Progression, maintenance, and feedback of online child sexual grooming: A qualitative analysis of online predators

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ABSTRACT

The limited literature on online child grooming has focused mainly on studying the characteristics of perpetrators and victims that facilitate the sexual abuse of minors. Little attention has been given to the perceptions of the perpetrators about the abuse process and the strategies used to sustain it over time. In the present study, after identifying a sample of 12 men convicted of online grooming, we used qualitative grounded theory through in-depth interviews and comparisons with the proven facts of their convictions. The results show how aggressors actively study the structural environment, the needs and vulnerabilities of the minors). In this way, the aggressors adapt by using most effective strategies of persuasion at all times, so that the child feels like an active part of the plot. This allows the aggressors to have sexual interactions with minors either online or offline and in a sporadic or sustained manner. This process is maintained with some distorted perceptions about minors and the abuse process, which seem to feed back to the beginning of the cycle with other potential victims. The interaction between the persuasive processes and the distorted perceptions of the aggressor leads to a potential work focus for treatment as well as detection and prevention. Trying to visualize the complexity of the phenomenon could also help researchers to understand processes from this approach that may be applied with other types of vulnerable populations.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have revealed a worrisome increase in complaints of sexual solicitation and exploitation of children through the Internet (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, & Collings, 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). Originally, interest in sexual exploitation was more focused on the field of production, use, and distribution of child pornography, with limited studies on online grooming to date (Whittle et al., 2013). *Online grooming* is the process by which an adult, using the means offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), enters into the dynamic of persuading and victimizing a child sexually, both physically and through the Internet, by performance or obtaining sexual material from the minor (Kloess et al., 2014; Mcalinden, 2006).

ICTs enable issues such as greater accessibility to children who participate in a normalized way in the virtual environment (Gámez-Guadix, De Santisteban, & Alcazar, 2017b; Gámez-Guadix, De Santisteban, & Resett, 2017a; Gámez-Guadix & Gini, 2016;

Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Quayle & Cooper, 2015). Motivated adults see increased opportunities for interaction with minors as well as the ability to operate in multiple scenarios and with different potential victims at the same time (Quayle, Allegro, Hutton, Sheath, & Lööf, 2014; Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017). Likewise, elements such as anonymity and the ability to operate from a distance are significant factors that enable perpetrators to overstep habitual limits of social control, favoring abusive behaviors (Garaigordobil, 2011; Smith, 2012; Suler et al., 2004). Studies have found that most offenders have abused several victims (Bergen, 2014; Winters et al., 2017). Little is known, however, about how this cycle of grooming progresses and is maintained throughout several cycles of abuse with different victims (Winters et al., 2017).

Most studies show a greater sexual victimization online among girls, followed by victims who are either gay minors or have a poorly defined sexual identity; victimization is most common among minors between 13 and 17 years of age (Winters et al., 2017; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013; Wolak et al., 2010). Associated behaviors also include contact with strangers over the Internet or using chat-rooms (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007b; Wolak et al., 2010). The existence of vulnerabilities in the minors, such as the need for affection and attention, the existence of depressive states, or early traumatization (e.g., having suffered sexual or physical abuse) seem to be related to a greater probability of victimization by online grooming (Mitchell et al., 2007b; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2015; Wolak et al., 2010).

Apart from elements favored by ICTs and variables related to online predators and victims, little is known about the processes of persuasion that are developed during online grooming (Whittle et al., 2013; Quayle et al., 2014). There are studies, however, regarding the tactics of persuasion in processes of offline grooming that can provide us with valuable information to understand the tactics of online grooming (e.g., Gallagher, 2000; Mcalinden, 2006; Ost, 2002; Salter, 2003). For example, Mcalinden (2006) makes a classification of the different strategies of offline grooming. Specifically, "personal grooming" refers to strategies that adults use to make their contact legitimate and to gain power over children, such as knowing their interests and building a special rapport by giving them gifts (e.g., comics, sweets, etc.). The "familial grooming" is about preparing the child's parents or caregivers by establishing a friendship with them, to ensure trust, gain cooperation in accessing the child, and reduce the likelihood of discovery. Finally, McAlinden points to "institutional grooming," which is the strategy of using one's own job or professional situation as a means of abusing the children with whom they work. At the same time, one of the issues that is well-known regarding offline grooming is that the aggressors are usually people of the child's own family environment or close acquaintances (Grubin, 1998). Mcalinden (2006) pointed out that contact via Internet or via ICTs is a way in which aggressors can get to know children and stop being "strangers" to them. In this case, the time spent engaging with minors varies between studies (Whittle et al., 2013). According to Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen (2011), if the goal is to meet the child offline, "contact-driven" offenders typically spend less than a week in online engagement before arranging to meet. This is consistent with other studies showing that some abusers spend little time trying to engage with minors (Winters et al., 2017). On the other hand, "fantasy-driven" offenders were found to communicate online with victims for an average of 32.9 days, with the maximum relationship examined in that study lasting 180 days (Briggs et al., 2011). This is in agreement with other studies showing that some abusers expend considerable effort and time in engaging with minors (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004).

When identifying relevant elements in the perpetration of online grooming, Quayle and Taylor (2003) used a qualitative approach to analyze the model of problematic Internet use in people with a sexual interest in children. Their study established relationships between elements of ICTs and the role of cognition in men convicted of downloading child pornography as a part of their offense. The results showed that the perpetrators' cognition about themselves and about the minors or the pornographic material about the minors influenced the development of the problematic use of the Internet in adults with a sexual interest in children. In another study with offenders convicted of online grooming in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Norway, Webster et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of the distortions of thoughts fed by interactions in forums for people with a sexual interest in minors. In this study, the authors emphasized that the adults' beliefs of minimization of harm were maintained when there was no direct contact with the children or when there were no signs of resistance of the children in the pornographic material (Webster et al., 2012). In addition, the offenders exhibited other characteristics that complicated accountability, such as undercontrol of impulses or feelings of addiction to the Internet (Webster et al., 2012).

