

**An exploration of perceptions on online sexual grooming and solicitation in South
Africa among the youth in Pretoria.**

By

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Abstract

Several studies have shown that child sexual abuse cases worldwide, including in South Africa, are preceded by various sexual grooming tactics and solicitation (Harrison et al., 2018; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Sanderson, 2004; Winters et al., 2020b). Sexual grooming behaviours are challenging to detect as they resemble normative interactions between adults and children, highlighting the need for further research. The study used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore adolescents' perceptions of and experiences with online child sexual grooming. Social exchange theory served as the theoretical lens for analysing the data. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants with experience in child sexual grooming and solicitation. Eight in-depth individual interviews were conducted and analysed thematically.

Six themes were identified, these includes: understanding child sexual grooming, risks and vulnerability, grooming offender characteristics and grooming strategies, experience of being groomed and social support as a coping mechanism. These findings show that participants were unaware that they were being sexually groomed and fell into sexual grooming due to their risks and vulnerability. These vulnerabilities included talking and sharing personal information with strangers, minimal parental monitoring, peer pressure, social economic circumstances, and gender. As a result of these risks, vulnerabilities and grooming strategies, participants experienced sexual abuse, emotional distress, a distorted view of love and relationships, and kept their experiences a secret while also exhibiting personal agency. Consequently, they sought and received social support from family and friends to cope with the impact of their experiences.

The study findings can guide professionals working with children, including teachers and parents, to help prevent child sexual grooming and solicitation. Moreover, these findings

contribute to the existing literature on child sexual grooming in South Africa. The study recommends conducting additional research using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to further investigate sexual grooming in South Africa.

Keywords: Sexual solicitation, child sexual grooming, sexual abuse, youth, Pretoria.

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Overview of the Chapters

Introduction Chapter

The Introduction chapter establishes the framework for the thesis by outlining the issues related to juvenile sexual grooming and solicitation. It provides a clear problem statement, articulating the significance of the subject and the necessity for a thorough examination within the ambit of this thesis. Additionally, the Introduction offers essential background information relevant to the problem statement, contextualising the challenges associated with the grooming and recruitment of minors for sexual purposes. This chapter will include a discussion of the research question, a summary of the specific questions the thesis aims to address, and an outline of the goals and objectives guiding the investigation. The chapter will conclude by discussing the purpose and rationale for conducting this investigation.

Literature review

Chapter two of this paper presents the literature review, which aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing body of knowledge on online child sexual grooming and solicitation. The chapter will begin with a thorough examination of relevant definitions and prior research in the field, contextualising these within the scope of the study's aims and objectives. It will also discuss the purpose of the present study and the identified research gap in detail. Furthermore, the literature review will highlight the contributions made by previous researchers in this area. Their studies will be critically analysed and synthesised to offer valuable insights into the phenomenon of online child sexual grooming and solicitation.

Subsequently, the chapter will utilise social exchange theory as a theoretical framework to deepen our understanding of the motivations and dynamics underlying grooming and solicitation interactions online. This theory will provide a lens through which

the motivations, incentives, and dynamics of these online interactions can be explored and understood within the broader context of social exchange processes.

This study aims to advance the existing knowledge base on online child sexual grooming and solicitation by conducting a comprehensive review of the literature and applying social exchange theory. Through an in-depth analysis of relevant definitions, prior research, and theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to enhance the understanding of the factors influencing these behaviours. This comprehensive approach is intended to inform the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies in this critical area of concern.

Methodology Chapter

Chapter three, the methodology chapter, will follow the literature review and encompass essential elements such as the research sample, recruitment procedures, data collection and analysis methods, trustworthiness measures, and ethical considerations implemented throughout the research process.

The chapter will begin by describing the study's sample, including the participants' characteristics and the rationale for their selection. It will then detail the recruitment procedures employed to identify and enlist participants, emphasising the strategies utilised to ensure a representative and diverse sample. Subsequently, the chapter will describe the data collection techniques employed in the research, providing a comprehensive description of the tools, instruments, or protocols used to gather relevant information from the participants. Additionally, the chapter will outline the procedures followed to ensure data validity, reliability, and credibility while also addressing any potential limitations or biases.

Following data collection, the chapter will detail the data analysis methods employed to interpret the collected information. The data will be analysed using thematic data analysis, a qualitative data analysis technique designed to identify and analyse patterns and themes

within the data. Furthermore, the chapter will address the trustworthiness of the research process to ensure quality throughout, from data collection to analysis and the writing of the discussion. Lastly, the chapter will outline the ethical considerations adhered to during the research. This will involve a review of the ethical principles and guidelines followed, including informed consent, privacy protection, confidentiality, and participant welfare. The procedures followed to obtain ethical approvals or clearances will also be described.

The methodology chapter provides a comprehensive account of the methodological approach, clearly explaining the research design, data collection and analysis procedures, quality assurance measures, and ethical considerations used in the study. This transparency enhances the credibility and reliability of the research findings and facilitates the replication and further advancement of knowledge in the field.

Findings Chapter

Chapter Four, the findings chapter, will follow the methodology chapter and provide a detailed exploration of the research outcomes. It will begin with a brief description of each participant, including general demographic information such as age (both present age and age at the time of grooming), sex, and their first encounter with the grooming perpetrator. This contextual information will set the stage for the subsequent analysis of the research findings.

Following the participant descriptions, the chapter will examine the themes and codes that emerged from the data analysis. The key themes addressed in this chapter include youth perception of child sexual grooming and solicitation, characteristics of the grooming perpetrators, the impact of grooming on individuals, feelings associated with being groomed, grooming techniques, vulnerability to grooming, underreporting of abuse among adolescents, and coping with the aftermath of the abuse. The thematic framework for this study encompassed five overarching themes which illuminate various aspects of youth experiences with child sexual grooming and solicitation. These themes will be presented and discussed

systematically to provide a comprehensive overview of the significant patterns, trends, and insights derived from the collected data.

This chapter aims to deliver a detailed account of the research outcomes by presenting both participant descriptions and the findings from the thematic analysis. The inclusion of participant characteristics will enhance the readers' understanding of the diversity and representativeness of the sample. Concurrently, the thematic analysis will provide valuable insights into the research questions or objectives. The comprehensive presentation of the findings will facilitate the interpretation and discussion of the results in subsequent chapters, thereby enhancing the overall understanding and implications of the study.

Discussion and interpretations

Chapter six, the discussion and interpretation chapter, will examine the findings in relation to the literature review. The identified themes, patterns, and insights will be critically analysed and compared with the relevant theories, concepts, and empirical studies discussed in the literature review. This comparative analysis will provide valuable insights into how the research findings align with or diverge from the existing scholarly discourse.

Furthermore, this chapter will explore the implications of the findings with respect to the broader research study and its objectives. It will discuss the significance and relevance of the research outcomes, emphasising their contributions to the field and identifying potential avenues for further investigation. Any discrepancies, contradictions, or limitations observed in the findings will be critically evaluated, and possible explanations or alternative interpretations will be considered.

Conclusion, limitations, and recommendations.

The final chapter of the thesis will focus on the conclusion, limitations, and recommendations. It will also provide an exploration of the limitations encountered during

the research process, offer recommendations for future research endeavours, and outline the practical implications derived from the study.

The chapter will begin with a clear and concise conclusion, synthesising the key findings and their implications. By drawing upon the research outcomes presented in the findings chapter and their interpretation in the discussions and interpretations chapter, this section will address the research question and demonstrate the extent to which the study objectives have been achieved. The conclusion will serve as a logical endpoint, tying together the various threads of the research and offering a comprehensive understanding of the study's contributions.

Following the conclusion, the chapter will critically assess the limitations encountered throughout the research process. These limitations may include constraints related to sample size, data collection methods, or other factors that could have influenced the research outcomes. By acknowledging and discussing these limitations, the chapter will demonstrate transparency and offer insights into the study's scope and potential areas for improvement.

Subsequently, the chapter will offer recommendations for future research endeavours. These recommendations will stem from insights gained during the research process and gaps identified in the existing literature. By highlighting potential areas for further investigation, the chapter contributes to advancing knowledge in the field and encourages future researchers to build upon the current study's findings.

Moreover, the chapter will outline the practical implications derived from the study, with a particular focus on enhancing interventions aimed at protecting children from online grooming and solicitation. This section will provide guidelines for developing more effective interventions and identifying opportunities for policy improvements. By bridging the gap between research and practice, the chapter aims to translate the findings into actionable

strategies that can better safeguard children and inform policy development in this critical area.

In summary, the chapter on Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations serves as the final component of the thesis. By presenting a comprehensive conclusion, addressing the study's limitations, offering recommendations for future research, and outlining practical implications, this chapter effectively consolidates the study's contributions and provides a cohesive summary of its findings and impact.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Child sexual abuse is a widespread problem in South Africa (Artz et al., 2018), and the abusive relationships experienced by targeted children result in traumatic experiences and feelings of powerlessness, which distorts their sexuality and impact future adult relationships (Naidoo & Van Hoot, 2022). Research indicates that child sexual exploitation and abuse is frequently preceded by some form of grooming (Black et al., 2015; Collings, 2020; Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Winters et al., 2020a). Child sexual grooming is a process in which an adult builds a deceptive relationship of trust with a child, either in person or online, to manipulate, prepare, and abuse the child without being detected or reported (Winters et al., 2022). The objective of grooming is to gain the child's cooperation, reduce the likelihood of discovery, and increase the potential for future sexual contact (Plummer, 2018). Worldwide, online platforms have become increasingly used by children for educational purposes, communication, and entertainment (ECPAT 2020), particularly during Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic and after (Drejer et al., 2023). This increased online activity has rendered children more vulnerable, making them an easy target to child sexual groomers (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021). Among the risks children face on online platforms, online grooming and solicitation are the most detrimental, placing children in a position of defencelessness and vulnerability due to the power imbalances created by grooming techniques (Madigan et al., 2018).

Online child sexual grooming and solicitation is a global issue. According to a study in United States with 1,130 undergraduate students, the results show that 23% of the respondents reported having online intimate conversations with patterns indicative of online grooming. Among these, 38% met the perpetrators in person, and 38% engaged in sexual contact (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom, approximately 16.8% of youth

reported child sexual grooming during 2016/2017 (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). In South Africa, a survey that sought to find adolescents' internet use and their experience found that among the children who used internet, seven to nine percentage of them experienced online child sexual solicitation (ECPAT et al., 2022). In addition, a report between 2017 and 2019 shows that 325 cases out of 68,512 involved online solicitation (ECPAT et al., 2022). However, the cases of child sexual abuse could be more as mostly these cases are either underreported or not reported in South Africa (Mavunga, 2020). Lack of knowledge on what constitute child sexual grooming, stigma associated with child sexual abuse and lack of knowledge on how to report abuse could contribute to the underreporting (Mavunga, 2020).

There is a lack of research on adolescents' perceptions of online sexual grooming both globally (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2014) and in South Africa (ECPAT et al., 2022), despite the unprecedented increase in children's exposure to social media (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). This gap highlights the need for further investigation into adolescents' experiences and perceptions of online child sexual grooming. Such research is crucial for identifying and preventing such abuse, and for providing ongoing supportive interventions to affected individuals. Consequently, the proposed study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of online sexual grooming and solicitation among youth in Pretoria, South Africa. The research question guiding this study is: What are the perceptions of youth from Pretoria on online child sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa?"

Rationale of the Study

Several studies have shown that child sexual abuse cases in South Africa and worldwide, are often preceded by some form of sexual grooming tactics and solicitation (Harrison et al., 2018; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Sanderson, 2004; Winters et al., 2020b). Child sexual solicitation involves a process where an adult, using online platforms, engages

in a conversation with a sexual conversation with minor, and requests indecent photos and videos, (Gemara et al., 2022; Winters et al., 2017). A survey conducted in South Africa among 1,639 adolescents aged between nine and 12, found that 84% of the participants visited social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram daily through mobile phones. This puts them at risk of sexual grooming, exploitation, and violence in various cyberspace settings. Indeed, among internet users, 7-9% of adolescents reported having been subjected to some form of sexual exploitation (ECPAT et al., 2022).

According to Ali and Paash (2022), online communication significantly facilitates access to vulnerable children and contributes to the increase in child sexual abuse cases. The ease and directness of online communication provide perpetrators with ample opportunities for child solicitation and sexual exploitation, resulting in a rise in incidents of online molestation and exposure to offensive content (Ringenberg et al., 2022). Online platforms also allow offenders to access individuals while maintaining anonymity through the use of false identities (Winters et al., 2017). Furthermore, only a fraction of child sexual assault cases is reported to the police (Mavunga, 2020). In the USA, for example, only 310 out of every 1,000 cases are reported; the reluctance to report can be attributed to factors such as threats from perpetrators, feelings of complicity in the abuse, or fear that their images and videos already in the perpetrator's possession will be distributed on social media (Finkelhor et al., 2023).

Some authors argue that online grooming perpetrators can introduce sexual conversations to the targeted victim in as little as three days and may groom several children concurrently (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). Child sexual grooming often involves subtle psychological manipulation, where the perpetrator presents themselves in an innocent manner. This makes it challenging to detect grooming before sexual abuse has occurred (Jeglic et al., 2023; Ost, 2009; Sanderson, 2004). Forms of psychological manipulation used

in grooming often include games, bribery, gifts, and coercion, all aimed at convincing the child that the suggested behaviour is normal and natural (Ost, 2009). This manipulation aims to change the child's behaviour and perception, leading to distorted cognitions (Collings, 2020). The perpetrators of grooming often deflect responsibility for the sexual relationship by accusing the minor of taking an active and sexualised role. As a result, the child may feel complacent with the abuse, as this experience leads to cognitive distortions and a skewed understanding of the situation (Santisteban et al., 2018).

Child sexual grooming has gained increasing attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners due to its complex and disturbing nature. According to Section 18 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 in South Africa, acts such as touching a child's genitals, anus or female genitals, kissing, and masturbating a child constitute typical grooming behaviours and are classified as sexual violation offences (Coetzee, 2022). Sexual grooming is a child sexual violation crime where children are targeted due to their gender, therefore is deeply rooted in the gender-based violence. Indeed according to a study conducted in two provinces in South Africa with 3514 adolescents aged 10 to 17 years, 9% of children reported a lifetime contact sexual abuse happening in their homes, schools, community and home of the neighbours, this makes abuse and neglect of the children a pandemic that needs a lot of attention from scholars so that proper preventative measures can be taken to prevent it (Meinck et al., 2016). Understanding the mechanisms and stages involved in the grooming process is crucial for comprehending the strategies employed by perpetrators and for developing effective prevention and intervention measures. By recognising the goal-directed nature of grooming, the varying goals pursued by offenders, and the self-regulatory mechanisms involved, professionals and authorities can better identify and disrupt instances of grooming, thereby safeguarding potential individuals from sexual exploitation.

In South Africa, there has been a lack of studies using primary data and qualitative research methods to gauge adolescents' perceptions of their experiences of online grooming and solicitation. While several studies have employed content analysis methodology to define and delimit child sexual grooming and conceptualise what grooming is in child sexual exploitation (Collings, 2020; 2021), Van Zyl (2017) has critically analysed existing laws concerning sexual grooming, and Coetzee (2022) has aimed to show how teaching as a profession may promote sexual grooming, there remains a gap in understanding from the perspective of the victim. The only study that used primary data and qualitative methodology in South Africa focussed on the perpetrators of child sexual abuse as the participants (Naidoo & Van Hoot, 2021). Finally, a study that investigated adolescents' perspectives used a survey or quantitative research methodology (ECPAT et al., 2022). This gap identified in the literature can be bridged through empirical research on online child sexual grooming in South Africa, specifically from the perspective of the youth. The study aims to contribute to scholarship on more effective online sexual grooming protective intervention programmes and policies by non-governmental and governmental agencies in South Africa. The overall aim of the study is to understand adolescents' perceptions of their experiences with online child sexual grooming.

The Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To understand adolescents' experiences of online sexual grooming in South Africa.
2. To gain an in-depth understanding of the risks that make adolescents vulnerable to online sexual grooming and solicitation.
3. To understand the coping resources available to youth following exploitation through online sexual grooming and solicitation

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The chapter explores the literature on child sexual grooming and solicitation, focussing on defining the terms child sexual grooming and solicitation, the grooming process, strategies used by groomers, the characteristics of grooming offenders, the perception of grooming among adolescents, the risks and vulnerability faced by adolescents, and the impact of grooming. This chapter will conclude by reviewing the literature that supports the need for this study in the South African context.

Child Sexual Grooming

Child sexual grooming is a deceptive process in which a potential perpetrator approaches a child and then manipulates the child, as well as the environment and people around the child, in order to gain access to, prepare, and ultimately abuse the child without detection (Winters et al., 2022a). The goals of a child sexual groomer are to create a situation in which the child's resistance to sexual abuse is minimised, thereby facilitating repeated sexual abuse and reducing the likelihood of disclosure (Plummer, 2018; Winters et al., 2020a). Sexual grooming can take place in various settings, including in person and via the Internet or within an institutional environment (Pollack & MacIver, 2015). It may involve a combination of both online and in-person grooming (Beren et al., 2023).

Sexual grooming behaviours are challenging to detect because they are similar to normative interactions between adults and children. Normative behaviours include for example buying a child a gift, playing child-like games, driving child to school baby-sitting, hugging, these behaviours are normal adult-child interactions (Winters et al., 2016; Winters et al., 2022). Normal behaviours can however turn into sexual grooming behaviours if the adult introduces sexual conversations such as asking their sexual preference their desire or

their experience (Winters & Jeglic, 2017). In an effort to understand experiences of adolescents on child sexual grooming, Chiu and Quayle (2022) similarly found that the affected children view their interactions with groomers as based on a genuine connection. Winters and Johnson (2023) identified several behaviours that are indicative of child sexual grooming, including desensitisation, constant and frequent interaction with the child, buying gifts, paying compliments, and spending significant time with the child. Additional grooming behaviours may include building a trusting relationship or a special friendship, finding excuses to be around the child, as well as engaging in voyeurism and exhibitionism (Daniel, 2016). Greene-Colozzi et al. (2020) showed that interactions between the perpetrators of grooming and adolescents are often characterised by flirting, flattery, and sexual undertones, rather than expressions of romance or love. Additionally, the majority of adolescents reported sharing similar likes, dislikes and interests with adult strangers (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020).

