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# Author's Accepted Manuscript

Understanding Grooming Discourse in Computer-Mediated Environments

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**Understanding Grooming Discourse in Computer-Mediated Environments**

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## 1. Introduction

Online Grooming (OG) is broadly understood as the process whereby an adult seeks to arrange a sexually abusive situation with a minor through the use of cyber-technology, such as mobile telephones, internet games and chat rooms. OG affects a significant proportion of children and teenagers. A recent National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) survey completed by 1,024 11-16 year old holders of social network profiles reveals that 12% of them received unwanted sexual messages whilst online (Lilley, Ball, & Vernon, 2014). The most recent OFCOM *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*<sup>1</sup> concludes that, although 8% of children aged 8-11 and 18% of those aged 12-15 who go online and acknowledge exposure to sexually offensive content report that they “know the sorts of actions they should avoid online, but they do not necessarily act accordingly” (2014, p. 10). Similarly, the UK-based Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) reports a significant rise in the illegal online distribution and trade of indecent images of children, and that these images have become “more extreme, sadistic and violent” (2012, p. 4).

Despite the increase in OG, research into its many aspects is scant. For instance, whereas for offline grooming different vulnerability and risk-taking levels in relation to victims’ age, gender, and psychological traits have been identified (e.g., Vizard, 2013), research into OG has yet to generate robust socio-demographic victim and groomer profiles. Similarly, research into the exact scale of OG is underdeveloped, since the nature of the problem and the vulnerability of victims mean that many cases go unreported (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> OFCOM is the Independent Regulator and Competition Authority for the UK Communications Industries (<http://www.ofcom.org.uk/>)

The scarcity of research into OG is also reflected in a certain over-reliance within OG research on what we know about grooming in offline settings. A number of OG definitions, for example, simply refer to it as grooming that happens online.<sup>2</sup> Also, a number of software products claim to be able to catch paedophiles online. Yet, the researchers behind the development of preventive technology are rightly cautious, for their research has tended to adopt theoretical models of offline grooming rather than test and adapt them to online contexts (see Gupta, Kumaraguru, & Sureka, 2012). Kontostathis, Edwards, & Leatherman (2009) claim to base their technological outputs on an OG model that expands and/or modifies the offline grooming model developed by Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers (2007). However, this amounts to their making two small changes: 1) including within the category of gaining access to victims “the initial entrance into the online environment and initial greeting exchange by offenders and victims”, and 2) adding the “use of slang, abbreviations, net speak, and emoticons in online conversations” to one of the previously identified offline grooming stages (Kontostathis et al., 2009, p. 2). The features referred to in both changes are far from idiosyncratic: gaining access to an online environment necessarily requires entering it; greetings are commonplace interactional openings across many contexts, both on- and off-line; and slang, net speak and so forth pervade across many Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environments. It is thus unsurprising that a missing element in the development of OG detection software seems to be “clarification within the [discourse] categories” (Kontostathis et al., 2009, p. 11).

Future detection software development, therefore, should be grounded on a better understanding of the discourse of OG, which is the principal aim of the present study. In doing so, we endorse Walther’s (2010) call for CMC research to pursue a comparative, online-offline agenda without which the analysis of online behaviour may “lead to artificial

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/grooming/what-is-grooming/>

conclusions” (p. 471). This seems especially relevant to grooming, where claims that online and offline grooming differ in a number of crucial respects (O’Connell, 2003) have only begun to be investigated (see e.g., Webster, Davidson, & Bifulco, 2014; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2015; Black, Wollis, Woodworth, & Hancock, 2015).

## **2. (Online) Grooming and Discourse**

Although there is no universally-accepted definition of grooming (see McAlinden, 2012), it is generally understood as a “process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure” (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006, p. 292). The most comprehensive theoretical model of offline grooming to date was developed by Olson et al (2007). This is based on an extensive review of multi-discipline literature and characterises grooming as a process of communicative deviance (see Figure 1).

[please insert Figure 1 here]

As shown in Figure 1, this communicative process, which Olson et al (2007) label ‘luring’, commences with groomers gaining access to their victims and communicating their desire for sexual acts. The intended outcome is always the sexual abuse of minors. Deceptive trust development constitutes the core phase within the luring cycle of entrapment and entails a series of moves through which groomers cultivate their victims’ trust for deceiving purposes. Once the victims’ trust has been gained, the next phase of the luring process begins, which Olson et al (2007) call grooming. This sets the stage for future sexual contact via a number of strategies that fall into two categories: desensitization and reframing. Desensitization entails verbally and physically desensitizing the children to sexual contact; reframing consists of presenting sexual activity between children and adults as if it were of

benefit to the child later in life. The cycle of entrapment is also developed through two other phases: isolation and approach. Isolation consists of two, non-mutually exclusive forms: physical and mental. Approach constitutes the final phase of the cycle of entrapment and refers to groomers' attempts to meet their victims in order to abuse them sexually. It requires deceptive trust to have been established and isolation to be quite pronounced.

Although Olson et al' (2007) work has arguably had the highest uptake in subsequent research into OG, there are other OG models. One of them, by O'Connell (2003), is based on observation of approximately 50 hours of online grooming interactions with its author posing as an 8, 10 or 12 year old child, typically female, in chat rooms or online channels intended for child or teenage users. O'Connell's (2003) model includes six sequential phases: 1) Friendship forming: the online groomer gets to know the child; 2) Relationship forming: the online groomer seeks to create the illusion of being the child's best friend; 3) Risk assessment: the online groomer assesses the likelihood of his activities being detected by the child's parent(s), guardian, or older siblings; 4) Exclusivity: the online groomer seeks to introduce "a mutual respect club", comprised of him and the child, which must remain a secret from all others; 5) Sexual: the online groomer introduces sexual topics; and 6) Concluding: the online groomer seeks to strengthen his relationship with the child to reduce the child's fear and the possibility of his (the groomer) being caught.

A slightly different approach to modelling OG is adopted by Williams et al (2013), whose work is based on examination of the first hour of eight chat logs<sup>3</sup> from the Perverted-Justice Foundation website (see Section 3.1). They identify three themes: (i) Rapport-building: the groomer seeks to develop a friendship with a child; (ii) Sexual content: the groomer introduces, maintains and escalates the use of sexually-related terms; and (iii) Assessment: the groomer estimates the child's trust and his own risk of being detected. Each

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<sup>3</sup> The term chat log is here used to refer to the entire digital record of the conversation between a groomer and a PJF contributor.

theme includes a subset of strategies that show a significant degree of overlap with O'Connell's (2003) findings, including characterising the OG process as non-sequential.