Additionally, O'Connell (2003) suggested a model of the online grooming process based on sequentially organized stages. The analysis came from conversations between a researcher posing as a decoy between 8 and 12 years old and potential sexual offenders. The study suggested a progression between stages when starting and maintaining the relationship, with different persuasive elements typical of each of the five stages: the friendship forming stage, the relationship forming stage, the risk assessment stage, the exclusivity stage, and the sexual stage. However, later studies have examined the progression developed by O'Connell (2003), and have revealed inconsistencies that reflect the non-linearity and universality of the elements of the model (Williams, Elliott, & Beech, 2013; Black, Wollis, Woodworth, & Hancock, 2015). In the work of Black, Wollis et al. (2015), a computerized content analysis was performed on transcripts of convicted online offenders to analyze the type of language used in the different stages proposed by O'Connell (2003) and to examine the frequency of specific persuasion techniques used in grooming both online and offline. Assessing the target´s location and attempting to make plans to meet, using flattery and compliments, and assessing for the target´s parent´s work schedule were techniques used most often. The main limitation of the study by Black et al. (2015) is that the analysis was not conducted on conversations with real minors, but with volunteers trained by the Pervert Justice Foundation (PJF), a nonprofit organization committed to catching and exposing online sexual offenders in the United States.

Several studies have focused on analyzing elements that have generated an online predator's interest in a particular victim at the beginning of the grooming process (Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007). For example, Malesky (2007) highlighted elements such as a minor mentioning sex in any fashion online, a child online who appeared "needy" or "submissive," and the minor's screen name, especially if the name was "young sounding." All participants in this study were recruited from the Prision´s Sex Offender Treatment

Program (SOTP), which has selective screening criteria that exclude highly antisocial and psychopathic individuals (Malesky, 2007). In the study by Marcum (2007), the manipulation of minors was emphasized to encourage them to become actively involved in sexual activities either online or offline, giving an appearance of freedom of choice. The study raised issues such as offenders asking the children about their previous sexual experiences, or graphically describing the type of sexual activities they would like to have with the children, as well as discussing with the child the inappropriate behavior of the relationship between the adult and the child. One limitation the author noted was that he only analyzed communications between female adolescents and male adults (Marcum, 2007).

In a study by Kloess, Hamilton-Giachritsis, and Beech, (2017) of transcripts of conversations of five offenders with their victims, the researchers found that some offenders established more indirect and elaborated strategies for building relationships with minors. On the other hand, some offenders used very direct language, making clear their interest in sex from the beginning (Kloess et al., 2017). Other studies have noted the use of more direct strategies by the offenders when they were related to decoys posing as boys, compared to more indirect strategies when they related to decoys posing as girls (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). A research by Lorenzo-Dus and Izura (2017) using transcripts from the Perverted Justice website found that offenders used compliments to indirectly introduce sexual topics, playing with nonsexual and sexual conversations to develop a closer rapport. The most widely used compliments were about sexual physical appearance and nonsexual physical appearance (which prevalence increases in relation to online grooming speed), followed by personality compliments (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017). In addition, Quayle et al. (2014) established an interesting model on the online predators' acquisition of the ability to use Internet media and develop grooming processes. They illustrated a behavioral progression in the predators' use of the Internet as a space in which they targeted minors, starting with a discussion of the choice of different media (e.g., social networks, chats, text messages) and elements of gaining access to minors, such as targeting many potential victims at the same time. As for targeting minors, predators searched for potentially vulnerable or sexually curious targets and apparently adapted to the affective needs of minors (Quayle et al., 2014). Another element highlighted in the study was identity; most online predators pretended to be considerably younger than they actually were across a number of areas, such as name, physical appearance, and interests. The researchers emphasized how, in the discourse of the online predators, there were elements of justification by the predators and blame of the victims in the abuse (e.g., speaking of the initiative of the minors in the process, or of their sexual debauchery), similar to findings in other works (Malesky, 2007; Whittle et al., 2015).

In a study by Whittle et al. (2015), in which three victims and their offenders were interviewed, inconsistencies were identified in the perceptions and accounts of the abusive situation. The offenders blamed the victims for initiating sexual interactions, while the victims commented that since the beginning of the talks they were trying to talk about sexual topics. It was observed in all victims' states of vulnerability and descriptions of loving feelings toward the offender, identifying abuse as a loving relationship (Whittle et al., 2015). Winters et al. (2017) analyzed transcripts from the Perverted Justice website and found that 89% of offenders introduced sexual content in their first conversations with the decoy victim. Also, most of the offenders, as well as in other research, tried to talk on the phone with the victims and to organize meetings (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016; Winters et al., 2017). In another study with online sexual offenders, De Santisteban and Gámez-Guadix (2017) established a model of how offenders use strategies to actively involve minors in the process of online grooming and, thus, avoid disclosure. The most used strategies were deception, corruption, and the emotional involvement of the child. In the same vein, Villacampa and Gómez (2017), in research with a sample of secondary school students between the ages of 14 and 18, found that the strategies utilized by online offenders did not tend to include deceit, violence, or intimidation. In relation to reporting and ending the situation, when an adult asked the child to perform sexual behavior that they did not want to, the disclosure of the situation rose to 84% (most to friends). Likewise, most of the children said that the conversations end with them blocking the adult (Villacampa & Gómez, 2017). Similarly, Kloess et al. (2017) determined that most contacts were terminated by the victims, after refusing to have unwanted sexual contacts with the offenders (e.g., via webcam). The victims simply stopped responding or said they could not speak at that time, or were annoyed at the pressure and ended the conversation (Kloess et al., 2017).

