

Manuskript

Bei dem folgenden Beitrag handelt es sich um das Manuskript eines Beitrags zu dem Sammelwerk mit dem Titel "Sexual Online Grooming of Children. Challenges for Science and Practice", herausgegeben von Dr. Laura F. Kuhle und Daniela Stelzmann, das im ersten Quartal 2021 im NOMOS Verlag erscheinen wird.

Hedonistic Utilitarianism: The strategic use of digital media along the online-offline continuum of sexualised violence

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Abstract

Sexualised violence using digital media extends beyond the traditional understanding of sexual online grooming. This study examines how perpetrators strategically use digital media when committing acts of sexualised violence on the online-offline continuum against children and youth. Accordingly, digital media is also extensively used by perpetrators who are previously known to their victims. The choice of digital media as an instrument of initiation, threat, exploitation and humiliation demonstrates how different types of perpetrators rationalise digitally supported violence. Digital media acts as an instrument through which perpetrators assume the power of interpretation over victims' situation. The efficient ways in which digital media is used along the continuum of online-offline violence are a direct manifestation of the hedonistic utilitarianism demonstrated by perpetrators.

General Background

Academic and public discourses define Sexual Online Grooming (SOG) as virtual interactions with minors for the purpose of exploitation, in other words the process of preparing and establishing a framework for abuse (Vogelsang 2015; Broome 2018; Lorenzo-Dus & Kinzel 2019). The term SOG, coined in the early 2000s, tends to be associated with abusers who do not previously know their victims (Whittle 2014; Kloess et al. 2018; Jonnson et al. 2019; Sorell & Whitty 2019). According to this definition, online grooming can aim to and ultimately result in violent acts committed offline. However, academics and crisis intervention experts tend to focus on digital forms of contact and communication.

Experts tend to fundamentally differentiate between SOG and sexualised contact (grooming) arranged offline, which can include child sexual abuse that is initiated in person. However, due to the spread of digital media as a standard means of communication, online activity can also play a role in cases of abuse within the family. The same can be said for other forms of mediated violence, such as sexualised cyber-bullying, cyber dating abuse (Machimbarrena 2018 et al.), the use of child abuse material (Franke & Graf 2016) and, in some cases, online sexual victimisation (Kloess et al. 2019). Nevertheless, these forms of sexualised violence, together with SOG, can be collectively categorised as “sexualised violence using digital media” (Vobbe & Kärger 2019).

Despite increased examination of the strategies of perpetrators and the experiences of online grooming victims, there has been considerably less research into the ways in which digital media is used to commit sexualised assaults on the online-offline continuum¹.

¹ Based on Nicholas Negropontes' concept of the post-digital society, we assume that online and offline living environments in the late modern industrialised countries essentially overlap with one another. Most perceived offline activities have a digital component and vice versa. This spectrum of activities can be conceptualised as an online-offline continuum, on which the actions are differently weighted according to their online or offline relevance.

3. Purpose

With this research gap as context, the following report employs a social-psychological perspective to conduct an empirically-based study of how perpetrators strategically use digital media when committing acts of sexualised violence on the online-offline continuum against children and youth. It will also consider the corresponding consequences experienced by victims.

Procedure

The analysis is based on 46 sources documenting psycho-social crisis intervention in cases of sexualised violence using digital media. These sources were compiled in and by ten counselling centres across Germany for the purpose of this research project and contain information on specific acts of violence, strategies of perpetrators, burdens on victims and offers of help from the centres. According to the premise of reflexivity (Langer, Kühner & Schweder 2013), we interpreted the data by means of a typology designed by Kelle and Kluge (2010), which originated in the Grounded Theory Methodology.

Results

The following sections present the different forms through which digital media on the online-offline continuum of sexualised violence can be instrumentalised.

Digital media as an instrument of initiation and extortion by perpetrators previously unknown to their victims

In 12 cases, one or more persons previously unknown to their underage victims used digital media to initiate sexualised acts. In three of these aforementioned cases, explicitly violent acts could not be confirmed. Nevertheless, the victims were pressured to send nude photographs or perform sexual acts, sometimes on camera. In the absence of verified violence, these three cases were evaluated based on the limited, sometimes ambiguous, information available. Because the interactions took place online, the ages of some of the perpetrators is unknown and/or it is unclear to what extent the alleged instigators were aware of the ages or capacity for consent of their counterparts. These cases also appear to lack typical threatening or grooming strategies. For example, the instigators include a pornography distributor residing abroad, whose actor participated in a fee-based chat with an intellectually disabled 13 year old boy. Notably, Instagram has been recently flooded with aggressive automated spam bots, from which such chat contacts can arise (Deutschlandfunknova 2019).

The other nine cases did result in violent acts or attempts thereof, the production and dissemination of abuse images, child sexual abuse, attempted rape or rape. Most of the affected persons were the victims of multiple forms of abuse. In one case, a ten year old was approached off and on by 70 different, presumably male, adults. In these cases, digital media served as a typical grooming instrument, encompassing the complete spectrum of online-grooming strategies described by (Lorenso-Dus et al. 2016), including deceptive trust, compliance testing, withdrawal, reverse psychology, explicit and implicit sexual gratification and isolation.