Importantly, although the three models state that grooming is *patterned*, they do not examine the discourse that makes up those patterns. Indeed, to our knowledge, no *discourse-based* analysis of either off-line or OG has been conducted. The only discourse study of a related issue examined the message structure and politeness strategies used by a group of paedophiles communicating by email with each other, rather than with their victims. Results revealed that paedophiles quickly formed – and strongly displayed their belonging to – a community of practice and that their discourse was constructed “as polite communications ... with a telling absence of FTAs [Face Threatening Acts] in the form of banter, sarcasm or humour.” (Luchjenbroers & Aldridge-Waddon 2012, p. 39).

In order to contribute to this gap in knowledge, our study adopts a Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approach (see Section 3.2) to OG that is informed by research into online *and* offline grooming. Such an approach is justified by the absence of directly comparable online and offline grooming data and our belief that, whilst CMC does not fundamentally change human behaviour, it does influence how humans interact and hence how grooming discourse operates in online settings. Our study is guided by three propositions, which we next describe.

## **2.1 Investigating Online Grooming Discourse: Guiding Propositions**

The first proposition of this study is that online groomers likely use more direct means of sexual behaviour solicitation than offline groomers. Offline groomers are known to be particularly deceitful in their solicitation of children, relying primarily on covertness and indirectness (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachristis, Beech, & Collings, 2013). This is possibly because a higher number of interpersonal relations barriers are known to apply to face-to-face



than to online settings, including appearance and social stigmas about relationship-forming between adults and children (Black et al., 2015). In online settings, the absence of nonverbal cues reduces some of those barriers (McKenna & Bargh, 1999). This is not to say that nonverbal cue reduction necessarily leads to online users' impersonal orientation in discourse, as postulated by cues-filtered-out theories in CMC research (see Walther, 2010). Instead, and per the Hyperpersonal model of CMC, online users may find ways to adapt the cue limitations of different CMC systems in order to match, or even surpass, face-to-face levels of interpersonal communication (Walther, 1996, 2006).<sup>4</sup> In terms of OG, we propose that online groomers may generally adopt direct solicitation strategies in order to achieve intimate levels of interpersonal communication.

The second proposition of this study is that online groomers deploy a more varied range of strategies to develop the trust of their victims than offline groomers. Most cases of offline grooming occur between children and adults who know each other reasonably well, be it relatives or family friends. A certain level of interpersonal rapport therefore precedes the grooming process, with trust-oriented strategies being geared towards cultivating, rather than newly establishing, trust (Olson et al., 2007). In contrast, online groomers target children not previously known to them. OG therefore goes from a state of absence of interpersonal knowledge to one of deceptive trust. This may require an intermediary state, generally absent in offline grooming, of deceptive acquaintance/befriending, which we expect online groomers to realise through "relational work" (Locher & Watts, 2005; see Section 3.2) geared towards

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<sup>4</sup> The Hyperpersonal model of CMC predates, but fits within, a so-called 'second wave' of CMC scholarship that started approximately in the mid-2000s and that seeks to explore how users exploit the digital resources at their disposal. This rejects the technological determinism of the first wave of CMC research (Androutsopoulos 2006). The research context is now ripe for a third wave of CMC research, driven by questions, assumptions and methods that seek to understand digital communication as comprising inter-connected, mutually-shaping discourse-media practices (see, Androutsopoulos, 2015).

building a sociability platform from which to cultivate further the child's trust for deceiving purposes.

We see the above as being facilitated by another aspect of text-based CMC identified by the Hyperpersonal model: selective self-presentation. Text-based CMC is believed to facilitate the transmission of only those cues that a sender wishes, and thus selects, others to receive (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Online groomers may therefore construct messages in which they portray themselves in ways that "invite preferential reactions" (in the sense of Walther, 2010) from their potential victims. Asking children about their favourite online games, for example, may enable online groomers to disclose similar preferences strategically, to portray themselves as expert users of those games and being able to get the latest versions of them to the children, and so forth. These messages may be associated by the targeted children with idealised groomer identities to whom they increasingly wish to reciprocate self-disclosure across a range of personal domains, including sexuality.

The CMC system examined in the current study – Instant Messaging (IM) – is characterised by "intermediate synchronicity" (Herring, 2007, p.39), that is, users "can read messages sent while they are away from their computer upon their return, as long as their IM client remains open." This may make it easier for online groomers to construct these idealised selves discursively. As postulated within the Hyperpersonal model, users of CMC systems not bound by strict synchronicity can capitalise on the technical affordances of being able to edit, plan and reflect on the intended effects of their messages prior to sending them.

The third and final proposition advanced in this research is that online and offline groomers' ways of assessing their victims' risk-taking levels differ. Offline groomers employ a range of techniques geared towards ensuring that their victims do not reveal to others the nature of their relationship (Olson et al, 2007). Isolation and the need for secrecy are characteristics shared with the OG context (O'Connell, 2003; Williams, et al 2013).

However, research into the technical *modus operandi* of many online sexual offenders, including groomers, shows that they target multiple children at any given time by entering several online contexts simultaneously (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011). Under such circumstances, gauging the children's compliance level from the onset and in relation to a wide range of behaviours (rather than just secrecy) may constitute an efficient way for online groomers to select their next most vulnerable potential victim. We thus expect online groomers' risk assessment to be geared towards gauging child compliance regarding different behaviours, such as the willingness to reciprocate intimate talk promptly, to exchange indecent images, and so forth.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data**

Our corpus consists of 24 chat logs selected from all of the 593 chat logs available from Perverted-Justice.com at the point of data collection (November 2014). The Perverted-Justice.com website is a project of Perverted Justice Foundation Inc. (henceforth PJF), a non-profit foundation based in the United States that specialises in fighting online groomers ([www.pjfi.org](http://www.pjfi.org)). Specifically, it has a number of volunteers, called contributors, who pose as children online. These contributors build profiles on social networking sites and/or enter chat rooms on a regular basis. According to the PJF rules of engagement, contributors then wait to be contacted by an adult, at which point they begin a conversation. If the conversation turns sexual, they collaborate with law enforcement to try to secure the arrest and eventual conviction of the online groomer. If a conviction is secured, PJF makes available the relevant chat log on its website, along with the screen name, real name, age, photograph (if available), email address, and conviction notes for the groomer. Given the difficulty of accessing datasets of actual children interacting with groomers online, the PJF database offers a

valuable resource for investigating the discourse of online groomers who believe themselves to be interacting with actual children.

### 3.2. Procedure and Framework

In order to select our corpus we firstly identified all the PJF contributors who met two criteria: being active at that point of data collection and having a minimum of ten chat logs in their PJF archive. From the consequent 48 contributors we randomly selected eight. The number of chat logs available from the selected contributors ranged from 13 to 30. Three chat logs from each of our eight contributors, totalling 24 chat logs (c. 75,000 words), were randomly selected as our corpus selected analysis.

