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Offense Processes of Online Sexual Grooming and Abuse of Children via Internet

Communication Platforms

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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to provide an inclusive and realistic account of the offense processes of naturally-occurring, sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that took place via Internet communication platforms, and develop an offence process diagram of online sexual grooming and abuse. Five case series, comprising 29 transcripts of 22 interactions, were analyzed using the qualitative approach of thematic analysis. Police reports were reviewed for descriptive and case-specific information. The five offenders were men aged between 27 and 52 years ( $M = 33.6$ ,  $SD = 5.6$ ), and the number of children they communicated with ranged from one to twelve ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). Victims were aged between 11 and 15 ( $M = 13.0$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), and were both female ( $n = 17$ ) and male ( $n = 6$ ). Findings revealed that offenders employed either an indirect or a direct approach to conversations with victims and initiating contact with them. The approach offenders employed was also reflected in the types of strategies they used. Only two offenders were found to engage in aspects of sexual grooming as part of an *indirect approach*; the majority of the interactions by the other three offenders, that lacked features of sexual grooming altogether, were found to be of a *direct approach*. These findings are discussed in relation to current issues surrounding terminology and definition of sexual grooming, as well as theoretical and practical implications, concluding with suggestions for future research.

### Offense Processes of Online Sexual Grooming and Abuse of Children via Internet Communication Platforms

Recent years have seen a steady increase in research being conducted in the area of online sexual offending. While most of this research has explored offenses in relation to indecent images of children (where individuals access, possess, distribute, and/or produce such material), relatively few studies have examined interactions in which offenders engage in inappropriate sexual communication with children, noted as one of the ways in which the Internet may be misused by individuals with a potential sexual interest in children (Durkin, 1997). These interactions have typically been denoted as *online grooming* and *online luring* (e.g., Cybertip.ca, 2012; Gottschalk, 2011; O'Connell, 2003). *Sexual grooming* itself is defined by Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2006) 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" (p. 297). This definition highlights the complex nature of sexual grooming, and also identifies important aspects that form part of this process. While it is based on sexual grooming in the physical world, its aspects can be applied to the online environment.

Finkelhor (1984) proposes four preconditions that may lead to sexual offending, which are as follows: (a) *motivation to sexually offend*, (b) *overcoming internal inhibitors*, (c) *overcoming external inhibitors*, and (d) *overcoming the child's resistance*. In terms of motivation to sexually offend, visiting an online platform that is deemed to be popular among children (e.g., Briggs et al., 2011; Malesky, 2007) may suggest an existent motivation to initiate sexual contact with them. Overcoming internal inhibitors is facilitated by one of the components of the *Triple A Engine* (Cooper, 1998), namely anonymity, which is related to the belief that one's identity is unknown and cannot be detected (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley,

2002). In terms of overcoming external inhibitors, the online environment presents few obstacles for offenders in the absence of significant adults and protective surroundings, both of which have been shown to increase a victim's vulnerability, playing an important role in keeping children safe (Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014a). In addition to this, it affords a greater opportunity to gain access to a child through the availability of a wide range of Internet communication platforms and an apparently unlimited number of users, which relates to the accessibility component of the Triple A Engine (Cooper, 1998). These factors are also in accordance with the three elements of the *Routine Activity Approach* (Cohen & Felson, 1979), namely a motivated offender, a suitable victim and the absence of capable guardians, whose convergence in time and space are argued to increase the likelihood of a crime occurring. Once contact has been established with a particular child, offenders may engage in a process of sexual grooming in order to overcome the child's resistance, as well as gain their compliance and secrecy to avoid disclosure (Craven et al., 2006)<sup>1</sup>.

With regard to the process of sexual grooming online, O'Connell (2003) employed a participant observation methodology, which involved posing as a minor in chat rooms for more than 50 hours over a five-year period, leading to the identification of several stages: (a) friendship-forming stage, (b) relationship-forming stage, (c) risk assessment stage, (d) exclusivity stage, (e) sexual stage, and (f) the concluding stage in form of damage limitation<sup>2</sup> and the hit and run tactic (i.e., where offenders presented with no apparent interest in damage limitation or continued contact). The research found that offenders varied in terms of the types and order of stages through which they progressed. Some offenders spent considerably more time getting to know the child and establishing an exclusive relationship, whereas others progressed quickly to the sexual stage. This was further supported by Whittle,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kloess et al. (2015) for a detailed examination of offenders' *modus operandi*

<sup>2</sup> Damage limitation: exercises, such as very positive encouragement and high praise, intended to reduce risk of a frightened child divulging details of the online activities (O'Connell, 2003)

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Hamilton-Giachristis and Beech (2014b) whose study examined victims' perspectives of being groomed online through qualitative interviews. Their results revealed that the process of grooming was of a heterogeneous nature and that offenders did not move through a particular order of stages, suggesting the notion that online grooming is a varied and non-linear process.

The European Online Grooming Project (Gottschalk, 2011) was established to develop an understanding of the different ways in which offenders approach, communicate, and 'groom' children online. The project's findings, derived from qualitative interviews that were conducted with convicted online groomers, further highlighted that not all of these interactions end in a physical meeting. Albeit a small minority, seven of the 33 (21%) offenders in the sample did not meet their victims, which is slightly contrary to assertions in the literature that individuals who engage in a process of sexual grooming do this for the purpose of arranging a physical meeting with a particular child, either to engage in sexual activity or to produce indecent images of children (e.g., Durkin, 1997; Malesky, 2007). In particular, an exploratory study by Briggs et al. (2011) examined 51 participants convicted of an Internet-initiated sexual offense, in which they attempted to entice a child into a sexual relationship using an Internet chat room, and found that not all offenders who specifically access Internet communication platforms to interact with children for sexual purposes are motivated to arrange a physical meeting. A subgroup (21/41%) in their sample was characterized by a motivation to solely engage children in online sexual activity for the purpose of sexual gratification. A similar finding was revealed in the study by Whittle et al. (2014b) in that merely three out of the eight offenders (38%) progressed to meet with their victims in the physical world.

