

PROFILING ONLINE SEX OFFENDERS, CYBER-PREDATORS, AND PEDOPHILES

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ABSTRACT

Based upon a study of 22 forensic interviews with suspected sex offenders whose criminal conduct originated from Internet use, this paper examines the role of cyberspace in the development of virtual sex offending cases. A framework that differentiates patterns of online behavior of virtual sex offenders from classic pedophilia is presented, which delineates “situational” from “classic” offenders. Virtual Offenders are more likely to suffer from an addictive disorder motivated by an attempt to use sexual fantasies as a way to escape problems in their lives, acknowledging the exploitative features and harm or pain they inflict. In comparison, Classic Offenders make a conscious attempt to use children for self-gratification driven by a need for power, dominance, control, revenge, or anger, denying the exploitative features and harm and pain they inflict. Behavior patterns that differentiate each type of online sex offender are presented and the role of Internet-enabled pathology, or online sexual compulsivity, in the development of online sexual misconduct is examined. Understanding the psychological issues involved in online sexual misconduct will assist law enforcement and Cyber-Crime units in developing more accurate indicators for pedophile profiling online and will help court systems better understand Internet-enabled pathology and its role in criminal conduct.

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INTRODUCTION

Statistics show a sharp rise in the number of sexual predators who prowl the Internet looking for vulnerable children, then make arrangements to meet the child for sex. (Andrews, 2000a). The FBI calls these criminals “travelers.” The numbers are hard to document but travelers are clearly part of the Internet-era crime wave. According to a recent CBS News report, the FBI alone opens up six new traveler investigations every week (Andrews, 2000b). This same report indicated that the Center for Missing and Exploited Children receives about fifteen new leads about online enticements each week, and a traveler is arrested somewhere in the United States almost every day. A disturbing number of recent traveler cases involve men who are first-time offenders with no criminal history of sexual activity towards minors. Some high profile cases include Patrick Naughton, a top executive at Infoseek/Go.com, Terry Spontarelli, a Los Alamos research chemist, and George DeBier, a former Belgian diplomat (Andrews, 2000b). Their profiles were similar, that of men who held upper-income jobs, and otherwise law-abiding citizens, arrested for traveling to meet undercover agent posing as a minor on the Internet.

Cyberspace, with its lack of restrictions makes child pornography more readily available in the United States than it has been since the 1970s (McLaughlin, 1998). With a click of button, users may transmit, manipulate, and even manufacture child pornography, leading to rising statistics in the number of people arrested for trafficking in online child pornography. McLaughlin states that online child pornography is so abundant and intrusive that innocent keyword searches can lead to obscene and illegal material, turning words such as “young” “teen” “child” or “boy” into trigger words to find child pornography on the Internet. The revitalization of the child porn industry places children at greater risk to be abducted, as pornographers need

them to manufacture new photographs and movies and rather than playgrounds, pedophiles now have an anonymous means to meet and directly interact with them (Lanning, 1998).

Chat rooms exist in cyberspace with names such as “Daddy4daughter,” “Men for Barely Legal Girls,” and “Incest Room.” While these are branded as “fantasy only” chat rooms and require participants to be over the age of eighteen, it is difficult to decipher what is fact and what is fantasy, based upon the chat dialogues in such pedophilic virtual communities (Trebilcock, 1997). It is unclear from the discussion if users are describing fictional stories, sexual fantasies, stories about past activities, or plans for the future (Lanning, 1998). Given the lack of restrictions in cyberspace and the permissiveness of its sexual subculture, predators have a new medium to not only pursue potential contacts with children, but also unite and unionize with fellow users in a way that allows them to validate and normalize their sexual proclivities (Lanning, 1998).

Psychologists have begun to question how the anonymous availability of child-oriented sexual material not only creates an ideal breeding ground for pedophiles but also how this opens up a Pandora’s Box for unsuspecting users (Young, 2001). Unlike in the physical world, conventional messages about sexual behavior are ignored in cyberspace. Users are free to explore pedophilic themes within the sexually uninhibited environment of the Internet. In this way, cyberspace becomes an enabler allowing users to create personalized content without any limitations that provides them with an outlet to explore sexually deviant online behavior.