All the groomers in our corpus were male with a mean age of 37 years (range 22 to 63). Paedophiles have been historically depicted as older, European-American, middle-class men (e.g., Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004). Yet, research shows that their age ranges from 18 to 72 (Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995). A similar age range may easily apply to OG, as it is not only young adults who can deftly use the internet. Factoring groomer age into our empirical variables was thus an attempt at exploring the impact it may have on OG discourse. Once collected, a computer script was written to ‘clean’ the chat logs. This entailed separating the language used by the groomers from that used by the contributors, as well as excluding the interpretative glosses that the contributors added to some of the groomers’ contributions when the chat logs were published. The corpus was then input into the qualitative software package NVivo10 for analysis. The analysis was limited to the groomers’ discourse.

Our study adopts a CMDA approach (Herring 2004, 2013; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). CMDA builds on three theoretical assumptions of “linguistic discourse analysis, broadly construed”, namely that discourse “exhibits recurrent patterns”, that it “involves speaker choices” and – specifically regarding online communication – that

“computer-mediated discourse may be, but it is not inevitably shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems” (Herring 2004, p. 341). In terms of the specific form of CMDA adopted, we started with a ‘language-focused content analysis’ whereby we “let the phenomenon of interest emerge out of a sample of computer-mediated data and devise coding categories on the basis of the observed phenomenon, as in the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).” (2004, p. 354). This form of CMDA “is especially well suited to analysing new and as yet relatively un-described forms of CMC”, which is precisely the situation as regards OG.

Language-focussed content analysis can “profit from the structure, experience, and understandings available through specific discourse analysis paradigms” that are aligned to four domains or levels of language, namely structure, meaning, interaction and social behaviour (Herring 2004, pp. 354-358).<sup>5</sup> As described in Section 2, extant research agrees that OG is a communicative process but has not explored how it is realised discursively. In order to address this, we strengthened our language-based content analysis with an examination of the meaning and social behaviour domains in our corpus, focussing respectively on speech acts (Austin 1962) and relational-work (Locher & Watts 2005).

Our focus on speech acts is premised on the belief that OG provides a performative context of communication in the truest sense of Austin’s (1962) “doing things with words” dictum – online groomers obtain sexual gratification through their online chats with children. As for our interest in relational work, this is justified by the fact that OG is primarily about negotiating groomer-victim interpersonal relations, rather than just about groomers’ attempts at mitigating the potential FTA on their victims of seeking to engage them in illegal sexual behaviour. Therefore, and as per Locher & Watt’s (2005) notion of relational work, the whole spectrum of discourse behaviour geared towards establishing and managing interpersonal

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<sup>5</sup> In Herring (2013) “multimodal communication” is discussed as a possible fifth language domain or level to be added to the CMDA approach..

relations needs to be considered, and this includes impolite, polite and contextually appropriate (“politic”) talk. When discussing instances of the first two, we drew upon the work of, amongst other, Culpeper (2011) and Brown & Levinson (1987).

In order to integrate the content and speech act / relational work aspects of our framework, we followed a set of top-down (steps 1 and 7 below) and bottom-up (steps 2–6 below) analytic steps. This was because, like other complex social phenomena, OG is influenced by a range of extra-linguistic factors (such as personality and socio-demographic grouper features) that come into existence, and are maintained discursively, in local interactions (see, Wodak et al 1999). The steps were:

- (1) Conducting a critical reading of scholarly research;
- (2) Using (1) as the basis from which to identify an initial taxonomy of OG processes and strategies;
- (3) Testing the validity of the proposed taxonomy against a sample of the corpus (pilot analysis). In our study, this pilot analysis was applied to eight randomly selected chat logs from our corpus;
- (4) Revising the initial taxonomy in light of (3) and proposing a ‘final’ taxonomy;
- (5) Coding the corpus according to (4) as well as for speech acts and relational work;
- (6) Analysing inter-category relations;
- (7) Using (6) to test our propositions and position project findings within (1).

In step (2), we identified three processes and seven strategies. During step (3), however, we identified a new fourth process, comprising three strategies, and two further strategies within one of the previously identified processes. Step (5) yielded neither new categories nor modifications to their inter-relationships. Step (4) entailed mapping as far as

possible speech act and relational work onto already identified OG processes and strategies.

Multiple coding was used, that is, a single stretch of discourse could be coded as belonging to more than one process or strategy and as including more than one speech act and / or relational work realisation. Consider example (1)<sup>6</sup>

(1) hi...what city? i'm m/42/los angeles...for discreet lady

This example was coded within the “exchange of personal information” (male, 42 years old, lives in Los Angeles) and “relationship” (looking for “discreet lady”) strategies (see Figure 2 in Section 4.1). In terms of speech act realisation, it was coded as containing an informal greeting (“hi”), a request (for information - “what city?”), and a self-disclosing statement (“i'm m/42/los angeles...”) that also contained an expression of personal preference embedded in a request (looking “for discreet lady”). Regarding relational work, (1) was coded as displaying “politic” behaviour as far as the greeting was concerned. Under conditions of high social distance and low familiarity,<sup>7</sup> (1) was also seen to include “a bald on record” (Brown & Levinson 1987) request for information regarding the victim’s location and her matching, or otherwise, his personal preference statement.

Corpus coding was conducted by the authors of this study. Inter-coder reliability was achieved by resolving coding differences individually through inter-coder discussion (see Herring (2004) on the suitability of inter-rater reliability measures such as this in CMDA).

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<sup>6</sup> Original spelling has been retained in all the examples used in the article.

<sup>7</sup> The terms social distance and familiarity are used here in the sense of Brown and Levinson’s (1987), to refer to two of the three factors determining the overall weightiness of a given FTA.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. A Model of OG Communication

Our analysis revealed that OG comprises three phases: access, approach and entrapment (see Figure 2; for definitions and illustrative examples of each phase, and their processes and strategies, see the Appendix).

[Please insert Figure 2 here]

Access entails groomers making initial online contact with potential victims and therefore marks, as in offline contexts, the onset of grooming. Approach refers to groomers' use of verbal lead-ins online as requests to meet with the child offline for sexual purposes. The entrapment phase is the most complex. It entails a series of partly overlapping processes and strategies, the ultimate aim of which is to lure victims into different forms of sexual behaviour, including soliciting and / or sharing indecent images of children and /or adults. Four networked processes are identified within the entrapment phase: deceptive trust development, sexual gratification, isolation, and compliance testing.

