

Chapter 5: Blind Trust and Coercion in Online Social Media Grooming in a Community of Practice to Challenge Hate Crime

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Abstract

Research on trust has mostly focused on optimistic concepts of trust as an interactive relational psychological state, omitting aspects of misplaced and blind trust, notably their links with coercion. Yet, paradoxically, the stronger trust becomes, the more vulnerable the trustor is to increasing risks of a loss of trust. Although often slow to build, trust can be lost in a moment of betrayal. Its relationship with coercion is complex. A particular trust paradox occurs in the hidden coercion of online social media grooming of vulnerable young people. Blind trust, a form of dysfunctional trust established by the groomer through deception, is a perversion of basic trust simultaneously increasingly strong in its power over the victim yet progressively vulnerable to erosion if the implied social contract of mutual understanding is perceived to be breached. This chapter provides a unique, original exploration of the paradoxical relationship between blind trust and coercion observed from theoretical and empirical findings from interviews concerning young people learning about online social media grooming. The context of the research was a youth group in London. Interviews with 18-24+ year old young people and community supporters (n=22) were supplemented by findings from youth club workshop discussions (n=60+). A multi-stakeholder Challenging Hate Crime community of practice including a university, police, territorial army, and local council participated to provide guidance to young people. Recommendations for further research and professional practice on building trust and youth leadership to raise awareness of blind trust and challenge online social media grooming are provided.

Keywords: blind trust, coercion, online social media grooming, vulnerable young people, community of practice, youth-police engagement

Introduction

Online social media grooming is enabled by the deception that forms part of disinformation, an increasingly significant phenomenon in the early c21st. Whereas ‘misinformation’ is a form of untrue information unintentionally spread through mistaken beliefs rather than an intention to deceive, ‘disinformation’ is deliberately inaccurate information circulated with the intention to mislead people (Søe, 2021). Officially defined in 2018 by the European Commission as including “... all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (de Cock Buning, 2018: 3), disinformation has led to widespread dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories propagated by individuals and organisations who exploit dysfunctional trust (Freelon and Wells, 2020; Volker, 2022; Zoller et al., 2015). ‘Massive digital misinformation’ has been characterised by the World Economic Forum as ‘one of the main threats to our society’ (using the term ‘misinformation’ as a broad category for all forms of false information) (Romeo, 2022; Zoller et al., 2015). Unscrupulous parties may seek to generate profit, influence, and control others through the spread of disinformation online for self-serving reasons, including commercial sales, political propaganda, and personal gain. Such disinformation can play on the gullibility of large numbers of people, notably vulnerable people with lower or average levels of education who lack critical thinking skills (Lantian et al.; 2021; Vranic, Hromatko and Tonković, 2022).

When a tendency to be taken in by conspiracy theories is linked to other vulnerabilities in affected populations, this can increase the damage they suffer from false beliefs propagated by disinformation (de Cock Buning, 2018). Those at particular risk may include individuals and social groups suffering from marginalisation, poverty, mental and physical health problems, a lack of education, and/or an inability to engage in emotional, behavioural, and cognitive self-regulation. Wider destructive results of succumbing to duplicitous conspiracy theories may include financial loss, conflict, illness and even death, for example from anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Destructive effects may include political, economic, and personal risks to individuals who fall prey to manipulative content promoted by online social media channels, such as believing false information about terrorism, unsafe remedies, political issues, persuasive sales, and intrusions into private life from criminals manipulating unsuspecting people (Lennings et al., 2010). The question of why people put their trust in sources of

disinformation is highly complex: urgent attempts to answer this are needed, as recognised by a significant growth in recent research to understand the reasons for susceptibility to mis-and dis-information (Maertens et al., 2023). The growth of potential solutions to address this problem includes media and information education literacy attempts to inoculate the public in advance to ‘vaccinate’ people against the threats of succumbing to mis-and dis-information online (van der Linden et al., 2017) and introduce validated misinformation susceptibility testing (Maertens et al., 2023). However, while all attempts to address the problem of mis- and dis-information are valuable, the problem of the rapid online dissemination of fake information persists worldwide and is accelerating in its proliferation of harmful outcomes, notably in relation to online social media grooming. (Xiao, et al., 2021).

Rapid growth of disinformation in the online social media grooming of young people

Interestingly, increasing usage of online social media by young people is not always necessarily linked either to the negative outcomes of becoming victim to disinformation, nor proven to cause anxiety or depression if individuals are not already vulnerable, despite widespread moral panics and growing cyberphobia (Sandywell, 2006; Coyne, Rogers, Zurcher, Stockdale and Booth, 2020). Yet, for young people with prior or emergent mental health problems, socio-economic and social class vulnerabilities, family grievances, a low sense of self-esteem, and lack of critical thinking skills, accelerating risks may occur from participating unknowingly in compromising online social media activities. The lack of a sense of belonging within stable and supportive social relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 2017), and a history of insecure attachment to family members may put young people at risk (Whittle, et al., 2013). The developmental ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). in which young people find themselves may be dysfunctional at multiple levels, including the individual, family, community, social class, and cultural situations in which the young person lives. These circumstances may pre-dispose the person to exploitation, which is particularly the case if they fall victim by chance to the manipulative relationship-building techniques of adult groomers (Black, Wollis, Woodworth and Hancock, 2015), Such risks to young people include unwittingly falling prey to sexual abuse and/or other forms of ideological, terrorist or drug-related criminally mendacious grooming behaviour (Krasenberg and Wouterse, 2019).

As a deliberate, manipulative form of misinformation, disinformation provides a foundation for predators to carry out coercive grooming involving young people, particularly in the relatively unregulated form of messaging that occurs in online social media platforms. The

online messaging and chat functions in such platforms allow rapid unsupervised communication between multiple users to take place without content moderation (Borj et al., 2022), providing an open doorway for malicious individuals to gain access to vulnerable youth. Of particular concern is the easy access to children and young people such social media platforms provide for predators who are intent on grooming their victims for various forms of exploitation (Borj et al., 2022), including for sexual, ideological, commercial, or other criminal purposes. Lorenzo-Dus discusses the history of definitions of grooming, including the practice of caring grooming amongst primates, to arrive at a definition of ‘digital grooming’. This could be regarded as more or less equivalent to ‘online grooming’, although ‘digital grooming’ is a more comprehensive term that may also include off-line digitally enabled activity:

“... the term digital grooming refers to digitally mediated identity construction that manipulates a target into acting in a manner that both advances the groomer’s illicit goals and harms the target and/ or others. / This succinct definition covers three core, interrelated features of digital grooming: digital mediation, manipulation, and identity construction.”