The current literature illustrates apparent discrepancies and variations in the use of terminology and definition of online sexual grooming, which, coupled with the wide range of

behaviors this process reportedly comprises, hinders our understanding of it. In relation to this, Whittle et al. (2014a) have noted that there appears to be a lack of acknowledgement of the process of sexual grooming developing into exploitation and/or abuse. Studies thereby consistently refer to children being groomed, however, merely imply that abuse has occurred. Based on the definition by Craven et al. (2006), sexual grooming characterizes the process of preparation for the abuse of a child, and it is therefore suggested that interactions which move beyond this process more accurately constitute sexual exploitation and abuse rather than grooming.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to present a realistic and inclusive account of the offense processes of sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that took place via Internet communication platforms<sup>3</sup> by employing a qualitative data analysis approach to facilitate the development of an offense process diagram of online sexual grooming and abuse. The process of structuring and describing different types of offending behavior provides a theoretical basis for understanding the offense and offenders (Chambers, Horvath, & Kelly, 2010). We thereby hope to shed further light on what actually occurs within such interactions to clarify some of the existing issues, contributing to current knowledge about sexual grooming and this type of offending behavior online.

### The Present Paper

This paper is an extension of Kloess, Seymour-Smith, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Long, Shipley, and Beech (2015). While the same dataset was used and a thematic analysis conducted, the two papers cover distinct aspects that were apparent within sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and children. The former specifically focuses on the individuals who use Internet communication platforms to meet and interact with children

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<sup>3</sup> These represent real-world data in the form of naturally-occurring conversations between an adult and a child under the age of 16 years, who is not posed by an adult in the form of undercover police officers (e.g., Briggs et al., 2011; Grosskopf, 2010; Krone, 2005; Malesky, 2007) or private volunteers (e.g., Marcum, 2007; O'Connell, 2003; Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013).

for sexual purposes, as well as their modus operandi, with an emphasis on their underlying motivation and the range of strategies they employ. Both these and the types of sexual behaviors that are displayed by such offenders as part of their interactions with children are discussed in detail. While a thematic analysis was conducted to identify ‘themes of modus operandi’, there was a particular focus on offenders’ discursive tactics and how they ‘design’ their communicative contributions.

In contrast, the current paper specifically focuses on the offense process of sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and children, and the process of grooming respectively. It therefore describes in detail the different aspects and stages of this process as an offense is unfolding.

### **Method<sup>4</sup>**

#### **Context**

The data used in the present study consisted of transcripts of chat logs and police reports, and were provided by three UK police forces. All case material was anonymized by designated officers at each police force prior to it being made available to the principal researcher. The study was granted full ethical approval by the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham, UK. Additionally, the principal researcher received vetting clearance to undertake research activities as part of the Child Exploitation Investigation Team at a UK police force.

#### **Sample and Data**

A total of five cases were identified and selected by officers from three police forces through their intelligence systems, based on meeting the criteria of the offender having committed (a) an offense of sexual grooming under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003), or (b) any other offense under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that

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<sup>4</sup> Method. Reprinted from Kloess et al. (2015). Reprinted with permission. Copyright 2017 by Sage Publications



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involved sexual grooming. Furthermore, offenders had to have been convicted of these offenses, and their victims identified as children respectively, in order to be included in the sample. The offenses were committed between end of year 2009 and beginning of year 2012.

Cases comprised of a total of 29 transcripts of chat logs between an adult and a child under the age of 16 years<sup>5</sup>. In such interactions posts are necessarily short due to the nature of the mode of communication, yet each message is studied in depth. The number and length of available transcripts per case varied and ranged from two to twelve ( $M = 5.8$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ), and one to 75 pages ( $M = 14.4$ ,  $SD = 15.7$ ) respectively, resulting in a total of 415 pages (single-spaced format, font size 10). In addition to the transcripts, contextual information in the form of police reports was provided for each case.

### Participants

The five offenders were men aged between 27 and 52 ( $M = 33.6$ ,  $SD = 5.6$ ). Four were of Caucasian and one of Asian ethnicity. Their professional backgrounds varied, although two offenders worked in direct contact with children (i.e., a children's home and a school). Three offenders appeared to have access to a computer as part of their work. The number of children they communicated with ranged from one to twelve ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ , median = 4). Victims were aged between 11 and 15 years ( $M = 13.0$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ). Of the five offenders, three targeted young females, and two young males.

### Procedure

The study employed a qualitative design by using thematic analysis which is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) across a data set. It allows for meaningful elements or codes to be combined to generate themes and explanatory models (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> The total of 29 transcripts of chat logs is the result of interactions between five offenders and 23 victims, for some of which more than one transcript was available. This is due to the way in which Internet communication platforms process chat logs.

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The steps undertaken to ensure a rigorous thematic analysis of the study's data set are outlined here, and follow recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006), Guest et al. (2012), and Robson (2011).

Prior to the commencement of coding, the principal researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading the transcripts in detail. Transcripts were then formatted to be imported into MAXQDA11, a professional software package with the purpose of facilitating the process of qualitative data analysis. When re-reading the transcripts in MAXQDA11, an inductive, content-driven approach was adopted to allow for the identification of any key information, trends, themes, or ideas, apparent in the data (Guest et al., 2012). Initial codes and themes were identified and recorded in the coding scheme by assigning them a descriptive label. This was achieved by highlighting the relevant textual data and linking it to the corresponding codes or subcodes. Additional codes were developed as new features were identified, while reappearing elements were assigned codes that already existed within the coding scheme. Themes were then formed by collating relevant codes, and through the identification and understanding of key concepts.

A variety of content was coded in accordance with the aims of the present paper, generating codes pertaining to themes of: (a) initial contact/approach; (b) aspects of grooming; (c) cycle of online sexual activity; (d) closure; and (e) degree of contact. These descriptive labels were derived from previously identified categories in multiple perpetrator rape cases (Chambers et al., 2010; Chambers, Horvath, & Kelly, 2011), and phases in rape incidents (Dale, Davies, & Wei, 1997) respectively. Based on the procedure employed by Chambers et al. (2011), offense process diagrams were drawn up for each case and subsequently compiled into an overall diagram, depicting the offense processes and offending behavior in a temporal sequence. The extracts used in the following section to illustrate different aspects of the offense process solely represent the contributions made by offenders

due to issues of confidentiality and in order protect the identity of victims within the interactions.

