Interpreting the Intentions of Internet Predators: An Examination of Online Predatory Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Internet predators are finding new ways to prey on the vulnerabilities of youth in chat rooms and lure them into sexual activities. This study will examine three chat room transcripts between adult predators and adult volunteers of the group "Perverted Justice" posing as youth. These conversations will be analyzed to interpret the underlying meanings behind the words and actions of the predators and how they affect potential victims. The purpose of this article is to provide insight to the reader of the increased amount of child sexual abuse on the Internet, the often-blatant tactics used by online predators to pursue this abuse, and how they are continuing to successfully manipulate children with them.

Until recently, child sex abusers were stereotypically assumed to have found their victims on the playground, in their front yards, or at school. Now in the age of technology, children are being stalked and seduced online in the privacy of their own bedrooms. They are lured into a world of sexual maturity by predators using techniques of manipulation and deception. Many of these men and women declare love, marriage, and compassion to gain the trust of these naïve adolescents. And many times, these predators get just what they want from these youth: sex. Child pornography is an expanding problem across the globe and many Internet predators use it as well as adult pornography to lure children into sexual activities. However, not all online predators use pornography. Many use simply the power of their own manipulative words.

Few studies have been performed on the actual techniques and characteristics of online predators (Baker, 2002; Quayle & Taylor, 2003). Such studies have shown that adult males usually attempt to lure young girls into participating in sexual activity using various tactics. These sexual abusers feel a need for power and control, as well as possess deviant sexual behaviors and attitudes. Results of these studies have used different techniques to collect and analyze their data.

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the existing literature by providing an analysis of the current tactics used by online predators. Much like any computer program or website, there are constant changes regarding the abilities and uses of the Internet. Devices and strategies used by Internet sex abusers are not excluded from this continual cycle of transformation. Using transcripts from Perverted Justice, the present study extends the previous research by illustrating the haste and aggressiveness of on-line predators' solicitations for virtual and physical sexual activities. By understanding these techniques of solicitation for sex, academics and policy-makers are granted a unique perspective of this particular behavior. The results of the present study may thus assist in developing policy recommendations (i.e., further advocating of Perverted Justice) that may help reduce instances in this behavior.

In order to make this contribution, previous research studies will be presented that have examined adolescent use of the Internet, adult sexual interest in children, and a brief review of Perverted Justice, the organization from which chat room transcripts have been acquired. An explanation of the latent coding used to examine the transcripts will be also presented. Excerpts of the transcript that demonstrate examples of the types of techniques used by predators on adolescents will be provided, along with a discussion of the meaning behind the methods and how this type of analysis can benefit criminologist and policymakers in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the age of the Internet is still in its adolescence, the study of online misconduct could be considered in its infancy. The privacy the Internet provides has allowed adult sexual abusers, often termed "predators" or "pedophiles," to easily access material associated with sex acts involving children. For example, the availability of child pornography that was before limited to magazines can now be downloaded from the privacy of one's home as it is provided by intricately formed and well hidden provider groups. In 1998, the federal government disbanded the elite traffickers of "The Wonderland" group. This child pornography group had two hundred members in over 40 countries, including the United States, Australia, Germany, Great Britain, and several other European countries. In February 2001, seven Britons were sentenced to between 18 and 30 months for their involvement in the pornography ring. One of the defendants, Antoni Skinner, was found to have three-fourths of a million indecent images on his computer involving over one thousand children (McAuliffe, 2001). The Wonderland group is only one of many distributors of exploitative material of children.

Children using the Internet. The Youth Internet Safety Survey is a nationally representative survey of youth (10 to 17 year-olds) who participate in regular use of the Internet. In 2003, a sample of 1,501 adolescents was interviewed regarding their Internet use. The results showed that of the teenagers in this sample, 74% had access to the Internet at home. Other places of usage included school or the public library. In a typical week, 31% spent time online five to seven days a week. Although the majority of those polled reported using the Internet for the purpose of communication between friends, 19% of these youth reported unwanted sexual solicitation and 25% reported unwanted exposure to sexual material from an adult source (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003). This survey was administered again in 2005. Results indicated that the percentage of youth reporting unwanted sexual solicitation grew by 6% and the percentage of youth reporting unwanted exposure to sexual material from an adult source grew by 9% (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelohor, 2006).