Deceptive trust development and isolation have been previously reported in the offline and OG literature. Within deceptive trust development, however, our analysis identified two strategies (praise and sociability) not previously reported for offline grooming, alongside three other strategies known to be used in offline grooming settings (exchange of personal information, activities, and relationships). Praise was primarily realised through the speech act of complimenting. The main compliment topics were the victims' physical appearance (sexual and non-sexual features) and their personality (especially, their sexual or emotional maturity). In a minority of cases praise was realised via the speech act of congratulating, whereby groomers verbally applauded some behaviour on the victims' part that advanced their (the groomers') sexual needs, such as keeping the secrecy of their online



relationship (see Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2015). Although sociability was embedded within a number of strategies across processes, it was also distinctively realised through small talk (see examples in the Appendix).

Sexual gratification is our proposed term for a process similar to that identified in Olson et al's (2007) model as grooming. We believe sexual gratification to be a more accurate term in relation to OG given that the behaviours included within it already appeared to fulfil some of the groomers' sexual desires. Sexual gratification was realised via a range of speech acts, from suggestions and requests to commands and statements of sexual / romantic preference / intent. Reframing was mainly realised via positive politeness strategies that emphasised the "benefits" to the victim of the sexual or romantic "goods" being "offered" or "promised" by the groomer, as Example (2) illustrates:

(2) Id tech u all you'll need to know to enjoy [sex] i promise.

Our model newly identified compliance testing as an OG process that comprises three strategies: strategic withdrawal, role reversal, and reverse psychology. Through the use of strategic withdrawal, online groomers appeared to give control of their relationship to their victims by seemingly allowing them to make decisions. In role reversal, groomers seemingly adopted low risk-taking attitudes that may be expected of children when engaging with unknown adults. Reverse psychology entailed groomers challenging their victims' intentions or decisions to behave in ways that were (sexually) inappropriate for their age. Examples (3) – (5) respectively illustrate the use of these three strategies in the corpus:

(3) just an idea, up to you

(4) meet somewhere public where it's safe

(5) u gonna chicken out [in respect of sending the groomer a sexual image].

As in the case of the strategies within the sexual gratification process, the three strategies in the compliance testing process were realised through a range of speech acts. In

some cases, these entailed the groomer using negative politeness strategies (e.g. hedging in (3)). Other times, bald on record politeness strategies were used, such as commands (e.g. (4)) and even strategies that may be seen to threaten the victim's face needs. In (5), for instance, the groomer's use of reverse psychology may make the victim fear being "belittled" were she not to meet the groomer's challenge to perform the requested action. "Condescend, scorn and ridicule" is an impoliteness strategy (Culpeper 2011). Given that the overall aim of OG is for the victim to become close affectively, as well as sexually, to the groomer, it is unlikely that the kind of relational work illustrated by (5) is intended as a deliberate attack of the victim's face needs. Instead, and as with the other strategies in the compliance testing process, it seemed consistent with a deviant process of power negotiation leading to abuse.

Figure 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the number of occurrences of each OG process in our data. A series of Welch's t-tests were conducted to assess whether some OG processes were more frequent than others. Once Bonferroni correction was applied, results showed that deceptive trust development had a significantly higher number of references than compliance testing ( $t(24) = -6.52, p < .001$ ), sexual gratification ( $t(24) = 2.02, p < .05$ ), isolation ( $t(24) = 2.06, p < .001$ ) and approach ( $t(24) = 2.06, p < .001$ ). In addition, sexual gratification had a significantly higher number of references than compliance testing ( $t(24) = -5.54, p < .001$ ), isolation ( $t(24) = 2.06, p < .001$ ), and approach ( $t(24) = 2.06, p < .001$ ). Isolation, approach and compliance testing did not differ significantly.

[Please insert Figure 3 here]

The potential relationships amongst the processes, including also the groomers' age, were explored using Pearson correlations. Compliance testing showed positive correlations with sexual gratification and isolation ( $r = .51$ ), suggesting that an increase in the assessment of the child's compliance is related to an increase in the use of sexual gratification and isolation processes. Deceptive trust development showed positive and significant correlations

with the other three processes ( $r = .48$ , with sexual gratification;  $r = .56$ , with isolation; and  $r = .53$  with approach). This means that an increase in the relational work devoted to developing the victims' trust goes alongside an increase in the use of sexual gratification, isolation and approach. In other words, developing the victims' trust seemed to encourage online groomers to advance their other processes, including approaching the victims to meet offline. Coupled with an absence of correlation between sexual gratification, isolation and approach, this suggests that deceptive trust development may be paramount to OG, over and above any other process. Online groomers' age did not correlate with any of the grooming processes, indicating that the OG group as a whole displayed similar discourse behaviour across the grooming processes.

The descriptive statistics for the number of times the groomer used each of the identified strategies can be found in Figure 4. Welch's t-tests were selected to compare the mean number of occurrences of each strategy with each other. Once Bonferroni correction was applied, two differences were found to be significant. First, the number of occurrences of the activities strategy was significantly higher than of any other strategy, with the exceptions of explicit and implicit verbal desensitisation (all  $p < .0001$ ). Secondly, the number of explicit desensitisation strategies was also significantly higher than the number of any other strategy, except activities, exchange of personal information and implicit desensitisation. No significant differences were found between the mental and physical isolation strategies ( $p > .1$ ).

[please insert Figure 4 here]

The relations amongst the strategies, including the groomers' age, were explored using Pearson correlations. The correlation matrix with *Pearson r* values and their level of significance can be seen in Table 1.

[Please insert Table 1 here]

The following correlations were found. First, all but two of the strategies within the compliance testing process (i.e., strategic withdrawal and role reversal) showed a positive correlation with the use of explicit desensitisation, suggesting a close link between compliance testing and sexual gratification. In addition, role reversal correlated with mental and physical isolation. Second, the activities strategy showed a significant and positive correlation with every strategy except for reframing and explicit desensitisation. This indicates that activities might not be a discriminating strategy. Third, in addition to correlating with all the strategies within the deceptive trust development process, praise showed significant and positive correlations with the implicit desensitisation and mental isolation strategies. This suggests that, in addition to being an important vehicle to enhancing trust, compliments contributed to satisfying groomers' sexually and to their efforts at isolating their victims. Fourth, sociability correlated with implicit desensitisation, mental isolation and reframing. Small talk therefore functioned not only as a principal means to develop trust but also as a way to minimise or soften the possible threat to the victim's negative face needs when introducing desensitisation and isolation strategies. Lastly, explicit desensitisation only displayed two correlations, namely with strategic withdrawal and role reversal. This was further explored by plotting the number of occurrences in the corpus for the explicit desensitisation strategy against all the strategies within the deceptive trust development process (see Figure 5).

[Please insert Figure 5 here]

Figure 5 shows that the use of explicit desensitisation did not correlate with any of the five strategies within the deceptive trust development process because explicit desensitisation and each of the strategies cancelled each other out (see the plotted lines). That is, online groomers who made frequent use of explicit desensitisation made less frequent use of strategies within the deceptive trust development process and vice-versa.