Throughout the analysis, the principal researcher employed an iterative approach by revisiting and adjusting existing codes and subcodes, as well as revising themes, where appropriate. Additionally, textual data within codes and subcodes were re-examined to ensure that codes described the information within them accurately. Transcripts were re-read and segments of text recoded, where necessary. If new information or insight was gained, the principal researcher modified the coding scheme to further develop and refine it. The descriptions of themes, codes and subcodes were developed throughout, as well as verified and revised through discussions with the research team. Interpretation and refinement of identified themes were conducted through a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts, referring to relevant literature, and consulting with colleagues and experts in the field.

Finally, an inter-rater reliability check was performed on 10% of the analyzed data set (i.e., approximately 40 pages), totaling 55 randomly selected extracts, in order to ensure that these were reliably interpreted by a second rater as representing the themes identified by the principal researcher. The proportion of agreement was calculated as a percentage of overlap, which was revealed to be 85 percent ( $\kappa = 0.34$ )<sup>6</sup> and is above the minimum acceptable inter-rater agreement of 80 percent (McHugh, 2012). Any disagreements were mainly of a semantic nature, and agreement was reached through revisiting the relevant extracts and discussing their contexts.

Following the analysis of the transcripts, police reports were consulted for descriptive information about the offender, identified victims and additional evidence derived as part of forensic analyses (e.g., possession of child pornography). Researcher bias in the form of

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<sup>6</sup> While the Kappa value is considered to be fair, it constitutes a conservative estimate of agreement that is heavily skewed by the high level of chance agreement that occurred as a result of the second rater essentially agreeing or disagreeing with the first rater.

preconceived knowledge about each case was therefore avoided, ensuring objective interpretation.

### **Results**

Findings are presented according to different aspects that appeared within the interactions. It is anticipated that this highlights the development and progression of offending behavior in a temporal sequence from initial contact to end of contact.

#### **Initial Contact/Approach**

Across cases there were differences in the way initial contact was established between offenders and victims. The offender in Case 1 reportedly accessed a public chat room specifically geared towards adolescents between 13 and 19 years of age. He exchanged email addresses with four victims to move the conversation to a private instant messaging provider in three instances, and e-mail in one instance. In Case 2, the offender claimed in his police interview to have met the victim on an adult dating website, where they exchanged email addresses to continue using a private instant messaging provider. Although the former could not be verified, the transcripts provided for this case were from the latter context. The offender in Case 3 accessed a website that allows communication with others through video chat, and also exchanged email addresses with his victim to interact via a private instant messaging provider. The transcripts of chat logs from these cases stem from contexts of instant messaging and e-mail, and therefore represent continued conversations following initial contact elsewhere. Due to this, it is not possible to demonstrate the very first, initial contact making between offenders and victims in Cases 1, 2 and 3, or ascertain the duration of their conversations preceding the use of instant messaging or e-mail.

In Case 4, the offender reportedly established initial contact with a great number of victims (in the hundreds) via a social networking site, and appears to have exchanged email addresses for further communication via private instant messaging providers with only a few

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victims. He also used an online chat website that allows users to communicate via instant messaging, voice and video chat. Only eleven conversations with identified victims were available as transcripts. The offender in Case 5 established initial contact and communicated with victims via a social networking site, and used different Internet communication platforms to make video calls with victims. The transcripts of chat logs from the latter two cases therefore predominantly represented initial contact-making and formed the beginning of interactions (10/16), with the others featuring continued conversations following initial contact elsewhere.

The following extracts represent offenders' contributions to their conversations with victims within the first five minutes, as recorded in the transcripts of chat logs. Table 1 shows the extracts for Case 1, in which the offender communicated with four different victims.

Insert Table 1 about here

All four extracts highlight that the offender has had previous contact with the victims elsewhere (E1, line 3; E2 line 2; E3 line 4; E4, line 4). Although the offender engages in general conversation making by enquiring how victims are and what they are up to, he almost immediately introduces a sexual topic (E1, line 7; E2, line 3; E3, line 7; E4, line 7). Extract 5 shows the contributions made by the offender in Case 2, who communicated with one victim.

### Case 2, Extract 5:<sup>7</sup>

1 hey i can finaly seee tyou angel  
2 love you  
3 yay ya yay  
4 ive not got long i was just going lol  
5 damn you are so pretty

---

<sup>7</sup> Extracts solely represent offenders' contributions to the conversations due to confidentiality and ethical considerations

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6 so what you up to

7 ?

8 lol cool, im really glad i can see you now but i got to go, back later bye angel

Again, it can be derived from this extract that the offender and victim have been in contact before elsewhere, as a “relationship” appears to have been established at this point. The extract illustrates the offender’s excitement to finally see the victim via webcam, including signs of affection (line 2), compliments and flattery (line 5).

In Case 3, the first five minutes represent attempts by the offender and victim to video call each other. Technological problems prevented this from working, which led to the use of a mobile phone to communicate. It is unclear whether this succeeded.

Table 2 shows the extracts for Case 4, in which the offender communicated with 12 different victims. The five most representative extracts were chosen to illustrate the way victims were approached by this particular offender.

Insert Table 2 about here

The above extracts illustrate how the offender in Case 4 immediately “requested” to see victims and for them to show themselves via webcam. Most extracts can be seen to represent the first contact between the offender and victims, with the offender confirming their age (E9, lines 1-2; E10, line 3) and whether they have got a webcam (E9, line 2). Noticeable is also the persistent repetition of requests which underline a very direct, slightly aggressive approach by the offender. Table 3 shows the extracts for Case 5, in which the offender communicated with five different victims.