One important limitation in many of the qualitative studies is that online predators arrested and studied had targeted victims who were undercover investigators, trained volunteers, or undercover researchers posing as youth (Black et al., 2015; Marcum, 2007; O'Connell (2003)), rather than real minors. In spite of being very valuable examples, the processes of interaction could vary with respect to what takes place in online grooming with real minors. Likewise, in most studies with both real and simulated victims, all or most of the victims are female (Katz, 2013; Leander, Christianson, & Granhag, 2008; Marcum, 2007; O'Connell (2003)), which is limiting since the type of conversations or deception techniques could differ by gender (Marcum, 2007). On the other hand, most qualitative studies of online predators are focused only on the offenders' perceptions without information about their sentences (Quayle et al., 2014), which would include important information to complement that obtained from the offenders. Finally, the studies with direct participation of aggressors included prisoners who had completed treatment programs for sex offenders or individual therapy, which could give us limited information about the phenomenon (Malesky, 2007; Quayle et al., 2014). Programs have selective screening criteria that exclude highly antisocial and psychopathic individuals or include individuals with a greater motivation for change, so the studies may be missing a valuable part of the sample (Malesky, 2007).

1.1. Aim of the study

The present study aims to broaden the literature regarding adults convicted of online grooming who have had contact with real minors; the study will utilize an in-depth qualitative analysis of the accounts of offenders. The main objective is to explore the online grooming process and the perspectives of the aggressors as to the victims and the abuse, in order to identify elements that facilitate or maintain the grooming process. To this end, the sample includes inmates from treatment programs for offenders, convicts who openly refused to cooperate with the penitentiary system or to complete such programs, and those who had not had any other type of

Table 1
Offenders and victim characteristics.

Participants	Age	Country of participants	Educational level of participants	Number of victims	Age of victims	Gender of victims	Duration of the offense	Individual Treatment	PCAS	Conviction time served until now
1.NM	51	Spain	Bachelor's degree	2	12	Female	4 years	No	No	5 years, 2 months
2.NJ	27	Spain	Middle school	1	12	Male	4 months	No	Yes	2 years
3.MV	24	Spain	High school	2	15	Male	Days/ 2 months	Yes	No	4 years, 4 months
4.MJ	31	Spain	Middle school	2	13,14	Female	2.5/3.5 years	Yes	Yes	6 years, 3 months
5.VG	43	Perú	Elementary school	2	9,9,11	Female	Days	No	No	5 years, 9 months
6.EA	51	Spain	High school	3	14,15,16	Female	1 / 4 months	No	No	5 years, 2 months
7.SJ	39	Spain	Middle school	4	12,12,13,14	Female	Days/ 8 months	No	Yes	6 years, 1 month
8.CM	44	Spain	High school	1	14	Female	2 years	No	Expelled	7 years, 7 months
9.OA	21	Colombia	Middle school	2	13,14	Male	Days/ 2 years	Yes	No	3 years, 8 months
10.NP	39	Spain	Technical school	1	12	Female	7 months	No	No	7 months
11.NC	48	Spain	Middle school	1	12	Male	3 months	No	No	2 years, 6 months
12.ND	42	Spain	Technical school	1	11	Female	2 months	No	No	2 months

Note. PCAS (Program for the Control of Sexual Assault).

individual therapy. In addition to the aggressors' perspectives, the study includes information extracted from the proven criminal facts of their sentences, which provides relevant information to complement and contrast with the information provided by the offenders.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 12 male convicts in Spanish prisons, who had perpetrated contact sex offenses against minors who were under 16, including 11 females and 6 males, whom they had met or communicated with over the Internet. Of the 12 participants, 10 were Spanish, and two came from Latin American countries. Participants ranged from 21 to 51 years of age ($M = 38$, $SD = 10.32$). Four participants had attended the Program for the Control of Sexual Assault (PCAS), although one did not complete it because he had been expelled before the program ended. Of the remaining eight, two offenders had also received individualized treatment, while six of them had not received any psychological treatment. The time interval between date of first contact and date of last contact between the victims and the perpetrators ranged from 1 day to 4 years. These data and other information (e.g., the educational level of the participants, the portion of sentence completed up to the date of the interview, the number of victims of each aggressor, and the gender and age of the victims) are shown in Table 1.

2.2. Procedure

We searched for convicts who committed sexual crimes on minors in which sustained contact through the Internet appeared in several regions of central Spain. Data were collected between August 2015 and December 2016. We contacted 11 prisons and three Social Integration Centers (CIS) that housed offenders serving in open prisons or in an advanced process of reintegration and provided probation or alternative measures, such as working for the benefit of the community. Two of the prisons were for women, nine prisons were for men, and the three CIS were mixed gender. We identified no woman imprisoned for the targeted type of crime, but 12 men convicted of such crimes were identified.

The Autonomous University of Madrid's Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the study. After obtaining permission from the penal institutions, we signed an ethical protocol of action and we were given the contact with the directors of each Penitentiary Center. Subsequently, the deputy directors contacted the inmates, making clear at all times the voluntary nature of their participation and that the study was carried out by the Autonomous University. In order to give immate complete freedom to decide on their participation in the study, the prisoners were told that the study was completely independent of the penitentiary system. All contacts with inmates were conducted by a psychologist with experience in treatment programs for sex offenders in prison (the first author). The initial interviews were conducted to make a first contact with the inmates, ask them to participate, and to rule out cases that did not meet the requirements of online grooming. An ad hoc protocol was developed with the help of a prison psychologist to get as much participation from inmates as possible because of our special interest in including inmates who were particularly reluctant to cooperate or who had refused to complete the PCAS. A basic outline was drawn up on subjects of possible interest to the offender (e.g., time of conviction, permissions enjoyed, changes of module, activities carried out in the center). In this first interview we worked on the motivation of the participant, making evident the understanding of the researcher toward the convict's personal situation. All parties tried to manage offering a space of interest, respect, and nonjudgment. The inmates were told that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to, and that they could end the interview at any time they wanted to. Subsequently, each inmate was asked to consent to an in-depth interview, and was assured of the confidentiality of the information collected. Finally, the inmate was asked to go to the interview with an assistant to transcribe the entire interview verbatim—as criminal institutions did not allow us to record—and was asked to grant the researchers permission to access his folder of prison material that was guarded by the center. We assured them that the information would be exclusively used for the present study and presented without names. Three signed copies of informed consent were completed: one for the inmate, one for the investigator, and one for the prison.