Why do youth spend so much time on the Internet and with what purpose? A study by Beebe, Asche, Harrison, and Quinlan (2004) found that communication activities, such as emailing and instant messaging, dominate teens' use of the Internet. These online communications have also been found to alleviate loneliness and isolation felt by teenagers. Some of these youth have troubled relationships with their parents, or even are exploring their own sexuality, and find this interaction helpful when dealing with these personal problems (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2004). In fact, online friendships or romances are often formed by troubled teens or teens with high levels of conflict in their life (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). They can construct an identity that allows them to portray themselves as someone they wish they were and not who they actually are. Adults searching for these types of teens

also use this type of deception by creating their own aliases (Beebe et al., 2004).

A second allure of this changed identity is the expected anonymity that is available to you in chat rooms. Children engaging in sexual discussion feel more mature during these conversations, but also feel safe by believing their true identity is unknown. However, during conversation, children begin to trust their adult online companions and reveal an extensive amount of information, including their location, age, and activities of interest. Adult predators take advantage of this naivety and use it to their benefit (Beebe et al., 2004). By merely providing their name or personal website address, such as a MySpace.com profile, an exceptional amount of information is provided. Stephen Dean (2006), a noted investigator and journalist from Houston, was able to obtain the daily schedule of a local girl in his area solely from her MySpace.com profile. He confronted her at one of her basketball games, as the schedule was also in the profile, and demonstrated to her that although his surprise visit was intended as an educational warning, not everyone comes away unscathed.

The ages of children using the Internet are decreasing. Children as young as eight years old have reported regular use the Internet. The U.S. Department of Commerce (2002) discovered that from 1998 to 2001, an increase from 4.1% to 14.3% for *three to four year-olds* was seen regarding usage of the Internet. In all the other age groups (5-9, 10-13, and 14-17), usage jumped by at least 20% between the years of 1998 to 2001. According to Wolak et al. (2004), 99% of Internet sexual abuse victims are between the ages of 13 and 17, so the group with the highest increase of online use has the highest probability of victimization. However, not only are the ages of children using the Internet getting lower, the ages of children participating in conversations of a sexual manner online is often surprising to those unaware of the problem. O'Connell, Barrow, and Sange (2002) performed a study regarding the use of chat rooms by adolescents. They discovered that 53% of chat room users ages 8 to 11 admitted to have conversations of a sexual nature online. Paul Hook, founder of TheGuardianAngel.com, was shocked to find a 13 year-old girl he knew was having sexual conversations online with a supposed 14 year-old male who was planning to travel 700 miles to see her. After ceasing contact between the two, Hook began the online counseling site for children and adult victims of online abuse to help others in similar situations (Hitchcock, 2002).

Adult sexual interest in children. Durkin (1997) suggested that there are four ways adults with sexual interest in children use the Internet: trafficking of child pornography, location of molestation victims, communication with other pedophiles, and engagement of inappropriate sexual communication with children. The focus of this study will center on the latter. Quayle and Taylor (2003) performed a study regarding the effect of the Internet on persons that obtain child pornography or attempt to seduce children to meet their sexual needs. They state that we as a society try to understand adults that are sexually interested in children

in a cognitive-behavioral way. The distorted way of thinking of the child sexual offender is assumed to be based on beliefs that minimize and rationalize the disturbing behavior. Other experiments have found that some offenders specifically are unable to connect their mental state as wrong and relate it to the needs and beliefs of other people. However, other offenders are clearly aware of their actions and manipulative practices, as they can describe how a child was targeted and how he and his family were shaped to increase the opportunity for offending (Quayle& Taylor).