In-person Child Sexual Grooming

In-person child sexual grooming is the process where a potential child sexual groomer approaches a child by exploiting factors such as the child's compliance with or trust in adults, lack of confidence or low self-esteem, lack of parental supervision, and signs of loneliness, trouble, or isolation (Winters et al., 2020a). The goal is to groom, prepare and abuse while avoiding detection (Winters et al., 2020a; Winters et al., 2024a). Perpetrators of in-person grooming are often family members or individuals known to the child (Beren et al., 2023). These groomers typically present themselves as likeable, pleasant and charming to the targeted child and their immediate family and community to gain easy access to the child (Winter et al., 20242).

Research shows that groomers use a variety of tactics to manipulate and exploit their victims, including verbal coercion, drugs, alcohol, flattery, compliments and concealment

strategies (Black et al., 2015; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). The grooming process typically involves five steps (Winters et al. 2020a).

- **Selection:** The initial step is to identify and select the individual they want to groom.
- **Access:** They then gain physical and emotional access to the child by finding opportunities to spend time with them.
- **Building trust:** The groomer fosters a relationship of trust through flattery and incentives.
- **Desensitisation:** This is followed by a period of desensitisation where the child is gradually exposed to sexual touch and sexual contact, preparing them into a state of acceptance for further sexual exploitation.
- **Secrecy and exploitation:** Once the groomer solidifies their control through these techniques and interactions, the child is exposed to further sexual abuse with the groomer using bribes to ensure the abusive relationship is kept secret.

Online Sexual Grooming

While both in-person and online sexual grooming involves manipulating the targeted victim, online grooming differs from in-person grooming in terms of victim selection and duration. Online grooming manipulation strategies typically occur over a shorter period before exposing the child to sexual content (Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019). Online platforms provide “safe” and convenient opportunities for adults to initiate sexual relationships, groom susceptible children, and abuse them (Quayle & Newman, 2015). Online grooming involves the manipulation of a minor by an adult through Internet platforms with the intent to sexually exploit them (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Whittle et al., 2013). The exploitation can include making sexual advances, engaging in sexual conversations or activities, and collecting personal sexual information (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021; Kloess et

al., 2014; Villacampa & Gomez, 2017). This form of grooming involves a complex and prolonged psychological manipulation process, which can last for days to months or even years (Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Wachs et al., 2020).

Cyber technologies such as cell phones, internet games, and chat rooms significantly facilitate the grooming process. Over the past three decades, the evolution of the internet has expanded opportunities for committing internet-related crimes, including child sexual abuse (Drejer et al., 2023). In South Africa, young people are harassed, humiliated, exposed to violence, cyberbullied and engaging in posting and sharing of sexual content in online platforms (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). Online groomers can be categorised into two types: contact-driven offenders who desire to engage in direct sexual contact with their victims, and online-focused offenders, who are exclusively motivated by obtaining child sexual abuse materials through online interactions with the child (Soldino et al., 2024).

The study will use the term “child sexual grooming” to refer to the process by which an adult, aged 18 years or older, initiates contact with a child under the age of 18 through an in-person contact or online platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with the intention of grooming the child for sexual gratification (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). The adult aims to establish a relationship of trust with the child, to facilitate abuse and exploitation of the child (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021). Adolescents who are in transition from childhood to adulthood and dealing with sexual curiosities, identity formation, self-expression, and solidifying peer group memberships are vulnerable to grooming and unwanted sexual solicitations (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Given that grooming behaviours are often associated with online sexual solicitation of children and adolescents, this highlights the critical need for a comprehensive approach to address this issue (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

Online Sexual Solicitation

While online grooming typically unfolds gradually over time to deceive the minor, sexual solicitations are discrete incidents in which the adult explicitly requests sexual material from the child (Calvete et al., 2022). According to Kloess et al. (2019), groomers may encourage individuals to engage in a range of sexual activities such as showing or exposing body parts (such as breasts and buttocks), undressing, digital penetration, sexual touching, penetration with foreign objects, and other sexual activities that would be classified as humiliating for the child victim. Online sexual solicitation is defined as requests to engage in sexual activities, sexual discussions, or sharing of personal information (Mitchell et al., 2007).

In this study, sexual solicitation refers to the process in which an adult solicits or requests a child (under 18 years old) to engage in inappropriate sexual activities. These activities may include sharing explicit content, engaging in webcam sex, or any other activities that are unsuitable and abusive to a child. Perpetrators may also exploit existing online images of children to coerce or extort sexual favours (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2018). Online child sexual extortion occurs when an offender persuades a child to share sexual photos and then uses those photos to demand further participation in online video sexual activities by threatening to reveal and expose their sexual photos if the child does not comply with their demands (Ali & Paash, 2022).

Sexual solicitation can be wanted or unwanted; and the offender can be a minor or an adult (Hornor, 2020). Online sexual offenders are typically categorised as either preferential or situational offenders. Preferential offenders are those who have specific fantasies and seek out particular types of victims, while situational offenders are more indiscriminate in their choice of victims (Dehart et al., 2017). Online offenders are more likely to be white males with a low incidence of physical abuse compared to offline offenders; they tend to exhibit

greater victim empathy, have fewer cognitive distortions, and have lower impression management (Dehart et al., 2017; Gottfried et al., 2020).

Furthermore, some online sexual offenders interact with and abuse several children simultaneously (Ringenberg et al., 2022). In an online survey study examining the frequency of online sexual solicitation of minors, the authors found that 49.3% of a sample of 1,393 adults reported online interactions with a stranger; and of these 779 of a total of 1,393 (55.9%) reported sexual online interactions or sexual contacts with minors of different age groups. In the same study 1,128 participants reported soliciting adolescents, and 29 individuals reported soliciting younger children (Schulz et al., 2016). These findings highlight the significant risk that children face as potential predators have both the access and means to sexually exploit them. This underscores the urgent need to explore the youths' experiences in order to implement measures to protect them.

Perception of youth on child sexual grooming and solicitation

Many victims of child sexual grooming and solicitation are not aware that they being groomed. This was explored among America college students who had experienced online grooming, the result of the study shows that the grooming happened rapidly and insidiously, and many were not aware that they were being groomed (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017). According to another study conducted in United Kingdom, children who have experience of grooming perceive the relationship with perpetrators of grooming as one based on love and friendship which demonstrated their naivety (Batool, 2020). Similar findings that affected children viewed the relationship with the perpetrator as dating or romantic relationship was found in a study in United States (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020).

Prevalence of child sexual grooming and solicitation

The prevalence of online child sexual solicitation and grooming behaviours varies across studies and cultural contexts. Despite numerous studies aimed at understanding their prevalence, quantifying the number of children experiencing online sexual grooming and solicitation is challenging as children often confuse their online interactions with peers for those with adults (Borj et al., 2023). In South Africa, gender-based violence is a common social evil which has been attributed to the historical, social and economic factors of the country. According to Einaifoghe et al. (2021), the apartheid era demand for migrant labour had fathers leave their children unprotected, and women were forced to stay home and take care of the family while men went to work which reinforced the patriarchal systems and gender roles, men as the provider while women receivers. Further research in South Africa shows that girls and adolescent engage in transactional relationship with older men due to their poor background which help in catering for their material and financial needs (Duby et al., 2021). Similarly, another household survey conducted in Mpumalanga province South Africa with 5,631 participants aged 15 to 17 years found that 12.04% of the adolescents interviewed experienced some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime (Ward et al., 2018).

The abuse of children in South Africa go unreported because they lack the knowledge of what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse, and may therefore not recognise sexual grooming as a form of abuse; caregivers may dismiss reports from children; sexting has become a normalised behaviour often not seen as sexual abuse (ECPAT et al., 2022); children may fear losing essential material support, fear stigmatisation, or lack knowledge on how to report abuse (Mavunga, 2021).

A national survey of 2,639 participants in the United States found varying prevalence rates of various forms of online child sexual abuse. The lifetime exposure rates were as follows: image-based sexual abuse (11%), online child sexual abuse (15.6%), self-produced

child sexual abuse images (7.2%), online commercial sexual exploitation (1.7%), online grooming by adults (5.4%), sextortion (3.5%), and nonconsensual sexting (7.2%) (Finkelhor et al., 2022).

The prevalence of online sexual grooming and solicitation was examined in a meta-analysis using studies from 1990 to 2016. It found that approximately one in five youth experienced unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material, while one in nine experienced online sexual solicitations (Madigan et al., 2018). The extensive online engagement of young individuals increases their risk of sexual grooming and solicitation, as perpetrators exploit these platforms to target vulnerable children (Borj et al., 2023). In a study by Greene-Colozzi et al. (2020), involving 1,130 United States university students, participants, 17% reported being sexually solicited by adult strangers in online chatrooms during their youth, while 23% experienced online sexual grooming. Similarly, a Canadian police report covering 2014 to 2020 revealed an increase in online child sexual abuse, with 10,739 reported incidents of online sexual offences against children (Ibrahim, 2022). The report indicated that seven out of 10 victims were girls aged 12 to 17. In the United States, among youth who use the Internet, 20% reported experiencing unwanted child sexual contact, and 11% reported instances of online sexual solicitation (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). Similar findings were reported in South Africa, where a survey of 1,639 children who use the internet, found that 7-9% had been exposed to some form of child sexual exploitation (ECPAT et al., 2022).

The prevalence of online interaction and solicitation was further examined in a longitudinal study (Ortega-Baron et al., 2023), which aimed to examine the point prevalence, period prevalence, and incidence prevalence of online interactions and solicitation between adults and minors over three consecutive periods. The study involved 1,029 Spanish participants aged 12 to 15. The findings revealed an increase in sexual solicitation and period

prevalence from 11.3% in the first period to 11.9% in the second period and a significant rise to 16.1% in the third period. Additionally, the prevalence of sexualised interactions for the three periods was 4.8%, 7%, and 7.2%, respectively. The study also found that nearly 23% of minors reported experiencing some form of sexual solicitation, while 14% reported engaging in sexual interactions. These results highlight the significant problem of sexual solicitation in online contexts.

Grooming Techniques

Grooming techniques are manipulation strategies used by perpetrators of grooming to make individuals feel special in order to facilitate continued abuse. These tactics allow the perpetrators to manipulate the child into becoming a cooperating participant in the abuse (Kloess et al., 2019). The specific grooming strategy employed by an offender depends on factors such as the age and gender of the victim, their relationship with the offender, and the context of their relationship, including the effectiveness of the grooming tactics and cultural factors (Winters et al., 2020b). According to Bennet and O'Donohue (2014), perpetrators engage in the grooming process to create conditions that allow them to manipulate and abuse the victim while reducing the likelihood of being reported or detected by family, friends or the community. Grooming not only facilitates immediate sexual acts with the child but also sets the stage for ongoing and future sexual abuse as most perpetrators seek to engage in repeated sexual behaviour with the child (Kloess et al., 2019).

Perpetrators of child sexual grooming use a variety of strategies to manipulate their victims such as pressuring the child with bribes, threats, and repeated nagging; as well as employing the sweet talk techniques of flattery, expression of love, and acting as a friend (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021; Joleby et al., 2021). Other tactics used involve deception, secrecy, psychological manipulation, sexualisation, regular or intense contact, kindness and

flattery, and erratic behaviour (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2014; Plummer, 2018; Whittle et al., 2014). These psychological manipulation tactics create confusion and a sense of dependency in the child, leading them to rely increasingly on the perpetrator (Gemara et al., 2022).

Psychological manipulation aim is to change individuals' behaviour and perception, which can lead to distorted cognitions (Collings, 2020). Such distortions can result in children and youth not reporting abuse as they may feel complicit in the abuse (Heal & Gladman, 2017). The offender (groomers) overcome a child's resistance by presenting themselves as desperate and in need, being persistent, expressing disappointment, begging, and exerting pressure (Kloess et al., 2019). Additional techniques include using enticements, assessing risks such as enquiring whether the child has shared their interactions with authority, trust, fantasy, isolation, coercion, and substance abuse to manipulate their victims (Kloes et al., 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). These strategies are designed to establish control over the child and advance the perpetrator's abusive agenda (Collings, 2020).

Gamez-Guadix et al. (2021) conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to assess and differentiate various strategies employed by online groomers. Their study revealed that online groomers use six distinct strategies when targeting their victims: deception, gifting, studying the victim's environments, desensitisation to sexual content and physical touch, aggression, and other unidentified strategies. These findings are consistent with a scoping review conducted by Ringenberg et al. (2022), which analysed 19,679 peer-reviewed articles. The scoping review corroborated the Gamez-Guadix et al. (2021) findings, albeit with the observation that groomers employed a significant number of strategies before and after the advent of the Internet.

Furthermore, Gamez-Guadix et al. (2021) discovered that online groomers used different strategies for interactions before and after the widespread use of the Internet. Prior to the internet era, groomers primarily utilised strategies such as coercion, isolation, substance abuse, enticement, desensitisation of sexual content and physical touch, as well as secrecy. Following the rise of the internet, groomers employed strategies such as deception, isolation, arranging physical meetings, risk assessment, trust-building, coercion, and substance abuse. These findings highlight the evolving nature of grooming tactics in response to technological advancements and the changing landscape of online interactions.

Sexual Grooming Process

Research shows that there are no differences in the grooming process between online and face-to-face interactions; the main distinction lies in the selection process (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013). Sexual grooming perpetrators follow several steps to successfully groom their victims. According to a discourse analysis of 75,000 chat logs of online grooming by perverted.justice.com, online grooming involves three phases:

1. **Gaining access.** In the initial phase the perpetrator makes contact with the targeted victim.
2. **Approach:** During this phase the groomer uses an online platform to request a face-to-face meeting with the child.
3. **Entrapment:** In the final phase, the groomer uses various strategies to lure the child into engaging in sexual behaviour, such as sharing indecent pictures or soliciting inappropriate pictures from the minor (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). Other strategies include using deceptive trust development (building a false sense of trust through praise and sociability), sexual gratification (using rehearsed speeches or statements that suggest or request sexual intent), and lastly, compliance testing (using techniques

such as reverse psychology, role reversal and strategic withdrawal to test and secure the child's compliance).

A seminal contribution to the study of the online grooming process is the work by O'Connell (2003), which is based on the observation of approximately 50 instances of online grooming interactions. In this study, the author adopted various personas, portraying an eight-, 10, or 12-year-old child, typically female, in chat rooms or online platforms specifically targeting child or teenage users. The O'Connell (2003) model delineates six sequential phases that characterise the process of online grooming.

1. **Initiation:** The first phase is friendship forming, where the online groomer initiates interactions to establish a connection with the child; at this stage, the perpetrator has already selected the victim and gained access according to the sexual grooming model proposed by Winters et al. (2020a).
2. **Trust development:** Therefore, they proceed to the forming phase, where they build rapport by creating an illusion of being the child's best friend O'Connell (2003), which is consistent with trust development (Winters et al., 2020a).
3. **Risk assessment:** The third phase involves the groomer evaluating the likelihood of their activities being detected by the child's parent(s), guardian, or older siblings.
4. **Exclusivity phase:** The fourth phase emerges when the groomer seeks to introduce a sense of exclusivity through the formation of a "mutual respect club" between themselves and the child, emphasising the need for secrecy from others (O'Connell's 2003; Ringenberg et al., 2024).
5. **Sexual phase:** The fifth phase marks the introduction of sexual topics by the groomer into the interactions (O'Connell, 2003), which includes desensitising the targeted victim to sexual content and physical contact (Winters et al., 2020a).

6. Maintenance phase: The concluding phase involves the groomer's efforts to solidify their relationship with the child, aiming to alleviate the child's fears and minimise the potential risk of being discovered by external parties (O'Connell, 2003), similar to the post-abuse maintenance behaviours outlined by Winters et al. (2020).

O'Connell's (2003) model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the sequential progression of online grooming interactions, detailing how groomers manipulate and exploit their victims. By identifying and categorising these distinct phases, the model enhances our comprehension of the tactics used by groomers to establish and maintain exploitative relationships with minors in online environments. The framework of grooming stages outlined by O'Connell is supported by Ringenberg et al. (2024), which additionally examined differences in grooming stages and strategies in various contexts, including victim, decoy, and law enforcement conversations.

Grooming Offenders

According to Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Lamb (2021), online grooming offenders can be classified into five categories based on behavioural patterns. These categories include intimacy-seeking groomers, dedicated hypersexual offenders, social groomers, opportunistic-social groomers, and the mixed group. Intimacy-seeking groomers are characterised by their focus on building rapport with their intended targets. Dedicated hypersexual offenders emphasise sexual matters during their online interactions with potential individuals. Social groomers also work on building rapport with their targets, although to a lesser extent than intimacy-seeking groomers. In contrast, the opportunistic-social groomers invest minimal time building rapport with their individuals. These categorisations are based on an analysis of 101 transcripts of conversations between volunteer workers posing as minors and convicted offenders in the United States of America (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2021). This

analysis provides valuable insights into the distinct strategies and behaviours employed by online grooming offenders, contributing to a better understanding of their modus operandi and aiding in the development of effective prevention and intervention measures.

Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities

The vulnerabilities and risk factors associated with online sexual exploitation among young people are multifaceted, reflecting various aspects of their online behaviour and personal characteristics. Due to their limited socio-cognitive capacity, youth are more susceptible to online sexual victimisation compared to adults. Online sexual grooming and solicitation are a concerning aspect of sexual victimisation. These practices include requests for personal sexual information or images, and engagement in unwanted sexual conversations and activities (Hsieh et al., 2023). Several behaviour patterns are indicative of increased risk to youth. These behaviours include talking to strangers, having low self-esteem, searching for someone online to engage in sexual interactions, loneliness, low-income family, parents who are always working, sending videos or sexual pictures, and disclosing personal information (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014; Hornor, 2020). These risks and vulnerability factors have been corroborated by DeHart et al. (2017), which found that children who engage in online risky behaviour, such as conversing with and sharing personal information with strangers, are more likely to become targeted for sexual grooming and solicitation based on their post and chats on social media. This research highlights how online interactions and personal disclosures can make young people particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

In addition, several factors increase the likelihood of a child being sexually groomed and solicited. These factors include age, gender, social isolation, low self-esteem, and previous experiences of abuse (De Santisteban et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2018; Ost, 2009; Villacampa & Gómez, 2017). Furthermore, it has been shown that girls are at a higher risk of

being groomed and solicited online than boys (De Santisteban et al., 2018). In South Africa, research shows that girls are more likely to be contacted online compared to boys, while both girls and boys experience grooming and solicitation, boys tend to pay little attention to their experience, in contrast, boys are more likely to send pictures of themselves on social media compared to girls (Reneses et al., 2024). These same risk factors are also associated with online solicitation (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

Furthermore, unhappy or alienated children are more vulnerable to online exploitation because they are more likely to engage in risky online behaviour, such as cybersex, and may have strained relationships with their parents, further increasing their vulnerability (Mitchell et al., 2001; Wolak et al., 2003). For example, children in foster care, those who have bad relationships with their parents, are victims of bullying, or those from a single-parent household are at heightened risk of falling victim to sexual predators when seeking friendship and companionship on online platforms (Heal & Gladman, 2017; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Whittle et al., 2014).