We sought the consent of the sexual offenders and scheduled the interviews. All 12 men gave informed consent to participate in the study. Then, we carried out the in-depth interviews, which lasted about 100 minutes on average, and ranged between 90 and 120 minutes in length. We also collected aditional information from the proven facts arising from the trial. These facts included behaviors and specific crimes that the trial judge considered proven from the analysis of all information arising from the judicial procedure (such as police reports, confiscated material, and the testimonies of accused, victims, witnesses, and experts, etc.). All identifying data were eliminated in the transcriptions, and names were changed to numbers followed by unrelated capital letters to protect inmates' identities. The facts declared proven in the sentence of each participant were codified with their capital letters followed by the label "facts of sentence."

2.3. Analysis

Within the qualitative approach, grounded theory was chosen as the theoretical framework. It is an inductive theory because it arises from the data, but it is also deductive in the analysis of the data and redirecting the consequent actions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory, therefore, highlights its development in the form of a simultaneous process of collection, coding, and analysis until saturation occurs (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The new theory that emerges contrasts with previous literature and its

explanations fit a specific field, but attribute interpretive wealth and new perspectives on the phenomenon studied (Sampieri, Fernández, & Baptista, 2014). Within grounded theory, we chose the constructivist design (Charmaz, 2006), which allowed us to consider openly the perspectives, experiences, beliefs, feelings, and meanings of the people under study (Sampieri et al., 2014).

We began by analyzing the transcripts sequentially, where the first interview served us to explore emerging categories and to apply them during the remaining data collection. Constant comparisons—initially of data with data, progressing to comparisons between cathegories and more data, and then between categories and their relationships—were made at different levels of analysis. The data obtained were again contrasted with the initial data, to refine their definitions and properties. This process was carried out with both interviews and proven facts to create categories for the emergence of the theory. The memos that emerged in the analysis enriched the reflexivity and helped in the interpretation of the data.

First, to guarantee internal and external validity, we carried out consistency checks, providing to another coder the descriptions of the categories so that he could find the segments belonging to each category in the text. Subsequently, through a group of experts, we used triangulation as a strategy to guarantee validity; after a distribution of all interviews, each interview transcript had to be analyzed by at least two researchers. The final step in the triangulation between data was the analysis of the penitentiary material of the participants. As with the interviews, this analysis was carried out by providing another coder with the descriptions of the categories so that the coder could find segments belonging to the same categories in the text.

3. Results

The analysis of the interviews showed a progression in the process of online grooming, which began with the aggressors' perceptions of the Internet as a facilitator environment in which to interact with minors. We observed how the offenders initiated persuasion in the early contacts with potential victims, analyzed their vulnerabilities, and deployed strategies adapted to the needs of the children to get the children involved in the abuse. The resulting sexual encounters between adults and minors can be both sporadic and sustained over time. The experience of abuse with minors progressively shapes how the aggressors interpret and justify the events occurring, which seems to play an essential part in the maintenance of online grooming with those minors and the beginning of successive cycles of online grooming with different minors.

Fig. 1 shows the model of the grooming cycle that emerged from the interview analysis. Its elements are detailed as follows.

3.1. Perception of the internet as a facilitator environment

One element of the grooming cycle is how aggressors perceive the Internet as a place where they can express themselves openly and with fewer difficulties while they are acquiring expertise and actively participating:

"It may be harder to find same-sex partners. I do not know…but with the arrival of the Internet everything changed." (3.MV)
"I discovered that I was successful on the Internet. I'm very good at writing; I excited them…." (4.MJ)

3.2. Gaining access

Initially, the offenders tried to contact multiple victims at the same time, to multiply their possibilities of gaining access to minors

" I had a profile with hundreds of contacts. I do not know how but I controlled them all." (3.MV)
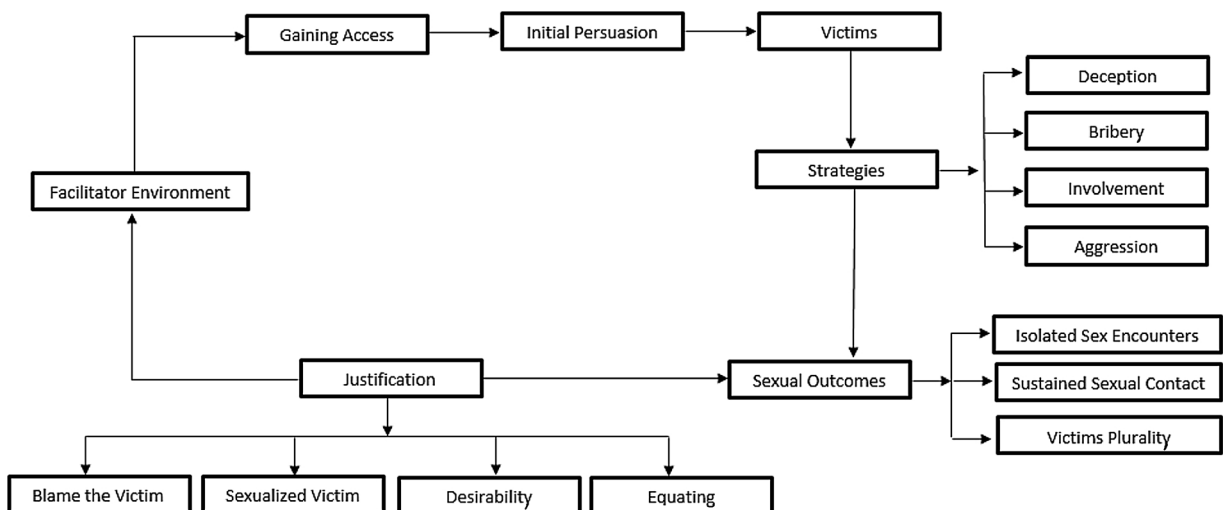

Fig. 1. Cycle of Abuse in Online Child Grooming.