While some Internet predators choose to actively recruit children for sexual purposes, those that maintain only online communication have been noted to justify their behavior by saying that this prevents actual injury to the child. Their sexual desires are satisfied from the knowledge that they are discussing sexual acts with a young child, but believe they do not require further pursuance of any physical act (Durkin & Bryant, 1999). However, not all predators maintain only online communication. The Internet can facilitate the communication of sexual desires through words, but the heated conversations often lead to requests for face-to-face meetings that result in sexual activity (McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2000). Previously in the text, it was mentioned how predators use techniques in manipulation to lure their victims. An example comes from the case of *United States v. Bodenheimer* (2005/2006), in the Northern District of Illinois, in which a 31 year-old man developed an online relationship with a 13 year-old girl that had been previously molested. After two months, he had gained her trust, proposed marriage to her, and convinced her that he was in love with her. After meeting her in Chicago, he brought her to a hotel and engaged in numerous acts of sexual intercourse. Bodenheimer returned home after the meeting and continued communication with her, as well as numerous other minors. After her parents reported the incident to the police, Bodenheimer was arrested and charged with traveling in interstate commerce for the purpose of engaging in a sexual act with a person under 18 years of age (Kendall, 1998).

Katherine Tarbox (2000) wrote a book named *Katie.com* describing her true-life story of meeting a man on the Internet and maintaining contact with him. He gained her trust, assumed a false identity, and even began proclaiming his feelings for her. Finally, he convinced her to meet him while she was at an out-of-state swim meet. Fortunately, Katie was found by her mother in the room of the man as he actively attempted to molest and rape her. Her predator was actually 20 years older than he had claimed and had a different name. In the case of *United States v. Kufrovich* (1997), the government presented evidence that Francis, known to Katie as "Mark," had other victims in his past and was found to have a wide collection of child pornography pictures in his home received from his victims and various other postings on the Internet (Tarbox).

A study performed by Wolak et al. (2004) polled approximately 2,500 law enforcement agencies in regards to their experiences with communications between Internet predators and adolescent victims that

often resulted in face-to-face meetings. The results of their study showed that the victims of these predators were generally between the ages of 13 and 15, and 75% of them were females. Only 5% of the offenders represented themselves as being teenagers, so the majority was honest about the age difference. Sixty-four percent of the cases involved online communication between the adult and victim for over one month. However, most of these communications actually turned into telephone relationships and almost half of the victims received gifts from their pursuers (Wolak et al.).

As the reader will see portrayed in the case studies below, the majority of offenders (80%) are open about wanting sex from their victims. Of the 74% of face-to-face meetings that evolved from these online relationships, 93% of them resulted in illegal sexual contact of some type. Only 5% of the reported cases involved violent offenses, so the majority of sexual contact was consensual. Although the victims were manipulated by the offender, the majority was not deceived by the intention of the meeting (Wolak et al., 2004).

A final note on these adults is the extensive nature of their personal characteristics. According to Mitchell, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2005), almost all are male, and 91% are white as well as employed full time. However, after these statistical probabilities, the other descriptive qualities (i.e., age, education, and employment type) are widespread. These sexual abusers cannot be categorized into one specific group and represent every aspect of what is often a respected society member.

PERVERTED JUSTICE

Perverted Justice, or "PeeJ," is a civilian watch group that is dedicated to exposing adult predators searching for children in chat rooms. The Website was launched in July, 2002 and receives thousands of hits per day by interested volunteers. Volunteers for PeeJ enter chat rooms and pose as children (generally 10-15 years old) and wait for predators to approach them for conversation. These volunteers are carefully selected, screened, and trained to know what steps are appropriate to take in conversation with these predators. The actions of PeeJ are not illegal and have been supported by the Department of Justice as well as local law enforcement agencies. Volunteers for PeeJ are not composed of all victims of child abuse, although approximately 50% have experienced some type of abuse in their lifetime. The common thread between the contributors is that all feel a complete abhorrence for predators and molesters of children (PeeJ, 2005a).

METHODS

The purpose of the present study is to provide an understanding of the speed and aggressive nature of online solicitation of minors for sex. This will be shown through an analysis of transcripts from sexual predators.

Results will assist academics in developing cogent theories to explain online sexual predators, as well as provide information to policy-makers to aid in the construction and institution of policies that will help keep children safe online.