Insert Table 3 about here

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The extracts above demonstrate that the offender in this case randomly added victims to initiate contact, with Extracts 11 and 13 suggesting that the offender selected the victims based on their profile picture (line 2). The offender immediately enquires about victims' age, as well as whether they have an instant messaging account with a private provider, or are in possession of a webcam (E11, line 8; E12, line 8; E14, line 6). Extracts 14 (lines 4-5) and 15 (line 4) also highlight how the offender openly states his sexual motivation, using blackmail to incite victims to show themselves via webcam and engage in online sexual activity (E15, lines 4-10).

In summary, this section illustrates differences in the way victims were approached by offenders. Although some of the extracts appear to represent continued contact between offenders and victims, they still provide insight into how offenders go about conversing with victims early on in conversations. Some offenders engaged victims in general conversation and employed a more gentle approach to establishing contact. Others used a very direct, highly sexualized approach, making a sexual motive immediately obvious.

**Offenders' online persona.** Offenders in this sample either presented as male adults stating their true age (Case 2) or a few years younger (Case 1), or as adolescents of similar age to the victims they communicated with (Cases 4 & 5). It is not clear from the transcripts how the offender in Case 3 presented himself online, and whether the victim was aware that the offender was an older male prior to the contact sexual offense taking place.

### **Grooming**

Grooming has frequently been referred to in the literature as being a major component in sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that take place via Internet communication platforms. However, only two offenders (Cases 1 & 2) in the present sample can be said to have engaged in aspects of grooming; the other cases (Cases 4 & 5) demonstrated a much more *direct approach* with no 'preparation' (of the victim) by the

offender. The following descriptions are therefore predominantly drawn from the two offenders who employed an *indirect approach*.

**Gaining a child's compliance.** In order to gain victims' compliance, offenders used the strategy of making victims feel special early on in their conversations through compliments and flattery, as well as affectionate expressions, such as "I have missed you". Sexual topics were initiated relatively promptly with offenders enquiring about victims' relationship statuses and boyfriends, if they were in a relationship at the time of conversing with offenders. This was also used to drop sexual hints in relation to victims' availability to the offender (e.g., "I take it no huggin or kissin as ur taken now lol"; Case 1), which, coupled with the use of compliments and making victims feel special, appeared to function as flattery. Offenders often continued to ask detailed questions about victims' previous sexual experiences (e.g., "you ever had a guy come on your tits yet?"; Case 2), engagement in sexual activities in current relationships (e.g., "wot did u do 2 tease?"; Case 1), body parts (e.g., "wot size r they hehe?"; Case 1), self-masturbatory practices (e.g., "do u wank much yet?"; Case 5), and their enjoyment and liking of such (e.g., "did that turn u on?"; Case 4).

In relation to this, offenders were interested in the age of victims' ex- or current boyfriends (e.g., "how old was ur ex?"; Case 1), their body parts, and the sexual maturity of victims and their friends. In particular, the offender in Case 1 demonstrated a keen interest in the age at which victims and their friends had their first sexual experiences (e.g., "have most of them had sex, or r most of them virgins?"), and whether they liked older men (e.g., "r u the only 1 of ur friends who likes older guys then lol?"; "do most of your friends like older guys then lol?"). In relation to instances where the offender sought reassurance from victims that they were comfortable with the age gap (i.e., that it was "okay" with them), he "sells" it as something appropriate and almost "cool" (e.g., "u dont mind that i think sex with 12yo girls is hot lol?"). Specifically, in conversation with one victim, the offender mentioned sexual



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contact to other girls, including having taken their virginities (e.g., “wen ive been wiv girls round ur age b4, ...ive taken a few virginities before...”), further normalizing the behavior and presenting himself as “desirable” to lower the victim’s inhibitions. At times, this set the scene for offenders to introduce behaviors in the form of showing and exposing themselves via webcam, or taking nude pictures and sending them to victims.

Throughout, most offenders used every opportunity to compliment and flatter victims with regards to their looks (e.g., “stunning as ever”; Case 3), personality and later performance (i.e., engagement in online sexual activity). This also involved sexual remarks regarding victims’ clothing or a particular activity they were carrying out (e.g., getting changed/dressed, showering – “oooooh lol would like to see that hahah”; Case 2), and expressions of sexual arousal and excitement at seeing or thinking of them (e.g., “just looking at you and I need to do the guy thing”; Case 2). In conversations where offenders suggested a meeting, they promised victims presents in the form of clothes and privileges (e.g., “awwww, well thats sumthing i will also be buying u then ;) [emoticon]”; Case 1). The offender in Case 3 ordered various sex toys via an online shop, and spoke to the victim about using them at their next physical meeting. In Case 1, the offender used bribery to incite one particular victim to model for him in return for money (e.g., “£50 each as well as having all the clothes as well”; Case 1). Offenders frequently used romantic expressions (e.g., “I love you”; “I want to be in a relationship with you”) and statements of longing contact (e.g., “I have missed you”; “I wish you could be here with me/I could be there with you”). The offender in Case 2 also presented as a friend and offered advice and encouragement.

While the use of compliments, flattery, and making them feel special in general, mainly functioned to prepare victims by insinuating a special relationship prior to online sexual activity taking place, it also frequently served to re-establish the exclusivity of the relationship post-engagement in and performance of such. This involved positive

encouragement and praise, and appeared to be aimed at ensuring continued engagement (e.g., “you are such a perfect angel, would you go out with me if you was closer”; Case 2). In addition to this, it is suggested that offenders generally behaving as though nothing problematic has occurred, often continuing the conversation, also normalizes the behavior. This may not only increase the likelihood of engagement by victims at a later point, but also minimizes disclosure, which will be discussed in more detail in the section Maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure.

**Overcoming a child’s resistance.** Offenders used various strategies in order to overcome a victim’s resistance to show him-/herself via webcam and/or engage in online sexual activity. These included: (a) being persistent; (b) expressing disappointment or sadness; (c) presenting as desperate and in “need”; (d) begging; (e) pressuring; and (f) reminding the victim of having made a promise. This range of cajoling and pressuring strategies center on manipulating the child and exploiting them through overcoming their resistance. In the conversations of offenders who employed more of a direct approach, the following strategies were more prominent: (a) threatening victims; (b) bribing victims; (c) insults; and (d) peer pressure, including offenders inciting victims to engage in online sexual activity, referring to other victims having performed more extreme sexual acts, as well as sending victims pornographic material.

**Maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure.** Offenders went to some efforts to maintain victims’ secrecy of their online contact. This was achieved through direct enquiries about whether victims had told their friends and assertive statements aimed at ensuring non-disclosure to parents (e.g., “I take it you wouldn’t be telling your parents though”; Case 1); at other times expressing a word of caution not to get caught in instances of inciting victims to engage in online sexual activity (e.g., “You will have to be careful”; Case 2). Then again, it is suggested that subtle, yet frequent, references to the future with regards

to victims' age in the context of a physical meeting (e.g., "It would be cool to see you, but that's a long way off"; "One day when things are different and you are older"; Case 2), as well as offenders repeatedly seeking reassurance about the age gap, creates an atmosphere in which both parties are aware that their relationship would be deemed inappropriate by others, indirectly facilitating victims' secrecy. It also became apparent from the conversations that some victims were secretly using Internet communication platforms to converse and interact with people online, making them more vulnerable as they would be less likely to disclose any negative experience in relation to this to their parents.

### **Cycle of Online Sexual Activity**

**Offending behavior.** As could be seen in the section Approach, offenders either introduced sexually explicit behaviors following the discussion of sexual topics, or immediately attempted to initiate online sexual activity through persuading victims to show themselves via webcam. Offenders predominantly engaged in exhibitionistic and exposing sexual behaviors, and performed masturbation, either offline or shown in the form of nude pictures and/or via webcam. Types of sexual activities victims were incited to engage in and perform by offenders varied and included: (a) getting changed/undressing, (b) showing/exposing body parts (i.e., breasts, bottom, legs), (c) sexual touching, (d) digital penetration, (e) penetration with a foreign object, and (f) other extreme sexual activity that would be classified as sexually humiliating. Online sexual activity was also comprised of sexual talk, including sexually explicit messages and fantasy enactment, with some interactions featuring what Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak (2000) referred to as "cybersex" ("... a form of fantasy sex, which involves interactive chat-room sessions where the participants describe sexual acts and sometimes disrobe and masturbate"; p. 3).

**Introduction of meeting.** Offenders often introduced a physical meeting after a "relationship" had been established and once they had achieved victims' compliance to

engage in online sexual activity (Cases 1, 2 & 4). The offender in Case 5, however, enquired almost immediately after initiating the conversation about whether victims would be interested to meet for the purpose of sexual activity. While this aspect and its function are discussed in more detail in the precursor to this paper (Kloess et al., 2015), it forms an important component in the process of these interactions.

**Maintenance-escalation.** The range of strategies employed by offenders to incite victims to engage in online sexual activity were sometimes also utilized in order to maintain contact with and ensure continued engagement by a specific victim. This was particularly noticeable in Case 2, where a clear progression and escalation of offending behavior could be observed. Once the offender had gained the victim's compliance, and a sexualized atmosphere was established, sexually explicit talk and activity was more readily initiated in following conversations and spiraled into deviancy over the course of the interaction. As part of interactions that featured relationship-building, offenders also communicated with victims via mobile phones. This can also be seen as a form of escalation, as the offender becomes a part of the victim's personal life offline.

### **Closure**

This section refers to offenders' behavior following their engagement in online sexual activity with victims, and how contact between offenders and victims ended respectively. Most interactions ended shortly after online sexual activity took place, and this formed the last contact between offenders and victims (Case 4). Other interactions were briefly continued at a later stage, or involved several attempts by offenders to re-initiate contact (e.g., Hello; Hi; Are you still there?; Case 5). Some interactions ended "naturally" due to planned activities in the evening or it being nighttime (e.g., victim saying that she is going to bed, offender replies with good night; Case 1); others abruptly, with no clear explanation possible (across all cases). In Case 2, the victim appeared to become increasingly non-responsive and

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distant (e.g., the offender commenting “you didn’t even say bye, are you there baby, are you back with me yet?”; “you haven’t been talking to me, where have you been?”), which may have been as a result of the preceding sexual abuse online. In most interactions in Cases 4 and 5, victims removed themselves from interactions after refusing to engage in online sexual activity (e.g., the victim saying “I can’t talk right now”; “no one can force me to get on cam! Bye”), or third party intervention involving a family member. It appears that the online contact between the offender and victim in Case 3 discontinued due to police involvement in response to the contact sexual offense(s) taking place, as no further messages were recorded in the transcripts of chat logs after the date of the physical meeting.

Figure 1 shows the offense process diagram of online sexual grooming and abuse, incorporating the offense processes of all interactions analyzed as part of this study.

Insert Figure 1 about here

We can see from Figure 1 that offenders employing more of an indirect approach only sexualized the conversation with victims following some kind of *relationship-building*, which involved engaging victims in general conversation. Once sexual topics had been introduced and formed part of the conversation, offenders attempted to incite victims into showing themselves and engaging in online sexual activity via webcam, which falls under *incitement sexual activity*. This also involved offenders *sending sexually explicit material* in the form of nude pictures. In this context, offenders engaged in *sexually explicit talk* and *fantasy enactment*, often combined with *online sexual activity*, in which offenders exposed themselves via webcam and performed masturbation. These not only sexualized the conversation, but also served to groom/prepare victims. As part of this process, some offenders assessed victims’ compliance, risk of disclosure and detection (*assessment*).

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Following *online sexual activity*, offenders often re-established the exclusivity of the relationship through positive encouragement and praise, as well as through re-enacting the relationship-building aspect. Both *assessment* and *establishing exclusivity of relationship* served to ensure victims' continued compliance and minimize likelihood of disclosure and detection by others. The end of these interactions predominantly took the form of *victim ceasing interaction* or a "natural" ending. One interaction featured the arrangement of a meeting, which did not take place, however, after which contact between the offender and this particular victim did not appear to resume, as no further chat logs were found.