"I used all the networks: badoo, tuenti, facebook … I had prepared phrases, I opened 100 windows and had cut and paste." (4. MJ)

3.3. Initial persuasion

Although persuasion persists throughout the online grooming process, it begins with maneuvers that facilitate the initiation of contact with potential victims. We can observe how the aggressors, while taking advantage of different scenarios from which to act, use strategies to initiate contact with the children and get them involved. For example, offenders adapt their language or talk about certain topics of interest:

"I added them to Messenger, always with fake profiles, and just talked. I pretended to look a little silly; I felt if they liked to try." (3.MV)
"If there was a girl who had stated an age that I liked…I used that age to get in." (1.NM)
"Using the language of adolescents, I introduced myself in the virtual communities of the Internet, and especially by video channels used by minors, for sexual purposes." (NM, facts of sentence)

Some of the offenders adapted aspects of their identity, such as decreasing their stated ages:

"[Offender] told him that he was 30 years old, but later [victim] recognized that he was 40." (10.NP, facts of sentence)

Another more elaborate offender tactic was to invent an identity more desirable to the tastes of the minors, which they would use to draw and sustain the attention of the minors:

"[I was] posing as a person associated with show business, appearing to be a representative or president of a fan club of a musical group or a successful television series, and using fictitious names." (4.MJ, facts of sentence)

In many cases, the offenders had even stolen other children's identities, to look more relatable and realistic to the victims:

"I introduced myself with a false profile; it was Dani, who was dark-haired and young." "I had created a character that was often used." "The photos that I sent were from another webpage of a boy; I took the photos from his profile, and I put them in my profile." (7.SJ)

After having initiated the contact and maintaining the attention of the minors, the adults begin to focus on studying the victims and their environment.

3.4. Victims and environment

Once adults engaged in conversations with children, the adults became interested in the structural elements of children's daily lives, such as schedules, activities, or available caregivers:

"[We connected] on weekends also because it was when she was with her father. Her mother did not let her connect so much." "Her parents knew nothing." (1.NM)
"She did not go to high school, the father ignored the two daughters." (8.CM)

The interviews highlighted how adults knew important details about conflicts of the family situation of the children:

"I believe that her mother could have suffered maltreatment from her husband, and her father and a brother were in prison." (10.NP)
"Her parents divorced when she was 2 years old. Her father went to another city." (1.NM)
"Recently, after the separation of her parents, she lived with her father. She did not attend school once she was twelve or thirteen years old, and she spent many hours alone at home." (8.CM. facts of sentence)

In the same way, the offenders were interested in knowing things that were lacking in the family system and needs of minors that were not covered:

"He told me that his parents were unemployed and did not have [money] to buy clothes. It attracted my attention—the way he dressed. His shoes were [worn out]." (2.NJ)
"[The offender] looked for unstructured families with economic problems, as he thought that. . . [the minors] would work for less money, and the [financial] need would make them not abandon [the offender]." (6.EA. facts of sentence)

Likewise, researchers observed that the offenders were aware of direct elements of vulnerability in victims, such as present or past maltreatment or neglect:

"You could see that she was asking for help. I went with her to the municipal council of the city. Her [concern] was that her father mistreated her psychologically and physically." (8.CM)
"I noticed it was late, and I did not have to be home. [The minor] told me 'my parents do not care what I do.'" (2.NJ)
"The girl said that when she was 9 or 10 years old, a caregiver had abused her and raped her." (10.NP)

Finally, the offenders often alluded to psychological problems in minors:

"[The girl] had gone to a psychologist since 1985 and. . . thought [she] looked fat. Her mother also went to the psychologist because she was crazy." (1.NM)

"She had problems with bulimia and drugs, and she called me to vent." (10.NP)

3.5. Strategies

As a result of this detailed knowledge of the vulnerabilities of minors and the particularities of their environment, the data showed that the aggressors developed different persuasive strategies that were adapted to the needs of the children; with these strategies, the offenders tried to involve the minors actively in the abuse process. We found four strategies: deception, bribery, involvement and aggression.

Deception. The deceit strategies that we found go beyond the mere concealment of intentions, and appear to have different degrees of elaboration. In some cases, the deception was maintained and increased to sustain and enhance the false identity created from the initial persuasion:

"I downloaded a program [to make] a video with a girl. I would [use] the camera and looked at the part where she showed [her] ass when we talked. She could do whatever [was] asked for." "She would stand up, she would lower her thong, even masturbate." "I took pictures of a similar girl for MSN." (3.MV)

"We also talked on the phone, and I had a friend who knew what to say. I gave them her number and she had her role studied." (3.MV)

In other cases, pretexts were introduced to obtain the involvement of minors, or parallel stories were created, involving several real or fictional characters, to give credibility to the lies:

"I told them it's a lie, that I'm from an Eastern country, and I want to see them having sex with an adult. I told them that my gang has [hacked] their computers and I sent them a photo of their contacts. I told them that if they do not agree, everybody will see everything." (4.MJ)

"From an e-mail account, [the offender] pretended to be an astrologer, who [made] predictions [that] advised her repeatedly not to end the relationship [with the offender] and told her that if she left him, she was going to sink." (1.NM, facts of sentence)

Bribery. The bribery strategies found in the cases studied were related to the offenders offering goods to minors. In several cases, money was offered explicitly in exchange for sex, modeling, or acting jobs, or gifts:

"It was money—20, 30, 40 €–it depended. I told them before [we] arranged to meet." (3.MV)

"[The offender] used the pretext that he could get VIP passes for concerts, or that he could get them into a [television] series. He could get the girls to send him naked pictures or pictures [of the girls] undressing through the webcam." (4.MJ, facts of sentence).