(Lorenzo-Dus, 2023:32).

This form of online child and youth exploitation has massively increased in recent years, as young people’s access to mobile phones and social media has expanded, and as the pandemic in 2020-2022 has increased both physical isolation and reliance on digital communication. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the UK reported an 80% increase in online grooming crimes in the four years from 2017/18 to 2021/22, citing police statistics from 41 UK police forces that demonstrated an 84% rise in such crimes since 2017/18, with a total number of 27,000 offences being recorded since 2017. The NSPCC report notes that, of the online grooming cases in 2021, where the gender was known, “four in five (82%) of grooming cases were against girls, with 12- to 15-year-old girls making up 39% of all victims, where the age and gender was recorded” (NSPCC, 2022).

The major risks this sharp increase in online grooming crimes poses to the well-being of children and young people is of serious concern. Technology-mediated predatory behaviour in youth online social media grooming is in fact a growing global problem (Chiu and Quayle, 2022; Seigfried-Spellar and Soldino, 2020). Amongst online grooming crimes, an increasing number of reports of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) by technology companies and criminal authorities in recent years has led to increased international

cooperation in multiple disciplines to “both identify, locate and safeguard victims and prevent, investigate and prosecute online child exploitation and abuse” (Quayle, 2020). Protective legislation has also increased, such as in the UK Online Safety Act (HMSO, 2023), and legislation against sexual grooming in at least 63 countries worldwide (Winters et al., 2022). Yet despite increasing policy, legislation, and research in this field (Lorenzo-Dus, Kinzel and Di Cristofaro, 2020; Lykousas and Patsakis, 2021; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Razi et al., 2023), an area of research within it that has so far received relatively little attention is the issue of blind trust formation linked to coercion in online grooming processes. A few researchers have begun to highlight the importance of trust formation as part of the grooming and coercion process, but more work needs to be done in this area (O’Connell, 2003; Lorenzo-Dus and Izura, 2017; Levano, 2020) and there is little that relates directly to the issue of blind trust.

This chapter addresses this gap through a unique research investigation into the role of blind trust and coercion as part of the serious problem of online social media grooming of young people. The chapter makes an original contribution to the research in this field by investigating the paradoxical relationship between blind trust and coercion observed from theoretical and empirical findings from interviews and discussions with young people aged 18-24+, plus community and police partners of the youth group. The research findings were also informed by a series of youth club workshops in which the university, police, territorial army and public protection and safety division of a local council participated to provide guidance to young people learning about grooming in social media in a youth group in Deptford. The limitations of the study were that the research did not explore the personality characteristics of individual victims and groomers; and the focus of the research was on a qualitative narrative analysis of participants’ reflections and experiences in London concerning the online grooming of young people in social media rather than any other kind of grooming, age group, or location. Recommendations for further research and professional practice on raising awareness of online social media grooming and fostering youth leadership are provided following a discussion of the findings.

The current study context

In order to investigate the problem of online social media grooming in a real-life participatory research community setting, the research reported in this chapter collected data from a local youth group, its community supporters, and partners. The youth group involved in the interviews and workshops for the research was set up in 1982, in Deptford, South-East London,

one of the most socio-economically deprived areas in the UK. The group is a small, charitable youth organisation specialising in urban arts. For more than forty years, the group has carried out activities to develop and provide voluntary education for marginalised youth under-represented in arts and cultural industries, organising a programme of performing arts activities for young people aged 14-24+, mainly from ethnic minority communities. The youth group fosters a partnership collaboration to develop safer neighbourhood environments, which has developed into a mature ‘challenging hate crime partnership’ focused on prosocial activities, with youth-centred artistic and creative processes at the heart of its work. The community-led advantages of this approach ensure both that the research maintains a lively relevance to key concerns of the local neighbourhood, and that, as community-based participatory research (CBPR), it actively welcomes the voices and actions of young people at the centre of all activities. This ensures the contributions of all participants are treated equally, with conscious recognition that the spoken contributions of young people are equally respected alongside those of more senior adults and professional participants.

Those who join the youth group are brought into a community of practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) which involves a dynamic, fluid process, distinctive in its transformative power to change people’s lives. The philosophy behind this involves Dewey’s notion of the ‘active self’ (Dewey, 1916) theories of ‘social constructivism’ (Vygotsky, 1978), dialogic talk (Wegerif and Mercer, 1997) and CBPR ((Brush et al., 2020). The process fosters trust, confidence, and social learning (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978) in which both young people and adult community partners join in with a dialogue involving participation in the youth-centred creative space. Without the support of such beneficial practices in youth arts, young people may find themselves adrift, drowning in a sea of uncertainty and difficulty with many life problems (Jameson, 2010).

A youth arts model of creative practice is provided to support young people to find ‘islands of truth’ and safety in the development of their identity and their future, in creative arts and in their adult lives ahead (Jameson, 2010). This provides a safe, protective space for young people to learn about and discuss problematic issues such as online social media grooming, and the need to develop critical thinking skills to avoid blindly trusting strangers in online platforms. The key point here is that if young people’s crucial needs for psychological attachment and belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 2017) are not satisfied within their family or community lives, the youth group provides an alternative ‘family structure’ in which they can safely

belong. Youth group workshop discussions included original drama, poetry and song performances written and directed by young people, including an original play and film disseminated to multiple school audiences on the terrorist grooming of a young person. Off-duty members of a metropolitan police force, territorial army, and safeguarding division of a local council participated voluntarily alongside the youth group and university researchers to engage in in-depth dialogic learning conversations (Wegerif and Mercer, 1997). The partners involved provided, in addition, authoritative guidance, information and legal advice to support young people regarding the dangers of grooming. The research took place in this context, to capture the views of young people, community partners and police to investigate their perceptions about online social media grooming, the reasons it occurs, and how young people can be alerted to protect themselves from the dangers involved. A key feature in discussions on trust and leadership held in youth group workshops on online grooming were issues relating to dysfunctional aspects of trust formation that can lead to exploitation of the vulnerability of young people, particularly those lacking a sense of belonging in their lives.