Children who have experienced difficulties in their childhood, such as maltreatment, experience increased risk and vulnerability and are more likely to become victims of human trafficking (Mitchell et al., 2005; Naramore et al., 2017). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to being targeted and sexually groomed by online sexual predators due to a combination of risky behaviours caused by hormonal changes which peak in adolescence, including sensation-seeking, impulsivity, and risk-taking (Hornor, 2020). In addition, factors such as alienation, despair, and a history of psychosocial adversity further heighten their vulnerability to online sexual exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2001). Sexual minority youth also face elevated rates of both offline and online sexual assault, indicating their increased vulnerability and overlapping risk factors (Priebe & Svedin, 2012). Adolescents with a history of sexual abuse may be particularly susceptible to exploitation, as they may struggle

to differentiate between genuine acts of compassion and support and abusive behaviour (Cole et al., 2016).

The risk and vulnerability to exploitation have been further elevated by the use and availability of internet connectivity and technology, such as social media and instant messaging applications. These platforms facilitate grooming by granting perpetrators access to potential individuals and providing anonymity, reducing social control and oversight (De Santisteban et al., 2018). Online synchronous and disinhibition factors also contribute to the ease of access and exploitation of children for child sexual abuse (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2018). As many young children use internet-based technologies for education, entertainment, socialisation, and empowerment, the risk of online grooming continues to increase (DeHart et al., 2017; Reeves & Crowther, 2019).

Risk and vulnerability are also further heightened by certain online activities, such as cybersex and the use of social networking sites, which exposes children to the risk of being bullied and sexually propositioned (Stanicke et al., 2024). Moreover, specific characteristics of children, such as transgender identity or intellectual or developmental disabilities, may increase their vulnerability to online sexual exploitation (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Normand & Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016). Troubled teens or those with strained relationships with their parents may also be more vulnerable to online exploitation (Heal, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2001; Wolak et al., 2003). Youth mental health is particularly critical, as symptoms of depression have been linked to unwanted Internet sexual solicitation (Daniel, 2016; Ybarra et al., 2004). Furthermore, young individuals who experience online sexual exploitation are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder than those facing other internet-related difficulties (Sicilia et al., 2024).

The Impact of Online Sexual Exploitation on Youth

The impact of child sexual exploitation on children is a pressing concern with significant implications for their overall well-being. Extensive research has revealed that children who have experienced child sexual exploitation endure trauma, including feelings of guilt and shame stemming from a sense of responsibility for and collaboration in the abuse (Sicilia et al., 2024). While youth may initially view online sexual solicitation as an exciting experience (Johnson et al., 2019), it can have immense negative consequences for adolescents and children (Honor, 2020). Sexually exploited children are at high risk for physical and mental health disorders (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016).

The internet has emerged as a major platform for cyberbullying-online grooming and cyberbullying-sexting, with an increase in instances of older individuals recruiting minors for sexual purposes (Machimbarrena et al., 2018). Adolescents who have experienced online child sexual exploitation are more prone to developing post-traumatic stress disorder compared to those facing other internet-related issues (Sicilia et al., 2024). Comprehending the variations in adolescent experiences of sexual exploitation is important for the development of successful treatment approaches and community-based prevention initiatives (Edinburgh et al., 2015). The commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, involving the for-profit exploitation of minors, represents a global problem requiring immediate attention and intervention (Laser-Maira et al., 2020).

The impact of child sexual grooming can result in long-lasting trauma that affects them throughout their lives (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). This trauma often results in significant challenges in their interpersonal and sexual relationships in adulthood, including sexual dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, diminished sex drive, identity confusion and diffusion, as well as persistent distressing thoughts and emotions (Daniel, 2016). In addition, individuals who have experienced child sexual grooming commonly exhibit symptoms such as

depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, low socioeconomic status, difficulties in forming relationships, and sexual dysfunction (Mavunga, 2020; Spenard & Cash, 2022; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

Child sexual grooming results in child sexual abuse and physical harm inflicted through sexual contact, exacerbating emotional and psychological developmental issues (Black et al., 2015; Gemara et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to the deceptive trust-building tactics employed by offenders during the grooming process, individuals often experience a profound sense of betrayal, resulting in enduring psychological wounds (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). The negative psychological outcomes include depression, as well as feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment, all of which contribute to heightened psychological consequences experienced by the individuals (Hornor, 2020).

The impact of sexual grooming through technology has similar consequences to non-virtual abuse. This is supported by evidence from young people who have experienced online sexual abuse that revealed a range of effects such as trauma, suicidal thoughts, hostility, self-harming behaviour, panic attacks, depression, shame, and others. These issues are heightened when the parents are not supportive (Ali & Paash, 2022). The consequences of such abuse can persist into adulthood, affecting interpersonal and sexual relationships and leading to various psychological difficulties and substance abuse (Black et al., 2015; Chetty, 2019). Moreover, the deceptive manipulation of trust by offenders during the grooming process exacerbates its impact and deepens the sense of betrayal experienced by individuals (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021). Exposure of online networks among adolescents in South has an immense impact on their well-being, it can lead to internet addiction, cybersex, internet dating and power imbalance relationships that are abusive both emotionally, physically and psychologically (Albert & Kheswa, 2017).

Existing Policies and Interventions

In South Africa, sexual grooming is recognised as a criminal offence under Section 18 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007.

This legislation identifies behaviours such as touching a child's genital organs (such as female breasts) and anus, kissing a child, and masturbating in front of a child as typical grooming behaviours which violate the law and are punishable criminal acts (Coetzee, 2023).

The country faces significant challenges concerning online sexual grooming, solicitation, and risky sexual behaviour among young people, and the true extent of the problem is difficult to determine (Coetzee, 2022). Efforts to tackle unintended pregnancies among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa, sometimes due to sexual grooming, necessitate interventions that not only enhance access to contraceptive information and services but also address sexual violence and provide support for survivors (Ajayi & Ezegebe, 2020).

Despite the implementation of national programs and policies by the government aimed at improving sexual health among youth, such as the National Youth Policy 2015-2019 and the National Strategic Plan for HIV/STIs and TB 2012-2016, young people in South Africa are still more prone to engaging in risky sexual behaviour compared to adults (Odimegwe & Ugwu, 2022). Study found South African adolescent visit social media frequently and engage in internet dating, sex video with older adults which creates power imbalance Albert and Kheswa (2017), in the relations leading to poor educational performance and other mental health problems associated with child abuse such as anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts (Ressett et al., 2022). This underscores the need for more effective interventions and policies to address risky sexual behaviour among young people. The prevalence of online grooming and exploitation is a significant concern, warranting the implementation of effective preventative education programs focussing on online grooming and abuse (Whittle et al., 2013). Furthermore, the most common risk factors identified are

cyberbullying-online grooming and cyberbullying-sexting, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive policies and interventions to address these issues effectively (Machimbarrena et al., 2018).

Additionally, it is crucial to assess the awareness levels of academic staff members at higher education institutions in South Africa regarding sexual harassment policies and procedures, as emphasised by Joubert et al. (2011). This highlights the need for effective policies aimed at reducing the incidence of sexual harassment complaints. While South Africa has implemented certain policies and interventions to address online sexual grooming, solicitation, and risky sexual behaviour among young people, there are still gaps that need to be addressed. Continued efforts are essential to enhance the effectiveness of interventions, develop comprehensive policies, and promote preventative education in tackling these issues. Additionally, addressing the awareness and implementation of sexual harassment policies within higher education institutions is of utmost importance.

Addressing the problem of child sexual grooming requires further research that prioritises the experiences and voices of individuals directly affected, thus informing the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies. By shining a light on the psychological and emotional consequences of online child sexual grooming, society can better understand and respond to this serious issue. Existing studies on online grooming have predominantly focused on the perspectives of perpetrators (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021), or have relied on police transcripts (Wolf et al., 2018), resulting in a scarcity of research on the experiences of individuals who have been groomed (Whittle et al., 2014). The proposed study aims to address this research gap by providing a platform for individuals who have undergone online child sexual grooming to share their experiences, thus enabling a deeper understanding through a subjective lens or perspective. This study has the potential to contribute to the

development of effective prevention and intervention strategies while shedding light on the underlying psychological and emotional consequences of online child sexual grooming.

It is important to recognise that the reported figures are likely to underestimate the actual prevalence of child sexual grooming and abuse. This underreporting can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, many individuals may not fully comprehend that their experiences of grooming constitute sexual abuse, thus leading to a lack of awareness and subsequent reluctance to report (ECPAT et al. 2022; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). Furthermore, cultural dynamics and generational gaps contribute to the societal taboo surrounding discussions of sexual matters, further discouraging individuals from disclosing their experiences. South Africa is plagued by gender-based violence which is rooted in the abuse of power, gender inequality and harmful norms (Enaifoghe et al., 2021). The patriarchal system that reinforces masculinity of male gender, makes it difficult for boys to report openly after experiencing sexual abuse, however if the questionnaire is filled confidentially, they are likely to disclose the abuse (Ward et al., 2018). Given these factors, additional research is required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the true extent of sexual grooming and abuse. Such research can facilitate the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies to address this pervasive issue.

In summary, child sexual grooming has been found to be a danger to children in general due to the psychological and emotional manipulation that the grooming perpetrators use to groom the victims. Child sexual grooming can occur both in person, in an online platform, or a combination of both. Therefore, there is a need to understand the perspectives of youth from their own experience, including the risks and vulnerability associated with adolescence, the impact of grooming, and the coping mechanisms used by survivors of child sexual grooming and solicitation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for online sexual grooming and solicitation can be understood using social exchange theory by applying this theory to explain child sexual grooming and solicitation on online platforms. According to social exchange theory, individuals engage in social interactions based on a cost-benefit analysis, seeking to maximise rewards and minimise costs (Homans, 1958). In the context of child sexual grooming and solicitation, perpetrators exploit the sexual grooming process to manipulate and control vulnerable children for their own sexual gratification (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020).

In the initial stages of grooming, perpetrators often employ strategies to establish trust and build a relationship with the child (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). Social exchange theory postulates that the behaviour is guided by the reinforcement tools of rewards and resource exchange between the parties (Cook et al., 2006). The perpetrators may engage in friendly conversations, offer compliments, or provide emotional support, creating a sense of reciprocity and mutual investment (Reddy & Minnaar, 2015). This positive reinforcement (such as compliments, perceived kindness, flattery, and a friend to lend an ear) serves as a reward for the child, which can lead them to perceive the interaction as beneficial (Whittle et al., 2014). The psychological manipulations that the perpetrators employ is for their own benefit, as these are purposely tailored to prepare the child for sexual abuse while simultaneously reducing the risk of being detected by the child's guardians (De Santisteban et al., 2018).

As the grooming process advances, perpetrators offer gifts or monetary goods in exchange for sexual favours. By accepting gifts and money from the perpetrators in online grooming situations, the child feels that they have to share what the perpetrators request as they perceive the benefits as valuable (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021). This situation is mainly prevalent among individuals from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, as any gifts or monetary

rewards fulfil a basic need. For these children, the immediate benefits of receiving gifts or money may outweigh the perceived harm of providing sexual pictures requested by offenders (Cook et al., 2006; Heal & Gladman, 2017; Mavunga, 2020). In addition, children that engage in interactions with the perpetrators are those children that lacked self-esteem and confidence to make friends face to face, others were lonely and were looking for friends online while others lacked social support from their family Daneil, 2016; Wachs, 2016; Winters et al., 2020a). Similarly, the perpetrators of grooming are those people with a purposely go to online platforms looking for children to engage in cybersex, masturbation and or find children who would be willing to meet face to face in engage in sexual intercourse (Kloess et al., 2013). The theory assumes that the social actor's behaviour is guided by the rule of reciprocity and, hence, is mutually rewarding to both parties and therefore, resources are exchanged based on the subjective cost-reward analysis (Cook et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the potential offender may employ tactics to increase the child's perceived cost of non-compliance, such as threats, manipulation, or emotional manipulation (Ringenberg et al., 2022). The social exchange relations create a power imbalance when the victim is manipulated to feel that they are complicit in the abuse as active participants (De Santisteban et al., 2018). This manipulation creates a power imbalance within the relationship, where the child may feel obligated to continue engaging in the interaction to maintain the perceived benefits or avoid the potential negative consequences (Black et al., 2015). This, therefore, reduces the risks of the groomer being reported or detected by the parents of the victim, which is beneficial to the offender as they can continue to abuse the victim for a prolonged period (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020).

Furthermore, social exchange theory suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in socially reinforced or normalised behaviours within their social environment (Cook

et al., 2013). In South Africa, relationships with older people and dating older people for financial benefits and to keep and maintain a rich lifestyle is a normalised behaviour (Thobejane et al., 2017). In the context of online platforms, where children often seek validation, attention, and social connections, perpetrators exploit these desires by presenting themselves as peers or individuals who understand and can fulfil their needs (Heal & Gladman, 2017). By leveraging the child's social motivations and desire for acceptance, perpetrators increase the perceived benefits of the interaction while reducing the perceived costs, making the child more susceptible to their grooming tactics (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020).

Additionally, social exchange theory highlights the importance of social norms and expectations in shaping behaviour (Cook et al., 2013). In some cases, children may lack awareness of the potential risks associated with online interactions or may be influenced by societal norms that discourage distrust or suspicion (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). Perpetrators exploit these norms and the child's limited understanding to manipulate their perceptions and maintain control (De Santisteban et al., 2018).

In summary, social exchange theory provides insights into the dynamics of child sexual grooming and solicitation in online platforms. By manipulating the perceived rewards and costs, perpetrators exploit vulnerable children and establish power imbalances within the relationship. Understanding these processes can inform prevention efforts by raising awareness about the tactics used by perpetrators and empowering children to recognise and report potential or existing grooming situations. The social exchange theory has been utilised in child sexual solicitation by Chiu et al. (2018), the researcher used social exchange theory to show perpetrators of sexual solicitation and groomers use self-disclosure to encourage the respondent to share their own personal information which enhance a cycle of self-disclosure and enhance participation in social relationship. The theory has also been utilised by

Blokland et al. (2024) to gain insights the extent to which social exchange theory can explain members continued contribution to the child sexual abuse member forum-members of darknet. Exchange of sexual materials through sexting is associated with online sexual grooming (Hernandez et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the chapter has provided an in-depth understanding of what child sexual grooming is, the prevalence, perception, risks factors, groomers characteristics and the strategies employed to groom, prepare and abuse a child. Also, the literature has shown the impact of child sexual grooming and solicitation to the affected child. To sum up, the social exchange theory has been utilised to show how the grooming strategies are employed to enable the trust building and relationships building between the perpetrators of grooming and the targeted child.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

The chapter introduces, describes, and justifies the research methods used in the study. This study aims to understand youth perceptions of child sexual grooming and solicitation. First, the research paradigm will be highlighted. The sampling and recruitment process, data collection and analysis will be subsequently explained. Finally, the chapter will shed light on how the study-maintained trustworthiness and reflect on the ethical considerations employed throughout the research study.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research approach to explore young people's perspectives of their experiences of sexual grooming and solicitation. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate due to its focus on meaning in context, aiming to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and construct their world. It enables an examination of the meaning attributed to the phenomenon, facilitating an understanding of lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Wertz, 2011; Willig, 2013a). Experiences of sexual grooming are subjective in nature; therefore, the qualitative research design is more suited as it allows the study to capture the quality and structure of experiences as expressed by participants (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015; Willig, 2013a). Understanding the nuanced dynamics of online child sexual grooming and solicitation necessitated an exploration of the meaning participants ascribe to these experiences in their own words (Merriam, 2014).

The methodology employed in this study was tailored to align with the research aims, objectives, and questions. The central research question of the study was formulated as follows: "What are the perceptions of youth on online child sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa?" The research questions were derived from the central research question to address the research objectives effectively. These objectives included:

1. To understand young peoples' experiences of online sexual grooming in South Africa.

2. To gain an in-depth understanding of the risks that render youth vulnerable to online sexual grooming and solicitation.

3. To comprehend the coping resources available to youth following exploitation through online sexual grooming and solicitation.

According to Willig (2021), qualitative research aims to produce three types of knowledge. A realist knowledge seeks to generate knowledge that captures and reflects as truthful as possible something that is happening in the real world, in the belief that there are processes that are social or psychological nature that exists and can be identified. The social construction of knowledge is concerned with how people construct versions of reality through the use of language. Discourses and the phenomenological approach to knowledge include the subjective experiences of research participants; this type of knowledge production aims to produce knowledge about the subjective experiences of research participants.

The qualitative research study adopted a phenomenological approach within the interpretive paradigm. To understand the nuanced dynamics of child sexual grooming and solicitation, we need to understand the meanings participants attach to these experiences in their own words (Merriam, 2014), as well as the discourses and practices of this phenomenon, hence the use of a phenomenological research design (Spraitz et al., 2018; Trainor & Graue, 2013).

The phenomenological design focuses on the lived experiences of the target population, specifically the youth who have experienced online child sexual grooming and solicitation (Creswell, 2014). The study took a phenomenological stance by acknowledging participants' unique experiences, meanings, and realities of their lived experiences with online child sexual grooming and solicitation. According to Creswell (2014), participants

seek an understanding of the world in which they live. The interpretivist paradigm allowed the researcher to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. The selected interpretive phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study as it facilitated an understanding of how participants attribute meaning to their subjective experiences of online sexual grooming and solicitation (Dibley et al., 2020).