"He proposed making a book of photos and including them on the website that [the offender] had [for] his business, in which [the girls] appeared as aspiring actresses or models, [and he] promised to even [publish] them to different media [outlets] to make the [photos] public." (6.EA, facts of sentence)

"When I left the cinema, I invited [the child] to have a snack and bought him a cell phone, and [the child] said he liked it." (2.NJ)

Involvement. Involvement strategies were focused on how the aggressors tried to get the affective involvement of the children in the abusive relationships by behaving as if the relationships were free and equitable There are a number of categories of involvement, such as investment of time and dedication:

"We talked every day, [and I] often did not even sleep because of the time difference between Spain and Colombia. I went there." "He told me that I was his only love, that he had never [experienced] a similar thing." (9.OA)

"It was a two-day relationship on the Internet and over the phone. Yes, we talked a lot." "[The child] started talking about having problems, and told me she was overwhelmed, and I said, 'You want us to talk on the phone?' [and] I gave her my telephone number." (8.CM)

The strategies progressed; from the beginning with simpler requests about the involvement of the child, to requests which increased over time:

"When we [decided] that we were going to be engaged, we would send [each other] sexual photos." (9.OA)

"The webcam was used over time. I also had exchanged photos." "I asked her [to exchange photos], she accepted." "The first ones are normal. The others were more sexual. I encouraged her to send me something more sexual." "Since I had confidence, I asked her [to send me something sexual], and she accepted. At first, [the solicitations] were more subtle." (7.SJ)

Finally, the offender used different modes of positioning (e.g., as a friend, caregiver, and partner) toward the child, probably in an attempt to adapt to the child's previously studied affective needs:

"I was positioned as all the options, as a friend, for what arose, [to be a] support…." (2.NJ)

"[The child] asked me about [my] job and I asked [the child] about [his] studies. I supported him in [his] studies, I told him not to be truant. We talked a lot on the phone." "[I could see it] on his face; it was clear that what I said had helped him, that no one [else] gave him advice." (2.NJ)

"[The offender] helped her with her physics and chemistry problems or helped her with English. It was a friendly relationship." (1.NM)

Aggression. Sometimes we observed that the adult also used behaviors including harassment, intimidation, or coercion, either to be able to maintain the abusive relationship or to exact revenge when the minor would not submit to the offender's pretensions or would try to leave the relationship:

"I uploaded a picture of her naked in Tuenti. I had her password. . . I did not use it to get in, but in [my] anger, I tried to hurt her. I. . . removed [the picture] within a few minutes [before] even people from her family saw it." (7.SJ)
"[The offender] pretended to be different fictional characters, to confuse and frighten her, in order to continue maintaining the relationship with her." (1.NM, facts of sentence)

The offenders used these strategies to exert and maintain the abusive situations while trying to avoid the exposure of the abuse.

3.6. Sexual outcomes

With the strategies developed, adults achieved their purpose of having sexual relations with the children, both online (through exchange of photos or videos of sexual content) and offline (sexual encounters). These sexual contacts were both isolated and sustained, and may have been carried out with one or multiple victims.

Isolated sex encounters. Isolated encounters may be one or more specific sexual encounters between the online predator and his victim.

"[The offender] offered her 100 euros in exchange for [performing] fellatio. The minor agreed, and they stayed in a nearby waste ground, [where the offender] took her to an open field and [engaged in] fellatio." (3.MV, facts of sentence)
"He, at least once, got the girl to take off her clothes and show her genitals to the computer camera." (5.VG, facts of sentence)

Sustained sexual contact. Sustained sexual contact is a relational contact maintained over time and with greater affective involvement. The difference with respect to the isolated sexual encounters would be the greater emotional attachment of the minors to their aggressors.

"After deceiving [the offender], telling [him] that she was 35 years old and being so in love, the minor agreed to continue the relationship with the accused." (1.NM, facts of sentence)
"She [the victim] wanted more relationship, for both, sexual and partner" (4.MJ)

Plurality victims. According to the analysis, we found that most of the online predators interviewed (i.e., all but two) had contact with several victims at the same time or several victims at different times.

"In order to gain the confidence of the [minors], he posed as a child singer, then asked them to undress before the webcam of the computers and to show their genitals." (5.VG, facts of sentence)
"[The offender committed] six crimes of violation of privacy by capturing and recording the images and messages of minors." (7.SJ, facts of sentence)

Most of the perpetrators were arrested because of the victims' disclosure about the abuse, as well as the knowledge of relatives or friends who realized it casually. In some cases, however, it was a subsequent actual or potential victim who denounced it, which prevented the abuse process from continuing with existing victims or being carried out again with other victims.

"The day before the arrest, [the offender] went to the school and saw that there was a police car [there] with the girl's mother and sister [in it]." (10.NP)
"[The offender was not] able to convince the child under pressure that they had to record the video before the weekend…" (4.MJ, facts of sentence)

3.7. Cognitive distortion and justification

We found in the discourse of the aggressors a series of cognitive distortions and justifications regarding the victims and the abuse itself, arguing against the aggressors' accountability for the inappropriate behavior, which seem to favor and facilitate the grooming process.