In terms of the more direct approach, we can see that offenders immediately initiated the cycle of online sexual activity through attempting to incite victims to show and expose themselves via webcam. As part of this, offenders engaged in *sexually explicit talk* and *fantasy enactment*, and also sent victims *sexually explicit material* in the form of pornographic material in order to desensitize and normalize the behavior depicted, with the aim to lower victims' inhibitions and achieve their compliance. Not all offenders engaged in exhibitionistic and/or exposing behaviors via webcam, although some offenders also performed masturbation offline. A few interactions featured the introduction of *sexual topics* and *assessment* of victims' identity, which could have served as a security measure or been a strategy to persuade victims to show themselves via webcam. The majority of these interactions resulted in *victim ceasing interaction*.

Overall, the cycle of online sexual activity in the maintenance-escalation phase aims to illustrate the cyclical nature of the interactions in this sample in that once the conversation had been sexualized, and a sexual contact and/or relationship established, a clear progression in content explicitness was observed, both in terms of sexual talk and sexual behaviors that were suggested and engaged in. Subsequently, conversations were also more readily redirected to the cycle of online sexual activity after temporarily deviating from it.

### **Degree of Contact**

Of particularly informative value in understanding the offense process and offending behavior, as well as offenders' motivation and the function of their engagement in interactions with children, was the examination of the length and frequency of contact over the period of time available in the form of transcripts. Table 4 presents an overview of this information for each interaction across the five cases.

Insert Table 4 about here

It becomes apparent that most interactions were of a relatively short-lived nature. Even where the period of time during which conversations took place lasted for several weeks and months, the frequency of contact points was comparatively low, with the exception of Case 2. The offender in Case 4 mostly interacted with victims on one occasion, not returning to the conversation once it had ended. When referring to the dates of the actual interactions, it is apparent that offenders either communicated with victims simultaneously (Case 1) or in sequence (Cases 4 & 5) during the time period they were active. This is further supported by the information presented in the previous section on how conversations ended, and may suggest that the degree of contact was highly dependent on victims' compliance.

### **Discussion**

The findings presented here illustrate differences in the way offenders initiated contact with victims and approached their conversations with them. Some offenders spent time getting to know the victim, engaging in aspects of relationship-building, whereas others employed a very direct and blunt approach, immediately introducing sexual content. Offenders therefore appeared to employ either indirect or direct approaches relatively consistently, with some individual variation (Case 1). These resemble approach strategies

(alias speech acts) identified in rape incidents, namely “blitz”, “con” and “surprise” (e.g., Dale et al., 1997), that serve to achieve victims’ compliance. Rapists may further employ more (e.g., “do as I say” = orders, demands, threats) or less overtly threatening (e.g., “foot in the door” = limitation reassurance, threat diminution; “door in the face” = concessions) strategies (Dale et al., 1997), which vary in terms of the level of requests and degree of force.

No features of sexual grooming could be identified in the direct approach, according to the definition by Craven et al. (2006) that describes sexual grooming as a process whereby an offender prepares a child for abuse. This is certainly of interest given that such interactions are commonly referred to as online grooming and online luring (e.g., Cybertip.ca, 2012; Gottschalk, 2011; O’Connell, 2003), providing new insight into their varied nature.

Although it was not possible to determine how long offenders, who employed more of an indirect approach, had communicated with victims by the time they had moved the conversation to a private provider, the openings of the transcripts still suggest that sexual topics were introduced relatively early. This is in accordance with findings of existing research, whereby offenders who had committed an (Internet) sexual offense reported to have initiated sexual topics in their first chat session (Dowdell, Burgess, & Flores, 2011), and sexualized conversations within minutes (Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Lööf, 2014; European Online Grooming Project, Webster et al., 2012). Yet, these offenders frequently reenacted relationship-building, a feature of sexual grooming, and a finding previously reported by O’Connell (2003) and suggested to be employed by offenders to maintain contact with a child over a period of time.

Gupta, Kumaraguru and Sureka (2012) further noted that the relationship-forming stage was the most dominant of O’Connell’s (2003) stages of cyberexploitation in the conversations they analyzed as part of their study (publicly available via the Perverted Justice website). One factor that may play an influential role in whether or not an offender employs



relationship-building is the intensity of online contact. Peter, Valkenburg and Schouten (2006) found that Dutch adolescents (12-14-year-olds) who engaged in long chat room sessions tended to talk with strangers (i.e., individuals they did not know in the physical world) on the Internet more often. This partly supports our conclusion in relation to victims' compliance and the degree of contact in cases that included relationship-building. Generally speaking, however, and with the exception of Case 2, interactions were of a relatively short-lived nature, with some offenders communicating with several victims simultaneously. While the former is contrary to assertions in the literature that offenders spend "hours, days and months communicating with children" (Lanning, 2010, p. 131), the latter replicate findings by Quayle et al. (2014) and Whittle et al. (2014b).

In interactions that featured sexual grooming, offenders most commonly used strategies, such as compliments and flattery, to make victims feel special and sexualize the conversation through the introduction of sexual topics. Offenders' approach (indirect vs. direct) was therefore further reflected in the types of strategies they used in order to incite victims to show themselves via webcam and engage in online sexual activity. Those who employed more of an indirect approach mainly presented as persistent, begging and desperate and/or in need for sexual stimulation, as well as gentle pressuring through expressing disappointment and/or sadness and reminding victims that they had made a promise. Offenders who employed a direct approach used more forceful strategies, such as blackmail/threats, insults and peer pressure. Another strategy apparent across cases was to show victims pornographic material, which served to normalize offenders' behavior and desensitize victims to sexual activity and the material depicted, with the aim to lower their inhibitions, overcome their resistance and achieve their compliance (Durkin, 1997; Marcum, 2007; O'Connell, 2003). Although most of these strategies have previously been reported to be employed by offenders, both in the context of sexual abuse cases in the physical world

(e.g., Craven et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006) and online (e.g., Cybertip.ca, 2012; Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007; O'Connell, 2003; Whittle et al., 2014b), the detailed qualitative analysis of such interactions facilitates an additional perspective on the nature and extent of offenders' use thereof.