The darker sides of trust

Trust can be described as a synergistic, fluid relational psychological state, in which faith in the trustworthiness of others is established, despite uncertainty, risk and vulnerability (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001, Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995). Prior research on trust has in general focused more on optimistic conceptualisations than on darker sides of trust (Gargiulo and Ertug, 2006; Kramer, 2006). Indeed, it can be argued that trust tends always to have positive expectations of benefit, as Deutsch argues (1958). However, Deutsch goes on to acknowledge that trusting behaviour may be “pathological”: inappropriate levels of trusting ‘may reflect a compulsive, incorrigible tendency to act in a trusting manner without regard to the characteristics of the situation in which the behavior is to take place. Our everyday language uses terms like "gullible," "credulous," "dupe," and "self-deception" to characterize the pathology of trust.’ (Deutsch, 1958: 278). Subsequent to Deutsch’s work, most research on trust has focused on positive aspects and benefits of trusting behaviour, with little attention paid to potential negative outcomes of excessive trust (Gargiulo and Ertug, 2006).

However, latterly, there has been an increasing interest in considering negative aspects of misplaced trust, as the gullibility of susceptible individuals may be exploited by criminals who deceptively persuade their victims to trust them (Levano, 2020). Defenceless individuals may

make errors of judgement in trusting others who are not trustworthy. This includes individuals who lack the social support of and basic trust in reliable family and friends and may have missed out on educational opportunities to learn critical thinking and analytical skills to defend themselves against disinformation (Lantian et al., 2021; Lorenzo-Dus, 2017). The natural inclination of such unprotected people may be to rely on and place their trust unreservedly in apparently charming persuaders. This kind of 'blind trust' may be dangerous if the trustee is unworthy and unreliable. Those who prey on such vulnerabilities may be involved in self-motivated schemes on a continuum ranging from commercial exploitation to criminal malfeasance.

A dysfunctional form of trust (Volker, 2022) is involved when people fall prey to trusting the disinformation that provides the foundation for predatory grooming. Since, as noted above, trust is a relational psychological state that can occur despite uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001, Mayer et al., 1995), the groomer exploits a naive victim's willingness to trust blindly without regard for the critical thinking and safety checks that could protect them from the risks involved in betrayal. When charmed by the manipulative strategies of an experienced groomer, victims may eagerly engage in a trusting relationship, letting down their defences and allowing the groomer easy access to sensitive, private areas of their life, such as intimate photographs of their body, confidential information, and secret emotional needs.

The victim's decision to trust the groomer is dysfunctional, being based on their vulnerability to manipulation through disinformation, often propped up by a groomer's deceitful mask of a fake online identity. Since trust allows actions otherwise not possible, often being taken for granted, the victim may not even think about the invisible processes of trust that have been groomed to play a formative role in their decision-making, until they suddenly notice a loss of trust, as their faith in the groomer is shattered. Paradoxically, the stronger the blind trust has become, the more vulnerable it is to even a moment of betrayal, when the victim suddenly begins clearly to recognise the reality of what is happening to them. Depending on the situation involved, this recognition process may take days, months, years, or even decades, as in the insidiously coercive case of grooming reported by McElvaney (2019). Grooming may therefore be a fast or slow process, depending on the circumstances, and it is a process with various stage. In fact, five stages of grooming for sexual abuse have been identified in the empirically-validated model developed by Winters et al. (2020; 2022) from the 1) identification of a victim, to 2) gaining access to and isolating them, 3) developing trust with them, 4) desensitising them

to the abuse the groomer wants; and 5) maintenance of the grooming processes through coercion into further abuse and secrecy:

“Sexual grooming is the deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection. Prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, the would-be sexual abuser may select a victim, gain access to and isolate the minor, develop trust with the minor and often their guardians, community, and youth-serving institutions, and desensitize the minor to sexual content and physical contact. Post-abuse, the offender may use maintenance strategies on the victim to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure.”

(Winters et al., 2022: 933)

While this relates specifically to sexual grooming in an in-person context, there are similarities with online grooming, as the empirical research reported here identifies. The research investigation that is the subject of this chapter examines the serious problem of online social media grooming of young people, which is a context in which access to and manipulation of vulnerable young people may occur even more easily than in in-person situations (Chiu and Quayle, 2022). This is because in unregulated anonymous online social media platforms, predators can easily mask themselves using fake persona to deceive multiple victims across different channels, charming unsuspecting young people who are attracted to the allure of promised friendship, benefits, and adventure. Selected definitions of this online grooming phenomenon were explored by the interviewees, as was the nature of online relationships that might be set up by the groomer and the strategies that could be involved in such deceptions relating to blind trust formation and coercion. Consideration was also given to the potential impact of grooming on the victim and the ways in which recommendations for the safeguarding of young people can be suggested, based on the theoretical and empirical findings.

Methodology

The methodology was designed to collect the following empirical findings, based on theoretical considerations deriving from the above literature review. Qualitative evidence was collected from semi-structured interviews with young people aged 18-24+ (omitting young people aged 14-17 for safeguarding reasons) and youth workers engaged in learning about online grooming in social media in the youth arts group described above. Participatory research interviews in 2021-22 (n=22) were informed also by reflections from workshop discussions during 2003-23

in a longitudinal Challenging Hate Crime community of practice (Jameson et al., 2006), which gradually co-constructed an in-depth shared understanding of the situational complexity, behaviours and risks involved in both hate crime and in the grooming of young people in online social media networks, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Snapchat. Theoretical perspectives derived from qualitative research, social constructivist knowledge sharing, dialogic talk, and social learning in a community of practice to achieve mutual understanding (Bandura, 1977; Barab and Duffy, 2000).

Data collection involved video recordings of between 45 mins and 1.5 hours capturing the conversations taking place in small group interviews with young people age 18-24+, youth workers, trustees, community and police partners on questions relating to ‘blind trust in the social media grooming of young people’ (n=12 in 2022) and questions on ‘building trust and shared leadership in communities of practice for conflict resolution’ (n=15 in 2021). Although 27 interviews were conducted, five respondents were interviewed both in 2021 and 2022, giving a total of 22 individual respondents, including 13 females and 9 males. Interviewees engaged in exploratory talk in a shared dialogic space (Wegerif and Mercer, 1997) to discuss their perceptions of online social media grooming. Interviews were conducted by an independent professional academic researcher with expertise in multi-racial kinship, language brokering and group analysis.

The aim of the research was to raise awareness of the dangers of online social media grooming and strategies to overcome this problem to safeguard young people. The focus of this chapter is on online social media grooming in general, rather than only sexual, terrorist, political or other grooming. A consideration of off-line grooming tactics was occasionally referred to in the interviews, but mostly the focus was on online grooming facilitated by social media platforms. The chapter analysis derives mainly from 2022 social media grooming interviews, but some 2021 interviews also informed the analysis.