INTERNET SEXUALITY

Early studies of Internet sexuality, or “cybersex” emphasized the fantasy nature of online sexuality and focused on use of the Internet for criminal and deviant behavior (Durkin & Bryant, 1995). They distinguished various motivations for erotic computer communication, from mild

flirtations to seeking and sharing information about sexual services to frank discussions of specific deviant sexual behavior. They posited that cybersex allows a person to operationalize sexual fantasies that would otherwise have self-extinguished if it were not for the reinforcement of immediate feedback provided by online interactions. As the Internet gained in popularity, researchers began to identify the addictive aspects of online communication.

Internet addiction, as it is often called, is a pathological preoccupation with Internet use (Young, 1998). Studies estimate that nearly six percent of online users suffer from Internet addiction (Greenfield, 1999) and can lead to significant occupational, social, familial, and psychological problems (Morahan-Martin, 1997; Scherer, 1997; Young, 1998). In one of the largest studies of online sexuality, Cooper et al. (1999) posted an online survey on the MSNBC Web site, netting a sample of 9,177 respondents, 86 % of them men. The study found 8% of users showed signs of sexually compulsive online behavior and that among both men and women "the most powerful and potentially problematic" interactions happened in online chat rooms.

According to the study, this "seems to corroborate an association of sexually compulsive or addictive behavior with social isolation." Young (2000a) found that online sexual compulsives became increasingly socially isolated as they retreated into a sexual fantasy world inside the computer. The majority of these cases involved men who previously had no history of sexual addiction, no history of renting adult movies, visiting strip clubs, or collecting pornography, but their sole problem with sex stemmed from using the Internet.

Users can explore darker parts of their sexuality using the anonymous and limitless context of the Internet, changing their name, age, occupation, or physical description. A woman can pretend to be lesbian online or a middle-aged man can pretend to be a hot young stud when talking to women in an online chat room. Young (2000b) referred to these individuals "fantasy

users” who utilized online chat rooms and instant messaging for the express purpose of role-playing in online fantasy sex chat. Fantasy users often progressed into sexually more explicit dialogue as a novelty created through cyberspace, and within the anonymous context of these virtual environments, gradually experimented with more obscene types of chat. Fantasy users hid their online interactions from others, and despite feelings of guilt or shame, continued to engage in such acts. Most importantly, fantasy users dissociated from what they did or said online, and often expressed that their online fantasies did not represent what they wanted in real life.

Young (2001) stated that “computer-enabled fantasies are highly reinforcing and the addict’s preoccupation with sexual arousal stems from his own imagination and fantasy history.” Online sexual fantasies can be so potent that they transform the computer into a modern day sex toy, as she stated, “Just recalling the potent images of one’s last online episode triggered arousal and reinforced the notion that cyberspace is an open gateway for immediate sexual fulfillment.”

In one noted example, Donald Marks, the attorney for Patrick Naughton, won a hung jury in the case, arguing that Naughton was only playing out a fantasy and that Naughton would have never acted upon that fantasy had it not been for the Internet (Andrews, 2000b). The “fantasy defense” as it is often called, directly questions the addictive nature of online adult fantasy sex chat rooms and their ability to enable users to develop an unhealthy obsession with the Internet.

Despite its success, the fantasy defense has sparked a heated debate in both the legal and psychiatric communities and little has been discussed in the literature to explain how online users develop a sexual interest in children using the Internet. Based upon a case study analysis, this article examines the psychological perspective of virtual sex offenders and the role of cyberspace in the development of deviant and illegal behavior. Specifically, the article explores how the Internet provides an outlet for sexually deviant behavior to develop and profiles two subtypes of

online sex offenders, the virtual offender and the classic sex offender. Investigative implications and ways to assess the behavior from an addiction perspective are also examined.