In terms of the process of interactions, no particular order of stages (e.g., O'Connell, 2003) was apparent, which is consistent with more recent research (e.g., Whittle et al., 2014b; Williams, Elliott and Beech, 2013). Specifically, even though there were clear differences in the way offenders approached victims and engaged with them, all interactions were highly sexualized. It is therefore suggested that features reported to be characteristic of the friendship- and relationship-forming stages, as proposed by O'Connell (2003), are merely aspects of sexual grooming that form part of a range of manipulative strategies used by offenders in this sample. These were found to be relatively consistent across interactions with different victims, and were not adapted based on victims' responses, as was revealed in previous studies (e.g., Craven et al., 2006; European Online Grooming Project, Gottschalk, 2011). This may be related to the increased opportunity to initiate contact with a great number of children via easily accessible Internet communication platforms that grant anonymity. Should future studies replicate this observation, it would demonstrate a marked difference to results of existing research. However, findings and their interpretation are tentative, and more research is required to determine whether revelations in the present study are duplicated by other samples.

Overall, the present paper provides new insights into the nature and process of sexual grooming, exploitation and abuse of children that takes place via Internet communication platforms. It was possible to ascertain that most offenders accessed Internet communication platforms that are specifically geared towards and/or popular among children, which may be suggestive of a sexual interest in children. While some of the transcripts indicated that

offenders randomly initiated contact with victims, it was not clear whether other offenders may have selected victims based on meeting certain criteria after reviewing their online profiles, a strategy reported to be employed by some offenders (Quayle et al., 2014). Through providing an offense process diagram of online sexual grooming and abuse we aimed to amend the detailed description of the nature of sexually exploitative interactions and better illustrate the process of such.

Despite those interactions commonly referred to as online grooming, both our description and the diagram highlight a lack thereof in most interactions. This not only needs to be taken into account when applying the terminology and definition of sexual grooming to sexually exploitative interactions, but also when it comes to detecting and criminalizing this offending behavior. More specifically, the ambiguous use of the term 'sexual grooming' has the potential to hinder the detection of this process, and any associated offending behavior respectively, by police. Furthermore, Section 15, the offense of sexual grooming under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 in the UK (Home Office, 2003), criminalizes interactions in which offenders engage in a process of sexual grooming that leads to a physical meeting, including arrangements thereof. However, some interactions do not demonstrate this process or arrangements for a physical meeting. Such offenses that involve the sexual exploitation and abuse of children that take place via Internet communication platforms, committed by offenders whose motivation is not to meet offline, do therefore not fall within Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2003).

All interactions were found to be of a sexualized nature, some revealing highly explicit content. Requests for pictures from victims, and the incitement to show themselves via webcam and engage in online sexual activity, could be seen across all interactions. It was merely the way offenders approached this that differed. Coupled with the information presented on the degree of contact between each offender and their victims, this may provide

evidence for a sexual motive in offenders, which they apparently seek to gratify through sexually exploitative interactions with children (Krone, 2005). The online environment may therefore serve as an opportunity that does not need to be created by offenders. These findings will be useful in informing treatment programs, as they provide important information in relation to offenders' offending behavior. This not only highlights perceptions of no harm being done due to a lack of physical/bodily contact in interactions that remain online, but also the fulfillment of different needs. Specifically, offenders who engage in aspects of relationship-building may seek to fulfill additional needs to those solely driven by sexual gratification.

### **Limitations**

The present study employed a qualitative approach on a small number of cases due to the sensitive nature of the data and the extreme difficulty in accessing this kind of material. While the number of transcripts the cases comprised of was appropriate for the methodology used (e.g., Georgaca & Avdi, 2012), findings are tentative and not generalizable across other populations. Furthermore, the cases used involve offenders who have been convicted of the offenses they committed, and are therefore merely representative of convicted offenders. While one may argue that such cases are of a more severe nature in light of having come to the attention of the police, as well as possibly different from those that are unresolved or not convicted, restrictions around data protection presented the use of "open" cases (i.e., a case where a suspect has not yet been convicted) in this instance. This practice is in accordance with the police's data usage requirements and guidelines by the ethical review committee, where the research was conducted.

Additionally, the availability of this type of data is limited due to chat room and instant messaging systems not always storing content of conversations, thus making it difficult to recover and explaining why some chat logs of interactions with additional victims

could not be retrieved. The use of a microphone does not enable the recording of conversations, and technical problems (e.g., Internet connection disconnecting) may lead to a loss of information and missing lines in the transcripts. There is a recent trend for offenders to interact with victims via mobile phones using more transient systems, where content is deleted automatically, making the recovery of such even more challenging.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

Cases involving online sexual exploitation and abuse require attention, particularly with a view to further our understanding of why individuals may engage in this particular offending behavior, given that they are suggested to represent a growing proportion of sexual offenses due to increasingly more time being spent online (Seto, 2013). Transcripts of chat logs are a rich source of data that provide valuable insight about offenders in terms of their potential motivation, sexual interests/preferences and offending behavior. More research is needed that examines this kind of data by also considering other relevant factors, such as the role of victims, to shed more light on “cross-over” offenses and those that escalate. The dynamics of each interaction are unique and varied (Leclerc, Proulx, Lussier, & Allaire, 2009; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013), and analyzing both offender and victim behaviors is suggested to provide a more comprehensive account of such interactions and their outcome, allowing a better understanding of aspects that may influence the offense process (Deslauriers-Varin & Beauregard, 2010). In relation to this, it would be of interest to explore whether offenders progress to commit more serious offenses than initially “intended”, when presented with an opportunity, and whether there are differences in *modus operandi* between those who have offended before and those who have not (i.e., do “first-time” offenders take a more cautious approach?). This has yielded interesting findings in the stranger rape literature, where researchers have attempted to distinguish serial rapists from one-off rapists (e.g., Slater, Woodhams, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014).