Workshop observations informed the analysis and discussion of the research findings from semi-structured interviews. The analysis of interviews was carried out using an open coding process in consultation with members of the youth group and the wider research team, in which members of the group considered and independently coded a selection of interview transcripts to arrive at an overall exploration of the themes and then discussions were held to debate the findings. Impressionistic thematic analysis deriving from this work was used for this chapter, while subsequent publications will provide more detailed analysis of coding. Research ethics

permission was granted for the participatory research involved in the project, with due attention to anonymity, informed consent, data protection, confidentiality, participants' right to withdraw, and avoidance of coercion in the process of the interview, which was conducted with confidential discretion regarding participant sensitivities to the questions involved. Pseudonyms were used for all twenty-two interviewees except one, who requested that we used their real first name. This person's name is not identified amongst the pseudonyms.

Findings: Thematic analysis

A number of key themes emerged during the interviews, which reflected also numerous workshop discussions amongst community of practice partners. These themes resonated with main points emerging from the literature review and provided a foundation for the analysis of empirical findings. The themes are the following:

Vulnerabilities of young people: the need for a safe space in adolescence

From discussions with the youth group and partner agencies in interviews in 2021-22 and in workshops over many years, it became evident that the 'in-between' stage of adolescence, as a transitional time between childhood and adulthood, is crucially important for developing identity and security for future life. Therefore, a traumatic experience of online grooming in adolescence is particularly damaging for the young person's lifelong development (Jameson, 2010). During adolescence, young people often experience uncertainty about their identity, physical body, and moral values. Competing emotions such as ambition, desire, anxiety, vulnerability, insecurity, and shyness can emerge as adolescents struggle to find and shape their 'space' in a difficult, competitive world. It can be extremely hard for young people to find that 'space' to evolve into being the person who they really want to be. It is important that young people are supported in these crucial formative years by adults, peers, youth groups, mentors, educational institutions, and the community as a whole, for example with creative opportunities like those in the youth group. As one workshop participant noted,

'Adolescence is a very important period in our lives: if you break the rules as a young person, you will be noticed.... The search for safety is set against the search for adventure: for young people who feel most vulnerable, the creative process allows expression and helps establish boundaries.' (Jameson, 2010)

Without the support of beneficial practices in youth arts, young people may find themselves adrift. The model of learning in the youth group is therefore linked with Dewey's 'active self' process (Dewey, 1916), based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978), building trust, creative leadership (Jameson, 2006), social constructivist and communities of practice theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) about how people learn with each other in the community. Young people are typically involved throughout a process lasting several years. The solidarity that comes about as part of this is linked to the formation of the wider community of practice regarding the beneficial aspects of working with others and the development of feelings of positive self-regard.

For example, as part of the youth group's work with the police, there is a recognition by young people of their own worth in supporting and helping to resolve complex, difficult situations: a realisation takes place within the person that 'what I am saying is valuable'. Dewey's concept of the 'active self' (Dewey, 1916) emphasises that a person's idea of 'self' is not something forever fixed, but is in fact a moving entity, capable of change and expansion. This notion emphasises the active taking on of an enlarged role for the 'self' with prosocial responsibilities beyond the norm of expectations. 'Prosocial' in this context means carrying out actions to help other people with no expectation of direct returns or reward. This is an enormously empowering process, in which young people become aware they can begin to be the kind of person they want to be in the future and can contribute positively to society.

In encouraging the growth of the 'active self' through prosocial behaviours, the youth group maintains a key focus on human beings, within a creative arts programme that emphasises humanising and empowering processes. These kinds of supportive developmental processes for young people in the safe space of a familiar neighbourhood community may enable adolescents to escape from the isolation and vulnerability that tends to provide a precursor situation enabling exploitation by opportunistic predators hunting for victims in online social media to target them for grooming. Interviewees from the youth group endorsed the importance of a safe creative space for youth to meet and the need to encourage young people to develop and support each other in a creative, welcoming community group to help vulnerable adolescents avoid the dangers of grooming situations.

Rose, a senior youth group manager, discusses the dangers of online social media grooming in relation to some young people's loss of trust in others and their lack of a supportive family or

peer group. She highlights the importance of the work the youth group does to support young people by providing a consistent, caring, and respectful alternative family structure:

“... trust is such an important part of young people’s experience, and when it’s broken, the impact on the way they engage with the world, can be very, very negative. And at that point in your life, when you’re sort of transitioning into an adult, you don’t find those people, adults in your life, peers, or anyone that you can trust - you’re at a serious disadvantage. So, what we realise is that the bonds that we build with young people, and the bonds that young people build with each other through the sort of practical activities, and enjoyable activities that we offer create this alternative community, alternative family, or whatever you want to call it. And that is particularly precious for those young people, for whom their own family or their own experience means they are without that kind of structure, somewhere to hold them, somewhere to come back to, and know that things will be the same and that people will be consistent, and that there will be people who understand you, or respect you, or treat you in a way that you feel good about. So, the issue with trust is, without trust you have nothing.”

(Rose [00:03:14]: interview, 2022)

Jasmine, a long-term supporter of the youth group and youth leader in many contexts, was also one of the interviewees who highlighted the importance of community social and educational support to young people, to avoid risks of isolation and grooming, saying:

“I think grooming exists because ... the access certain people have to education about other people, that other people might have different motives and that not everyone has your best intentions at heart ... that education seems to be missing. If there are people that don't have those interpersonal relationships and education where that kind of knowledge can be imparted, especially with young people, when that kind of knowledge can be given to them through parents, grandparents, or community members or where those gaps are missing, people will turn to an online environment, not necessarily being aware that these people online are not who they say they are: they are pretending to be whatever benefits them. So, I think because of those gaps missing for certain people, and most of the time these are people that have actual vulnerabilities and are not able to access that in their community or in their immediate family members. So, I think because there are those gaps, it enables these groomers and predatorial people to come in and take advantage of that and those people.

(Jasmine [00:04:53]: interview, 2022)

Definition of online social media grooming by the interviewees

To add to Jasmine's comments, all participants in the interviews in fact recognised the vulnerabilities of young people who do not have the kind of strong social support, educational development and professional guidance on the risks of grooming described above. The lack of such support leaves a gap which provides an initial opening that could be exploited by a groomer. Participants felt that online social media grooming of young people was a complex, sensitive area for discussion, given the vulnerabilities of young people. Therefore, they all felt the need to reflect on this phenomenon and how it could be understood. They each attempted to define online grooming from their own perspectives, willingly and openly discussing the difficult issues involved. The following definition from an experienced senior youth worker called Leonard was one of the more comprehensive characterisations. In this definition, Leonard captures key aspects of criminal exploitation, victim vulnerability, intentional predation and a calculated technique of persuasive deception and control of the victim by the groomer that may occur, using the resources of social media:

“.... it seems to me that what we're talking about here is a modern form of criminal predatory behaviour.... and by ‘criminal behaviour’ I mean there is... an intention. The intention of the perpetrator is to persuade, manipulate, deceive the victim. And I think it's a calculated technique, which targets the vulnerabilities of the victim, including their emotional vulnerability. And so, it seems to me it's definitely criminally motivated. And the purpose from the perpetrator's point of view is to exploit aspects of vulnerability in the victim, to influence that person, to persuade them and control them and possibly coerce them into doing something that suits the purposes of the perpetrator. And it seems to me that what is going on here is that there's a use of resources that are offered by social media, which allow these opportunities for deception to take place.”