We then grouped the online groomers into those who generated the highest number of explicit desensitisation strategies (Group 1;  $n = 7$ ) and those who generated the lowest number of explicit desensitisation strategies (Group 2;  $n = 7$ ) and looked at potential differences between these two groups. An independent t-test was conducted to see whether the observed difference was statistically significant. An age difference was observed: online groomers with a higher use of explicit desensitisation were younger (mean age = 27, SD = 4.5) than those without (mean age = 41, SD = 10.7;  $t(6) = -3.16, p < 0.05$ ). In addition, further t-tests were run to see whether the two groups differed in their use of strategies within the deceptive trust development process. Group 1 showed significant differences between the number of explicit desensitisation strategies and the number of strategies for relationships ( $t(6) = -8.79, p < .001$ ), praise ( $t(6) = -10.21, p < .001$ ), activities ( $t(6) = -3.46, p < .05$ ), exchange of personal information ( $t(6) = -4.19, p < .01$ ) and sociability ( $t(6) = -8.32, p < .001$ ), Bonferroni correction applied. In contrast, Group 2 showed significant differences between their use of explicit desensitisation strategies and the number of relationship ( $t(6) = 3.82, p < .01$ ), activities ( $t(6) = 3.65, p < .05$ ), and exchange of personal information ( $t(6) = 2.73, p < .05$ ) strategies, Bonferroni correction applied.

The high number of correlations across strategies shows a higher level of strategy permeability and interdependence than hitherto acknowledged for OG.<sup>8</sup> For instance, whilst reframing and desensitisation often served a sexual gratification purpose, they were also strategically used to reinforce the child's dependence on the groomer, as in the following illustrative example:

(7) he ever cum in your mouth [...] I want to make sure you are comfortable with me, so you don't feel odd when I get there.

---

<sup>8</sup> This is reflected schematically in Figure 2 though the three partly overlapping ovals in the entrapment phase, each containing multi-functional strategies, and the overarching oval for the compliance testing process.

In (7), the groomer uses the speech act of asking (“he ever cum in your mouth”) as a way to obtain information about the victim’s past sexual activities that may be sexually gratifying to him. He also supports the question with a statement through which he appears concerned about the victim’s face needs and, indirectly, the ‘quality’ of their emotional bond: “I want to make sure you are comfortable with me, so you don’t feel odd when I get there.”

Likewise, although compliments were used as a praise strategy within the deceptive trust development process, they were also employed to desensitise victims, especially when complimenting them on sexual physical attributes (e.g (8)), and to isolate them mentally, when used to mark the groomer-victim relationship as special or unique (e.g. (9)).

(8) I like them [breasts] that size to big tities are too much

(9) i have never met a guy on here like you bfore

The kind of process-strategy interdependence revealed by our analysis is not surprising – discourse is generally multifunctional after all, both online and offline. However, it is important to emphasise this finding because previous studies have treated deceptive trust development, sexual gratification, and isolation as linear (O’Connell, 2003) or cyclical (Olson et al., 2007) grooming processes. We see them, instead, as part of a complex entrapment network.

#### **4.2. Understanding Online Grooming as an Entrapment Network**

The results of our CMDA of OG support our three propositions. Regarding the first proposition, we expected online groomers to use more direct sexual behaviour solicitation than offline groomers. Our findings reveal a significant use of desensitisation strategies (see Figure 4), often through explicit sexual language (see (10a – 10b)).

(10a) would you let me fuck you

(10b) is you pussey shaved

The above desensitisation examples are realised via questions. In the case of (10a), sexual explicitness is included within a politely worded request. Note the use of the modal ‘would’, which shows concern for addressing the victim’s negative face needs and contrasts markedly with the illegal nature of the activity being requested and the vulgar / taboo (sexual) term in which that activity is lexically couched. Use of vulgar / taboo sexual language can be an impoliteness strategy (Culpeper 2011). Importantly, too, it can lead to victimisation, which is known to increase as a result of increased exposure to sexual material, including of a verbal nature (Whittle et al., 2015).

The kind of relational work illustrated by (10a) shows that, in the absence of some of the nonverbal and / or the paralinguistic cues that would be available to groomers in offline grooming, online groomers seek to ensure that their victims understand clearly the sexual intent behind their discourse. This contrasts with offline grooming settings, where desensitisation is “intended to appear accidental to the victim, making them unaware that anything out of the ordinary is taking place” (Olson et al., 2007, p. 241).

Explicit verbal desensitisation, furthermore, is linked to sexual gratification in OG. Our corpus contained numerous explicit groomer references to feelings of enjoyment and pleasure within desensitisation strategies. When online groomers in our data talked about the “naturalness” of sexual behaviour or being sexually aroused or showing an erection on camera, for instance, they were doing more than overtly desensitising their victims by preparing them to accept adult – child sexual activity as normal. They were also engaging their victims in mediatised sexual behaviour with them and were, therefore, already obtaining sexual gratification.

As per the second proposition of this study, we expected online groomers to deploy a fuller range of strategies than offline groomers in order to develop their victims’ trust. Reframing is assumed to be core to offline grooming (Olson et al., 2007) but it was hardly

salient in our data. Likewise, approach - which is central to offline grooming – was only minimally observed in our corpus. This difference may owe in part to the fact that the online groomers considered in our corpus were apprehended before making a final approach to their victims. It also owes to the fact that approaching victims in order to abuse them off-line may be less important to some groomers for whom interacting with their victims online already provides sexual gratification. It was deceptive trust development that proved to be qualitatively and quantitatively the most salient process in our corpus. Regarding the two newly identified strategies within this process, praise was realised primarily through compliments that sought to cultivate the victims' trust, desensitise and mentally isolate them. Moreover, especially when used alongside small talk, compliments invited preferential reactions (in the sense of the Hyperpersonal CMC model) from the victims and were used to construct positive self-images of the online groomers as caring and trust-worthy individuals.

Within the third proposition we expected differences in the ways in which online and offline groomers assess their victims' risk-taking levels. In offline grooming assessing children's risk-taking has been mainly associated with groomers' efforts at establishing and maintaining child secrecy and isolation. In our data, risk assessment was wider in scope; hence our choice of term compliance testing. Importantly, gauging victims' compliance occurred throughout the whole entrapment network, rather than only once trust was fully developed as reported for offline grooming. Online groomers are technically able to – and do – target multiple children simultaneously. Testing compliance levels from the onset of, and throughout, their interactions, and in relation to multiple sexual desires and targets, may be an efficient means by which to identify their most vulnerable victims.