Blame the victim. We observed how, in several of the cases, the adults said that they had been deceived by the minors on subjects like the minor's age or intentions:

"When I found out that she was going to actually turn 13, not 16, I did not expect it, but since I was in love, I forged ahead." (10.NP)
"I feel like an asshole, fooled by a girl. I should have known. I should not have let [myself get] carried away." (1.NM)

Sexualized victim. In most cases, we also observed how the adults deflected the responsibility for the sexual relationship, accusing the minor of an active and sexualized role including specifically sexual and provocative behaviors. It appeared as if, from that role they attributed to the child, that the child "deserved" to be abused by adults:

"She told [the offender] about relationships she had with boys, from previous relationships; she told me that she had a sexual intercourse with a boyfriend who had" "She was a tramp; she was in touch with everyone." (7.SJ)

"At the same time that she was with [the offender], she was with other adults. There were two that were controlled [by the police], then there were others who were younger." (2.NJ)

Desirability. In several cases, the adult tried to highlight his positive image, alleging good intentions or good treatment that he gave the child or how he took care of the child, in an attempt to minimize abuse:

"I was very affectionate. The first time we did it, I used petals and incense; we did not record it because it was her first time." (4.MJ)

"At the beginning of the relationship, I thought of helping her, altruistically" (8.CM)

"We could not consummate the relationship for two reasons: She was a virgin, and [having sex] hurt. That shocked me. After the first sexual [encounter], I called to see how she was. There was no penetration or aggression." (8.CM)

Equating. We also saw how, in several cases, adults explained how they tried to maintain an affectionate relationship with the children, as if the children were adults:

"We talked about maintaining the relationship, of having children…." (10.NP)

"I was not in love, but I felt upset that she had cheated on me. [It was] foolish of me—I came to think that we were a couple. We discussed why she left with [another] boy and that they kissed. She confessed. It doesn't go down well with me." (7.SJ)

"At that time, in a situation [where I] lived with economic problems, I sought love and someone who loved me; I wanted to give myself." "He [took] everything from me, but I did not [receive anything] from him." (9.OA)

Likewise, these forms of thinking seem to encourage the return to the same cycle of abuse; in the cases studied, that cycle ended with the arrest and imprisonment of the aggressors.

"If this had not happened to me, I would have sought a serious relationship with a minor." (2.NJ)

"When I tried to do it with the little ones in 2010, the mother found out. Then, I used the same strategy. The girl got scared and [reported] it in school." (4.MJ)

Finally, some differences were found between the inmates who had come to the PCAS program and those who did not, mainly in their attitudes toward the interviews. Those who had not participated in PCAS were more suspicious, distant, and reactive to particular questions. On the other hand, the inmates who had participated in the PCAS program presented greater fluidity and initial willingness to collaborate, as well as a more positive presentation of themselves.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore the online grooming process and the perspective of the aggressors toward the victims and the abuse, in order to identify elements that facilitated or maintained the abuse process. The main finding focuses on how the distorted perceptions of aggressors appear to maintain and feed a cyclical process of online grooming in combination with the complex persuasive structures the aggressors employ to achieve their goals. To better understand the process, we constructed a model from the perspective of the aggressor, which begins with the Internet as a facilitator environment in which to abuse. On the Internet, offenders attempted to gain access to a large number of potential victims at the same time, and then developed initial persuasion strategies to begin contact with children more easily. Subsequently, adults thoroughly study the children's environment and vulnerabilities, and then develop strategies adapted to the needs of the children in order to gain the children's involvement in the abuse. The resulting sexual encounters between the adult and the minor could be either isolated or maintained over time. Finally, the model highlights how the perpetrators interpret and justify the events, a process which seems to be an essential element in the aggressors' return to begin the process of online grooming.

The early phases of the model—"Internet as facilitator environment to abuse," "gaining access" and "initial persuasion"—are broadly in line with those in the previous literature (O'Connell, 2003; Quayle et al., 2014; Smith, 2012; Suler et al., 2004). The results reflect how online predators sought and took advantage of opportunities for interaction with minors and operated in multiple scenarios (e.g., chats, social networks, video conferencing) and with different potential victims at the same time (O'Connell, 2003; Quayle et al., 2014; Winters et al., 2017). Likewise, we observed how elements such as anonymity allowed the adults to establish certain strategies of persuasion to attract the attention of minors (Smith, 2012; Suler et al., 2004).

Regarding the study phase on the victim in our model, several previous studies talked about how the online predators tried to know the environments of the potential victims to learn the capacity of access to them (Black et al., 2015; Katz, 2013). In our study, we observed how situational factors (such as the schedules of children and their caregivers, the level of autonomy of minors on the Internet, etc.) provided useful information for abusers when crossing the usual barriers of social control and approaching minors. Other works showed how online predators tried to identify minors with affective needs in the early stages of contact, such as a child online who appeared needy or submissive (Malesky, 2007; Quayle et al., 2014). In our analysis, we observed how the adults, besides considering those situational factors and possible vulnerabilities of minors, seem to be deliberately involved in knowing in detail the children's specific problems, deficiencies, and vulnerabilities. The situations of vulnerability of the victims were known not only from the in-depth interviews, but also from some of the proven facts of the inmates, which appeared to detail the same elements that the aggresors already knew, such as the problems of family conflict or school absenteeism of their victims.

Once online predators got to know these needs of the minors, they adapted one or more strategies of persuasion in order to maximize their chances of success in sexual contact. The different strategies of persuasion developed during the process of online grooming had the function of actively involving the child so as to avoid disclosure. In addition, the adults provided a complex relational framework in which the children were immersed and, in many cases, the children had little capacity to become aware of the problem due to the function that the abusive relationship could serve for them. This can lead to the most vulnerable children being the least able to detect that they are being prepared for abuse; this aligns with findings of previous research, which has found that most attempts of online grooming are finalized by minors when they feel pressured to do something they do not want, especially in relation to sexual behavior (Kloess et al., 2017; Villacampa & Gómez, 2017).

The strategies of persuasion found throughout the process of online grooming correspond to a large extent with many of those strategies suggested in the previous literature (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Leander et al., 2008; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Katz, 2013; Quayle et al., 2014; Whittle et al., 2015; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016), although the data obtained provide rich information on the specific ways aggressors proceeded and their elaboration. For example, in the strategy of deception, the results highlight the creation of parallel stories and the involvement of different real or fictional characters or the use of audiovisual aids as false webcams to give credibility to lies. The bribery strategy highlights examples where free photo sessions were offered by adults that would help the minors in the process of finding work, or where the minors exposed their bodies to make themselves known and to be selected to act in a fashion television series.