(Leonard, [00:01:07]: 2022 interview).

In her interview definition, Gloria, an adult supporter of the youth group, emphasises that groomers target and manipulate young people who are inexperienced, in order for the groomer to achieve ‘what they want in a not nice way’, as a result of which the victim finds themselves ‘entangled in a web’ of coercion from which they don't know how to escape:

“... the definition of online grooming means like someone has just targeted someone, who hasn't lived life experience, just starting out in the world ...they can use their presence ... and manipulations against that person ... to get what they want in not a nice way... Even if that person is younger, they think they're trying to please... and they really are grooming and manipulating them. And it's so hard for them to recognise it because they're ... entangled in that web, and they don't know how to get out, you know.”

(Gloria [00:09:03]:2022 interview).

Jasmine provides her own definition of this ‘entangled web’ that the victim may be enticed into, immediately identifying coercion as a key motivation for a manipulative groomer who exploits an area of need in the young person:

“I would define it as a type of coercion, a type of repetitive coercion of a person and giving them what is perceived by the groomer that they want, identifying the person’s need or lack of need, or whatever it is, and particularly targeting that person to give them what they want. But it's always under false pretences and it's also admirable to the predatory people that are seeking out people with these vulnerabilities that they can, you know, potentially use or expose or groom them to their liking, to their benefit”.

(Jasmine [00:03:42]: interview, 2022).

Jasmine’s response highlights the ‘false pretences’ of the groomer’s tactics, in a process which a malicious predator might find ‘admirable’ for its ease of access to victims. This echoes Leonard’s comments about the groomer’s criminal intention to deceive and the use of calculated techniques such as a fake image and identity to lure the victim, as discussed below.

Deceitful use of a fake image to lure a young victim into blindly trusting the groomer

The opportunistic use of social media to deceive a naïve young victim and lure them into a false sense of security is explored further by Leonard in his ongoing interviewee response below. Here, he highlights the dangerous use of (mis/) disinformation in social media by the groomer. This is a grooming technique that presents a fake image of security and trustworthiness to entice the victim into trusting the perpetrator, offering the victim a ‘special relationship’ based on a false pretence of genuinely understanding and caring for their needs:

“... So, there are opportunities offered by social media for misinformation and deception and these are being exploited and used by the perpetrator to in some ways offer the victim a false sense of security in terms of feeling they can trust the perpetrator. But also, I think to sort of present an image of the perpetrator as this sort of trustworthy individual who can be trusted. It falsely suggests that they will care for the victim in some way, that they will somehow understand that individual and offer them a kind of special relationship. And that's, I think, what's quite dangerous about it.”

(Leonard, [00:01:07 - 03:37]: 2022 interview).

Leonard's comments point out the key danger that inexperienced, insecure, and vulnerable young people are often not able to differentiate between a trustworthy and an untrustworthy person. Echoing this theme of deception through online pretence, Sally, a young leader, offered her own point of view about the deceitful use of fake images to lure a young victim, and the dangers of social media platforms. She discussed this particularly in terms of the 'protective layer' that social media provides between online communication exchange and the realities of people's lives, saying that:

“... whatever the goal of the grooming is, I think it's a lot to do with power and using the kind of protection, the protective layer of being separate in terms of being on social media as opposed to being in person, as a tool for that. So, you know, people who are online can be anyone. You know, when I talk to people online who I maybe, haven't met in person, the first thing people say is, 'Are you a catfish?' Because it's so easy to be someone else, and pretend to be something that you're not, that it makes grooming a lot easier, because I can meet someone, and build a connection with them based off of things that are wholly untrue.”

(Sally [00:02:12]: interview, 2022)

Following up to discuss the dangerous pretence involved in the groomer's luring techniques in a similar way, Rose discusses the cynical and deceitful use of social media for terrorist grooming of young people through friendly, playful, cute images:

“...so the question of grooming in the context of young people, and the negative aspects of grooming, it's usually presumed to be something to do with a stranger who enters into your life, and through the sort of drip effect, builds trust and is moving in the direction of blind trust -

begins to have control over you in a way that actually benefits them, does not benefit you, and that is the clear differentiation. They have an agenda: someone wants to have that power over you, and they become known to you through the norms of social media, the friendliness, the interactivity, even the playfulness. One of the women involved in grooming young people who travelled to Syria was using images of kittens to send to the young women and their techniques were very deceitful. ...

(Rose [00:11:26]: interview, 2022)

Imbalance of power in the coercive groomer-victim relationship: naivety of the victim

The danger that Leonard, Gloria, Jasmine, Sally, and Rose identify that young people experience is linked to an imbalance of power in the groomer-victim relationship as the grooming situation develops. As Rose observes, this gradual development from blind trust towards increasing coercion occurs through the repetitive process of a 'drip effect' manipulated by the groomer. Because the interaction is based on false information, the victim's naivety, as highlighted by Gloria, is exploited by the groomer to encourage the formation of blind trust. This kind of dysfunctional trust is established during the progressive development of a feigned bonding process in the relationship. The victim believes this is real bonding and does not realise they are being tricked into a submissive situation in which they are surrendering their own power. They are enticed into an increasingly vulnerable and subordinate position in which they gradually give up more and more of their power, independence, and freedom to the groomer, as Leonard explains in his interview:

".... The victim then, I think increasingly trusts the perpetrator, and becomes increasingly vulnerable to those methods of manipulation and control. So, there's a gradual process here, but essentially [in] the relationship that's being established, there is no balance of power. There is no balance of power in that relationship. The power resides with the perpetrator and gradually power is being drawn out or taken out of the victim as the victim may not be aware of it, but they are gradually becoming less and less powerful in this relationship."

(Leonard, [00:03:37]: 2022 interview).

