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Persuasion strategies and sexual solicitations and interactions in online sexual grooming of adolescents: Modeling direct and indirect pathways

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ABSTRACT

Online sexual grooming and exploitation of adolescents is receiving increasing social attention. Drawing on a social influence framework, the aim of this study was to test a model of the direct and mediated relationships between an adult's use of persuasion strategies and online sexual grooming of early adolescents. The initial sample of the study consisted of 2731 early Spanish adolescents between 12 and 15 years old (50.6% female). Of these, 196 adolescents (7.17% of the total; 53% girls) were involved in online grooming (mean age = 14.93, *SD* = 0.90). Persuasion strategies by the adult through internet increased the probability of using deceit, bribery, and the minor's nonsexual involvement. In addition, deceit and bribery were associated with higher rates of sexual solicitation, which in turn increased abusive sexual interactions. Understanding strategies used by adults to groom minors contributes to the prevention of and intervention in this crucial societal problem.

1. Introduction

In recent years, concerns about the occurrence and consequences of online sexual grooming of minors has grown considerably both socially and academically (Burton et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2016; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013). Online grooming of a child or adolescent is the process by which an adult through information and communication technologies gains access to and the confidence of a minor in order to maintain some sort of sexual interaction with the minor, either online, offline, or both (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; Gámez-Guadix, Borrajo, & Almendros, 2016; Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014; Smith, Thompson, & Davidson, 2014; Webster et al., 2012). This process may include a wide range of modalities, from conversations about explicit sexual content, to online sex games (e.g., via a webcam) to sexual abuse face-to-face (Kloess et al., 2014). Online grooming usually includes online sexual solicitation made by the adult to engage in sexual talk, sexual activities, or to obtain personal sexual information from the minor (Burton et al., 2016; De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017a; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007; Whittle et al., 2013). Sexual solicitations and interactions of minors with adults increase the likelihood of negative consequences for the victims, such as depressive symptoms or posttraumatic stress disorder (e.g., Ybarra, Leaf, & Diener-West, 2004).

The behaviors through which the adult develops a trusting relationship online with the adolescent to achieve his or her sexual compliance have scarcely been investigated to date (DeMarco et al., 2016). Luring communication strategies have been reported

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among male child sexual abusers in engaging their potential victims into a sexual relationship (Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007). Much of this knowledge is based on sex offenders' disclosures about their behavior directed to gaining access, isolating, and ultimately entrapping the minor into accepting sexual interactions (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011; Campbell, 2009; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). The subtle communication strategies used to foster relationship-building and trust developing enhances the probability of the victim lacking awareness and recognition that anything out of the ordinary that differs from a general online relationship forming is taking place (Kloess et al., 2014; Lang & Frenzel, 1988; Olson et al., 2007).

To date, little is known about the pathways from online to offline sexual offending of minors (DeMarco et al., 2016). Though several tactics have been reported among perpetrators to obtain behavior and attitude changes that increase the probability of victim assent with the adult sexual solicitations, ultimately deriving to sexual interactions, little of this has been framed within the social influence literature. To explore this further, we turn to Cialdini's (1984) six principles of influence, as they may be present in preparatory stages preceding sexual exploitation, as well as during and after exploitation to maintain and prevent disclosure of the abusive relationship.

1.1. Principles of influence in grooming situations

Cialdini (2009) pointed out that there are six universal principles of social persuasion: reciprocity, commitment and consistency, authority, social validation (also called social proof), scarcity, and likability. These principles are used as heuristic cues or cognitive shortcuts for decision making when evaluating messages and determining whether to comply with a request (Guadagno, Muscanell, Rice, & Roberts, 2013).

Reciprocity is based on the feeling of obligation to give back what is received from others (Cialdini, 2009, 2016). The use of attention, favors, and affection by child sex offenders has been widely reported in the offline world (e.g., Craven et al., 2006; Lang & Frenzel, 1988), which may make it more probable that the minor would comply with subsequent requests.

Commitment and Consistency play on the tendency to be consistent with prior commitments. The adolescent's tendency to exhibit consistency with prior actions may form the basis for ongoing, escalating activities suggested by the online sex offender. Initial requests might be for the adolescent's daily life images (e.g., adolescent's face; adolescent on holiday) before moving on to requests for sexually explicit material (O'Connell, 2003).

The *authority* principle relies on the tendency of people to rely on authority figures to guide their decisions, especially when under uncertain situations (Cialdini, 2009). Being perceived as trustworthy seems essential in the grooming process (e.g., Craven et al., 2006; Olson et al., 2007). Online sex offenders may use direct or indirect cues that signal status and expertise to increase their influence, even offering to mentor, teach or guide the adolescent to a greater understanding of his or her own sexuality (O'Connell, 2003).

Social proof relies on the actions of others to guide one's own behavior (Cialdini, 2009). In the child and adolescent abuse literature, evidence has been provided of offenders using this principle of influence, by attempting to demonstrate how many others, especially the minor's peers, have done the thing they are asking him or her to do (Lang & Frenzel, 1988).

The principle of *scarcity* is based on the value provided to items perceived as less available, rare, or uncommon (Cialdini, 2009). The use of the principle of scarcity by child sex offenders is probably about the most mentioned in the literature, from descriptions of the supposedly "secret," "exclusive," and/or "unique" adolescent-offender relationship (Craven et al., 2006; Kloess et al., 2014; Lang & Frenzel, 1988; Olson et al., 2007; O'Connell, 2003). The threat of loss of the "special relationship" they share may interfere with the adolescent's ability to disclose, look for protection, or end the relationship (Craven et al., 2006).

The *liking* principle relies on people's tendency to favor those who they know and like and their proneness to like those who are similar to themselves (Cialdini, 2009). A "friendship-forming" initial stage has been proposed as characterizing online sexual exploitation (O'Connell, 2003), and related contents have been found to predominate in pedophile online communications (Gupta, Kumaraguru, & Sureka, 2012). Learning about the adolescent's life and becoming knowledgeable about his or her existing preferences build a common ground among the offender and the adolescent that would inform subsequent persuasion attempts. Attempts to highlight similarities have been reported, such as verbal familiarity, pretending to share interests and hobbies, and engaging in activities preferred by the adolescent (Campbell, 2009; Kloess et al., 2014). More importantly, the influence agent's demonstrations of apparently genuinely liking and caring for the persuasion target would be the most influential mechanism of the liking principle (Cialdini, 2016). Offenders showing affection, caring, and understanding of what the adolescent is going through has been widely reported (Campbell, 2009; Olson et al., 2007; O'Connell, 2003).

There is increasing evidence of the effectiveness of these principles of persuasion in online settings (e.g., Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005, 2007; Guadagno et al., 2013; Muscanell, Guadagno, & Murphy, 2014). However, to date no study has examined their role in grooming.

1.2. Mediating variables between the principles of influence and sexual solicitations and interactions

Different variables may mediate the relationship between persuasion strategies used by the adult and the sexual solicitation and interactions that characterize online adolescent grooming. Specifically, based on previous literature, we propose that the persuasive appeals may increase the likelihood of a progressive involvement of minors with adults, and the successful employment of deception and bribery, which, in turn, could increase the likelihood of sexual solicitation and interactions.

One of the strategies most commonly used by offenders is deception (Bergen et al., 2014). Previous studies have estimated that up to 50% of the adults deceived minors about their identity, for example, lying about themselves, passing off fake photos of other

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