A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

The cases involved 22 clients seen through the Center for Online Addiction. The Center for Online Addiction was established in 1995 and provides education, support, and treatment to those concerned about Internet addiction. The center also provides diagnostic and forensic evaluations of Internet addiction conducted by the author. In all 22 cases, clients were men arrested for engaging in sexual misconduct with a minor using the Internet. In each case, this was a first-offense and clients had no previous criminal record or sexual history involving children.

Clients ranged in age from 34 to 48 with a mean of 38. 58% were employed in white-collar professional work, often engineers, doctors, or lawyers, 17% were blue-collar workers, often working in factories or in manufacturing, 15% were unemployed, and 10% were on disability. In ten cases, extensive collections of pornographic images downloaded from the Internet were found, in three cases, the images contained child pornography, and in one case, the client had a long-standing history of meeting women on the Internet for sex. At the time of arrest, 47% of the clients suffered from depression or anxiety, 39% had a history of alcoholism or drug dependence, 19% had a history of sex addiction, and 10% had a history of sexual abuse.

In all cases, clients engaged in pedophilic themed adult chat rooms, unknowingly chatting with a federal agent or police officer posing online as a minor. The undercover agent established an online persona of a pre-pubescent girl or boy and online conversations led to an arranged meeting in real life. In ten of the cases, clients arrived at the designated meeting place, but when spotting the police decoy (someone posing as a minor), made no attempt to approach the minor,

and arrested at the scene. In nine cases, clients were arrested immediately upon arrival at the designated meeting place. In two cases, the client never showed up at the arranged meeting time and was arrested at home for attempting to engage in sexual misconduct with a minor over the Internet. In one case, the client sat down with the police decoy and was then arrested.

Online behavior patterns were analyzed in each case using clinical interview and available discovery materials such as psychological reports, progress notes from therapists currently treating the individual, pre-sentencing reports, warrants or affidavits by investigators, and transcripts of chat room dialogues. Clients were also administered the Internet Addiction Scale developed by Young (1998), an eight-item questionnaire that examines symptoms of Internet addiction such as a user's preoccupation with Internet use, ability to control online use, extent of fantasizing when online, and continued online use despite its potential consequences.

PROFILING ONLINE SEX OFFENDERS

To assist investigators and the legal system in general, a framework that differentiates virtual sex offenders from classic predators was developed based upon the forensic evaluations, chat room dialogue review, and behavioral assessments among the 22 cases. Young (2000b) first described online sex offenders whose crime originated from the Internet as "Virtual Offenders" whose behavior emerged from the anonymous availability of online chat rooms that encouraged adult-child sexual fantasies to develop. Using this description, behavior patterns and post-offense emotions exhibited by these first-time offender cases, or "virtual offenders", differed from that of repeat sex offenders, or "classic offenders", along several dimensions as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Behavioral Profiles Differentiating Virtual from Classic Online Sex Offenders

	Virtual	Classic
Nature of Conduct	Situational	Chronic
Progression of Activity	Gradual	Immediate
Nature of Chat Environment	Adult Fantasy	Child Oriented
Sexual Interests	Inclusive	Exclusive
Extent of Identity Concealment	Open	Hidden
Chat Dialogue Assessment	Explicit	Disguised
Post-Offensive Gains	Remorse	No Remorse

Virtual Offenders tend to be “Situational Offenders,” a term coined by Federal Agent Kenneth Lanning of the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crimes sponsored by the FBI (Lanning, 1998). Virtual Offenders are generally “fantasy only” users that experiment in pedophilic theme chat rooms. Their entrance into the whole process is through the Internet, with this type of sexual acting out being a novelty cultivated via cyberspace chat rooms. Classic Offenders exhibit a chronic and persistent pattern of sexualized behavior toward children that typically begins in early adolescence (McLaughlin, 2000). Classic Offenders are clearly a more serious threat to the welfare of children as they utilize the Internet, because they often have prior convictions related to sexual crimes against children on their records. When they travel to meet children from the Internet, they are likely to carry with them “Sex Kits” or sexual paraphernalia such as condoms and lubricant or bare gifts such as a teddy bear, flowers, or candy, and possibly secure a nearby hotel room (McLaughlin, 2000).