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Overall, gaining a better understanding of online sexual grooming and abuse also has the potential to inform current approaches to policing and prevention. The identification of certain risk factors (e.g., possession of IIOC, reference to contact sexual abuse) would facilitate the early detection of malicious interactions and assist with the prioritization of cases. Through increasing awareness of such interactions and providing guidance to children in the form of generic life skills (Finkelhor, 2014), they will feel more empowered to use the Internet safely, particularly in light of the possibility that indirect and direct approaches lead to diverse experiences that have differing impact. While online abuse occurs less frequently than abuse in the physical world (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009), it is still of importance that research in this field progresses, considering the use of rapidly advancing new technology.

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Table 1

*Extracts of Case 1 by Victim*

Extract 1 (V1)	Extract 2 (V2)	Extract 3 (V3)	Extract 4 (V4)
1 heya	1 hey gorgeous, how	1 hello stranger	1 h ( <i>name of victim</i> )
2 how r u?	was ur day? Xxx	2 how r u?	2 hey*
3 its been a while	2 mine was pretty	3 im pretty good	3 how are u?
lol, wot u been up 2?	good, ive missed u	thanx	4 im pretty good
4 nothing much,	tho xxx	4 what u been up 2,	thanx, bit tired tho
been pretty bored,	3 have i convinced u	its been ages since	after staing up so
but my laptops been	that its a good idea 2	we spoke	late with u last nite
fucked which is why	meet up haha? Xxx	5 where u been then?	lol
i aint been here for a		6 cool	5 u speak 2 ( <i>name of</i>
while		7 i bet u've found	<i>victim's friend</i> )
5 sorry		urself a bf	about anything from
6 ive missed u		8 why was he bad?	last night lol?
7 r u still single, or u		9 awww, i cud beat	6 lol, what did u tell
got a bf now?		him up if u want, u	her?
8 ah cool, congrats		deserve 2 be treated	7 oh yeh, tell me
9 i take it that means		like a princess	more lol, wot wud u
u dont wanna meet		10 did he take ur	do then?
lol		virginity?	

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Table 2

*Extracts of Case 4 by Victim*

Extract 6 (V1)	Extract 7 (V5)	Extract 8 (V6)	Extract 9 (V10)	Extract 10 (V11)
1 i cant see u	1 hey	1 can i see u	1 asl	1 tell me sweet
2 wat do i see	2 how r u	2 accept	2 age	heart
3 can i see ur tits	3 can i see u 4 i see u on cam	3 i cant see anything	3 sex 4 location	2 u got cam 3 asl plz
4 let me see ur chest	5 plz u look HOT	4 well i cant see u	5 16 m 6 u got cam	4 wana see cock 5 ur mine
5 to make sure ur a girl	6 hey, thats kool babes, if its	5 wow 6 whos that	7 wana see cock 8 can i see u	6 ok sorry
6 no more until i see u	worth anything i very proud of u	7 where r u 8 can i see u plz	9 hey 10 its u	
7 tits	7 ur welcome	9 plz	11 can i see tits	
8 show ur face	8 u do			
9 nice	9 can i see u plz			
10 u wana suck my cock	10 horny 11 plz			

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Table 3

*Extracts of Case 5 by Victim*

Extract 11 (V1)	Extract 12 (V2)	Extract 13 (V3)	Extract 14 (V4)	Extract 15 (V5)
1 hi there hope	1 hi	1 hi thanks for	1 hi	1 who are u
you didnt mind	2 good u	accepting	2 u ok	2 age?
the random add	3 kl wuu2	2 u looked nice	3 yeah wuu2	3 14
2 kl u look	4 kl doin what?	3 hope u dont	4 nm lookin for	4 i only fuck
really cute	5 no sorry u	mind	a cam boy	boys who do
3 wuu2?	6 kl how old are	4 about me	5 looking for a	stuff on
4 how old are	u by the way?	adding u	lad to go on	webcam first
5 jw and u look	7 kl im 14	5 so wuu2	webcam for me	5 no
older	8 do u have	6 same	6 u got a cam?	6 na bye
6 im 14 that o	(private IM		7 well if u ever	7 i have no cam
7 kl	provider)		wanna meet up	8 na im gonna
8 do u have	9 just wonderin		go on and do	delete u
(private IM	and whats ur		some stuff for	9 im only gonna
provider)?	friends name		me	offer this
9 nice boxers in	10 kl u two		8 playing with	tonight
the pic	should go on		ur dick for me	10 na on
	cam for me im		9 ok	webcam only
	bored lol			

Final

OFFENSE PROCESSES OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Table 4

*Degree and Frequency of Contact for all Interactions*

Case	Victim	Time Period	Frequency	Duration of Main Conversation(s)
Case 1	Victim 1	5 weeks	4 days	2 hours 30 minutes
	Victim 2	1 day	1 day	1 hour 20 minutes*
	Victim 3	1 month	4 days	3 hours 20 minutes
	Victim 4	2 months	14 days	3 x 2 – 2 hours 30 minutes, 1 x 4 hours 20 minutes
Case 2		4 months	Almost every day	2 – 5 hours and 30 minutes
Case 3		3 weeks	11 days	4 hours
Case 4	Victim 1	1 day	1 day	1 hour 20 minutes
	Victim 2	1 day	1 day	1 hour 10 minutes
	Victim 3	1 day	1 day	1 hour 10 minutes
	Victim 4	1 day	1 day	10 minutes
	Victim 5	1 day	1 day	30 minutes
	Victim 6	2 days	2 days	5 hours
	Victim 7	1 day	1 day	2 hours 40 minutes
	Victim 8	3 days	3 days	4 hours 20 minutes
	Victim 9	1 day	1 day	1 hour 30 minutes
	Victim 10	1 day	1 day	5 minutes
	Victim 11	2 months	5 days	3 hours
Case 5**	Victim 1	3 weeks	10 days	-
	Victim 2	5½ months	3 days	-
	Victim 3	1 week	5 days	-
	Victim 4	6 months	6 days	-
	Victim 5	6 weeks	7 days	-

\*Via email

\*\*Chronological information was not available for the transcripts of this case