Perpetrators often feign romantic relationships with their victims, which evolve into dominant/submissive relationships with sadomasochistic elements, in which the perpetrator acts as the “dom”. Should a victim attempt to leave the relationship, they are often blackmailed with threats that damaging chat threads, implicating them in their own abuse, will be exposed, or that

abuse images will be disseminated in their social environment. Occasionally the perpetrators follow through with these threats. For example, in one case, the perpetrator sent an abuse image to five thousand contacts.

Digital media as an instrument of initiating cyber Date Rape

In two cases, situations that began as online dating led to rape. The perpetrators used digital media to initiate contact with the victims and to arrange in-person meetings. The evidence in these cases did not indicate the use of traditional grooming strategies. For example, there was no indication that victims were pressured into meeting their eventual rapists, and presumably, the dates were planned consensually. In both cases, the victims later came forward about the violent acts committed against them. The subsequent trials were each characterised by victim-blaming. The victims were held jointly accountable for their rapes, based on the fact that they were not coerced into meeting their eventual rapists; this had a mitigating effect on the perpetrators' sentences. One can speculate that sexual predators, aware of the increasing popularity of online dating, are incorporating undercurrents of victim-blaming into their tactics.

Digital media as an instrument in the initiation and progression of sexualised violence by perpetrators previously known to their victims

In nine cases, digital media served as the instrument of initiation and/or progression of sexualised violence by perpetrators previously known to their victims. In five of these cases, in contrast to the definition of digital grooming used by Kloess et al. (2019), grooming activities and sexual exploitation took place exclusively online despite repeated and ongoing interactions offline in settings such as sports clubs or school. With one exception, in which an offline encounter led to severe child assault, the perpetrators' in-person behaviors are either unknown or remained noticeably distanced from their victims. The victims tended not to know how many others in their social circles had been abused by the same perpetrator until the crimes were exposed. The perpetrators interacted with their victims throughout the day, often very regularly, thereby deepening the victims' senses of dependence and ambivalence.

In four of the remaining cases, there was no evidence of a particular grooming strategy. In these cases, perpetrators contacted victims online despite previous offline acquaintanceships. They sometimes threatened and blackmailed the victims into sending them abuse images. The perpetrators used digital media to build emotional pressure against the victims. In two cases, perpetrators used abuse images to increase pressure on the victims and force offline sexual assaults. In some cases, perpetrators also distributed these images. In one case, the perpetrator used digital media to continue the sexual assault for years after the victim had moved away.

Digital Media as an instrument by which perpetrators use abuse images and nude photography to shame victims previously known to them

In eight cases, youth and adult perpetrators, who were previously known to their victims, used digital media to distribute abuse images and nude photographs. In all of these cases, the dissemination served to expose and humiliate the victims.

In two cases, online grooming preceded dissemination of the compromising images. Through the use of deceit (fake accounts), deceptive trust and sexual gratification, perpetrators misled victims into sending them nude photographs for the purpose of dissemination. In five cases, the perpetrator recorded a rape or sexual assault. This is noteworthy, as the recording documents

incriminating evidence of a serious offense committed by the perpetrator. It appears that these perpetrators have given greater consideration to the potential harm that the recordings could have to their victims than to themselves as a form of self-incrimination. This logic demonstrates the depths of their hostility towards the victims and their willingness to rationalise acts of violence.

Public shaming and humiliation harm the victim by attempting to damage their reputation by exposing them to mockery or other forms of social sanction. In such cases, public shaming and ongoing harassment in a victim’s social environment may take the form of attacks on their sexual identity, based on heteronormative attribution. For example, a female may be accused of being too sexually uninhibited or called a slut, while a male who does not conform to a hypermasculine, heterosexual dominant stereotype may be labeled as “gay”.

Publishing damaging materials within one’s peer group is consistent with the dynamics associated with bullying. Online and offline humiliation tend to merge. Bullies and their associates justify their behavior with the rebuke that the victims allowed themselves to be the subject of damaging images and videos. This is presented as proof of a victim’s own responsibility in their abuse and as provocation for the sexual slurs.

Digital media as an instrument of (commercial) sexual exploitation in the context of child sexual abuse and organised sexualised assault committed offline

In six cases, digital media supplemented (commercial) sexual exploitation in child sexual abuse committed primarily offline. This type of abuse can take two distinct forms. In some cases, digital media acts as the bait for in-person grooming. For example, a perpetrator may offer to give a victim electronic devices to enhance the victim’s social status or as a reward for sexual favours. In other cases, acts of sexual abuse are recorded to produce abuse images. In the latter cases, there is a clear link to organised or ritual exploitation. Corresponding case documentation indicates that victims were actively prostituted by their families or sexually abused in connection with cults. Where there is indication that abuse images were produced and disseminated, the primary objective in these cases appears to be commercial - sale or trade of the images - rather than the humiliation of the subject. Sometimes the victims possess video recordings of their abuse without knowing who gave them the videos in the first place. In accordance with the ritual character of the violence, one can hypothesise that the compromising material was leaked to the victim in order to imprison them in the organised structural violence, to trigger them, to control them from a distance or to alienate them, and in doing so, to hinder them from coming forward. Analogous to current research insights about organised violence, these cases are sometimes particularly complex due to the traumatisation of the victims (Briken et al. 2018). Trauma can lead to victims suffering from dissociation and split personalities, thereby further complicating efforts to assess the scope of the abuse. Experts report that they interacted with different personalities when treating victims and therefore could not evaluate the effect of therapeutic interventions.