Virtual Offenders gradually escalate into online participation of sexual themes involving

minors. Initially, they may participate in chat rooms with names like, “Married and Flirting,” “Romance Connection,” or “Over 40 Chat” and over time graduate into adult fantasy chat rooms, such as “dad&daughtersex,” which clearly indicate that an “older man, younger women” fantasy is to be observed in the room. Classic Offenders may frequent these rooms, but only to look for others to trade in child pornography, not to meet young children (Young, 2000b). They quickly learn that the main types of “children” in these rooms are in reality older persons pretending to be young, for which they have little interest. Instead, Classic Offenders mainly visit chat rooms designated exclusively for children and adolescents, such as “Teen Chat.”

Virtual Offenders have a range of sexual interests that go beyond child themes, whereas Classic Offenders show an exclusive and central interest in themes involving minors – even reading child psychology books to know how best to approach children or collecting artwork depicting children (Salter, 2003). For example, a Virtual Offender might be arrested for possession of child pornography but only a small percentage of the total collection is related to children. This distinction is not to minimize the criminal offense or its impact towards children, but more to contrast the behavior between these types of offenders.

Classic Offenders are skilled manipulators who disguise their true identity online and hide their true intentions (Farella, 2002). Classic Offenders pose as young children themselves through the use of handles such as “John12” or “Claire10” in order to gain trust and acceptance from the other children in the room. Typically, they prey on children who feel misunderstood and are more vulnerable to develop a friendship online (Salter, 2003). Classic Offenders offer attention missing in the child’s life and mirror the child’s interests, such as agreeing to also like their favorite music or hobbies. This helps the predator to establish an intimate bond with the child, often known as “grooming” a child. As trust is further established he (or she) will slowly

reveal his (or her) true identity and offer to be the child's "special friend," then slowly encourage the child to meet in real-life (McLaughlin, 2004).

Conversely, Virtual Offenders are generally forthcoming about their true age, appearance, and identity. Virtual Offenders scan the room and randomly chat with various people rather than trying to cultivate an intimate online relationship, and they are explicit about their intentions to role-play sexual fantasies involving minors. They may bluntly ask about prior sexual experiences or for the person's measurements within the first few seconds of a virtual meeting, suggesting that they believe they are talking with fellow adults. This type of questioning would typically scare away a child. Instead of "grooming" behavior, their conversations are often detached and stilted. Virtual Offenders tend to forget their place in the conversation, often because he is chatting with multiple users simultaneously, forget the person's name or physical description, interrupt the chat conversation because he took a phone, or abruptly end the chat conversation. These interactions show disinterest and a lack of connection.

Post-offense rehabilitation focuses on acceptance of responsibility and can become more useful by differentiating between the two classes of sex offenders. Virtual Offenders typically acknowledge responsibility for the harm they have caused, display consistent remorse, so express an unwavering desire to get their urges under control. They are more likely to respond to treatment with improved social competence, self-regulation, victim empathy, and an ability to adhere to a healthy lifestyle. Alternatively, Classic Offenders lack remorse, so treatment is often unsuccessful because they continue to rationalize their sexual proclivities as "natural." They are unable to feel empathy for their victims and often rationalize their interests in children with statements such as "the child is sexually mature" or "the child gave consent." (Farella, 2002)

By examining the role of Internet-enabled pathology underlying online offending

behavior, this classification system becomes an important method to assist law enforcement agencies in the investigation process. It might be useful in helping investigators develop more accurate methods of profiling online sex offenders, better evaluate offender behavior in the content of online sex chat, assist in proving intent, and improve the overall investigative strategy.