Gloria expands her definition of online social media grooming by highlighting the reasons why such experiences may happen to young people in particular online. She feels this is because

these victims lack support in real life, and are therefore targeted and manipulated into a coercive entanglement with online groomers from which they can't escape, because of their vulnerable naivety and uncritical approach to trusting blindly:

'... because they probably in their real life... don't have any good strong family support, or their parents or their family members don't really appreciate or care for them. They try to find that from somewhere else and the next person that shows them interest, let's say online, they will think that... 'cause they've never had it ... this is what it's supposed to be. And this is how they get stuck, entangled, and continuously get deeper and deeper into the wrong crowd... also because they're so naïve and this is where a lot of online predators use that for their benefit because they're so naive, because of how young they are... They don't understand it, so they can manipulate them, and the young person thinks they are doing something right or can't see it because they're blinded, because they just want that attention, that love, and it's not really love. And this is how they get [entangled], more and more deep[ly] ... and they can't get out until it's too late, and that's what's kind of really a disappointing thing.

(Gloria [00:11:51]: 2022 interview).

The desperate need for love and a sense of belonging felt by young people without secure social bonds is compounded by their innocence. The naivety of such young victims is also pointed out by Timothee, a youth group leader, who discusses the fact that many young people have no knowledge of grooming, as he discovered when the youth group performed a play about terrorist grooming in social media to audiences of school children. As the actor playing the groomer, Timothee was engaged in numerous discussions with many school children about the dangers of terrorist grooming. He was shocked at the lack of knowledge amongst the school children regarding this danger, even amongst older school children in their last couple of years of formal schooling:

".... the feedback that we got from the audience, a lot of the young people didn't actually know what grooming is, which is what I feel is very scary. Because... we're performing to [12- to 18-year-olds]. So, ... to see at the level of [17-18-year-olds], they didn't know what grooming was... they just need the basics of what it is ... because it's a very in-depth topic. But just to see the response from them about what grooming is, and to know that "Ah, they've learned something here today. They've learned to be aware of who approaches you, not only online, but in reality, as well." And to be okay with expressing that to someone you feel safe with,

whether it be your teacher, ... a parent, ... your friend's parent... just to be okay with expressing the fact that you feel that this older person is telling you to do stuff, ... is giving you stuff, is trying to bribe you, just being okay with expressing that. I feel we got that message out loud and clear to those young people...”

(Timothee [00:41:56] interview, 2021).

Isolation of the young person in an online grooming situation

In his interview, Leonard explores further the nature of the kind of grooming relationship that Timothee has outlined. Leonard goes on to describe the unbalanced power dynamics of the groomer-victim situation from his point of view as a senior youth worker who has spent many years observing and supporting young people. He analyses what is likely to be happening to a young victim in an unsafe, fearful situation of increasing dependency and powerlessness in online grooming, when the victim feels their life is being taken over and they can't make their own choices anymore:

“And part of what I think is going on is that the perpetrator is disguising their actual motives, and there's a kind of subterfuge here to be offering what seems to be a caring relationship when actually they are offering the opposite of a caring relationship. So, the effect is to undermine the confidence of the victim, make them feel they can't trust their own judgment, and they become increasingly dependent on the perpetrator.... And that means the victim is increasingly making a kind of emotional investment in that person who's actually manipulating them, out of a fear of rejection. What's being brought about is a sense that, if you feel rejection, you feel more isolated, potentially more lonely, and increasingly dependent on that person that seems to be offering you this special relationship. And that constantly being reinforced over a period of time means the victim feels they have to comply with whatever the perpetrator is saying, or doing, or expecting of them. The demands made by the perpetrator become more and more difficult to say no to, the victim feels they cannot reject what the perpetrator seems to be offering. And that is gradually intensified, so that it becomes increasingly harmful for the victim, but they feel more and more powerless to do anything about it. So, it's that way of threatening the self-worth, the self-image, filling the life of the victim, with a sense of doubt and anxiety [so] that they don't feel they can make their own choices, or their own decisions because there's always that fear of being rejected.”

(Leonard [00:03:37]: interview, 2022).

Leonard's identification of the issue of increased isolation as part of the entrapment process of online grooming is linked with the loneliness and vulnerability of the young person in a grooming situation. A number of other interviewees also brought up the issue of isolation as a key consideration of why grooming may occur, and what happens to a young person before, during, and after a grooming situation. Discussing the process of a victim becoming isolated after blindly trusting a groomer, Jasmine said,

".... I think it could be like a rabbit hole. If you start to isolate yourself and then you go down this road of more things to separate yourself from people... once you start to isolate yourself from the community, then you isolate yourself from family, from any partners, and then that will have impact from, on your work and all that kind of thing. And the things that want to hurt us love it when we're isolated. They absolutely enjoy it, because then whatever they do to us... There's no repercussion. There's no one to be accountable. They can do what they want with someone that's isolated and doesn't have community, doesn't have people to tell them "No, that's not right. That shouldn't be working like this or that shouldn't have gone that way." I think the things that want to destroy us love it when we're isolated because then they can completely destroy us, you know, our confidence, our aspiration, everything can be taken from us when we're isolated, you know?"

(Jasmine [00:19:54]: Interview, 2022)

Powerlessness and obedience of the victim to groomer coercion in social media

Jasmine perceives that the groomer 'can do what they want' by isolating the victim, and enjoying the control they have over this vulnerable person, as there is 'no one to be accountable' so they can 'completely destroy' the victim and take everything from them. Coercion of the victim by the groomer and the victim's increasing obedience to their demands is therefore hidden from exterior judgement behind a cloak of normalcy, isolation and secrecy surrounding the relationship, that is easy to achieve on social media. As Leonard observes of this process:

"... And so gradually what you're moving into is a sense of the victim feeling they have to obey what the perpetrator is expecting them to do. So that sense of the power of one personality over another and how that links into the power of social media is that there is a feeling that you are searching for the approval of the person that is manipulating you. And once you get into that relationship, it's very difficult to get out of it. There's a sense that your life is being closed

down, is being narrowed down and your social connections outside the relationship become less and less... you're less and less aware of how you can connect with the world outside this manipulative and controlling relationship. So, it's difficult to question it. It's difficult to develop any sort of critical awareness of what's happening to you. That seems to me the main feature of this kind of control or coercion, that makes it sort of impossible in a way to live your life with a sense of openness to the world around you. It's as if your life has sort of closed down to just these sort of dimensions and the power of social media is to reinforce that sense, that you are actually isolated, that you feel you have this sort of clear sense of connection with a person who you think you can trust, but actually is damaging your life in various ways, and making demands on you and controlling you in a way that you cannot fail to obey. And going back to the first point really, that's where I think the criminal intention is being expressed through the social media side of things.