Design

When developing this particular study, the author had to determine which research design would obtain the highest quality of information for the purpose of examining manipulation tactics used by online predators: qualitative or quantitative. Each design provides access to different types of data and allows for different styles of analysis. Based on the comparisons and reasoning presented below, it was decided that discovering these tactics could best be captured with a qualitative study.

The units of analysis, transcripts of online conversations, are subjected to examination that is attempting to uncover the thoughts and feelings of the participants involved in the conversation. A qualitative study permits collection of data regarding perceptions and experiences through more in-depth data collection techniques that do not limit the potential answers (Creswell, 2003). Researchers using qualitative methods can analyze observations in social settings and develop concepts as the study progresses, as opposed to limiting the study to pre-formulated hypotheses (Bachman & Schutt, 2001). This type of design is best suited for this study based on the type of information that is being reviewed.

Analysis

For this particular study, three case studies were chosen based on availability as they were presented on the website. Each transcript as it becomes available is listed in reverse chronological order (the most recent transcript is listed first). The first three transcripts listed on the Website were chosen to be examined. Each transcript was read and notations were made by any text that was not only sexually explicit advances toward the adolescent, but presented interesting cues into the techniques of manipulation and sexual satisfaction of the offending adult. This latent coding allows us to find the underlying meaning of the communications as a whole, not necessarily based on the frequency of a word as a measure. Although it is beneficial for the reader to receive an interpretation of the underlying meaning communication in its entirety, there is limitation to this method of coding (Babbie, 2004). These interpretations are at the discretion of the author and the readers may interpret the context differently.

It is important to note that the screen names or identities examined in this study have not been changed. These transcripts are available for public viewing on the PeeJ website and each participant is identified by the names provided in our study. Based on this fact, the author did not

feel that confidentiality was an issue and there was no need for aliases.

RESULTS

Case Study #1–Michael, Age 24

The first chat log analyzed began on March 29, 2005 between Michael a.k.a. "flamningdonkeybutt" and the Perverted-Justice volunteer known as Courtney a.k.a. "courtneyd132004." Michael, a 24 year-old from Santa Rosa, California, approached Courtney in a Yahoo Teen regional California chat room and immediately stated his age, gender, and location. Courtney responded with her invented age of 13 and her home location of San Jose. After the brief exchange of introductions and review of Courtney's photograph on her profile, Michael immediately offered to show Courtney his penis via his web camera and proceeds to display his genital area. After Courtney's response of "wow!," he proceeded to offer to meet her in person so she can take part in sexual activity with him. The following dialogue ensued:

courtneyd132004: cn we talk on the fone first?
flamningdonkeybutt: sure tomorrow k
courtneyd132004: wats ur #
flamningdonkeybutt: ### #######
flamningdonkeybutt: good night baby
courtneyd132004: im afraid 2 give it out
flamningdonkeybutt: dont be afraid
flamningdonkeybutt: I wont do anything u dont want me to do

(PeeJ, 2005c, p.2).

It is important to keep in mind that although Courtney is not an actual teenager responding to the seduction of this male adult, the techniques and responses that she gives is mimicked after much of what she has seen in actual online sexual conversations between adults and children. From this brief excerpt, the reader can observe the speed and aggressive language used by Michael to solicit sex from the teenager. Since Courtney appears hesitant to engage in a physical relationship so quickly, Michael reverts to a technique that has been termed "grooming" (Dean, 2006), which is the process of showing care and concern for a teenager by a sexual predator to gain his or her trust. It is also interesting to note Michael's desire to expose himself to Courtney. This is not the only time he exposed himself during their online relationship, which could be an indication of his desire to receive approval from his online companion.

The conversation then turned to a sexual undertone as shown in the following excerpt from the chat transcript:

flamningdonkeybutt: I really want to see u at ur house hon, so we can do things

flamningdonkeybutt: you want to right?
courtneyd132004: if u want to
flamningdonkeybutt: court. I need to know that u do - u have to tell
me
courtneyd132004: y u need to kno
flamningdonkeybutt: because if u don't want to do it then it would
be considered rape
flamningdonkeybutt: u don't want me to go to jail do u

(PeeJ, 2005c, p. 5).