## **5. Conclusions**

Previous characterisations of OG as a linear process appear overly-rigid. Our results show that it would be more appropriate to characterise OG as an entrapment network within which



a number of processes and strategies occur simultaneously and vary in their salience. Our results also show that, although there are many similarities between grooming discourse in online and offline environments, the former also exhibits a number of idiosyncratic features. These can be summarised as: (1) a marked use of direct sexual solicitation, mainly in the form of desensitisation talk; (2) a wide range of rapport *and* trust development strategies, notably including those aimed at establishing a sociability platform; and (3) an emphasis on gauging victims' compliance throughout the entire interaction and beyond secrecy and exclusivity concerns.

We see these findings as important for advancing our understanding of OG discourse. Child sexual predators are described as lacking in social adeptness (e.g. Fagan, Wise, Schmidt, & Berlin, 2002) because many of them also suffer from psychiatric or personality and substance abuse disorders (Murray, 2000). Our results show that online groomers invested significantly in relational work, from their use of bald on record (and possibly impolite) requests and commands to contributions that showed great concern for addressing the positive and negative face needs of their victims (and hence displayed politeness). Whatever disorders a number of them may suffer from, they do not seem to be conditions that significantly affect their sociopragmatic competence. It is therefore important, especially for detection purposes, that we understand the "accomplished" nature of OG discourse. Adding speech act realisation and relational work analyses to the lexical analysis tools that currently inform online grooming prevention software may lead to improved detection levels. At the same time, the multifunctionality of OG strategies highlights the challenging task of profiling online groomers on the basis of their discourse. Two distinct profiles emerged within our study (Group 1 and Group 2) but it is likely that there are more. Our findings also prompt further lines of inquiry. It would be useful, for example, to map speech act and relational work patterns onto groomer profiles.

Finally, our findings need to be taken with caution for they are limited in terms of corpus size and features. OG discourse in our corpus comes from chat logs in which groomers believed they were interacting with children. Since all the groomers in the PJJ website, and therefore in our corpus, were convicted, it is reasonable to assume that the contributors with whom they interacted modelled child language reasonably well. However, it would be advisable to validate the proposed model of OG discourse with data involving groomers and actual children.

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Table 1 - Correlation matrix for thirteen communicative strategies and age

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1- Strategic Withdrawal													
2-Role Reversal	n.s.												
3- Reverse Psychology	n.s.	n.s.											
4- Activities	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.										
5- Praise	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.467 *									
6-Ex of Personal Information	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.753 **	n.s.								
7- Relationship	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.517 **	.680 **	.547 **							
8- Sociability	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.564 **	.565 **	n.s.	.561 **						
9- Reframing	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.531 *					
10- Explicit desensitisation	.429 *	.527 *	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.			
11- Implicit desensi	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.677 **	.474 *	.545 **	n.s.	.441 *	.518 *	.448 *			



tisation													
12- Mental Isolation	n.s.	.633 **	n.s.	.508 *	.544 **	n.s.	n.s.	.516 *	.726 **	n.s.	.613 **		
13- Physical Isolation	n.s.	.568 *	n.s.	.530 **	n.s.	.608 **	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.556 **	.556 **	
14-Age	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

n.s. not significant; \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Appendix: Online Grooming Processes and Strategies: Definitions and Examples

Process	Communicative Strategy	Examples from the corpus
<p><b>DECEPTIVE TRUST DEVELOPMENT:</b> a process whereby groomers disguise their main intention to engage a child in sexual behaviour by cultivating a personal and friendly relationship with him / her via internet communication. It includes one or more of the following communicative strategies:</p>	<p>Exchange of personal information: groomers engage the child in the reciprocal exchange of personal details, including actual whereabouts (town, city, state), ages / birthdays, real names, computer locations (address), mobile or land line telephone numbers and pictures.</p>	<p>I am 28/m/Pocatello. Where in mich are ya U have pic. yes i have a pic and a web cam</p>
	<p>Relationship: groomers engage the child in discussion of feelings and attitudes towards maintaining, building, and dismantling their relationships with each other and with the child's friends, family and significant others.</p>	<p>U ever have a bf? I would like to be frends with you if u want to</p>
	<p>Activities: groomers engage the child in the reciprocal exchange of information about favourite music, movies, books, sports, hobbies, foods, online behaviour and general likes and dislikes. The strategy also includes encouraging the child to talk about what he/she and the groomer are doing during the online interaction, as well as previous and planned activities.</p>	<p>Do you talk to a lot of people on line? I enjoya lot of things...with friends i like to hang out watch a movie...Hopefully we will get the chance to chat again</p>
	<p>Praise: groomers praise the child's physical appearance or other personal traits, as disclosed by him / her textually and / or visually in the course of their online interaction.</p>	<p>I like your home page I like them that size to big titles are to much</p>
	<p>Sociability: groomers engage in interactional exchanges that seem to have no informational or functional purpose but that help to manage interpersonal distance and to develop a stronger social bond with the child.</p>	<p>Bye and nice meeting you Well I hope to hear from you again ok</p>
<p><b>SEXUAL GRATIFICATION:</b> a process whereby groomers prepare the child to accept offline sexual contact and to engage in online sexual activities. It comprises the following communicative strategies:</p>	<p>Explicit desensitisation: groomers seek to make the child insensitive to sexual activities by using vulgar sexual language (e.g., sexual slang terms and graphic descriptions of sexual activities) and images (e.g. showing and sharing nude pictures, having erections on camera).</p>	<p>The other ones i got are nude Do you want to lose your virginity? would u like some head?</p>
	<p>Implicit desensitisation: groomers seek to make the child insensitive to sexual activities by using indirect sexual language (e.g. metaphorical references to orgasm) and images (e.g. provocative poses but no nudity or sexual acts) or emphasising the romantic, rather than sexual, nature of their intended relationship.</p>	<p>I just think it would be cool and kind of romantic and intimate I can make girl walk on clouds</p>
	<p>Reframing: groomers seek to persuade the child to engage in sexual activities by describing them in implicit ways that may appear beneficial to the child, for example, as learning experiences, games, or skills.</p>	<p>I can make it fun Id tech u all you'll need to know to enjoy i promise</p>
<p><b>COMPLIANCE TESTING:</b> a process used by groomers to gauge the extent to which the child is an actual minor and will agree to engage in the sexual activities proposed to him / her. It includes the following communicative strategies:</p>	<p>Reverse psychology: groomers challenge and / or compete with the victim.</p>	<p>U gonna chicken out. If you never had sex you are the baby</p>
	<p>Role reversal: groomers adopt the child's expected low risk tasking behaviour.</p>	<p>Meet somewhere public where it's safe</p>
	<p>Strategic withdrawal: groomers make the child believe he/she is in control by apparently letting him / her make decisions.</p>	<p>Just an idea, up to you I want what you want</p>

