

Using Luring Communication Theory to Analyze the Behavior of Online Sexual Offenders

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of sexual offenders (SOs) contacting children online attempting to engage in sexual exploitation has increased dramatically in recent years likely due to more potential victims and greater offender anonymity in online environments (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Hernandez, 2000). Since its inception in 1998, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has received nearly 28 million complaints submitted to their CyberTipline® concerning the online enticement of children for sexual acts with an increase of 150% within the first four months of 2016 (NCMEC, 2018). This startling statistic illustrates just how dangerous online environments are for children, and it underscores the pressing need to identify online SOs so they can be apprehended and prosecuted.

Online anonymity is an enabler for SOs. Suler (2004) described the effects of anonymity as instances of the *online disinhibition effect*, a phenomenon in which people say or do things via the Internet that they would not normally say or do in person. Three key factors involved in this process are *dissociative anonymity*, *dissociative imagination*, and *invisibility*. Dissociative anonymity is the ability for individuals to separate their online personae from their real identities (Suler, 2004). Dissociative imagination is the

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tendency for people to create separate imaginary online personae, allowing them to avoid responsibility for what happens online because they believe it has nothing to do with offline reality (Suler, 2004). Finally, invisibility is the capability to stay hidden from others on the Internet, which is thought to give people the courage to do things they normally would not do (Suler, 2004).

The problem to be addressed in the present study was to examine the viability of a novel approach to the identification of online SOs despite their attempts to hide behind the curtain of anonymity. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that Luring Communication Theory (LCT) may provide a useful way to understand and identify the steps SOs utilize in their efforts to exploit children using online communications.

BACKGROUND

Differences in the Etiology of Sexual Offending

Considerable past work has indicated that people become SOs in different ways and for different reasons. Building on the earlier work of Finkelhor and Araji (1986), who provided a comprehensive explanation for sexually deviant behavior, Hall and Hirschman (1991), Ward and Siegert (2002), and Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, and Beech (2006) all have proposed models of sexual deviancy based on the influence of specific psychological and physiological contributing factors, such as cognitive distortions, difficulties with emotional regulation, personality problems, deviant triggers for sexual arousal, and intimacy deficits, all of which may lead to a distorted understanding of what defines appropriate sexual behavior, a condition sometimes referred to as having a *deviant sexual script*. According to these models, not all of the same contributing factors necessarily need to be present or even dominant for individuals to become SOs. This variability across individuals in the specific factors that can result in the emergence of sexual deviancy means that there are different etiologies, or experiential pathways, for becoming an SO. However, as noted by Middleton et al. (2006), when multiple factors are present simultaneously in an individual, they may develop the *pure pedophile* deviant sexual script in which there is a strong, if not exclusive, preference for children as sexual partners. These SOs gravitate toward online environments because of the greater number of potential victims and the aforementioned anonymity these situations provide (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Suler, 2004)

A Motivational Dichotomy in Online Sexual Offending

The varied factors and pathways by which individuals become sexual offenders likely imply that not all *pure pedophiles* have the same exact deviant sexual scripts. An important study by Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011) revealed two distinct behavioral patterns of online SOs based on an apparent difference in their motives for initiating contact with potential victims. In one pattern, offenders were motivated by the desire to arrange an in-person meeting in order to engage in an offline sexual relationship. These so-called *contact-driven* offenders engaged in a relatively short online relationship with few sexual behaviors because their focus appeared to be on meeting the child without delay (Briggs et al., 2011). In contrast, a second behavioral pattern was exhibited by offenders who were motivated to develop a purely online sexual relationship with their victims, engaging only in cybersex and exhibitionism. These so-called *fantasy-driven* offenders worked to maintain their online relationships for longer periods of time and were not interested in offline contact (Briggs et al., 2011).

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