UNDERSTANDING VIRTUAL OFFENDERS FROM AN ADDICTION PERSPECTIVE

Exploitation cases involving computers present many investigative challenges, but they also present the opportunity to obtain a great deal of corroborative evidence and investigative intelligence (Lanning, 1998). In computer cases, investigators can examine screen names, screen profile, amount of time spent online, number of transmissions, theme of messages and chat, and theme of online pornography through information ascertained gathered from Internet Service Providers, undercover communications, record checks, and computer forensics.

As part of the investigation process, investigators should examine how fantasy-based chat users crossed over into pedophilic online sexual misconduct. Young (2001) identified five stages of online sexual compulsivity that can be used to show how Virtual Offenders follow a similar addiction cycle in the development of pedophilic online behavior. The are stages discovery, experimentation, escalation, compulsion, and hopelessness and can help investigators understand how the Internet provides the initial exploration for sexual fantasies with children to develop.

Discovery - For the Virtual Offender, cyberspace becomes the gateway into pedophilic fantasies. In each of the 22 cases, discovering chat rooms with names like, “Daddy4daughter” or “Incest Room” peaked their initial curiosity. The discovery that pedophilic chat rooms existed online provides a curious user with an initial doorway for inappropriate sexual experimentation to occur

(Young, 2001). Most people do not yet realize that there is any risk involved in engaging in online sexual pursuits. While in some ways it may seem like a journey into “foreign territory,” online sexual behaviors occur in the familiar and comfortable environment of home or office thus reducing the feeling of risk and allowing even more adventurous behaviors. A curious person may be completely unprepared when they step into one of many rooms specifically designed for the purposes of facilitating sexual experimentation. Titles such as the “Dominance and Submission Room”, the “Fetish Room”, or the “Bisexual Room”, may intrigue a casual browser who is initially shocked, but at the same time titillated by the permissiveness of others engaged in virtual sex. Such virtual environments may be more seductive than most users anticipate, providing short-term comfort, distraction, and/or excitement (Cooper et al., 1999).

Experimentation - A user’s sense of accountability dissipates within the anonymity of cyberspace, so he is able to experiment with bolder and bolder child erotica themes without fear of repercussion. A user becomes sexually uninhibited and lets loose his innermost primal urges with fantasies that in real life he would find reprehensible, but is now sexually interesting online. Virtual Offenders often start out in general adult sex chat rooms and gradually experiment with erotic and graphic chat themes, dabbling in bondage rooms, water sports rooms, interracial sex rooms, gay men rooms, or phone sex rooms. The risk of experimenting in sexually deviant online fantasies is that the virtual sex offender begins to distort what normal sex is and slowly develops a dependency on the nightly variety of sexual themes that Internet chat rooms can provide.

Escalation - With repeated exposure – like building a tolerance to alcohol – as an online user gradually becomes addicted, he also becomes more desensitized to these online fantasies and

starts to form a secret online fantasy life. In the same way, Virtual Offenders were engaged in a private, self-contained world that existed only inside the computer, which they began to use as a form of psychological escape during moments of excessive stress and mental tension. This set off an escalation cycle, as the fantasy distracted them from their mental discomfort and the more stressful life became, the more they retreated into a secret virtual fantasy world. As the alcoholic requires larger and larger doses of the drug to achieve the same sensation and pleasure from the experience, the virtual sex offender becomes bored with routine fantasies and now looks for the next big virtual thrill. In the escalation stage, their behavior becomes more chronic and pronounced and they become saturated with a continuous stream of sexual content that can take on riskier and riskier forms. In cases of virtual sex offenders, they begin to explore pedophilic sexual fantasies and use more graphic online handles such that “JohnEngineer” becomes “OlderMan4YoungGirl” or “Father of Two” changes to “Man4TeenSlut”.