ISOLATION: a process used by groomers to establish and develop the secrecy of their intended relationship with the child, including efforts to avoid discovery by the child's support network. It comprises the following communicative strategies:	Physical isolation: groomers make arrangements to spend time alone with the child online and / or offline, such as seeking assurance from the child that he/she is communicating without adult supervision, and asking or instructing the child to eliminate previous chat logs, photos, email addresses, websites, etc.	When will ur dad be back? Make sure ur archive is off Are you alone in your room
	Mental isolation: groomers induce psychological and emotional separation between the child and his/her support network such that they can step into that space. Groomers attempt to increase child dependency on them for friendship forming. They also show a marked interest in the child's social life, providing sympathy and support and questioning parents' rules.	I would not let your family find out ☺ Oh well dont u worry about what others think Just tell any kids that see us I'm your dad and I'm visiting
APPROACH: a process whereby groomers make verbal lead-ins online as requests to meet with the child offline for sexual purposes.		U could come to our motel room to meet if you wanted to do that

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Figure 1: Olson et al's (2007) Model of Luring Communication

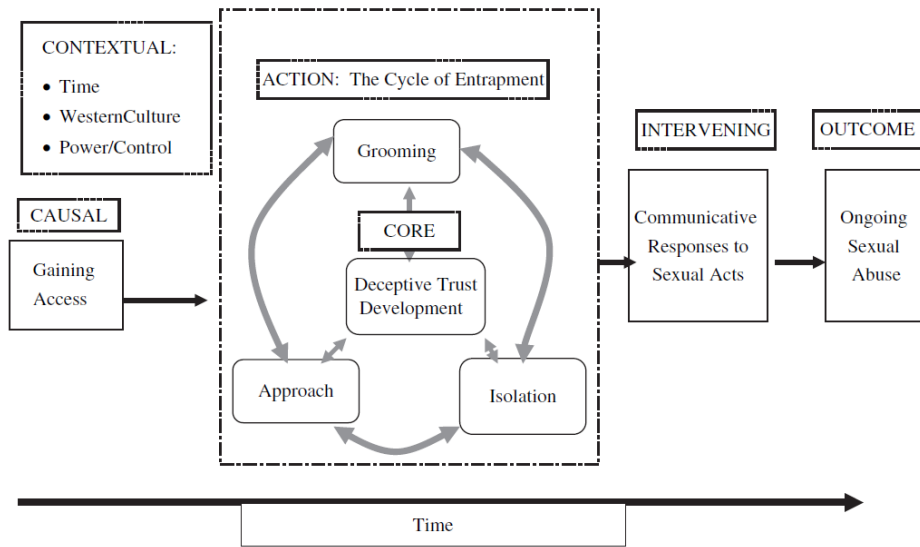


Figure 2: A Model of OG Discourse

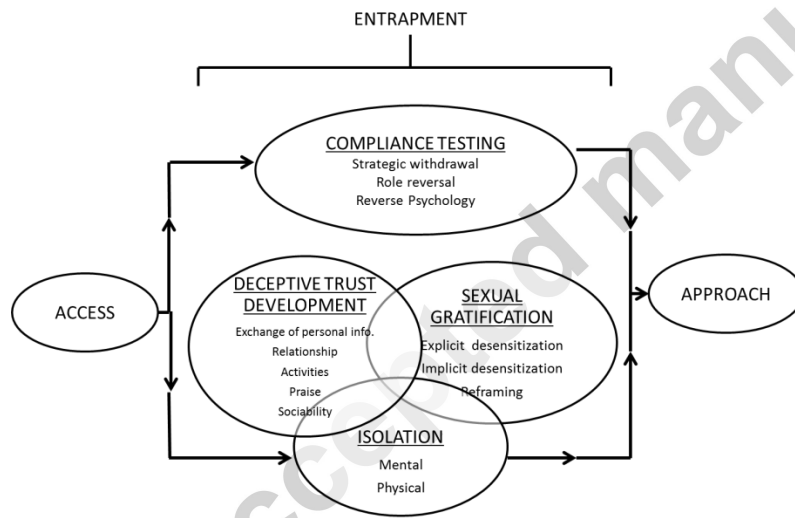


Figure 3: Mean number of references and standard error of the online grooming processes. Each bar refers to the average number of references made to each process by the 24 groomers under analysis.

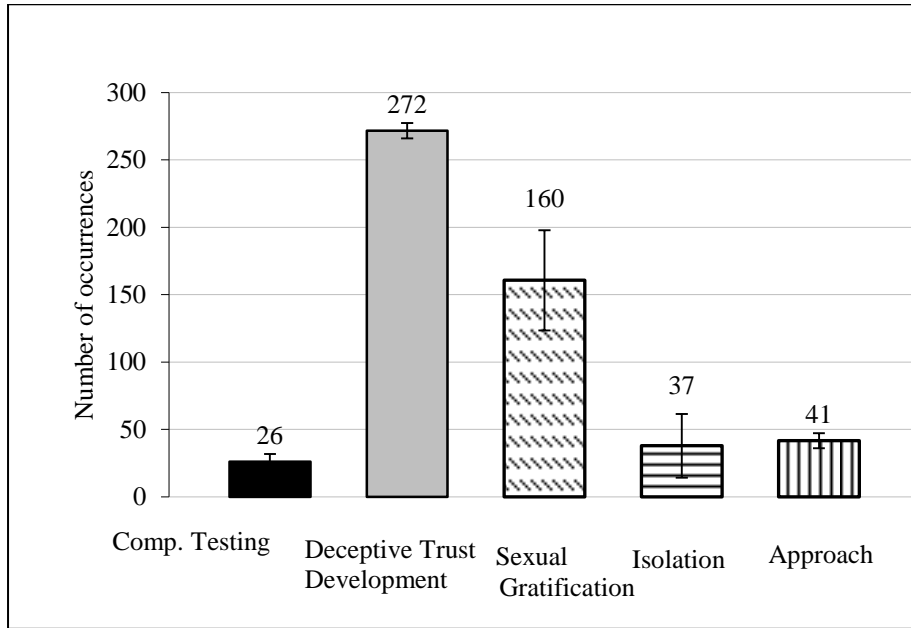


Figure 4: Mean number of references and standard error of the communicative strategies. Each bar refers to the average number of references made to each strategy by the 24 groomers under analysis.