(Leonard [00:06:36]: interview, 2022)

The fact that this blind trust and isolating entrapment process happens online in virtual social media platforms away from in-person scrutiny is a key point, making the victim even more vulnerable to the attractions of this deceitful grooming, as their personal lives are already lacking in support, as Anna discusses:

“I think that's a big issue, especially with social media or online... because I feel like... it's easier to blindly trust someone if you're not face-to-face with them. There's kind of something in the middle... It's taken down your barriers almost. I feel like I've seen more people put more trust into people online that they've just met, that can say some very nice things to them, make them feel they have so much in common, and they're a great person, and they can do so much for them. They will put all that trust in them, especially if they're not getting that in their personal lives. “

(Anna [00:08:58]: interview, 2022).

Impact of online social media grooming on young people

All interviewees raised issues regarding the profoundly negative impact of online social media grooming on young people. Rose was amongst those who identified this deceitful entrapment

of vulnerable people as a form of destructive hate crime that oppresses young people and is insufficiently recognised:

“... well, all of the things we’ve always looked at, the things that oppress young people, whether it’s racism, sexism, or any other kind of isms. All the things that judge you and put you down, make you feel you don’t belong, or you can’t be part of something... All of those sorts of negative influences that can control your life if you don’t have a positive influence counter it... Those things sort of focus in as a kind of hate crime... These things can really destroy your self-esteem and have a massive impact on your life. If you add to that, the idea that this can be formulated online, with groups of people choosing to openly act that way as well, you have a serious issue of hate crime that is sort of unrecognised.

(Rose [00:07:12]: interview, 2022).

Patsy, a young professional who was formally a youth group leader, points out the severely harmful consequences that online social media grooming can lead to in young people’s lives. She responded to a question on the potential impact of social media in the following way:

“... Gosh, the worst extreme is death, isn't it? Like you hear about growing up, we always had honeybee traps - where young women would end up being manipulated and groomed and they will eventually set up somebody else to be killed or to be targeted, and so, I guess the ultimate consequence of it is death. I think, as well, is the irreversible trauma that it has on you just throughout your whole life. You know, the way that you trust, the trust that you have in strangers, and everything is online now, so when you’re going through online transactions, if I’m buying something, could this potentially be a scam? You just start to question a lot of things because social media makes up such a huge part of our every day and in building relationships as well. I think when things like that happen, you really do start to question not just the people around you, but also yourself, you know, how could I? How could that have happened to me? Why me? And eventually, it does become, you know, the victim blames themselves, which I think is probably one of the worst consequences of it for someone, especially a young person who’s just in their formative years.”

(Patsy [00:03:42]: interview, 2022).

The shocking outcomes of death, irreversible trauma, loss of trust in strangers and in doing online transactions, as well as the loss of confidence, self-esteem and self-trust raised by Rose and Patsy were echoed by other interviewees, who mentioned other harmful consequences such

as humiliation, desensitisation to violence, bullying, the break-up of peer group friendships, being criminalised, being arrested by police, and being kidnapped by a groomer. From the above themes, the discussion and analysis of the stages of grooming, the impact on young people, and recommendations to prevent this were drawn up.

Discussion

Blind trust in the luring process in online social media grooming of young people

The literature review and empirical findings revealed that the relationship of blind trust with coercion is complex, mostly relating to darker, more dangerous, and powerless forms of dysfunctional trust (Volker, 2022). Blind trust results from a deceptive formation of trust activated by the groomer to facilitate the process by which young people are lured into a coercive grooming situation (Olson et al., 2007). The term ‘blind trust’ according to most dictionary definitions refers to “a financial arrangement in which someone's money is invested for them by another person or company, who controls and makes all decisions about the investments.” (McIntosh, 2013). The interesting thing about this definition is that the person who owns the money voluntarily gives up all knowledge about and control of their funds. They allow themselves to become powerless, which may beneficially avoid a conflict of interest in some situations, for example in political contexts where someone has a role as a leader and cannot ethically participate in investment decisions. Although the term is mostly used for financial transactions in business and political contexts, in social contexts, the term has a somewhat different connotation as a form of perverted trust, as Volkan explains:

“Once the basic trust of members of a group is shaken, it gets perverted and is replaced by a blind trust. In such a societal regression, we tend to follow leaders’ views and directions, whether they are reparative or destructive.” (Volkan, 2014: 14).

The literature review and interviews revealed that victims targeted by groomers tend to be those who have vulnerabilities, which the groomer exploits, enticing the young person into believing that their relationship with the groomer is ‘special’ and needs the protection of secrecy, while calling into question the extent that they should trust their normal contacts. The blind trust that the groomer encourages is therefore established as a perverted form of dysfunctional trust that replaces the basic trust they might have in family and friends. A particular trust paradox then

occurs in relation to hidden coercion that abusers gradually introduce into the online social media grooming process of young people. Blind trust is gradually encouraged by the groomer through compliments, temptations, and deceptive trust development in the early stages of the grooming process (O'Connell, 2003; Lorenzo-Dus and Izura, 2017; Levano, 2020). This forms part of the arsenal of calculated online groomer strategies that are procedurally designed to flatter, tempt, and manipulate young targets into a dependent emotional state involving blind acceptance of their abuser's trustworthiness (Lorenzo-Dus and Izura, 2017), as Leonard and others point out above.

The naïve trust of vulnerable young people and their lack of critical thinking ability (Lantian et al., 2021) is thereby exploited in a gradually encroaching entrapment cycle through a luring process described by Olson et al. (2007) in their 'theory of luring communication (LCT)'. The victim is lured into a tightening cycle of 'deceptive trust development' and threatening coercion which becomes increasingly traumatic and dangerous to the young person, as Olsen et al. (2007) describe as part of their 'luring communication theory':

'After perpetrators have gained access, they then begin to engage in the primary action strategy (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), labeled the cycle of entrapment. At the center of the cycle is the theory's core phenomenon, deceptive trust development. Like the hub of a wheel, the establishment of trust allows the perpetrator to groom, isolate, and approach his potential victim; therein, creating the cycle of entrapment.' (Olsen et al, 2007: 236)

As the grooming situation develops further through variable stages of bonding, control, and dependence (O'Connell, 2003), the victim's blind trust in the groomer becomes simultaneously increasingly strong in its power over the victim and progressively vulnerable to erosion if the implied social contract of mutual understanding is perceived to be breached by an anxious young target who senses - and starts to question - the growing threat of coercion. However, at this stage the victim may be relatively powerless to break free, having been manipulated into an increasing sense of isolation, shame, and fear of reprisal, depending on the type of grooming involved (Lennings et al.; Wolf and Pruitt, 2019). So, although trust may now be breached, vulnerability, guilt, denial, and fear may now have taken over, leaving the victim in thrall to the groomer, as a literal or psychological prisoner, unable to get help, and terrified, confused or threatened into silence about reporting their situation to their family, friends, or the police (McElvaney, 2019). Even if the relationship with the groomer ends with an escape from further

damage after an initial traumatic encounter, the young person's life prospects may be so harmed at this point that to the victim there may seem to be no way back into a safer and saner world.