According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), qualitative research is based on the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes a subjectivist epistemology. It states that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed and that these can be accessed in numerous ways. On the other hand, quantitative research is based on the positivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is objective, and that knowledge can be discovered impartially as meaning resides in objects and not the consciousness of the researcher. The researcher's role is to obtain the meaning attached to language without influencing them in any way (Scotland, 2012). The interpretivist paradigm allowed the researcher to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. The selected interpretive phenomenological research design was fitting for this study as it facilitated an understanding of how participants attribute meaning to their subjective experiences of online sexual grooming and solicitation (Dibley et al., 2020).

Participants

The primary objective of this study was to provide detailed information on the lived experiences of online sexual grooming and solicitation as experienced by young people who used the Internet during their childhood years. The study sought to comprehend the emotions the children experienced and identify factors contributing to varying vulnerability levels. Conducting interviews with children presents logistical and ethical challenges compared to similar activities with adults. To address these challenges, the study was designed to interview young adults aged 18 to 25 years who had experienced child sexual grooming and

solicitation during their childhood. This exclusionary tactic was primarily used to facilitate the research process. The study further delved into the lived experiences of individuals self-identifying as having endured online sexual grooming and solicitation during their childhood. The study's objectives were aligned with the research aim of understanding young people's perceptions of experiences related to online child sexual grooming. By gathering data from a sample of young adults who experienced child sexual grooming and solicitation during their childhood, insights into their experiences of online sexual approaches as children were provided. The research process undertaken in this study played a critical role in establishing and implementing the necessary procedures to ensure compliance with guidelines for the equitable treatment of participants who contributed their time and experiences to the project.

Sampling and Sampling Technique

The participants for the research were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling is a sampling method that involves selecting individuals or groups of people who have knowledge of or have experienced the phenomenon of interest, while snowball sampling is where the participants are recruited through other people with similar experiences or who know people with similar experiences (Patton, 2002). The purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria after the study's advertisement was posted on the social media platform, Facebook. In addition, the snowball recruitment strategy was used after the community intermediary first introduced the first participants to the researcher, and thereafter, the volunteer participant helped to recruit the other participants. The community intermediary met the researcher when she was advertising the study in person on the streets of Sunnyside, she seems interested in the topic and mentioned that she knows some of the girls who had similar experience, she offered to help in the recruitment.

The participants deemed appropriate for the research project were those who indicated that they were subjected to sexual grooming and/or solicitation by an adult when they were under the age of 18. The study excluded participants who are undergoing psychological treatment after having experienced of online grooming. The participants were thus purposefully recruited to ensure they meet both inclusion and exclusion criteria; they were recruited based on having similar experiences with the phenomenon under study (Hartwig, 2014; Willig, 2008). The study used eight participants according to the phenomenological research design guidelines (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The aim of the study was not to generalise the findings but to focus on gaining extensive insight into the phenomenon through participants' accounts of their experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014).

Recruitment Procedure

The recruitment process for the study commenced after the researcher received ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria. Initially, an advertisement was posted on Facebook. The advertisement contained information about the phenomenon under investigation, the rights of the participants, the data storage procedure and the contact details of the researcher, supervisor, and co-supervisor. Only one participant was recruited using the free Facebook advertisement. The advertisement was aligned to the purpose, inclusion, and exclusion criteria for participation in the study in order to target those who experienced the phenomenon of online sexual grooming and solicitation. Those who expressed willingness to participate were screened for suitability through phone calls. During these calls, the researcher explained the research topic, aims, and objectives to ensure the participants' understanding.

In addition, the researcher informed participants that their information would be kept confidential, and that their names and any identifiable information would be anonymised so

that no one could identify them. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any point during the research process (Wiles, 2013). They were also provided with the contact information of a clinical psychologist who would offer them psychological help if remembering their experience caused them distress.

Once participants confirmed their understanding, they provided their email addresses, and the researcher shared via email the participants' information sheet (Appendix A) for their perusal and informed consent (Appendix B) for them to sign indicating their willingness to participate in the study. After the participants read and understood the document, the researcher allowed them to ask any questions that they may have about the study (Flick, 2018). Consent forms (Appendix B) were signed once they understood the content of the participant's information sheet (Appendix A) (Flick, 2018; Wiles, 2013). Once participants signed and returned their informed consent by email, this indicated their informed agreement to participate. Subsequently, the researcher arranged for online interviews using Microsoft Teams and with the participants' consent recorded the interviews.

The interviews commenced after each participant had an opportunity to ask questions about the research study and were answered satisfactorily by the researcher, and the consent form was signed and emailed to the researcher. Then the time and date for the interview was set according to the participant's availability.

Data Collection

Following the principles of phenomenological research, the data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews (Josselson, 2013). Semi-structured interviews resemble real conversations, where the researcher asks a single question about the topic of

interest, and the interviewee responds freely, with the interviewer following up on relevant points (Bryman et al., 2022).

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide that consisted of open-ended questions prepared by the researcher before the interviews (Flick, 2018). The interview guide provided a brief list of memory prompts for the unstructured interview questions (Bryman et al., 2022). While semi-structured interviews are more time-consuming compared to structured interviews (Willig, 2008), they allow the researcher to probe participants' responses and seek clarification regarding their lived experiences.

Before commencing the interviews, the researcher obtained ethics clearance from the University of Pretoria, and informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interview process, ensuring they were fully informed about their participation's potential risks and benefits (Flick, 2018).

The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, with the researcher asking questions and the participants providing immediate responses. The choice of the method was based on the participant's ability to access and use technology (a laptop) to sign the consent and to attend online interviews. On average, each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes per participant (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Half the participants were interviewed online, while the other half were interviewed in person and recorded on the researcher's mobile phone, with the recording then downloaded and stored on a laptop.

Only the researcher and the supervisor knew the participants' identities and personal contact details for communication purposes. Identifying information was stored on a stand-alone computer with restricted access, limited to the researcher. Each participant was assigned a false name (a pseudonym) used throughout the transcription and analysis process. Transcribed interviews were carefully reviewed to remove any identifying information, such as names, locations, and descriptions of places and people, ensuring the anonymity of the

interview content. Attention was also given to language or conversational style that might be recognisable to others known to the participant. Additionally, if a participant used repeated phrases or pragmatic markers within a conversation, these were highlighted for future reference in case the quotes were used in the analysis.

Interviews were recorded on a passcode-protected laptop, and precautions were taken to address data risks during storage and transfer from the interview location to the researcher's workplace. The data were transcribed and stored in a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. To ensure data security, interview recordings and subsequent transcriptions were stored in an encrypted and password-protected folder.

The interviews were guided by open-ended questions, such as: "Have you experienced any issues related to online sexual grooming or solicitation during your adolescence?" For Transition A (Demographic Questions): "Let me begin with some questions about yourself". These questions enabled the building of rapport as the participants were invited to discuss their personal information, which increased confidence and openness to discuss their experiences (Gilbert, 2008). For Transition B: "I would like to move to questions about your experience of online child sexual grooming and solicitation". In this section the discussion is about their understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation, their experience, risks factors and how it impacted on their life. To conclude the participants was given an opportunity to ask questions or add any other information that they wanted. The questions were designed as a guide to encourage participants to share their experiences freely and without coercion.

Data Analysis

The data was gathered from the participants through the open-ended interviews and transcribed by the researcher after each interview (Flick, 2018). This process helped the

researcher become familiar with the data. The data were analysed using an interpretative thematic analysis, a methodological analysis in qualitative research that focuses on formulating emergent themes and expands from mere descriptive to a more interpretative approach. Interpretative thematic analysis enabled the researcher to make sense of the experiences of the participants collectively. Interpretative thematic analysis is appropriate for the research question because it is flexible in terms of epistemological viewpoints and diverse research questions (Willig & Rogers, 2017).

Interpretative thematic analysis, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifies, analyses, and reports patterns or themes within the data and then interprets various aspects of the research topic using these. Thematic analysis examines what is said rather than how it was said (Bryman et al., 2022). The questions in the interview guide acted as a guide when coding the data set for themes. The analysis involved searching across the data set through the interviews to find repeated patterns of meaning or themes.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), interpretative thematic analysis comprises six steps. The first step is familiarisation with the data, and at this stage the researcher engaged with the data that were gathered through interviews. The researcher read and re-read the data set to familiarise themselves and search for meanings and patterns. During this step, the researcher noted coding ideas. Coding is the process of labelling, categorising, and organising data into a meaningful group to facilitate analysis (Bryman et al., 2022).

The next phase was generating codes as identified by Braune and Clarke (2006). In this phase, the researcher engaged in the process of producing the initial codes from the data which appeared relevant to the research questions. The data were coded manually by writing notes on Microsoft Word highlighting the potential patterns. Once the initial codes were identified, they were matched with data extracts that demonstrated the code. Many potential codes were identified at this stage.

The next phase in the analysis was searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase occurred after the data were coded and collated as it refocused the analysis at the broader level of themes rather than codes. During this step, the researcher sorted the previously identified codes into potential themes and collated all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. To facilitate organisation, the codes were systematically arranged in a table format alongside their concise descriptions. Subsequently, various methods of theme identification were employed iteratively until a sense of confidence was established in the emergent themes. Some codes that were insufficient to be classified as main themes were classified as subthemes. Many subthemes were joined together to form main themes. The main themes were informed by their relationship to the research questions, aims and objectives of the project. Every main theme identified was defined, and the codes that were collated to form them were listed including their extracts.

Reviewing themes is the next phase in the analysis, where the researcher refined the themes that were identified in the previous stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, themes that did not have enough data to support them were removed, and themes that had similar interpretations were grouped. Other themes were broken into separate themes as they had different messages that could not be classified together. This was to ensure that the themes were coherent yet maintained clear and identifiable distinctions. During this stage, the researcher read all the themes, subthemes, codes and extracts to ensure that they form a coherent pattern.

Defining and naming themes was the subsequent phase where the researcher defined the themes that was represented in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this stage the researcher collated the extracts for each theme and organised them into a coherent and internally consistent account with an accompanying narrative. Identifying what is of interest in each theme and why was important. Each theme identified highlighted the story that the

researcher intended to talk about in the data in relation to the research question in order to ensure there is little overlap between themes. Finally, the researcher ensured that each theme was defined, which involved describing their scope and content. The names given to themes were concise and gave a sense of what the theme was about.

The final phase was producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The report of the findings begins after the themes have been refined and defined in the previous phase. The purpose of this stage is to tell the readers the story of the data in a way that convinces them of the merit and validity of the analysis. The researcher allocated each defined and refined theme with codes and extracts that help tell a coherent story, and this is described in the Results and Discussion chapters.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is a fundamental concern, encompassing the researcher's assurance of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Maree, 2020). Qualitative researchers evaluate the quality of their work based on the entire research process including data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the findings (Flick, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the research findings can be applied to other settings and contexts using different participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Research studies typically have a defined scope, which aids in determining the applicability across various contexts (Maree, 2020). To increase transferability, the researcher took several steps: ensuring that participants interviewed had experienced online sexual grooming and solicitation; providing detailed descriptions of the context, participants, and research design

used in the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Maree, 2020); and by providing a detailed description of the entire research process, and particularly the data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility in research is established through the active involvement and encouragement of participants in the data collection, such as through interviews, which allow them to provide feedback on the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A study's credibility is further enhanced when it is rigorously conducted, and the insights resonate with readers, other researchers, and practitioners in the field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To bolster the study's credibility, the researcher held frequent debriefing sessions with the study supervisor and maintained reflective notes throughout the research process (Maree, 2020). In addition, the study employed well-established research methods, a research design appropriate to the research question, and a theoretical framework aligned with both the research questions and methods (Willig, 2021).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research findings. It involves ensuring that the findings, interpretation, and recommendations are well-supported by the data and the participants' experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To achieve this, the researcher included verbatim quotes of the participants' experiences in the presentation of the findings, which helped to substantiate the study findings and ensure their voices were accurately represented. In addition, the researcher maintained an audit trail, documenting the steps from the commencement of the research project to the dissemination of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Maree, 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the study's findings are based on participants' experiences rather than the researcher's personal motivations, biases, or interests (Maree, 2020). To ensure confirmability, the researcher kept a reflection diary documenting pre-existing understandings of the phenomenon under investigation and tracked how these beliefs have influenced and evolved throughout the research process (Jason & Glenwick, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, an audit trail was maintained to document the whole research process, including all the steps from the proposal's inception to the dissemination of the findings (Maree, 2020). In addition, the researcher provided verbatim participants quotes in the findings, which allowed the reader to interpret participants perspectives directly, which helped to avoid imposing the researcher's interpretations (Maree, 2020).

Reflexivity

To help the readers understand my journey as a researcher, I will delve into my research journey through reflexivity, the personal, interpersonal, methodological and contextual reflexivity. I will include considerations and decisions made from conception of the research project up to the final conclusions of the thesis.

The choice of my research topic was influenced by personal and societal factors. Firstly, the personal experience of one of my closest friends who survived child sexual grooming underscored the significance of investigating this issue. After completing my honours degree in psychology at the University of Pretoria I volunteered with a group of psychologists based in Pretoria where I was tasked with creating awareness on sexual grooming during a mental health awareness month. Understanding of the process of grooming, led me to a realization that it is difficult to detect, and offenders often goes unpunished due to the manipulation used. This therefore attracted me to the topic of child

sexual grooming. Moreover, as a mother of three daughters residing in a foreign country, I am acutely aware of the high crime rates, particularly concerning gender-based violence, prevalent in South Africa. The frequent reports of sexual abuse in South Africa heightened my concerns for the safety and well-being of my own children. These factors collectively drove my decision to delve into the subject matter, aiming to contribute to the understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa, ultimately with the intention of safeguarding my daughters.

At the early stages of the research journey and the choice of the philosophy of the research, I knew that understanding child sexual grooming is not out there, and that could be objectively measured as experiences are both contextual and subjective in nature. Taking the stance that knowledge about child sexual grooming and solicitation could be socially constructed by the participants in collaboration with me as a researcher was influenced by my prior knowledge of research methods in social sciences. To attain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, a qualitative research methodology was employed. This approach is designed to elicit rich and detailed information, facilitating a nuanced comprehension of the complexities surrounding child sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa. By employing qualitative methods, the researcher sought to shed light on the underlying dynamics and intricacies of this issue.

As a researcher, I approached the field with a presupposition that young children are specifically targeted and subjected to sexual abuse. This presupposition was partly influenced by my direct observations during my stay in South Africa, where I witnessed older men (over 18 years old) driving around and initiating conversations with young girls adorned in school uniforms. It is important to note, however, that despite making concerted efforts to include both men and women in the study, most men contacted for screening did not meet the

predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria established for this research. This limitation may affect the breadth and depth of the study's findings.

In the field, conducting a study of a sensitive nature, according to my experience as a researcher, has shown that community members are best suited to assist in the recruitment process because they are more aware of people's experiences, and people would be more willing to participate and share their experiences when approached and introduced to the researcher by a community member. This observation shows that researchers should use community gatekeepers to create a trusting relationship which will help in building rapport. In addition, the researchers should be flexible when conducting interviews as the proposed data collection methods can change depending on the targeted people. In this regard, this study initially proposed using an online platform, however, some participants agreed to online interviews, while others preferred face-to-face interviews due to a lack of access to a smartphone or computer, a poor network or a lack of an internet connection. The online interviews could thus not be implemented consistently leading to difficulties in the data collection process. Therefore, the researcher should be flexible in the field and adjust depending on the participants' context.

The data gathered from the participants cannot be understood without considering the power dynamic between me as the researcher, my supervisors and my relationship with the participants. As a researcher the questions that were asked were pre-determined to answer the objectives of the research guided by my prior knowledge of the literature on child sexual grooming and solicitation could have influenced data gathered. It is to be understood however that even if the interview questions were pre-determined, I gave the participants a chance to elaborate on their responses and asked questions to be able to understand them better to avoid misrepresentation of their experiences. In addition, the collaboration between me and my supervisor helped understand the participants narratives better through back-and-forth

feedback with my supervisors helped me in noticing some instance where I might have misunderstood the participants which further helped eliminate my prior biases and prejudices.

Finally, this thesis can only be understood better if one considers the context of the participants and that of the researcher. Personally, as a foreign student, I was emotionally and psychologically affected by the stories and narrative of the participants. I could not understand how an adult male could deceive and sexually abuse a child and get away with the crime scot-free. One case specifically made me feel very bad as the headteacher of a school sexually groomed and abused several students and got away with it for a long time. This made me realize that the grooming offenders are people within the community and therefore to eliminate and protect children from the abuse, there is a need to involve the whole community in the preventative measures. Therefore, I hope in the future I can expand the research throughout South Africa so that I can conduct empirical research that bring real change to the communities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics and Approvals

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential for participants to disclose information of criminal offences or experience vulnerability during the data collection process, it was imperative to adhere to ethical guidelines and obtain the appropriate approvals. To ensure alignment with recommended best practices, the research design was developed in accordance with the guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2020). Approval for the research project was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Humanity Department at the University of Pretoria, with the ethical approval reference number 15319688 (HUM023/0823). This approval approved the proposed study ethical considerations that will

be followed when conducting the research, including the implementation of appropriate mitigation processes to protect participants and their personal data, as well as to minimise risk, ensure informed consent, maintain confidentiality, and establish an informed recruitment process.

Informed Consent and Voluntary Withdrawal

When conducting research on sensitive subjects, difficult choices often arise, and it is essential to ensure that the benefits of the study outweigh any potential harm to the scientific community, the public and the participants (Wiles, 2013). In the case of this project, which focused on victims of online child sexual grooming and solicitation, obtaining full informed consent from the participants was essential. The consent process was carefully designed to provide participants with comprehensive information about the research topic, aims, data storage, confidentiality and anonymity, and overall objectives of the research (Wiles, 2013). This process aimed to establish an open and trusting relationship between the researcher and the interviewees (Willig, 2021). In addition, the participants were clearly informed about the nature of their involvement, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Gilbert, 2008).

Confidentiality, Privacy, and Anonymity

To protect participants from potential future ramifications, their identifying details, such as names and other identifiable information, were kept confidential. Furthermore, the participants' names and other identifiable information were anonymised; each participant was assigned a different pseudonym (Wiles, 2013). The hard copy of the data will be securely stored in a locked storage at the Psychology Department for 15 years, accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. The data that does not include any identifiable information will be

stored on the University of Pretoria's research data repository and platform (<https://researchdata.up.ac.za>) for 10 years. The University of Pretoria manages, maintains, and controls the platform.