Regarding outcomes, we found that the online predators we interviewed had sexual interactions with the minors, both online (e.g., through exchange of photos or videos of sexual content) and offline (e.g., sexual encounters), as reflected in previous research (Quayle et al., 2014; Whittle et al., 2015). We found that some victims had one or more specific contacts with their aggressors, while others maintained sustained sexual contact over time. Direct strategies, such as aggressors offering money in exchange for sex, may encourage more instrumental and timely relationships, as found in other research (Kloess et al., 2017; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). On the other hand, strategies that were more adapted to the needs of the minors may encourage a greater affective involvement of the children in the abusive relationship, as found in previous literature (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Whittle et al., 2015); this emotional engagement with the aggressor would facilitate the maintenance of the relationship over time. In addition, we found that most of the online predators we interviewed had contact with several victims at the same time, or several victims at different times (Bergen, 2014; Winters et al., 2017). This plurality of victims provides a greater basis for our thesis of the circularity of the model to which we refer, along with other elements, such as cognitive distortions.

The last element of the model reflects the distorted perceptions by the aggressors of the victims and the abuse exercised. The cognitive distortions and justifications we found (i.e., blame the victim, sexualized victim, desirability, and equating) seemed to serve the function of trying to relativize the crime and the damage caused to the victim. Within the approach proposed, some distortions seemed to be more specifically oriented to the victim's responsibility in the abuse, such as blame the victim and sexualized victim, which are more in line with those found in previous research (Quayle et al., 2014; Winters et al., 2017). On the other hand, the distortions within the desirability category seem to serve a function more related to the maintenance of a positive image of the aggressor, similar to strategies of minimization observed in previous research (Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Webster et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2015). Finally, the equating category showed a pattern of thinking that was particularly focused on lack of awareness about the inequity of the relationship between an adult and a minor, instead understanding as valid the construction of a couple relationship as if two adults were involved; this concept has not been reflected in previous literature. However, this is consistent with perceptions of minors who claim to be in love with offenders (Whittle et al., 2015). These findings may reflect that this moral justification on the part of the aggressors is used to manipulate children into a pseudo-romantic relationship. Future studies should explore the extent to which moral justifications are used by adults to groom children, in addition to justifying their acts to themselves. The identified cognitive distortions would facilitate the aggressor's return to the beginning of the online grooming process we propose in the model, with the return to the Internet as a facilitator environment in which to abuse and start again with the strategies of initial persuasion.

Another important issue from our model is the great dissonance that appears around the interaction between the cognitive distortions manifested by the aggressors and the persuasive strategies that they use throughout the process of online grooming. The complex persuasion structure used by many of the aggressors to achieve their goals is inconsistent with their perceptions of the victims and the abusive situation. If cognitive distortions were indeed valid interpretations for adults, such complex manipulation processes as those performed would not be necessary. In this sense, for example, sexualized minors who took the initiative in sexual interaction would quickly accept direct sexual solicitations. It would be interesting to have this interaction in mind when developing treatment programs adapted to online grooming, since currently those convicted of this type of offense are included in the programs for treatment of common sexual aggressors, from which also come the samples for the majority of previous studies (Malesky, 2007; Quayle et al., 2014). In addition, understanding the interaction between cognitive distortions that are generated against adult accountability, from the perspective of interaction with persuasion strategies, could open new fields of study on other types of vulnerable populations. Child abuse is a problem for which legislation provides specific and effective protection because of the legal rights it protects. However, in other cases with older and vulnerable people, it might be more difficult to recognize an abusive situation. It would be interesting to consider the findings of the research when formulating future lines of inquiry around relationships built in a framework of broad inequality (e.g., dependent or disabled people without economic resources, persons suffering from social exclusion or psychological problems).

Finally, inmates who had not participated in the PCAS program were somewhat more reluctant to give information than the inmates who did participate in the program. These nontreatment prisoners were more distant, and their distrustful attitudes caused greater difficulty in approaching and working with them, in accordance with Malesky (2007). In addition, the fact that the proven facts of these non-treatment prisoners coincided less with their interviews could be related to that they were more antisocial and

psychopathic individuals or had worse motivation for change (Malesky, 2007).

4.1. Limitations

First, the sample size was small, despite being suitable for the type of analysis chosen. The process of theoretical sampling could not be undertaken given the limited number of participants identified. It would be interesting to replicate the study with a larger sample size. Despite this, we believe that these 12 interviews, after adding the 12 documents on the proven facts, have allowed us to gather enough data to establish the parameters of all the categories and to explain their properties. We believe, therefore, that we have reached saturation since the information was repeated in successive interviews without providing new information on the categories. We think that the sample we used captures all elements of the theory that had emerged. On the other hand, in all cases of our study, the perpetrators had been arrested and convicted. This left out an important sample of unconvicted or unidentified aggressors to whom we have no access—a population which could provide valuable information on the cyclical pattern that we defend in our model.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study extends the scarce prior qualitative research by generating a tentative exploratory model of the process of online grooming. On the one hand, it provides relevant information on how online predators manage to introduce minors into the abuse process through different strategies. The fact that all participants have had sexual interactions with actual minors (as opposed to undercover investigators or other proxies) brings us closer to the knowledge of the dynamics of communication that are established. In addition, the distorted perceptions of the aggressors regarding the children and the abuse give us information on the mechanisms that could maintain the process of grooming. Also, the access to the proven facts in the inmates' cases allowed us to know the existence of multiplicity of victims, which encouraged us to work to develop actions adapted to the problem. The results of this study could be used to develop specific treatment programs with offenders exhibiting this criminal typology. In the same way, the results are important to keep in mind for the creation of prevention policies aimed at children, caregivers, and teachers. In this sense, it would be interesting to further examine the importance of situational factors (e.g., absence of parental supervision) and the interaction or these factors with individual factors (e.g., minors' depression symptoms) in ways that could expose minors to greater danger. Future studies should complete the information with the perspectives of children who have been involved in an online grooming process. In addition, it would be enormously interesting to be able to study the same case from the perspective of the aggressor, the victim, and the proven facts of the case.

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