Stages of online grooming: raising awareness

From the literature review, interviewee responses and workshop observations, it became clear that the five empirically validated stages of sexual grooming identified by Winters et al. (2020; 2022):

- 1) identification of a victim
- 2) gaining access to and isolating them
- 3) developing trust with them
- 4) desensitising them to the abuse the groomer wants; and
- 5) maintenance of grooming processes through coercion into further abuse and secrecy

were also, broadly speaking, identified by interviewees in relation to the online grooming of young people in social media and therefore are likely to be involved in other types of grooming, for example, grooming for ideological radicalisation and terrorism. Interviewees recognised the profound importance of raising awareness amongst young people of these issues, as Timothee notes above.

How to challenge online grooming

Building on the stages of grooming identified above (Winters et al., 2020; 2022), and drawing from the interviews and workshop observations, the following actions are suggested at each stage of the online grooming process. These aim to protect young people by challenging and counteracting the efforts of groomers:

- 1) raise young people's attention to the risks of being identified as a victim for grooming
- 2) provide young people with community support to increase 'belonging' and avoid isolation
- 3) warn young people of the risks of blind trust, encourage critical thinking and basic trust
- 4) educate young people on the risks and stages of grooming; set up youth support groups
- 5) assist young people to report any incidents of grooming and to support their peers

Although this provides only an initial list for raising awareness of and challenging the stages of grooming, interviewees identified that considerable work needs to be done to support young people: this is not a straightforward task. From a practitioner's point of view, it is important in the first place to identify the most vulnerable young people in the community. There is then an urgent need to increase these young people's attention to critical thinking skills development. This is a vital safeguard to avoid naïve young people being seduced into dysfunctional forms of blind trust and to help them to challenge grooming, as Rose outlines below, saying that this was a 'tall order':

"... to counter that kind of experience you need somewhere where you will be respected, where you belong, where you can belong, where your peers give you positive feedback... Isolation is a technique... so there's a reason why people, who want to isolate you don't want you to find yourself in a situation where you can be supported. And you know, we have to own the fact that it is a technique that is being used by people who want power over you in different ways, for different reasons. And social media has become a very, very useful tool to people of that kind, and groups of that kind.... social media has become a massive problem for young people. And we're just beginning to try and consider how we can get young people out of their phones, and into their social spaces again. It's a tall order."

(Rose [00:12:12]: interview, 2022).

Conclusion

The rapid growth of disinformation in social media platforms and the facility with which these platforms can be used by those with criminal intent has led to significant risks for young people from the potential for online grooming. This chapter reported on selected literature and empirical findings from interviews (n=22) and workshops (n=30+) within a local youth group in Deptford, South-East London, which has worked for many years with multiple community partners to challenge hate crime and safeguard young people from harm.

The aim of the research was to raise awareness of the dangers of online social media grooming and strategies to overcome this problem to safeguard young people. The focus of this chapter has been on online social media grooming in general, rather than only sexual, terrorist, political or other grooming. The chapter analysis mainly derives from 2022 social media grooming interviews, but some 2021 interviews also informed the analysis.

The evidence from the interviews and workshops on online social media grooming of young people revealed that respondents were extremely concerned about the vulnerabilities of young people to the risks of grooming. This confirmed the findings of the literature review regarding the global increase of serious concerns about this problem. Young people who are isolated, insecure, naïve, lack family and community support, frequently engage in social media on their own without support from others, and have not had the experience of developing critical thinking skills, are most at risk. Manipulative individuals have easy access to social media and can readily target vulnerable young people, charming them with compliments and friendly approaches, using fake information to create blind trust, while disguising their true criminal motivations.

Having established the victim's blind trust in themselves while weakening the young person's basic trust and faith in their routine support networks, the groomer then begins to increase the isolation of the victim, heightening the imbalance of power in the relationship, so the victim becomes increasingly powerless. The stages of grooming validated through prior research were confirmed by the interviews. Respondents felt that grooming needed to be challenged at all stages of the process, and young people encouraged to report grooming instances to the police or another responsible adult. The findings from interviews and workshops were incorporated into an initial list of actions to challenge each stage of grooming, though it is recognised that this is not a straightforward process and there is need for considerable work.

Recommendations for further research and professional practice include providing improved information and professional training on the paradoxical relationship between blind trust and coercive control in online grooming. Awareness raising of issues regarding the need to belong in secure social situations, the dangers of isolation and of blind trust in grooming are recommended. This includes the identification of blind trust as a form of perverted trust when the victim's basic trust in existing contacts and support networks has been broken down by the groomer during the stages of entrapment. For this, multi-stakeholder community-based participatory and interdisciplinary research between educators, psychologists, social workers, and behavioural scientists is recommended.

Linked with such research, knowledge exchange using educational materials is also recommended, to be developed with youth groups to inform young people, the police and

safeguarding staff about preventative measures that may assist in resolving the paradox of blind trust and developing critical thinking skills re. basic trust and youth leadership learning dialogues. Prevention programmes to disseminate knowledge about tactics used by groomers are recommended, involving youth groups and community partners. Further research and professional knowledge exchange are recommended on this issue, including expanding the reach of the current performing arts workshops on terrorist grooming that the youth group is delivering across multiple schools to thousands of pupils in the pan-London region.

In addition, recommendations on the digital aspects of online grooming in social media are essential to improve protection for young people at risk of grooming by predators. There is an urgent need for improved digital leadership from the companies that provide platforms for meeting strangers, including stricter levels of monitoring, screening, and ethical oversight, as well as transparent reporting and accountability. Improved government regulations are greatly needed to tighten existing legislation, and to challenge and eliminate social media risk factors. Clearer pathways for reporting suspected grooming attempts to the police or other authorities are recommended. A regulatory framework needs to be developed that addresses different levels of intervention and support to challenge online social media grooming of young people. This should start from families and young people, and include social groups and communities, as well as digital technology companies, and government regulators. The development of such framework is highly recommended as a subject for future research.

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