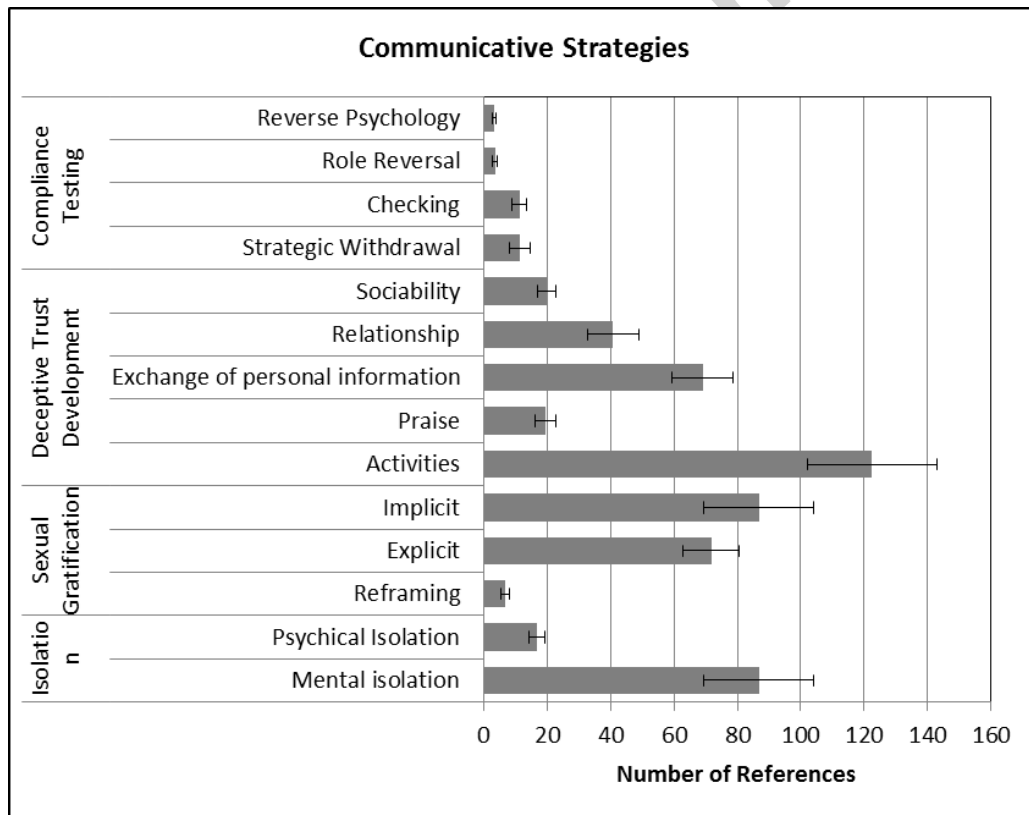
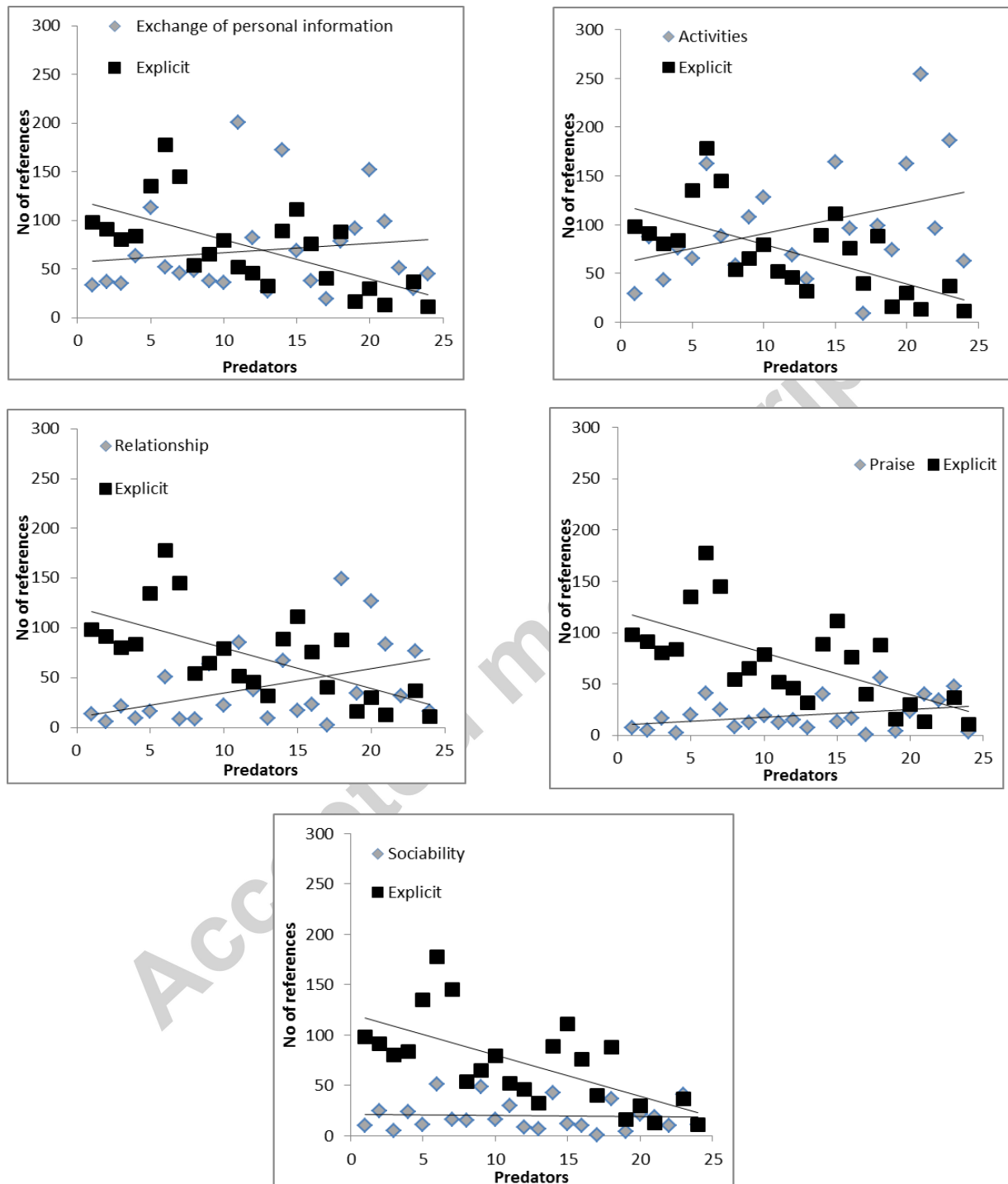


Figure 5: Number of references to explicit desensitisation plotted against all the strategies within the deceptive trust development process.



**Highlights:**

- The article describes the first model of online grooming *discourse*
- The model is based on analysis of a large corpus of online groomer chatlogs, focussing on the groomers' contributions
- Methodologically, the study integrates language-based content analysis, pragmatics (speech acts) and interactional sociolinguistics (relational work)
- The findings reveal that online grooming is a complex entrapment network, rather than a linear or cyclical process
- Building trust discursively is paramount to groomers' aims in online environment and it is realised via a range of communicative processes and strategies that include testing victims' compliance, desensitising and isolating them
- Compliments and small talk are identified as particularly effective means used by online groomers in the corpus for building their victims' trust
- Online grooming discourse already provides groomers with sexual gratification