Avoid Causing Harm to the Participants

Considering the sensitive nature of the study and the potential discomfort participants may experience when disclosing uncomfortable information, it was crucial to ensure their well-being throughout the study. To achieve this the researcher provided comprehensive information about the study to ensure that the participants were well informed about the research, their participation, and to ensure that participants were competent to give voluntary consent and thus uphold ethical standards (Gilbert, 2008). In addition, to protect participants, the data gathered from the participants were anonymised, with all their personal information was anonymised to promote confidentiality and avoid any harm to the participants (Dixon & Quirke, 2018).

Doing Justice to Participants

During the data analysis, the researcher ensured that the participants' experiences were accurately represented by asking probing questions whenever their statements were unclear. This approach helped prevent misrepresentation and ensured that the participants' meanings were preserved during the analysis (Flick, 2018). In addition, the researcher worked to build trust with the participants and encouraged their voluntarily participation, which ensured that their experiences with sexual grooming were effectively integrated into the scientific body of knowledge and contributed to promoting social justice (Guishard et al., 2018). In addition, several measures (as previously described) were taken during recruitment and data collection to ensure that participants were treated ethically throughout the process.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter focuses on describing the findings of the study of the youth experiences of child sexual grooming and solicitation. It starts by providing an overview of the study participants, followed by an exploration of the themes that were identified through the data analysis. Each theme and associated sub-themes are briefly discussed, with quotations from the participants' narratives included as evidence to support the findings.

Description of the Participants

Eight women were interviewed in total, and the interviews lasted between 26 and 60 minutes. The participants' ages when the grooming occurred ranged between 11 and 17 years old, with a mean average of 15 years (see Table 1).

Table 1

Study Sample Demographic Details (n = 8)

Name (pseudonym)	Current age (years)	Sex	Age when grooming occurred (years)	First contact with the perpetrator	City of residence
Kaya	21	Female	14	Face-to-face	Tshwane, Gauteng Province
Nicoline	20	Female	17	Face-to-face	Tshwane, Gauteng Province
Lesedi	22	Female	17	Face-to-face	Tshwane, Gauteng Province

Bonolo	25	Female	15	Online	Tshwane, Gauteng Province
Elna	21	Female	16	Online	Tshwane, Gauteng Province
Abena	26	Female	11	Online	Johannesburg, Gauteng Province
Anathi	20	Female	16	Face-to-face	Tshwane, Gauteng Province
Edith	23	Female	17	Online	Tshwane, Gauteng Province

Note: n= represents the number of participants.

Kaya: Kaya, a 14-year-old girl, was approached by a stranger in a mall. The perpetrator, who was 20 years old, expressed a desire to befriend her and requested her phone number. Through phone communication, the perpetrator engaged in grooming tactics such as flattery and material gifts, including shoes and money. By the age of 15, Kaya experienced sexual abuse on multiple occasions at the hands of the perpetrator. By the time she turned 16, she became pregnant. Furthermore, during her late teens, Kaya was sexually abused by the high school principal, who enticed her and her friends with alcohol and money. This pattern of abuse persisted into her early adulthood.

Nicoline: At the age of 17, Nicoline encountered the perpetrator, a 23-year-old college student, who addressed her using endearments like "sugar" and expressed a desire to obtain her phone number. After exchanging contact information, the perpetrator continued the grooming process through WhatsApp. Grooming strategies included complimenting Nicoline's physical attributes, emphasising her body, specifically, her breasts and buttocks,

during phone conversations. The perpetrator also bestowed her with gifts and provided McDonald's takeaways. In secluded settings, he escalated the abuse by kissing Nicoline while fondling her buttocks. Over time, he convinced her to visit his apartment, which was in the same building as hers, where the sexual abuse persisted on a weekly basis for an extended period.

Lesedi: At the age of 17, Lesedi was attending a friend's birthday party when she encountered a stranger who approached one of her friends and expressed his romantic interest. He offered to provide food and drinks, and the group agreed without much consideration. The perpetrator, approximately 28 years old at the time, requested Lesedi's phone number and subsequently engaged in a grooming process involving gifts, money, and flattering comments. Upon meeting in person, he expressed the desire for sexual intercourse despite Lesedi's refusal. He manipulated her by reminding her of the financial investments he had made in their relationship, coercing her to comply. Additionally, he compelled Lesedi to promise not to disclose their relationship to anyone and exerted control over her movements. Eventually, Lesedi managed to escape from the perpetrator's control due to his increasingly restrictive behaviour.

Bonolo: Bonolo, at the age of 15, received a friend request on Facebook from an older individual who was a college student at the time. They were familiar with each other from the neighbourhood where Bonolo used to reside. After engaging in online conversations, they decided to meet in person. However, upon meeting, the perpetrator immediately initiated sexual contact by touching Bonolo's breasts and engaging in kissing. On multiple occasions, he introduced vaginal penetration with his fingers during their encounters. Although there was an encounter when he almost sexually abused her in a room, the presence of another individual interrupted the situation. Subsequently, she never reencountered the perpetrator.

Elna: Elna, aged 16, received a message from a stranger expressing fondness for her. The individual introduced themselves as a 45-year-old when they eventually met in person. They engaged in frequent conversations where the perpetrator employed flattery regarding Elna's physical appearance, emphasising his appreciation for her body and beauty. During video calls, he concealed his face but showcased his luxurious house and furnishings. Over time, the perpetrator escalated the abuse by requesting that Elna undress while he watched on camera. Initially declining, Elna eventually succumbed and then continued by engaging in self-masturbation at the perpetrator's request. This persisted for several months, leading to an addiction to pleasing herself. Subsequently, the perpetrator proposed an in-person meeting and proceeded to sexually abuse Elna on a weekly basis for over a year.

Abena: Abena experienced three instances of grooming. In the first instance, when she was just 11 years old, a stranger contacted her through the Mix-it app, commonly used for chatting among young individuals at the time. After conversing, the perpetrator proposed a meeting in a private location. However, Abena insisted on meeting near her home under the supervision of her cousin. Upon meeting, she discovered the individual was an older man and promptly fled. In response, the perpetrator posted explicit messages on her app wall, expressing his attraction to her body and a desire to see her again. Disturbed and frightened, Abena blocked him, terminating further communication.

In the second instance, while in high school, Abena was offered a ride home by the perpetrator, whom she had encountered before. The first occasion was uneventful, but during the second encounter, the perpetrator unexpectedly locked the car doors and began touching her thighs. Momentarily stunned, Abena regained her composure and caused a disturbance, demanding to be released from the vehicle. Fortunately, the perpetrator relented, allowing her to escape. Despite avoiding further encounters with him, Abena experienced significant fear and reluctance to attend school, resulting in a temporary absence.

The third and final instance occurred while Abena was in high school. A 20-year-old individual persistently followed her, making comments about her body. Despite her attempts to ignore him, the perpetrator's behaviour continued.

Anathi: At the age of 16, Anathi encountered the perpetrator while walking home from school. The perpetrator, a 20-year-old black male, approached her and proposed a friendship. Given her lack of friends, Anathi accepted and exchanged phone numbers. Subsequently, the perpetrator engaged in grooming behaviour over the phone, employing flattery and buying her gifts. Eventually, he sexually abused her. As time passed, he exerted control over Anathi's movements, forbidding her from meeting with friends. If she defied his commands, he responded with anger and physical abuse. On one occasion, he violently assaulted and verbally abused her in the presence of another woman.

Edith: Edith, a 17-year-old girl, received a friend request from a male stranger on Facebook. They began chatting frequently, with him showing a keen interest in her life. The conversation eventually moved to WhatsApp, where they continued to communicate. Over time, he asked to meet her in person, and they met multiple times in malls. He would treat her to meals and snacks and would give her money upon request. After several in-person meet-ups, he asked for them to go and relax in his home. Upon arrival at his home, he asked her to go to the bedroom, where they were engaged in sexual encounters several times. After the sexual encounters, she became pregnant. When he found out that she was pregnant, he reduced communication with her and started giving her excuses that he was travelling out of the country. She was heartbroken, and she mentioned that she felt so sad that she was thinking of committing suicide. Luckily, after the arrival of her baby, she found purpose in her life, and she encouraged herself that she has to let the past go so that she can move on.

Upon analysis of the data, the study identified five themes, namely 1) the youth's understanding of what constitutes child sexual grooming and solicitation, 2) the risks and

vulnerability of young people to child sexual grooming, 3) the grooming characteristics and the grooming strategy used on young people, 4) the experiences of young people after being groomed, and finally 5) the coping strategy the youth employed after experiencing grooming. The five themes and their sub-themes have been outlined in table 2.

Table 2.

Study Findings by Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation	
2. Risk Factors and Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking to strangers and sharing personal information • Absence of parental monitoring • Peer behaviour • Social economic circumstances • Gender
3. Grooming Offenders Characteristics and Grooming Strategies	<p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple relationships • Physical proximity to the participants • Age discrepancy • Abusive behaviour towards the participants <p>Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body validation • Incentives and promise of a future • Desensitization of sexual content and physical touch
4. Experiences of Being Groomed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual interactions

-
- Emotional impact
 - Distorted view of love and relationships
 - Secrecy during and after being groomed
 - Agency

5. Social Support as Coping Mechanism

Theme One: Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation

This theme encapsulates the understanding that the individuals held at the time of the interaction with the groomer about the concepts of sexual grooming and solicitation. It appeared from the narrative of the participants that there was a limited understanding regarding child sexual grooming and solicitation. When asked if they knew what child sexual grooming and solicitation meant and how they understood what constitutes the terms, four of the participants articulated that they did not understand what it meant, as evidenced by Kaya (15 years old), “I do not understand”.

Furthermore, the participants' narratives showed that the participants viewed the interaction with the groomer as a normal relationship between partners. In the participants' experiences, they were dating. Participants regarded the relationship as romantic, built on love and trust, as demonstrated in the following quote:

So, he approached me and told me how much he liked me. As naive as I was, I also fell in love with the person. When we started being in a relationship and then, yeah, that's how it all started. (Nicoline, 17 years old)

The misunderstanding and lack of awareness appeared to render them vulnerable to falling victim to the groomer. This contributed to the risk of being exposed to and influenced by individuals who employ grooming strategies and prolonged engagement with these

individuals. This viewpoint was expressed by six participants, as exemplified by the following quote:

When we went inside the room, I was quite uncomfortable, but you know I really liked this guy. I was looking forward to meeting him after we had been talking for a long time. I kept on telling myself that age is just a number, and so I pushed these thoughts away.

(Elena, 16 years)

In addition, most participants in the study showed a lack of personal experience or prior knowledge regarding sexual solicitation. However, a subset of four participants engaged in discussions pertaining to the concept of sexual solicitation. Among these participants, two expressed that they had not personally encountered instances of sexual solicitation. Despite their limited experience and knowledge, these individuals displayed an awareness of the potential hazards associated with sharing private pictures on the internet. They stated their reluctance to share any personal pictures with strangers. The following statement succinctly captured this sentiment:

In that instance, I would not say I have an experience of having to be asked for pictures that I got blackmailed of; I grew up having told myself that I do not take any nude pictures at all, with a face, without a face. (Bonolo, 15 years)

Even though there was no initial understanding of grooming, some participants had an inclination to set boundaries. This perspective was most clearly conveyed by Anathi (16 years old): “He did, but I said no. I don't take such pictures. That's right because you know I don't trust anyone. I don't trust anyone.”

Theme Two: Risk Factors and Vulnerability

In addition to having limited knowledge of the grooming process, it was evident that the participants displayed similar traits and actions that could be identified as risk factors that

make them more vulnerable to continued interaction with the perpetrators. All eight participants demonstrated difficulty discerning the intentions and purpose of perpetrators who made contact through online platforms or mobile phones. The identified factors include social factors, such as talking and sharing personal information with adult strangers either in person or on an online platform, and environmental factors, such as a lack of parental monitoring, peer behaviour, gender, and physical attributes. The participants willingness to share their information could be that they felt that the relationship with the adult stranger was a good one and beneficial to them.

Engaging in a Conversation and Sharing Personal Information with an Adult Stranger

The participants maintained ongoing and frequent conversations with the grooming perpetrators, primarily through online platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp. These platforms served as a space for perpetrators to identify, select, establish, and maintain connections with their targets. This was displayed in all the participants' narratives and was exemplified by the following quote:

Okay, on Facebook, he just asked me who am I and then I asked him. We introduced ourselves and got to know each other on Facebook. That's when we were chatting and then asking about our lives, where do you live and then something like that. (Edith, 17 years old)

Absence of Parental Monitoring

The degree of parental involvement played an important role. Six participants stated that there was limited parental supervision. This allowed the participants more time and freedom on their mobile phones and social media platforms, contributing to more time spent with the groomer. Moreover, as online communication evolved into in-person meetings, due to the limited parent monitoring, participants could talk and interact with strangers through

their phones and in person. This contributed to the participants encountering situations where the perpetrator could engage in manipulation, as evidenced by Bonolo, (11 years old girl) “They were not checking my online activities yeah even going to go meet him I would sneak. Let me say, I will just sneak out to go meet him”.

In some cases, participants lied to their parents about what and where they were going. This gave the participants time to talk and meet the adult stranger without the awareness of their parents or caregivers. The deception used by the participants facilitated the meetings and interactions to go unnoticed and undisclosed as they were able to meet and interact with the groomers without any parental supervision. This is best represented by the following statement by Edith, (17 years old), “Maybe I am going out, I am going to the mall, I am coming back, or I am going to my other friend, and then I am coming back, I want to see my other friend, and then I will be back”.

Peer Behaviour

The study findings unveiled a prevailing perception among participants that engaging in relationships with older individuals was familiar to their peer group, with friends neither discouraging nor questioning such behaviour. Peer behaviour emerged as a noteworthy environmental influence among four participants that heightened the susceptibility of four participants to becoming targets of sexual grooming. The normalisation and acceptance of this conduct within the peer group underscored the significant impact of peer influence. The shared involvement of peers in similar interactions led participants to downplay the inherent risks and vulnerabilities associated with communicating with and divulging personal contact information to adult strangers. This was best represented by:

First time we tried, and I didn't have that thing, thinking he is old or he's using me, and even for him. Because my friends, they were doing the same thing. They were sleeping

with older people. So, I thought maybe like that's something other children do. I didn't even think about other things. I felt maybe I'm doing like them. (Kaya, 14 years old)

In two instances, their friends actively encouraged participants to engage in such interactions. The participants felt a need to please their friends and fit in, which further motivated them to accept these interactions. This was observed by:

So, he called me, he called my friend, and he told him that I want your friend, and I can buy you guys drinks and food. So, my friend, obviously we are girls, so my friend agreed. So, she came to me, and she told me, hey, there's this other guy, he said he likes you and he's going to buy us drinks and stuff. (Lesedi, 17 years old)

Socio-Economic Circumstances

Socio-economic circumstances were an environmental factor that increased the participants' risks and vulnerability to being groomed. The findings indicate that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to fall victim to the manipulation and strategies employed by the perpetrators of grooming. Monetary gifts and other material items provided by the perpetrators of grooming were seen as a welcome incentive by all the participants, as they were items, they would not have been able to afford otherwise. The material support provided by the groomer creates a dependency among the participants, increasing their vulnerability and putting them at higher risk of further grooming. This was seen among six participants, Kaya (14) explains "Yeah, I loved him, and he was buying me things. So, I thought, maybe he loved me. Also, because when I was pregnant, he still bought me gifts."

Gender

The findings indicate that both the gender of the participants and their perceived physical attributes played a pivotal role in their being targeted for child sexual grooming and

solicitation, this was seen in seven participant's narrative. Participants reported that being a female contributed to their constant worry and vulnerability. In their narratives, participants stated that being born a girl in their neighbourhoods was a risk factor.

Aah, for me, I feel like, it is not supposed to be a risk factor. But as a young girl in our country. Growing up and you have men around you, and you have a beautiful body; they will try and convince you much more beyond that. Aah, your body is beautiful, you deserve to be touched like this. (Bonolo, 15 years old)

Furthermore, participants experienced worry and anxiety every time they had to leave their homes. Their concerns revolved around the safety of their commute to and from home, as well as their safety when walking alone or with peers in the community. They described how these feelings also influenced how they carried themselves and their choice of clothing. The feelings of worry and anxiety were best expressed by:

Being a girl in South Africa lately it is just dangerous because a lot can happen to you. According to my experience, I was scared of men in general, and I just did not feel safe being around male strangers, I'd say. When you leave the house, you would be worried of whether the item of clothing you are wearing is revealing to that extent for someone to take advantage of you and say such things. (Abena, 17 years old)

Theme Three: Grooming Offender Characteristics and Grooming Strategies

The thematic analysis revealed several common characteristics that the groomers shared, as described by the participants. A pattern of grooming strategies also emerged from the participants' narratives. The common characteristics of groomers included having a higher perceived socioeconomic status than the participants, engaging in multiple romantic relationships during the period of grooming, potentially living in close proximity to their victims, being considerably older than the participants, and exhibiting abusive behaviour

towards the participants. Groomers commonly used grooming strategies such as body validation, incentives, making a promise of a future together, and sexualisation.

Grooming Offender Characteristics

Perceived higher socioeconomic status. The findings showed that the grooming perpetrators appeared financially secure in all the participant's narratives, which likely enhanced their allure for the participants. They gave the participants material gifts such as money, airtime, trips and sneakers. These material gifts had a significant psychological impact. Providing the participants access to things that they might not have otherwise. The groomer reinforced the participants' dependency on them and encouraged them to spend more time with the groomer. This was best demonstrated by:

We met for lunch, for lunch and he explained how he wanted to take care of me and all these stuffs, and I agree because since I feel that really, I think he has money because he bought us drinks. (Lesedi, 17 years old)

Multiple relationships. The findings also revealed that the grooming perpetrators were involved in other romantic relationships during the grooming period. Four participants reported that the grooming offenders were grooming other adolescents simultaneously, while one perpetrator was married with children. The groomer's behaviour appeared to have escalated from initially charming to increasingly forceful as time progressed. Participants discovered this only after they had already been groomed and abused, leading to them feeling betrayed. The sense of betrayal and hurt further demonstrated the participants' lack of understanding about the true nature of their relationship with the groomers. This was best illustrated by:

Two months down the line, it did not end well, we were already fighting, he was cheating on me with girls, so he just changed, he was not treating me the way he was before like we

had sex. So yeah, that's when I realized that he never really liked me. (Nicoline, 17 years old)

Physical proximity to the participants. Half of the participants' narratives revealed that the groomers lived geographically close to their homes. Four grooming offenders lived in close proximity with the targeted child. Some lived in the same building, while others lived in the same neighbourhood. Their close proximity to the participants likely facilitated the groomer's ability to identify vulnerable children. In addition, proximity might have provided opportunities to strategize the most effective approach for grooming and preparing the targeted child for abuse. This was best demonstrated by Nicoline (17 years old), "So, we lived in the same flat. I was coming back from school, and he was wearing blue jeans".

