environment** for information
- There was **no awareness of continued abuse online by collecting images** without a meeting
- **Internet enabled mobile phones** is an emerging risk not acknowledged by young people
- Limited awareness of the **potential risk in continuing conversations** with unknown contacts
- The **importance of disclosure** is not embedded in an understanding of risk management. To engage young people and parents with this information messages could encompass:
  - **targeted approached for boys and girls** and **identified vulnerable children**
  - **sharing information beyond peer groups**, to encourage disclosure by friends/siblings
  - people **will not be seen as unintelligent** if mistakes are made online.

## Process gaps

- To empower and engage young people, a **punitive, fear-based approach** does not seem effective
- Parents to encourage disclosure of harm. **Internet access as a home privilege undermines the potential for disclosure**
- **Parents and carers** have a key role to play in providing compelling, balanced information about online risks. Significant others require accurate information about online behaviour and risks.

## **How can the industry contribute**

- Multi-national organisations have done much to fund and assist the promotion of online safety. However, a sense of competition when social networking encouraged some young people to accept unknown adults as friends, with profile pages of use to groomers kept open. Therefore, can social networking sites keep all settings private when an account is opened, with the onus on the user to unlock settings rather than having to lock them retrospectively?
- In addition, can more be done to prevent the sharing of indecent images and discussion of offence-supportive beliefs on forums that promote the sexual abuse of young people? Indecent images and offence-supportive helped maintain the online offending process, therefore, any intervention from the Industry to limit this type of behaviour would be welcome.

## **Online groomers assessment and treatment needs**

### **Risk assessment**

- For online groomers without offline contact histories and no previous conviction, it is not clear if current **static risk** assessment scales can be reliably used. For static scales to accurately assess

the future risk for online grooming, it would be helpful to consider the *number of people contacted online* and whether *multiple identities were used*. The **dynamic risk factors** it would be helpful to consider include: *the role of indecent images and sexual chat in maintaining the offence process; the impact of the online environment on disinhibition, with particular regard to anonymity and identity masking*.

### Treatment approaches

- Internet Sexual Offenders can receive a diverse range of interventions across Europe. Therapies differ according to the model adopted by the therapist, or organisational preference if delivered in institutions. The range of treatment options and how this research may contribute to programme content is set out below.

Approach	Considerations for Treatment of Online Groomers
<b>Addiction model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• aspects of online grooming as an addiction (time spent online, compulsion to go online, collection of indecent images).</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive-behavioural model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• online offenders treated separately or mixed in with a group of contact sexual offenders? this research suggests groomers share many characteristics with those offending offline,</li> <li>• nature of online disinhibition included in programme content for online sexual offenders,</li> <li>• develop risk, need, responsivity treatment targets pertinent to findings from the features of online grooming, offence maintenance/images, and type of groomer presenting,</li> <li>• develop psychometric measures of treatment change that measure the offence-supportive beliefs described by online groomers in this report,</li> <li>• consider pairing CBT with pharmacological treatment (hormonal drugs that reduce sexual drive) for the hyper-sexual groomer obsessed with indecent images.</li> </ul>
<b>Psychodynamic model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what does Internet pornography and indecent images of children offer and the role of a virtual second life?</li> </ul>
<b>Good lives model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evidence of strengths include: pro-social activities that took place online; some men had the skills and capability to learn how to build computers and operate ICT in a sophisticated way - suggests potential that could be used positively.</li> </ul>

### Raising awareness across key stakeholders

- A core aim of this research was to empower professionals, policy makers and parents with robust information to manage the risks presented by online grooming. Seven events were run in the UK, Italy, Norway and Belgium with parents, teachers and professionals working with offenders and young people.
- The key learning messages from **parents** encompassed greater awareness of how online groomers can use the Internet and enhanced knowledge of how young people are operating online, and the associated potential risks. In particular, there was a sense that the concept of being a parent is evolving, as are new technologies. As such we need to equip parents with the right information for them to feel empowered and cascade that learning to their children.

- Events with **teachers** were also well received. In Italy, some of the feedback concerned the report 'not telling them anything that they did not already know'. This is encouraging as it indicates that our sample of Italian teachers are equipped with good information about online grooming. In Belgium however there seemed to be an implicit view that the problem of online harm felt almost unmanageable. The final dissemination events involved groups with **professionals** working with offenders, and/or survivors online grooming. The overarching feedback was that the professionals had gained additional and detailed knowledge about online grooming to help their work.
- From the accounts of stakeholders, online groomers and young people, the European Online Grooming Project has presented a series of implications for safety campaigns, the Internet industry and the assessment and management of online groomers. We argue that if the challenge of online grooming is to be robustly tackled, it is helpful for online grooming to be understood as a public health concern. This will enable a joined-up response to a multi-dimensional problem. This in turn will help identify and target the needs of different young people and online groomers, and ensure we do everything possible to keep people safe online.