Compulsion – As the behavior escalates, the fantasies become more ingrained and can easily develop into a compulsive obsession. In his pioneer book, *Out of the Shadows*, Patrick Carnes best explains sexual compulsivity: “The sexual experience is the source of nurturing, focus of energy, and origin of excitement. The experience turns into a relief from pain and anxiety, the reward for success, and a way to avoid addressing other emotional issues in the person’s life. The addiction is truly an altered state of consciousness in which ‘normal’ sexual behavior pales by comparison in terms of excitement and relief from troubles that is associated with sex.” In the same way, the virtual sex offender’s experience produces an altered state of consciousness when online and they come to rely upon this virtual sexual fantasy world inside the computer as a means to avoid life’s complications and responsibilities. In this stage, the behavior is largely

driven by increasingly painful states of tension and agitation, as an alcoholic is driven to drink or an overeater is driven to eat, and their behavior becomes more erratic and out of control. In this stage, life becomes unmanageable, as relationships or careers are jeopardized, as they become increasingly preoccupied with the computer, mask the true nature of their online activities, and continue to engage in the behavior despite its known risks, including arrest and incarceration.

Hopelessness - To rationalize the behavior, the addict must mentally detach from the online experience making it possible to disown his moral wrongdoing as “It’s just a fantasy” or “This isn’t who I really am.” However, these rationalizations are temporary and eventually break down as the addict becomes more and more disgusted by his actions online. The addict may experience episodes of despair as promises to stop are broken and attempts to control his fantasies fail. Consistently, at the time of arrest, all 22 case studies had engaged in negative thoughts about himself making such self-statements as: “I am helpless”, “I can’t control my use”, “I am weak”, “I am defective”, “I am worthless or disgusting because of my dirty habit”. These negative thought patterns were followed by repeated attempts at abstinence and repeated failures to quit.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This article attempts to show how Virtual Offenders are more likely to suffer from an addictive spectrum disorder motivated by an attempt to use sexual fantasies as a way to escape loneliness, relationship difficulties, shame and low self-esteem, acknowledging the exploitative features and harm or pain they inflict. In comparison, Classic Offenders make a conscious attempt to use children for self-gratification driven by a need for power, dominance, control, revenge, or anger, denying the exploitative features and harm and pain they inflict.

In a precedent setting legal case, Kenneth McBroom, a New Jersey lawyer, was arrested for downloading child pornography, his first federal offense of a pedophilic nature (US vs. McBroom, 1998). He compulsively viewed child pornography, and even when he learned that the FBI was investigating him, he could not bring himself to simply delete the pornographic pictures from his computer. Prior to his arrest, Mr. McBroom suffered from a history of marital problems, alcoholism, sexual compulsivity, and childhood sexual abuse. Rather than being deemed a pedophile, the court ruled that he actually suffered from a mental condition that significantly reduced his capacity for choice – i.e., an addiction. Based upon his clinical history, the court determined that his viewing of illegal pornographic material was less about erotic gratification and more about a compulsive disorder, granting him a reduced sentence and the statutes of the Federal Sentencing Guidelines were modified to incorporate this ruling based upon this finding. Cases like this raise legal questions about the role of a person's clinical, sexual, and online history in making informed and appropriate sentencing judgments.

The Internet is a powerful tool, much more powerful than we realize, and it certainly has implications for adult sexuality that can move quickly from harmless fantasy into unhealthy

patterns of addiction and sexual deviancy. It should be noted this discussion is not intended to reinforce the notion of the “abuse excuse” when people hear the word addiction to describe what appears to be volitional behavior. However, in light of recent court decisions, the legal system should consider the interaction between a person’s psychological makeup and the cyberspace culture that enables and contributes to the occurrence of the offense.

Although going online for sexual pursuits does not necessarily cause problems or inevitably lead to inappropriate sexual acting out, increased awareness seems the best way to help users understand the long-term effects of this type of behavior and to prevent potential cyber-crimes against children. Online sexual compulsivity and the involvement of otherwise pro-social and law-abiding persons in illegal pornography and pedophilic chat sites have distressingly been on the increase as availability of the Internet has grown. This paper seeks to document this recently evolving phenomenon and to provide insight in relation to it for use by treating professionals, forensic examiners, and legal authorities. New and continued research in profiling virtual sex offenders will also assist the courts in achieving learned, accurate and just evaluation of such matters as they become presented with increasing frequency.

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