Abusive behaviour. It appeared that the groomers' behaviour escalated from initially charming to increasingly forceful over time. When participants resisted the demands of the groomers, the perpetrators used threats and controlling behaviours. The use of abusive behaviour was seen among four of the participant's narratives and was designed to coerce compliance from the participants to do and act as demanded by the groomer, and the participants who, in fear of further angering the groomer, complied with their demands. The controlling behaviour included instructing participants to distance themselves from friends and to be available whenever the groomer asked.

Along the way, he started to be insecure. Like, he would not allow me to go out and have fun with my friends. Like, he only wants me to be around him only. And then, even if I raise my problem, he wouldn't listen to me because he wants me to do exactly what he wants me to do. So, there was this time I came home late and then I was with my friends. Then he took my phone and searched it. Then he was starting to act like strange. He was busy questioning me. Why do I come home late? I was being honest with him, that I was with my friends. He took my phone and broke it. (Anathi, 16 years old)

Age discrepancy. The findings showed that the grooming offenders were adults and significantly older than all the participants, with age differences ranging from five years to over 20 years. The youngest sexual perpetrator was a 20-year-old male targeting a 14-year-old girl, while the oldest was over 45 years old and involved with a 16-year-old girl. The substantial age disparity contributed to a power imbalance in the relationship, allowing the perpetrators, through manipulation, to control the interactions. This power imbalance further increased the participants' vulnerability, contributing to their confusion about the nature of the relationship they were involved in and leading to their victimisation. This was observed by the following statement:

After a while, he asked that we meet; we met in those places where people pay to use a room per hour, and he paid for a few hours. When we met, I realized that he was an old man (45 years old), and this made me uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. He could be my father or my grandpa, I mean he was more than twice my age. When we went inside the room, I was quite uncomfortable. (Elena, 16 years old)

Grooming Strategies

The findings show that the groomers cultivated trust with the participants through strategic and deliberate actions. This manipulative behaviour was aimed at creating an emotional bond, which the groomer later exploited to coerce the participant into unwanted and abusive sexual activities. The participants' narratives showed that perpetrators of grooming used strategies such as body validation, incentives, and sexualisation. By employing these strategies, the grooming offenders were able to maintain the targeted adolescents' interest in continued communication, which allowed them to learn more about the participants, determine the best strategies to apply, and how to implement these for the purpose of sexually grooming.

Body validation. The body validation strategy involved objectifying the participant's bodies and using flattery to make them feel good about themselves, thereby encouraging continued interactions and was employed in seven out of eight participants. Groomers would start by complimenting the participants, describing their beauty, and expressing admiration for their bodies. This approach was designed to make the participants feel appreciated and desirable, which increased their eagerness to maintain the relationship. This strategy was used on seven of the participants and is best observed by:

He makes me feel like a woman. Sometimes, he sent me messages like, hi, I like the way your body is. I was thin by the time. I was not thick. He told me that he liked my ass, my body and the way I looked. He liked me, my eyes, the way they are brown, and stuff and he would always compliment me when I'm with him. Like, I always had big boobs. So, he is like, oh my gosh, I like your boobs. (Nicoline, 17 years old)

Incentives and promise of a future. Five participants reported that the groomers used incentives and made promises to create a sense of security and safety. This approach cultivated a stronger emotional bond with the perpetrators, laying the foundation for groomers to have more control in subsequent interactions. Some perpetrators of grooming promised participants a better future, which was particularly enticing given the participants' age and lower socioeconomic status. These factors made the participants more vulnerable to the incentives and promises made by the perpetrators, making them susceptible to the grooming offenders' manipulations. Some of the grooming perpetrators promised the participants a better life than they had by promising to take care of their needs. Groomers manipulated participants into envisioning a more favourable future by offering a vision of a better life and committing to meet their needs. As a result, it became easier for groomers to demand compliance and engage in manipulative behaviours. Four participants were groomed using this strategy, Lesedi (17 years old) and Elna (16 years old) explained respectively, " If I

wanted airtime, he would send me hundreds and a time if I tell him, I do not have taxi fee he would send me money if I said I am sick he would send me money for medication yeah sometimes you like baby let me send you 300, and you can go and spend it however you want okay,” and “We continued to talk frequently, where he would pay me compliment me, and when he video calls me he would show me his house, the house was beautiful, and he would tell me this could be my home, I started imagining me living there. I liked the idea.”

Desensitisation of sexual content and physical touch. The groomer initially introduced sexual topics over the phone, which then escalated to physical interactions. These interactions started with casual sexual touches and progressed to more intimate areas, such as participants’ breasts and buttocks, after meeting in person. This gradual desensitisation aimed to make the participants more comfortable with sexual touch and to test their willingness to engage in sexual activities, this was seen in the narratives of five participants. This was best observed in the following quote:

He asked me to undress, and I did, then he asked me to start touching myself, touching my boobs and putting fingers in my private parts, he also shown me a picture of his penis, and he started touching it, so I did as he requested, he all started touching ourselves, and he came, and I really enjoyed it. (Elena, 16 years old)

Yeah, he was touching me. He was touching me. He was touching my waist, my ass and while kissing. Sorry, what is it ass? My bums. Okay. And then while kissing, he would want to put his finger under. (Nicoline, 17 years old)

Theme Four: Experiences of the Participants

The participants' lack of understanding about child sexual grooming and solicitation, combined with their personal risks and vulnerabilities, and the characteristics and strategies of grooming offenders, led to significant detrimental emotional, physical, and psychological

repercussions. Following the grooming experiences, participants failed to maintain stable connections and concealed their relationships from their parents and carers. They also suffered from chronic sexual assault, experienced emotional trauma, and developed a warped perspective on love and relationships. However, some participants showed a sense of urgency and stopped communicating with the offender.

Sexual Interaction

Several participants reported engaging in sexual interactions with the groomer. Some participants shared that the sexual relationship continued over a period of time, involving multiple sexual interactions. Seven participants defined this interaction as sexual abuse due to the lack of consent.

Well, I did tell him to stop but then he made me feel in such a way that I just let him do it. He did not force me. Like I told him, I am not ready to... let us stop. Then he continued and it was nice, I let him. we started doing it every day until he got tired. (Nicoline, 17 years old)

It appeared that the perpetrators engaged in different types of sexual abuse. One participant reported that the perpetrator inserted his fingers in her panties while he kissed her as she protested, and this was repeated several times as observed by Bonolo, (15 years old) “And throughout the kissing he starts inserting his hands in my panties, I pushed the hand once, twice and the third he said, no relax”.

In another instance, a participant was engaged in sexual interactions with the perpetrator on both an online platform and through physical interaction. The first interaction happened through the webcam in the privacy of her room at home, and the in-person interaction happened at a motel. This was best represented by:

He video-called me and asked me to go into my room and lock it. I did that; I was excited; it was the first time he had done this. So, I went to my room and locked the door, though his camera was facing away. After we engaged in sexual intercourse and then we left the motel, when we were outside, he gave some money, and we parted our way. I liked that he gave me money (Elena, 16 years old).

The findings further show that out of the seven participants who had sexual intercourse with the participants, only one participant reported using protection to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy; two of them were impregnated, as demonstrated by:

Then we started sleeping with each other. We started doing the things. We did not even use protection. I did not even think that I would get pregnant. I did not know anything. I was still young at that time, and now when I think about it, I feel like maybe he took advantage of something. Now I understand that he actually took advantage of me because I still was young, and he was old. (Kaya, 14 years old)

Two of the participants reported that they participated in sexual intercourse because the perpetrators asked them to do it as proof that they loved them. Their participation in the sexual interaction, as requested, could be explained by the participant's lack of understanding of the relationship they had with the perpetrators of grooming. This was best illustrated by Nicoline (17 years old) "As in having sex? He told me he loves me. He is like, prove to me that you love me also. So, from one day to another it went to... No, not just, not in a day".

Beliefs about Love and Relationships

The experience of being groomed influenced the participants' views on love and relationships. Five participants reported having trust issues with their partners. Others reported that their view of the relationship has become transactional, reflecting what they

experienced during the grooming process. Additionally, two participants stated that they struggle to connect with people or be in a relationship. Their grooming experience influenced their approach to relationships, contributing to a pervasive sense of mistrust, as seen in the following quote:

It is difficult for me to trust that people love me and hence I have had problems since then being in relationship. I view relationships as transactional, give or take because this was my experience. This has affected me negatively because I struggle to trust people who want relationship with me. I haven't been able to be in stable relationship. (Elna, 16 years old).

The Emotional Impact

All participants reported a range of emotions associated with their experiences during and after being groomed, including feelings of guilt for engaging with the perpetrator. Most participants felt hurt, rejection, self-blame, insecurity, anxiety, confusion, and a fear of being abandoned. These emotions and reactions were prominent during the interaction with the perpetrator and after the relationship with the groomer ended. This was best illustrated by:

Like, I felt so bad. Like, it was difficult for me. It was difficult for me to speak. Sometimes I was thinking of maybe I should commit suicide but then I was thinking that my life matters. (Edith, 16 years old)

Agency

Five study participants demonstrated their agency by ending their interactions with the perpetrator when it was no longer of benefit to them. The findings showed that when the participants felt uncomfortable or uneasy, they took decisive action to end the conversations and cut off the grooming perpetrators from their lives completely. This demonstrated their ability to use their will and power to end the interactions. This was best observed by:

Okay. So, he first, he, firstly started making comments about my body, right? And then, um, then after, I think a day later, after the conversation, he then started sending explicit pictures. And after receiving the explicit pictures, it was then uncomfortable for me, and then I decided to, I do not know, yeah, delete, yes, delete his contact on the app, and that is when the conversation between me and him stopped. (Abena, 11 years old)

While most study participants ended their interactions with the grooming offenders, three participants did not. There were also three cases where the grooming perpetrators themselves ended the interactions. This led to a range of emotional experiences for these participants as they felt used, humiliated and abandoned. Participants whom the perpetrators discarded after they had sexual interactions were more devastated than those participants who took the initiative to end the relationship themselves. This was illustrated by the following:

After a year, he called me, and he told me that he did not like me anymore and that he does not want to have sex with me anymore. I was heartbroken, I felt terrible. I felt abandoned and I cried a lot, shame I cried too much. (Elna, 16 years old)

Secrecy

According to the participants' narratives, all participants went to great lengths to keep their ongoing interactions with the perpetrators a secret. Some participants used their relatives to lie to their parents or caregivers, while others would sneak out of the house for face-to-face meetings with the grooming offender. This was illustrated best by:

They did not want me to go out. When I go, I will sneak out, you know. Sometimes I'll say, I'm going to my friend to study with her. Then I would go carrying books so that they can believe that I am going to study (Kaya, 14 years old).

Despite all the participants' efforts to conceal their interactions with the perpetrators, two participants were expressly requested by the perpetrators of grooming to keep their

interactions a secret, and this was observed in the following statement by Lesedi, (17 years old), “Yes, he said that he does not want people talking about his private life.”

Theme Five: Social Support as a Coping Mechanism

The grooming strategies employed left the participants with distorted cognitions and emotionally charged responses. Four participants reported turning to their social support system during and after being sexually groomed to help them cope. Some participants’ narratives show they received social support from their friends and relatives. They said that talking about their experiences to friends and family helped them overcome the emotional impact of grooming and facilitated their healing. This is demonstrated best by:

Until last year where I met a friend, I could trust then I shared it with her. She is a bit older than me so she would comfort me at all times, she basically became my safe space when it came to this issue. (Elna, 16 years old)

Some participants reported having difficulty talking to their parents about their experiences, feeling that that their parents would not provide a safe space for them to talk about what they were going through. They thought that their parents would judge them, punish them, and question why they were talking with adult strangers in the first place. This fear of judgement and potential repercussions prevented them from disclosing their experiences to their parents. This was best elaborated by:

Like I said, I did not really get that much of support because I was scared to mention this to my elders. I was afraid because of the fact, I think the first question that they would have asked was, what were you doing on that that App? And why did you not. But why were you talking to an older person? Because at my age, at this time, you would not be expected to talk to another person in that manner, and the first thing would be to report it immediately. Why wait until such things happen and that's only when you're reported it.

So I was scared to be asked questions. And I was afraid that instead of them supporting me, it would be them shouting at me. So they'd not support me but they did not stay just shout at me for doing the wrong thing instead of them helping me get over the trauma that I had. So that was my fear. (Abena, 11 years old)

In conclusion, the study found that adolescents have a limited understanding of what child sexual grooming entails. This lack of knowledge and understanding, coupled with factors such as their developmental stage, minimal parental supervision, and a lower socioeconomic status, increases their risk of being exposed to and engaged in grooming strategies. The age discrepancy and strategies used by groomers make this population more vulnerable. The experience of grooming has a great impact on the emotional and relational functioning of participants. However, the role of social support and the agency displayed by some participants emerged as pivotal protective factors that can empower individuals and help them navigate the challenges associated with being groomed.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings and provides insights into the experiences of youths regarding child sexual grooming and solicitation. The chapter builds upon the findings analysed in the previous chapter, providing contextual interpretations of each theme and sub-theme about the research participants. Additionally, the findings are placed in context with the existing literature on the topic of child sexual grooming and solicitation. The themes that were identified in the previous chapter and which will be discussed here are the youth's understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation, risks and vulnerability, grooming offenders' characteristics and the strategies they employed, the experience of the participants after being groomed and the coping strategies the participants employed to cope with the impact of being groomed.

Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation

The participants displayed limited awareness of child sexual grooming and solicitation, highlighting a significant gap in their understanding of these critical issues. Participants were unaware they were being groomed or solicited during the grooming process. This lack of understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation seemed to give the groomer an advantage, allowing them to gain the participants' initial cooperation and an opportunity to foster a relationship that appeared to be built on mutual interest and an emotional connection (Ali et al., 2021; Plummer et al., 2018). Grooming often occurs rapidly and insidiously; hence, many children and adolescents may not recognise that they are experiencing sexual grooming due to the emotional manipulation used in the grooming process (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2023). Without this awareness, they are more likely to unknowingly enter into and remain in an exploitative relationships, thereby increasing their risk of harm. Kloess et al. (2017) showed that the grooming survivors lacked

a clear understanding of the nature of their interactions with the perpetrators of grooming. Consequently, Kloes et al. (2017) found that due to uncertainty, these minors sought reassurance about their relationship with the offender, such as whether the offender liked them. In contrast, Chiu and Quayle (2022) found that participants often viewed their interactions with the groomer as a romantic relationship, perceiving it to be built on connection and trust. Similarly, Greene-Colozzi et al. (2020) also showed that many survivors described the nature of their interactions with grooming perpetrators as dating. The perception of the relationship plays a crucial role in understanding the vulnerabilities of participants, as grooming typically involves the perpetrator fostering a sense of trust, affection, or dependency. When participants perceive the relationship as genuine or caring, they are less likely to question inappropriate behaviours, making them more susceptible to manipulation and exploitation.

Risks and Vulnerability

The risk factors and vulnerabilities that were displayed by the participants included talking to individuals that they did not know, sharing personal information with adult strangers, absence of parental monitoring, peer behaviour, and their social economic circumstances. Notably, all participants in the study were female, which they stated played a role in increasing their vulnerability to these interactions.

The adolescent developmental phase, characterised by sexual curiosity, leads to risky behaviours such as accepting unknown people as friends on online platforms, visiting pornographic sites, and sharing photos and videos, which can heighten their risk of being targeted by online sexual predators (DeMarco et al., 2017; Hornor, 2020). Risk-taking behaviour, such as talking and sharing information with strangers online or in person, increases children's vulnerability to child sexual grooming and solicitation (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017; Plummer, 2017). The conversations between the groomer and the targeted child

are aimed at building a false sense of “relationship” as these discussions revolve around daily activities, such as the child’s hobbies, school life, their friends and family, while simultaneously, these interactions work to gradually isolate the individual from their social support (Kloess et al., 2017; Ringenberg et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2023). Information gathered from the targeted children helps the groomer identify their vulnerabilities, enabling the groomer to tailor their grooming strategies to best suit each targeted child’s needs and weaknesses (Ali et al., 2021; De Santisteban et al., 2018; Gamez-Guadix et al., 2021).

Several prior studies reported similar results regarding adolescents’ risky behaviour (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014; Jonsson et al., 2019; Yusuf et al., 2023). The sharing of personal information between the groomer and the targeted child enables rapport building, which is an integral stage in the grooming process (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017).

The participants grew up in a particular socio-economic context, which, coupled with their developmental stage, may make them more inclined to engage with someone who offers material benefits. Groomers are aware of this vulnerability and, therefore, offer material incentives that participants might not have had access to due to their circumstances (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014; Manyane et al., 2021; Plummer, 2017). The material support from the groomer makes the individual dependent on the groomer’s support, which then reduces their resistance and will to report the abuse as they feel complacent (Beren et al., 2023; Collings, 2021). Accepting monetary benefits from a groomer may be appealing for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as it helps meet their basic needs (Heal & Gladman, 2017; Mavunga, 2020). These findings are expected, considering the significant wealth disparity in South Africa, where the gap between the rich and poor is substantial (Burn et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the risks and vulnerability of the participants to child sexual grooming were found to be exacerbated by their living conditions, such as poor parental supervision.

Due to their social and economic circumstances, parents may struggle to monitor their children's online activities as they may work long hours to support their family and may be technologically illiterate. In South Africa, poor parental supervision could be attributed to community and family disintegration resulting from increased modernisation and urbanisation. As parents move to work in towns or cities, they often leave their children unprotected, which increases the children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Mavunga, 2020). The finding that the absence of parental monitoring puts young people at risk of being sexually groomed and solicitation is supported by previous studies (ECPAT et al., 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014; Whittle et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2024).