The interplay between problematic digital media use and suspected child sexual abuse between persons previously known to one another

In nine cases, either problematic digital media conduct led to suspicions of child sex abuse or verified child sex abuse led to speculation of additional forms of digital exploitation. Problematic media conduct includes, an adult watching pornography with his son, having a collection of nude photographs of one’s own children that are not explicitly criminal in nature, having a collection of

questionable images of children or having a history of online exploitation of children. In the remaining cases of child sex abuse, it is unclear whether abuse images were also made or whether digital media was used as a grooming tool. In all of these cases, the implications of the use of digital media in (potentially) violent contexts are ambiguous. One can assume that the possession of child pornography provides some sort of thrill to the perpetrators. Established correlations between the consumption of abuse images and perpetrating abusive acts feed suspicions of sexual abuse, although in the cases discussed here, evidence corroborating exploitation remains unverified.

Conclusions

Sexual online grooming by perpetrators who were not previously known to their victims offline, as discussed by Sorrel & Whitty (2019), makes up many, but not the majority, of the cases in this study. Consequently, digital grooming strategies, in the context of sexualised assaults committed on the online-offline continuum, appear to be prevalent among perpetrators who were previously acquainted with their victims offline. It can therefore be inferred that perpetrators perceive digital media as an effective tool. The formal distinction between online and offline predators, as defined by Black et al. 2015, must be critically revised in reference to supposed offline predators. The link between gathering information online about a potential victim, developing exclusively offline relationships or relationships that develop divergently online versus offline, and ongoing digital intimacy should be taken into greater consideration.

At the same time, digital grooming strategies are also employed in interactions that are more about humiliating the victim than sexually motivated exploitation. If a victim has only participated in sexualised interactions online, their awareness of compromising digital material (e.g. chat conversations, images and videos) may foster a dependency relationship with the perpetrator. The perpetrator may strategically cultivate fear that the material will be disseminated, despite the fact that the aforementioned digital materials are self-incriminating for the perpetrator. Perpetrators draw upon a societal bias of hostility towards victims. Cases in which compromising materials were disseminated document the effectiveness of this bias, with the effects of victim-blaming ranging from peer-to-peer bullying to criminal prosecution. Digital media, therefore, plays a role beyond the violent act itself, serving as an instrument by which to spread disinformation. Thus, the response by the social environment into which compromising materials are disseminated is just as important as the actual "content" disingenuously distributed by the perpetrator.

Against this backdrop, the central characteristic of sexualised violence through the use of digital media may be a vague fear of abandonment by the victim. This fear of abandonment is often strategically tested by the perpetrator as early as the initiation process (strategic withdrawal). Fostering a fear of abandonment through violence on the online-offline continuum allows a predator to manipulate the victim's power of perception. In the context of sexualised violence, digital media allows a predator to gradually strip away the victim's self awareness. The victim comes to associate negative attributions with the use of online media and to avoid digital media for fear of additional repercussions. These negative attributions foster dependence on the perpetrator and a loss of agency on the part of the victim. Digital media transforms this loss of agency into a loss of perception, because the interactions result in evidence of violence, which can be reinterpreted by the perpetrator and used to exert pressure on the victim. As a result, the victim becomes more and more afraid. To that effect, digital media may be regarded as a structural amplifier in the violence spiral. Therefore, one must question whether an understanding of SOG needs to be expanded beyond a definition that focuses on sexually motivated seduction strategies

employed primarily by perpetrators who meet their victims online. There are aspects of SOG in the majority of cases of violence perpetrated on the online-offline continuum. Reciprocally, it is questionable to what extent it makes sense to classify acts of violence that are exclusively committed online as a separate form of violence. Young people today live in a world in which their relationships and sexual development take place as much online as offline. Young people experience not only violence, but also romantic relationships primarily online, and predators are taking advantage of this reality.

The choice of digital media as an instrument of initiation, threat, exploitation and humiliation demonstrates how perpetrators rationalise digitally supported violence. One should not underestimate the power of digital media as an instrument through which perpetrators assume the power of interpretation over victims' situation and are able to tap into their everyday realities. The efficient way in which digital media is used along the continuum of online-offline violence, in other words sexual online grooming and sexualised violence through the use of digital media, are a direct manifestation of the hedonistic utilitarianism demonstrated by perpetrators.

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