After examining this excerpt, the reader can see that Michael is attempting to manipulate Courtney to believe that he is giving her the choice to have sex with him. This is beneficial to him because if Courtney does choose have sex with him, it is more likely that she will not report it to an adult for fear she will be punished and he will suffer repercussions based on her choice as well. Throughout the remainder of the conversation, Michael continues to attempt to persuade Courtney to meet for sexual activity.

Case Study #2–Randy, Age 50

This referenced conversation with a PeeJ volunteer known as Jess a.k.a. "sugahboogah93" for Randy a.k.a. "shinelfmc2005" quickly escalated to the discussion of sex. Jess described herself as a 12 year-old female in Virginia, and Randy later admitted to being a 50-year old male from Texas. Over the next few days of conversation, Randy continuously asked Jess about her sexual experiences with men and women, and described graphically what types of sexual activities he would like to participate in with her (PeeJ, 2005d). At one point, he also revealed his genital area to her, as well as masturbated for her to view.

Excerpts from the transcript are too graphic to depict in this article, but will be summarized. Randy attempts to have discussions with Jess regarding her experience as a rape victim. At two points in the transcript while informing Jess of his sexual fantasies, he informed her that he has molested two other girls her age. His first admitted experience was with his niece when she was 12 and involved urination during oral sex. The other occurrence involved a 13 year-old girl. Randy used these as demonstrations to show Jess that other young girls enjoyed sexual activity with him and so would she. After Jess's repeated hesitation to masturbate for him, he agreed to speak with her on the telephone to reassure her that he had sincere intentions (PeeJ, 2005d).

During the multiple online conversations between Jess and Randy, interestingly enough, never once did Randy aggressively attempt to arrange a meeting between the two as Michael did in the previous case study. He seemed to be satisfied to use online and mental visual images, as well as explicit verbal descriptions from the adolescent, to satisfy his sexual needs. His authority and emotional control over the adolescent's

behavior and words seemed to gratify him enough to not need actual physical activity. However, the aggressiveness of his attempts to immediately engage in the conversation could indicate that he has no interest, nor patience, to participate in any type of relationship other than a sexual one with his online companions.

Case Study #3 - William, Age 51

Of the three case studies examined in this article, this predator used the most methods of deception and manipulation on his adolescent target. However, many of his techniques fit into what society views as a stereotypical child molester. First, during his conversations with the PeeJ volunteer posing as 13 year-old Jen a.k.a. "jenjen_1991," he portrayed himself as much younger (early 30s) than his actual age of 51. Secondly, William told Jen his name was Marc, hence his screen name "markiemarcc." William's profile also included a picture of him smiling and holding a puppy (PeeJ, 2005e).

The conversations with Jen over a three-month period mostly consisted of questions about her virginity and her interest in having sex with him. He repeatedly asked if she would enjoy losing her virginity to an older man. However, as can be seen in the following two excerpts, William tries to gain a reaction from Jen:

markiemarcc: lol hardly, u a virgin?
jenjen_1991: yea, y
markiemarcc: at 13 u would be, but u look 18-20
markiemarcc: maybe its just the pic
markiemarcc: maybe im a pedophile
jenjen_1991: wats that?
markiemarcc: a child molester lol, but im not
jenjen_1991: omg, r u really?
markiemarcc: no IM NOT!
markiemarcc: but I could be if I met u, lol

(PeeJ, 2005e, p.2)

William's statement "maybe im a pedophile" is interesting because it makes readers wonder what his true intention is with those words. It is possible he wants confirmation from his young online colleague that she does not believe it to be immoral to have sex with an adult. Another possibility is that he will feel comforted with a response that she does not believe he is doing anything wrong, and therefore will not report him to authorities. The next excerpt from a few days later may provide more clarification:

markiemarcc: I could get in real trouble
jenjen_1991: wat u mean
markiemarcc: afraid youd have the cops there waiting on me

jenjen_1991: huh?
markiemarcc: Id be a child molester
jenjen_1991: d00d, now ur freakin me
markiemarcc: its not worth the chance
markiemarcc: freakin u-y?
jenjen_1991: saying ur a molester
markiemarcc: i would be considered that yeah
jenjen_1991: and the cop —
markiemarcc: my god your 13
markiemarcc: but then . . .
markiemarcc: if u came knocking on my door it might be
different

(PeeJ, 2005e).