Moreover, being female was found to contribute to participants' vulnerability to sexual grooming. Likewise, several other studies found that girls are more likely to fall victim to child sexual grooming and solicitation compared to boys, as they receive more solicitation in online and offline environments (Alonso-Ruido et al., 2024; Ortega-Baroon et al., 2022; Wachs et al., 2016; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016). According to a study by Bennet and O'Donohue (2020), participants were exposed to sexual grooming behaviour as an intervention for them to learn what constitutes grooming behaviours. The findings showed that after exposure to several grooming behaviours, girls could label grooming behaviour better than boys. This may be linked to societal norms attributing masculinity, strength and assertiveness to men, which contribute to the underreporting of abuse among boys and their reluctance to disclose and seek help when sexually abused (Batool, 2020; McLeod, 2015).

Groomer's Characteristics and Grooming Strategies

The key patterns in grooming behaviours identified in the study included proximity factors, methods, and characteristics of the perpetrators. The present study findings showed that the perpetrators of grooming lived in close proximity to the participants, had multiple individuals or victims, were older than the participants, and exhibited abusive behaviour. The

groomers used grooming strategies such as body validation, offering incentives and the promise of a future to build trust. They also used desensitisation to sexual content and physical touch to prepare, groom and condition the participant for sexual abuse. The groomers' characteristics and strategies facilitated the grooming process.

The observation that groomers lived close to the participant is in line with earlier studies indicating that contact-driven groomers lived geographically closer to their individuals/victims compared to online-driven perpetrators (Daniel, 2016; Finkelhor et al., 2024; Soldina et al., 2024). Their physical proximity allows the groomer to closely observe and learn more about the targeted child, identify how to approach them, and become aware of any financial or other issues that are lacking in the child's environment (De Santisteban et al., 2018; Li et al., 2024).

Further findings of the study show that the groomers were older than the participants, with age differences ranging from four to over 40 years. The finding that groomers are older than the targeted children is consistent with previous research that showed that grooming perpetrators are, on average, 35 years older than the survivors (Wachs et al., 2016; Winters et al., 2017). Young individuals initially engage with older people due to the sense of validation, affection, or maturity that attention from and association with an older individual can provide. They might also perceive attention as a form of admiration or interest, which can boost their self-esteem (Heal & Gladman, 2017). In some cases, peers, family members and the community know about the relationship between the groomer and their survivors but do not intervene as the behaviour is normalised in the community (McElvaney, 2019).

In South Africa, the findings of this study are expected, as intergenerational relationships between older men and young females are normalised behaviour among peers and in communities. The significant age differences create an unequal relationship, reduces the decision-making power of adolescents which further increases their vulnerability to

grooming strategies employed by groomers (Mampane, 2018). The age differences increase the power imbalance Enaifoghe et al. (2021), which could facilitate the success of the groomers' manipulation and grooming strategies, making it easier for them to prepare and sexually abuse the participants (De Santisteban et al., 2018).

The study's findings also revealed that perpetrators of grooming exhibited abusive behaviour towards the participants during the grooming process. In line with the findings of the study, many earlier studies found that groomers used aggression and other abusive behaviours as part of their tactics during the grooming process. Aggression was used to coerce the participants into complying with the groomers' request, to maintain the relationship, and to exert reprisals when the survivors failed to comply with the abuser's demands (De Santisteban et al., 2018; McElvaney, 2019; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017).

In addition, the study found that the groomers targeted several young girls simultaneously. Engaging with multiple adolescents allows the groomer to assess their compliance levels and vulnerability, helping groomers select the more compliant persons (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017). These findings align with those of Joleby et al. (2021), who revealed that grooming perpetrators often had multiple survivors simultaneously. Similarly, De Santisteban (2018) reported that perpetrators of child sexual grooming confessed to grooming many survivors concurrently.

In addition to the previously mentioned strategies, perpetrators also used incentives such as gifts to groom the participants and offered promises of a future together. Due to the lower socioeconomic status of the participants, the use of incentives such as monetary gifts and promises of a future together is an effective grooming strategy as grooming perpetrators target survivors from socially disadvantaged families, capitalising on their unfulfilled material needs to facilitate manipulation and control (Heal & Gladman, 2017; Plummer, 2017; Mavunga, 2020). The use of material gifts, such as buying shoes and providing

monetary incentives, to enable the grooming process is consistent with the findings of several studies (De Santisteban et al., 2018; Joleby et al., 2021; McElvaney, 2019; Plummer, 2017; Winters et al., 2020b). Participants accepting and receiving incentives from the groomer increased their vulnerability by fostering a greater dependency on the grooming perpetrator (De Santisteban et al., 2018; Joleby et al., 2021). According to South African Law, any economic or emotional manipulation by an adult aimed at reducing a child's resistance or securing consent for sexual conduct is classified as sexual grooming and is punishable by law (Van Zyl, 2017).

In addition to using incentives to groom the participants, perpetrators of grooming also used body validation as a grooming strategy. The groomers objectified the participants' bodies and physical attributes through flattery and compliments, thus appearing affectionate and loving, which facilitated the development of trust in the relationship. These strategies were used to desensitise participants to physical touch and sexual content in the relationship (Black et al., 2015; Joleby et al., 2021; Winters et al., 2020a). The use of body validation in child sexual grooming and solicitation is consistent with previous research that showed that groomers use positive personal compliments on the targeted child's appearance and maturity (Lorenzo et al., 2016; Ringenberg et al., 2024).

Complimenting the physical attractiveness of the targeted child is geared toward enhancing and testing the targeted child's compliance (Black et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017). Such compliments can also function as form of reverse power, implying that the child is in an equal relationship with the perpetrator (Ringenberg et al., 2024). This approach fosters trust by portraying perpetrators as charming and loving, which helps to strengthen the manipulative dynamic (Winters et al., 2020b). The successful use of body validation as a grooming strategy could imply that girls navigate complex beliefs and feelings towards their bodies. Validation from a male figure can enhance their self-esteem and make them feel

valued and important, which can be particularly compelling during their formative years (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Beech, 2014; Longobardi et al., 2021; Winters et al., 2024).

Once the targeted child has developed trust in the relationship with the groomer, the groomer introduces desexualisation through sexual conversations, sexual touch and exposure of their naked body to the child to assess the child's willingness to engage in sexual interactions (Plummer, 2017; Ringenberg et al., 2024). The study findings show that the perpetrators of grooming were involved with sexualising the participants through sexual touch and having sexual conversations, and in some cases, introduced them to their genitalia. Introducing the participants to sexual touch and their naked pictures is aimed at gauging the targets' compliance level and preparing them for physical and sexual contact (Brown, 2019; Winters et al., 2020b). The use of desensitisation of sexual content and physical touch is consistent with prior research that one of the grooming strategies used by groomers is sexualisation (Joleby et al., 2021; Kloess et al., 2017; Plummer, 2017; Ringenberg et al., 2024; Winters et al., 2021a). Considering the various strategies employed and the developmental age of the individuals subjected to grooming, their experiences significantly impact their psychological and emotional development, as well as their views and beliefs about relationships.

Experiences of Being Groomed

Experiences of grooming had a profound impact on the participants' lives during and after they were groomed. These experiences influenced their emotional state, shaped their views of love and relationships, affected their views on the role of sexual interactions, and fostered feelings of guilt. Therefore, many individuals avoid disclosing the relationship while it occurs. During the relationship with the groomer, the participants met and engaged in a physical sexual interaction with the grooming perpetrators multiple times. Sexual contact with the targeted child is usually isolated and sustained over a long period of time due to their

emotional attachment to the perpetrator (De Santisteban et al., 2018). Previous research found that targeted children comply with sexual requests from groomers out of curiosity and naivety due to their lack of experience given their young age (Batool, 2020). Jonsson et al. (2019) conducted a study with 5,715 adolescents and found that 330 participants had engaged in sexual acts with the grooming offender.

In addition to sexual abuse, survivors of sexual grooming and solicitation experienced an emotional impact after the relationship with the groomer ended (Thomas et al., 2023). The findings show that the participants experienced feelings of significant emotional distress. Participants reported feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, anxiety, confusion, abandonment, and rejection. Engaging in the interactions facilitated by grooming left the participants burdened with self-blame, as they blamed themselves for their involvement (Winters et al., 2020a). Patriarchal norms that characterise African society promotes gendered upbringing which results into sexual abuse survivors blaming themselves for the abuse (Abi Rached et al., 2021). These results are consistent with the findings by Plummer (2017), where the targeted children reported feelings of confusion about being selected by the groomer and feeling shame and guilt for accepting the incentives that were offered.

These emotional responses also align with the findings by Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021), who documented the presence of anxiety, shame, and suicidal thoughts as consequences of child sexual grooming. Further support was found in research by Gamez-Guadix et al. (2022), who reported that the survivors of grooming felt shame and guilt after the experience. Additionally, a meta-synthesis conducted by Ali et al. (2024) revealed that survivors often feel powerless, leading to self-loathing, guilt, and shame. The participants' emotional turmoil can be attributed to the manipulation tactics employed by the offenders, who, through manipulation build deceptive relationships, create a false sense of trust, and leave the participants feeling used and betrayed (Winters et al., 2020b). In addition, Stănicke

et al. (2024) showed that survivors who were sexually abused were left feeling self-loathing, guilt, shame, and blaming themselves, which supports the findings of the present study.

In addition to experiencing feelings of betrayal, shame and guilt, participants also developed a distorted view of romantic relationships. Some perceived the relationships as transactional, characterised by “give and take”, and different from a normal relationship with genuine connections. This could have been due to the incentives provided by groomers to groom and manipulate the participants (De Santisteban et al., 2028). A study conducted in Africa confirms the findings, sexual violence against girls can become normalised through gift giving (Toudeka & Ouattara, 2024). In addition, the impact of grooming caused survivors to believe that all romantic relationships will be abusive, as they began to view the grooming relationship as normal (Schmidt et al., 2023). Similarly, other studies found that survivors of grooming have difficulty forming healthy romantic relationships, and these were characterised by breakups, dissatisfaction, and avoidance of relationships altogether (Hanson, 2017; Spenard & Cash. 2022; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

The participants did not disclose their experiences during or after being groomed. After the physical and emotional abuse occurred, they maintained the secrecy of their relationship. This secrecy was likely driven by fear of parental consequences. These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Chiu and Quayle (2022), which found that survivors of child sexual grooming feared parental discovery of their online conversations with individuals they do not know due to concerns about potential punishment. Similarly, Winters et al. (2020b) found that survivors refused to disclose their experiences due to feelings of being held responsible, fear of rejection by their families, and threats of abandonment. In contrast to the study’s findings, Ringenberg et al. (2024) found that grooming offenders instructed individuals to keep their interactions secret and not disclose them to others. In South Africa, survivors of sexual abuse fear disclosing due to concerns

about punishment from their caregivers for interacting with the groomer, doubts about being believed, and the risk of further victimisation, as the abusers are usually trusted people in the community (Burns et al., 2014; Manyane et al., 2021; Mathews, 2016).

On the other hand, the findings showed that some participants demonstrated agency during their ongoing interactions or relationships with the groomer after experiencing abusive behaviour. Agency is the willpower of an individual to withdraw or get away from unfavourable situations, here agency is understood as both process and action taken by the participants (Penttinen, 2018). When the participants felt hurt, betrayed, or abused, they took the initiative to end the relationship and cease further communication. The change in the groomer's persona from a caring, affectionate personality (Winters et al., 2020a) to an aggressive, abusive person prompted the participants to end their interactions with the groomer (Thomas et al., 2023). A study by Chiu and Quayle (2022) supports the findings that adolescents can display sexual agency when engaging with adult strangers online, for example, by terminating interactions if their needs or desires are not met

Conversely, participants whose relationships were terminated by the perpetrators experienced devastation and heartbreak. In contrast to these findings, several studies showed that the use of aggression and abusive behaviour is intended to manipulate the child into complying with the perpetrator's demands (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2021; Pollack & MacIver, 2015). According to previous studies, participants who exercised agency used their interactions with the groomers as an opportunity to expand their social circle (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). In contrast, participants who did not exercise agency experienced greater manipulation by the groomer (McElvaney, 2019).

Coping

Due to the emotional and physical impact of grooming, participants used several coping mechanisms, with social support from their friends and family members being the

most prominent. This support provided a safe space for participants to discuss their experiences, which helped them process their feelings and enabled them to cope (Schmidt et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with the study by Harrison et al. (2018), which emphasised the importance of support from parents and coaches in assisting survivors of grooming to seek therapeutic services. In addition, it has also been shown that survivors of child sexual abuse seek professional help from therapists to help them cope (Heal & Gladman, 2017; Winters et al., 2020b).

Conclusion

In summary, the “relationship” between groomers and participants was guided by the proposition of social exchange theory. According to Homan (1961), people engage in interactions; their behaviours are considerably influenced by the reward or profit they may gain from these interactions. Social capital, such as norms, beliefs, expectations, obligations and information channels, facilitate or restrict the development of social relationships and their outcome (Homan, 1958). The grooming perpetrator invested time and money to develop a befitting grooming strategy for the participants so that he would successfully prepare, groom, and possibly sexually abuse the targeted child without disclosure. The development and application of the grooming strategy are the costs that the groomer is willing to invest in the relationship, while the enactment of the abuse is the reward (Blau, 1964).

The participants' meeting and engaging in sexual acts with the groomer can be understood as a way to reciprocate the compliments and incentives that the grooming offender gave them during their interactions (Horskykl, 2018). For the participants, the cost represents the time spent interacting with the groomer as well as personal meetings with the groomer, while their benefit was the compliments and incentives the groomer gave them (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959).

In any relationship, both parties are expected to gain rewards (Blau, 1964). When the relationship fails to provide benefits to both parties, the dissatisfied participant is likely to withdraw from the relationship. This was illustrated when some participants ended their relationship with the grooming perpetrator when he exhibited abusive behaviour towards them, while others did not. Those who remained in the relationship showed that they were satisfied with the status quo. According to social exchange theory, if one party has more losses than profit, the relationship is deemed not worth continuing, prompting them to end the interaction (Homan, 1958).

Chapter 6: Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will outline the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research. The conclusion will summarise the study's aim and the themes identified in chapter four. Next, the study's limitations will be addressed. Finally, recommendations for future research and practical implications will be discussed.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed to explore youth experiences of child sexual grooming and solicitation from the perspective of the youth themselves. The main findings were that youth are not aware of what constitutes child sexual grooming. This lack of awareness was due to their risks and vulnerability, including minimal parental monitoring, talking and sharing personal information with strangers, low socioeconomic factors, and peer pressure. These risks and vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by the groomer's characteristics and the strategies they use to manipulate and groom their targeted children. In terms of characteristics, groomers are usually adults who are older than their survivors, live geographically close to their targeted children, and exhibit abusive tendencies towards the targeted individuals.

In addition to the increased vulnerability of the targeted children due to the groomer's characteristics, the grooming strategies further increased the risk of young people. The use of body validation, incentives, and sexualisation resulted in the young children's dependency on the groomer. Grooming strategies were thus used to manipulate the young children to comply with the groomer's demands. For example, their use of incentives such as money and gifts put adolescents from socially disadvantaged children at increased risk, as these children may lack some of the basic necessities of life and thus be more vulnerable to exploitation. Due to their risks and vulnerability, the grooming characteristics and strategies employed, the

survivors of child sexual grooming experience sexual abuse, emotional impact and other problems in their adult relationships. These experiences and their impact on the participants' lives lead them to seek social support from family and friends. Talking about their experiences with friends and family members helped the participants to cope with the shame, guilt feeling and understanding that it was not their fault that they were sexually groomed.

Child sexual grooming is a significant concern in South Africa, which requires further exploration. This study has demonstrated that child sexual grooming and solicitation are severe forms of child sexual abuse which have immense psychological, emotional and physical impacts on the affected individuals. Despite some recent studies, this area of study remains in its infancy, and further research is required to better understand the youth's experiences of child sexual grooming and solicitation. Future studies should expand on this knowledge to ensure that young people receive adequate support on online platforms and in their daily living environment, enabling them to flourish and enjoy their youth. In addition, the interpretation of these findings should be treated with some caution, as the data were collected from a small sample in one province in South Africa.

It is generally acknowledged that a child's experience of grooming can be a traumatic experience (Van Zyl, 2018). Therefore, understanding the adolescent experience of grooming can help therapists challenge the children's distorted cognitions that arise, such as feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame (Plummer, 2017; Winters et al., 2020a). Furthermore, exploring adolescents' experiences and their perceptions of grooming contributes to a better understanding of the impact of the grooming process, which involves isolating and disempowering the targeted children. In the South African context, it would be necessary to also consider the non-contact sexual behaviours experienced during child sexual grooming when prosecuting offenders of sexual offences (Aucamp, 2015). In summary, understanding the experiences of adolescents with sexual grooming can be used to challenge unfounded

legal assumptions concerning the dynamics of child sexual abuse, particularly concerning the child's compliance, consent, and non-disclosure. This understanding is essential, highlighting how the grooming process isolates and disempowers the child (Aucamp et al., 2012; Van Zyl, 2018).

Limitations

The study has provided insight into the experiences of youth on child sexual grooming and solicitation; however, it is not without limitations. Due to phenomenology study guidelines, the study was limited to a small sample size to gather in-depth individual reflections on their experience (Willig, 2021). The small sample size limits the study from being generalised to other contexts yet still offers a valuable contribution to understanding the child sexual grooming and solicitation phenomenon.

To further investigate the phenomenon, future research should focus on developing interventions aimed at protecting children from child sexual grooming and solicitation by targeting the risks and vulnerabilities found in the present study. These include ensuring that parents monitor their children's online and normal daily activities, informing children of the dangers of chatting with adult strangers, emulating peer behaviours, and wanting to own things beyond their reach. By focusing on these areas, future research can create effective strategies to safeguard children and prevent grooming and solicitation.

All the study participants were female, which limits the findings to female youths' experiences with child sexual grooming. This gender-specific sample further limits the study's findings as behavioural patterns related to child sexual grooming may vary with age, gender and time elapsed since the offence or experience during the offence. Adolescents aged 15 to 17 years are more likely than young children to interact online with strangers and to meet them in person (Batool, 2020). This is due to their developmental stage, which is characterised by curiosity and impulsivity (Honor, 2020). Furthermore, females are reported

to experience more child sexual grooming and solicitation than males (De Santisteban & Gamex-Guadix, 2017). The passage of time after the experience and subsequent experiences may affect participants' willingness to share their experiences or their ability to remember details accurately.

Notably, the study included participants who were groomed before the age of 18, with the participants' ages ranging from 14 to 17 years old. This time gap may impact the accuracy of their recall of the situation as participants may have forgotten some of the details of their experience over time. Including adults in the study sample could have affected the amount and depth of the information collected. However, it also has its benefits, as adults are likely to have processed the abuse and gained an understanding of their experience. Additionally, the individual participants could influence the subjective nature of qualitative data collection. The information gathered for the present study relied on the participants' subjective accounts of their experience, which could have been exaggerated or minimised in their context to justify their actions based on their concern about being seen less favourably or avoiding negative repercussions. Such concerns could introduce bias into the study's findings even if the researcher mitigated this through follow-up questions to understand the context and gain more clarity on the nature of their experience.

Furthermore, the study was conducted in an urban setting, which may have excluded the experience of youth in rural areas. The context between urban and rural areas could differ significantly, leading to people having different experiences. This could, therefore, limit the understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation. These contextual differences could limit the study's ability to understand the phenomenon across diverse settings fully. This highlights the need for future research that includes participants from both urban and rural contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study contributed by identifying areas for future research. The study's findings have expanded the understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation, including the risk factors and vulnerability of children, the grooming characteristics and strategies employed, youth experiences and their coping mechanisms. As the study used a small sample size, future studies should aim to use bigger sample sizes and a variety of methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods, to conduct empirical research to expand the knowledge base of child sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa and worldwide.

Furthermore, future research could be conducted on adolescents who are currently experiencing grooming rather than adults who experienced grooming when they were under the age of 18. By engaging with adolescents directly, researchers could obtain information from their current experiences, and more information may emerge, which will add to the existing literature on adolescents' experiences of child sexual grooming and solicitation.

An important area for further investigation is exploring the experiences of males who have undergone grooming and sexual solicitation. This will facilitate a comparison of gender-specific experiences, enhancing the understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa. Learning how young males are approached and by whom, the grooming strategies employed, the associated risks and vulnerability, and the impact these experiences had on the young males will allow for a comparison with females' experiences. This comparative analysis will inform more effective future recommendations and preventative measures tailored to the needs of all genders.

The present study was conducted in an urban area, highlighting the need for additional research in rural areas to improve our understanding of youth experiences of child sexual grooming and solicitation. Conducting research in rural areas will enable a comparison of the

experiences of urban and rural youth. This is because children living in rural areas may have limited access to the Internet and quality education than urban adolescents, which could potentially impact their awareness of the dangers of online risks and their ability to manage inappropriate requests from others.

Practical Implications of the Study

The study findings can inform preventative measures of child sexual grooming by minimising the risks and vulnerability faced by young people both in online and offline settings. The risks and vulnerability of young people can be minimised through the empowerment of parents, professionals working with children, teachers, government and non-governmental organisations. Specific areas of risks that should be focussed on include talking and sharing personal information with strangers, minimal parental supervision, peer pressure, socio-economic circumstances, and gender.

The study findings provide detailed insights into the experiences of youth regarding child sexual grooming. Teachers, psychologists, and social workers can use these findings to deepen their understanding of child sexual grooming, which they can then use to educate and help young people. The knowledge passed on to young people will empower the youth to differentiate normative behaviour from grooming strategies, which will help to prevent them from falling victim to child sexual grooming and solicitation. Educating young people about these distinctions can shift their mindset and improve their ability to identify and resist grooming techniques, ultimately reducing their risk of being sexually groomed. This proactive approach can also influence their peers, enhancing awareness and protection against grooming.

To further reduce the risks of young children falling victim to child sexual groomers, parents should take several proactive steps to closely supervise their children's online activities and advise them on the safe way to be online, advise them of activities that are

risky, and create a safe platform for communication between them and the children. This will make it easier for young people to talk to their parents if they are contacted online or face to face. Parents who are not technologically literate should seek advice and learn how to operate smartphones and laptops to monitor their children on online platforms. Limiting screen time can also help reduce children's risks and vulnerability. By implementing these measures, parents can play a significant role in protecting their children from child sexual grooming and creating a safer online environment.

The study found that the parents' socioeconomic status can increase the risk of their children being groomed. To address this issue, government and non-governmental organisations can help alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerability. They can do this by providing jobs or empowering unemployed parents by making loans available for small self-employment businesses. In this way, parents can provide the necessities for their children so that children would not easily be enticed by money and material goods from groomers, reducing their vulnerability. By improving the socioeconomic conditions of families, these measures can help minimise the risks of child sexual grooming by decreasing the appeal of material incentives offered by groomers and enhancing the overall stability and well-being of the family unit.

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Appendix A: Participants Information Sheet

Title of the Study: An exploration of perceptions on online sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa among the youth in Pretoria

Hello, my name is Peninah Kigunda, I am currently completing a master's in research psychology in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. You are being invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, which will explain the details of this research project. Please feel free to ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

- The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of online child sexual grooming among youth in Pretoria, South Africa. In other words, the study's purpose is to explore the young people's experiences of online child sexual grooming and how they understand and interpret these experiences. Little is known about the youth's perspectives in South Africa as the majority of studies have been done with offenders of child sexual grooming. I have decided to conduct a study on child sexual grooming to hear the perspectives of those that have had the experiences so that by understanding, it will inform prevention of child sexual grooming on online platforms. The overall aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of online child sexual grooming and solicitation among youths in Pretoria, South Africa.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You have been invited to participate because you are the right person to talk because you have had the experience of online child sexual grooming when you were 18 years and younger.

- You have also complied with the following: You are between the age of 18 and 25 years old, lives in Pretoria, South Africa, and when you were younger than 18 years old you had experience with online sexual grooming and solicitation.
- You will be excluded if you do not live in Pretoria, South Africa, if you are not fluent in written and spoken English, and if you are younger than 18 or older than 25 years old.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

You will be expected to participate in a 45-to-60-minute interview, through google meets, and as this is an online interview you will be required to have access to an electronic device and access to the Internet. Should you not be familiar with google meets, the instructions on how to install and navigate the google meets platform will be provided. Before the interview, you will be expected to read the participant information sheet and sign the consent form, and email it to me indicating you have agreed to participate in the study.

- During the interview, I will ask you to describe your experiences of online child sexual grooming, that happened when you were younger than 18 years old. I may also ask about your life in general when growing up, how the conversations started with the perpetrator, the characteristics of the perpetrator, the kind of the conversation you would engage in, and the impact of online child sexual grooming on your life.
- The interview will be audio recorded.

- When the interview is completed, I will type it out, and a copy will be sent to you to check if everything was included, and in case you want to add or remove anything.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

- Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason if you decide not to take part in the study without negative consequences or being penalized.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

- Anonymity will be ensured by using pseudonyms throughout the research process and all the documents to protect your information. All the information that can identify you such as your name and address will be changed and replaced with other names to protect you from being identified by the readers of the research.
- To maintain confidentiality during the virtual interview, I will conduct the interview in a private room with the door closed and I will make use of earphones. You will be advised to do the same. All participants will receive a unique link that is only accessible to them so that no one else can have access to the interview.
- Confidentiality will be further ensured by assigning code names/numbers to each participant, that will be used in all the research notes and documents. Findings from

this data will be disseminated through conferences and publications. Reporting of these findings will be anonymous, only the researchers of this study and the supervisor will have access to the information.

- Please note that participant information will be kept confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obliged to report incidents, such as abuse.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study, however, I hope that the information obtained from this study may help in informing government, mental health practitioners, and other stakeholders in online child sexual grooming, and to help in the prevention of child sexual grooming in South Africa.

WHAT ARE THE ANTICIPATED RISKS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

- Due to the length of the interview, you are likely to feel tired, therefore, if you feel the need to rest, you are free to take a break at any stage of the interview process.
- Also, by talking about the experiences of online child sexual grooming, you might remember traumatic memories and emotions. Should this occur, you are advised to contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) at 0112344837 for free telephonic counselling.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT THAT SOME FORM OF DISCOMFORT OCCURS AS A RESULT OF TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

- Should you have the need for further discussions after the interviews, I will provide an email address for you to contact me during working hours.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

- Electronic information will be stored for period of 10 years at University of Pretoria repository, and any future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval, if applicable.
- Participant electronic information will be kept in a file that is password protected in the Department of Psychology.
- The electronic data held by the researcher will be kept in a secure password protected device and encrypted.

WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH DATA BE USED FOR?

Data gathered from the participant would be used for research purposes that includes:

- Writing a mini-dissertation and article publication
- National and international conference presentations
- Policy briefs
- For further research in the form of secondary data analysis.

WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- No, you will not be paid to take part in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

- This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria.
- Ethical approval number is.....
- A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

- The findings of the research study will be shared with you electronically by Peninah Kigunda once the dissertation has been examined and finalised within a period of six months.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE CONCERN, COMPLAINT OR ANYTHING I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE STUDY?

If you have questions about this study or you have experienced adverse effects because of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided below. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if

problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the researcher, please contact the supervisor at contact details below.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and in advance for participating in this study.

Researcher

Name Surname; Peninah Kigunda

Contact number: +2784 0809 5801

Email address: Peninah.kigunda@gmail.com

Supervisor

Dr Elné Visagie

Email address: elne.visagie@up.ac.za

Co-Supervisor

Dr Danile Elize Arendse

Email address: arendse.danielle@gmail.com



Appendix B: Consent Form

An exploration of perceptions on online sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa among the youth in Pretoria.

CONSENT FORM

ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER 15319688 (HUM023/0823)

WRITTEN CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (**participant name**), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any consequences or penalties.			

I understand that information collected during the study will not be linked to my identity and I give permission to the researchers of this study to access the information.			
I understand that this study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, as well as for my data to be used for future research purposes.			
I understand who will have access to personal information and how the information will be stored with a clear understanding that I will not be linked to the information in any way.			
I give consent that data gathered may be used for dissertation, article publication, conference presentations and writing policy briefs.			
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.			
I consent to being audio recorded.			
I consent to being video recorded.			
I consent to having my photo taken.			

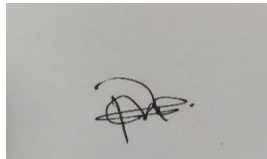
I consent to have my audio recordings/videos/photos be used in research outputs such as the publication of			
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articles, thesis, and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication whilst remaining anonymous.			
I have sufficient opportunity to ask questions and I agree to take part in the above study.			

Name of Participant Date Signature

Peninah Kigunda

26th March 2024



Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature



Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Hello, my name is Peninah Kigunda. I am conducting research on online child sexual grooming and solicitation among youth in South Africa. Firstly, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Before commencing with the interview, I would like to assure you that everything you say during this interview will be kept confidential, and only my supervisor and I will have access to the voice recordings. I want to remind you that you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time during the interview. You also have the right to refrain from answering any question you are uncomfortable with. Should you wish to view the results of this research, please email me and I will forward these to you upon completion of this study. You can find my contact details on the information sheet provided to you prior to this interview.

(Transition A (Demographic Questions): Let me begin with some questions about yourself)

1. Full names
2. How old are you?
3. Where do you live?
2. Are you currently working or in school?
3. What is your marital status?
4. Do you have children?

Before we begin, if you have questions at any time throughout the study, please feel free to ask.

(Transition B: I would like to move to questions about your experience of online child sexual grooming and solicitation)

1. What is your understanding of child sexual grooming and solicitation?
2. How did the conversation with the offender begin?
3. What did the conversation entail, and how often did you converse?
4. Are there risk factors in your experience, you believe could have contributed to the offender contacting you online?
5. In your experience, how did sexual grooming and solicitation impact your life?

(Transition C: In closing, do you have any questions for me or is there anything thing you would like to add?

I would like to ensure that your participation in this interview will not harm you psychologically and to ensure you receive the necessary help if needed. I understand that sharing your experience today may have been distressing. If you are feeling distressed at any stage following this interview, I suggest that you contact a Clinical Psychologist on standby (071 454545) to receive online counselling services at no cost to you.

You are also free to contact me should you have further questions pertaining to the study or the results.

I want to thank you for sharing your experiences with me and for taking the time to help me with my research.

Contact Information Peninah Kigunda

Phone Number: 084 809 5801

Appendix D: Ethical Approval



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo



24 October 2023

Dear Mrs PK Kigunda

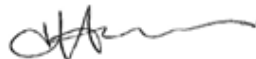
Project Title: An exploration of perceptions on online sexual grooming and solicitation in South Africa among the youth in Pretoria
Researcher: Mrs PK Kigunda
Supervisor(s): Dr SB Sibanda
Department: Psychology
Reference number: 15319688 (HUM023/0823)
Degree: Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 24 October 2023. Please note that before research can commence all other approvals must have been received.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,



Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

Addendum

Theme Development

Participants Names (Pseudonyms)	Quotes	Related Themes
Kaya	<p><i>I was 14 years old, 2014, that's when I started dating, the person I dated was I was fourteen years -old okay that person was 20 years, he was a security man at the mall. yeah I started loving him time goes by he stopped me on my way home and then he asked for my number, I gave him, we talked over the phone.</i></p>	<p>Theme 1: Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation</p> <p>Theme 2: Risk factors and Vulnerabilities</p>
	<p><i>Me dating their principal? I was at school some other time. Some teacher told me to give the teacher the register, the principal register. So you know he had an office, and he was alone So I found him in his office and he was alone then he asked for my numbers I gave him and he was a married man.</i></p>	<p>Theme 3: Grooming Offender Characteristics and grooming strategy</p>
	<p><i>I just regret myself for doing that. I should have listened to my parents. Maybe I could be somewhere now, I would help them. I don't even know what to say.</i></p>	<p>Theme 4: Experience of Being groomed</p>
Anathi	<p><i>Yeah, so on Fridays, like we used to meet. So when time goes on, he said like he he's falling in love with me. Then I told him the same because I was also falling in love with him. Okay. Then we started dating.</i></p>	<p>Theme 1: Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation</p>
	<p><i>We met around on 2019 around February when I was on my way back to school and then he approached me. He said he want us to be friends.</i></p>	<p>Theme 2: Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities</p>
	<p><i>... I went to his room, and I found him with another girl. And when I went there, I went there with the intention to know why he was not answering my phone because it is unusual. Okay, then I found him and then when I asked him what was happening, he just said he doesn't know me.</i></p>	<p>Theme 3: Grooming Offender Characteristics and grooming strategy</p>
	<p><i>Things went well. Like, was even my virgin breaker</i></p>	<p>Theme 4: Experience of Being groomed</p>
	<p><i>Yes, I talked to my mother and then she used to advise me each and every day and i also talked with my friends then I became fine</i></p>	<p>Theme 5: Social Support as a Coping Mechanism</p>

Edith

My parents didn't know anything about our relationship because we only met during the day and then I've never slept in his place before, even when I got pregnant, I never slept in his place before.

My parents didn't know anything about our relationship because we only met during the day and then I've never slept in his place before, even when I got pregnant, I never slept in his place before.

He was giving me money, yeah, something like that.

Okay, that's when he fetched me and then we went to his place and then we chilled and then that's when it started happening, then we had sex.

Yeah, it was a difficult journey for me after the pregnancy, but I just told myself that I have to be strong. Even my mom always told me that just be strong for your baby. It already happened.

Theme 1: Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation

Theme 2: Risk factors and Vulnerabilities

Theme 3: Grooming Offender Characteristics and grooming strategy

Theme 4: Experience of Being groomed

Theme 5: Social Support as a Coping Mechanism

Nicoline

I didn't know

Can I have your numbers? I was charmed. I gave him my numbers and after that we started talking

He would buy me McDonald's. McDonald's, gifts, you know, messages, calls, him showing me love, coming to take me at school, you know.

I was heartbroken, I remember I was crying in the bathroom, I was very heartbroken.

Theme 1: Understanding of Child Sexual Grooming and Solicitation

Theme 2: Risk factors and Vulnerabilities

Theme 3: Grooming Offender Characteristics and grooming strategy

Theme 4: Experience of Being groomed

Elena

First, he sent me a message on my phone, I was surprised because I did not have his number. I asked him who he was and how he got my number, he told me his name, but he refused to tell how he got my number. We started talking frequently

Theme 2: Risk factors and Vulnerabilities

He asked me for my account number, I sent him, and he put some money for me there

Theme 3: Grooming
Offender Characteristics
and grooming strategy

He said how much he loves, and likes me, and how much he loves my body, and he would like to see me, meet me and I was very excited

We had unprotected sex for a year, at least once every week in different places

Theme 4: Experience of
Being groomed

Lesedi

We kept on meeting, dating, going out.

Theme 1: Understanding
of Child Sexual Grooming
and Solicitation

And then that's when we started talking and exchanging phone numbers. We said we were leaving, then he asked to meet me the next day and then we met but that time it was just the two of us.

Theme 2: Risk factors and
Vulnerabilities

Because he was starting to be controlling, and he didn't want me to tell him how I feel. Like, he wanted us to be the man. He wanted us to do things that he wanted

Theme 3: Grooming
Offender Characteristics
and grooming strategy

Yeah, it felt uncomfortable, you know, the fact that I was young and he was old and I was not ready. I'm just regretting what happened

Theme 4: Experience of
Being groomed

Bonolo

I get a friend request from this guy, I did not know him, I did not know him honestly, he is in Cape town, he is there in school

Theme 2: Risk factors and
Vulnerabilities

He seemed like somebody who already knew me, because he happened to know one of my cousin brothers or happened to have been friends with him, so he was like no you I know you...I used to see you in my brother's place".

Theme 3: Grooming
Offender Characteristics
and grooming strategy

You can say that because of that experience then you associate all men as perverts in the way it is emotional abuse it was emotional.

Theme 4: Experience of
Being groomed

Abena

So initially the messages that we'd sent to each other back and forth were just personal information like our names and where we stayed and personal information

Theme 2: Risk factors and
Vulnerabilities

I was 17 and then he was older, but he lied to me that he's 25

Theme 3: Grooming
Offender Characteristics
and grooming strategy

I was shocked I Was really shocked and at that point I didn't believe that they are people that do such things, you know. And I felt, even though I didn't know it was violation at that time, I've felt violated

Theme 4: Experience of
Being groomed

I guess, speaking about it, but not to my elders, to my age mates, you know, and to say that I've seen such and I'm traumatized I didn't really get that much of support because I was scared to mention this to my elders

Theme 5: Social Support
as a Coping Mechanism