From this excerpt, we can make two assumptions. First, William is
aware that having sex with a minor is not only wrong, but also illegal. It
is possible that it is his intention to confirm to himself through the reaction
of others that he is in fact viewed as a sexual abuser, which is a resemblance
of the techniques referred to by Cooley (1902) as the
"looking-glass self." The second assumption we can make is that he is
using techniques of manipulation to lure Jen to his home to have sex. By
persuading her to have pity on him because of the negative image that he
would obtain from approaching her for sex, he is influencing her to approach
him. William is trying to obtain his desired end result without
the guilt of approaching a minor. Fortunately, Jen is only a role, but
other children do fall into this trap of manipulation (PeeJ, 2005b).

DISCUSSION

Without having any knowledge about the life histories or current life
styles of the three adult males in our case studies, it is hard to make any
solid assumptions regarding why they are sexually attracted to young
children. However, we can refer to child abuse expert Dr. Leigh Baker's
(2002) characteristics of sexual offenders against children as a guideline
for our postulations about our three predators regarding the types of
manipulations they use. For example, she states these men and women
feel a need for power and control, as well as possess deviant sexual behaviors
and attitudes. In regards to the need for control, Randy is an excellent
example. He seemed to derive pleasure from dominating the
conversation with his victim by questioning her about her sexual past
and insisting he was aware of sexual misconduct from her past. Despite
her efforts to change the subject, he steered her back into that arena of
discussion. It is apparent from the transcripts that all three of these men
possessed a deviant sense of sexuality by the single act of involving
themselves in conversations of this content with online participants they
assumed to be children.

It is also difficult to make generalizations to the population of
Internet predators as a whole because we are only looking at three men

out of a group of thousands. For example, many online sex abusers are victims of past sexual abuse, while others are the ones that are originating the cycle of abuse; therefore, the causes of their actions can be traced back to various sources. However, we can affirmatively say that from the review of the three men, all used manipulation to lure their victims, which is valuable knowledge that can be used to influence protective programs in the future. Based on the results of past research (O'Connell et al., 2002; Wolak et al., 2004), this is not an uncommon tactic. All of the men were very blunt toward the adolescent females with their intentions of sexual activity. According to Henderson (2005), one in 33 children that use the Internet receive an aggressive sexual solicitation, which is demonstrated by the men in our case studies. Only William seemed to vocalize any sort of reservation or made note of the possible wrongdoing he was trying to initiate with his aggressive attempts to arrange a sexual encounter.

This study has several limitations that could be improved upon in later research. First, it would be beneficial to review the communications between not only female adolescents and male adults, but also combinations of different genders of the adolescents and adults. For example, the type of conversations and deception techniques may be quite different between two males than between two females. Second, a greater number of case studies should be examined to allow for a better representation of the population of Internet predators. Finally, analysis of the lifestyles and past experiences of these predators would allow for a better understanding of their choices and activities.

Few studies have actually been performed regarding behaviors and characteristics of Internet predators. As stated earlier, the study of sexual abuse on the Internet is still in its youth and scholars are attempting to educate parents and children on the dangers that are presented online. The naivety of our youth is being taken advantage of by adults possessing much more sexual maturity. Children like Katherine Tarbox need to understand the dangers of online chatting, while parents need to understand what types of people are out there looking for their children. This contribution to the literature is valuable as it exposes actual tactics used by predators. Policymakers can create courses of action to prevent these sexual exploitations from occurring so effortlessly. With this and similar research, the public can be aware of the manipulation techniques used to lure children into developing relationships, online and offline, with these predators and can educate them on how to protect themselves.

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