

Victim Voices: Analysing Child Discourse in Online Sexual Grooming Interactions

Ruth Mullineux-Morgan
Swansea University, Wales, UK
Email: 967459@swansea.ac.uk

“Silence is what allows people to suffer without recourse, what allows hypocrisies and lies to grow and flourish, crimes to go unpunished. If our voices are essential aspects of our humanity, to be rendered voiceless is to be dehumanized or excluded from one’s humanity.”¹

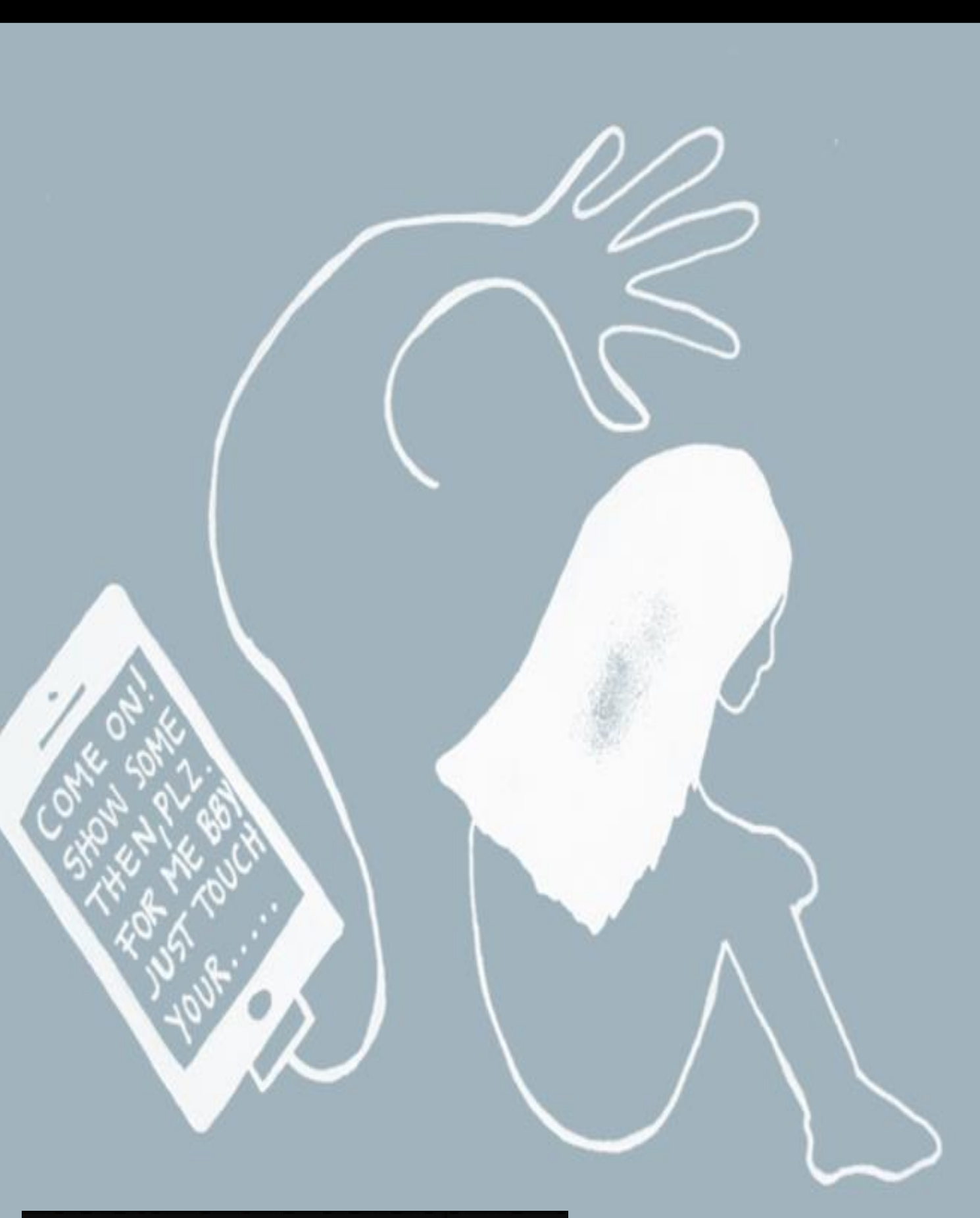


Illustration by Jennifer Stråle

1. Background/Context

Online Child Sexual Grooming (OCSG) affects a large number of our children. Based on latest police recorded crime data, it's estimated an average of 1 online abuse offence against a child is recorded every 16 minutes in England and Wales.²

OCSG is a communicative process of entrapment. Extant research has focused on the offender's communication.³ Few studies explore the child's perspective, experience or behaviours within the grooming process.⁴

To date no study has carried out an in-depth discourse analysis of child victims' talk within, or about, the OCSG process.

2. Aims

This research asks 'why is this the case?' The challenges of a research focus on victim voice are probed and the research explores the benefits such a focus may hold. It advocates the importance of seeking new methodological approaches to overcome potential challenges.⁵ By analysing young people's talk in OCSG, the aim is to amplify children's voices, ensuring fuller understandings of the complexities of the OCSG process leading to additional insights to support prevention.

The research aims to:

- Explore children's discourse relating to experiences of OCSG, drawing on hitherto under-researched data sources from a UK-based child helpline and via partnership with Welsh Police forces;
- Examine the perceptions and views of adult child-protection and child counselling professionals about the ways children talk about their experiences of OCSG;
- Develop practice recommendations for professionals, and support OCSG preventive technology development.

3. Methodology

4.1 Data: Having secured ethical approval, data will be drawn from:

(i) Chat-logs (n=30, c.33,000 words) anonymised transcripts of post-OCSG counselling sessions provided to children (aged 13-17; 20f, 10 m) by a UK child helpline;

(ii) Police data - (n=30, words approx 30-50,000 (tbc)) anonymised social media records of OCSG interactions.

iii) Deliberative focus groups⁶ (n=15 participants) with adult child protection and child helpline counsellor professionals.

4.2 Analysis: Data analysis is ongoing and explores: (i) the **child's discourse about the groomer's behaviour** during the OCSG process mapping it onto the Online Grooming Discourse Model (OGDM)³ originally derived from analysis of linguistic processes used by the groomer; (ii) the child's **discourse about their own behaviours** to examine how far the groomer's communicative strategies have '**hit**' (submission) or '**missed**' (refusal) their target of entrapping the child with the intention of sexually abusing them and (ii) the child's **evaluation of OCSG** experiences and interactions.

Impoliteness theory⁷ will be used to support analysis of the child's perspective layered onto the OGDM, particularly to support understanding the child's discourse of submission and refusal.

Analysis of the child's evaluation of OCSG draws on Appraisal Theory,^{8,10} specifically the revision to the taxonomy of AFFECT proposed by Benitez-Castro & Hidalgo-Tenorio and the system of JUDGEMENT developed by Martin & White to explore the feelings and opinions expressed by the child.

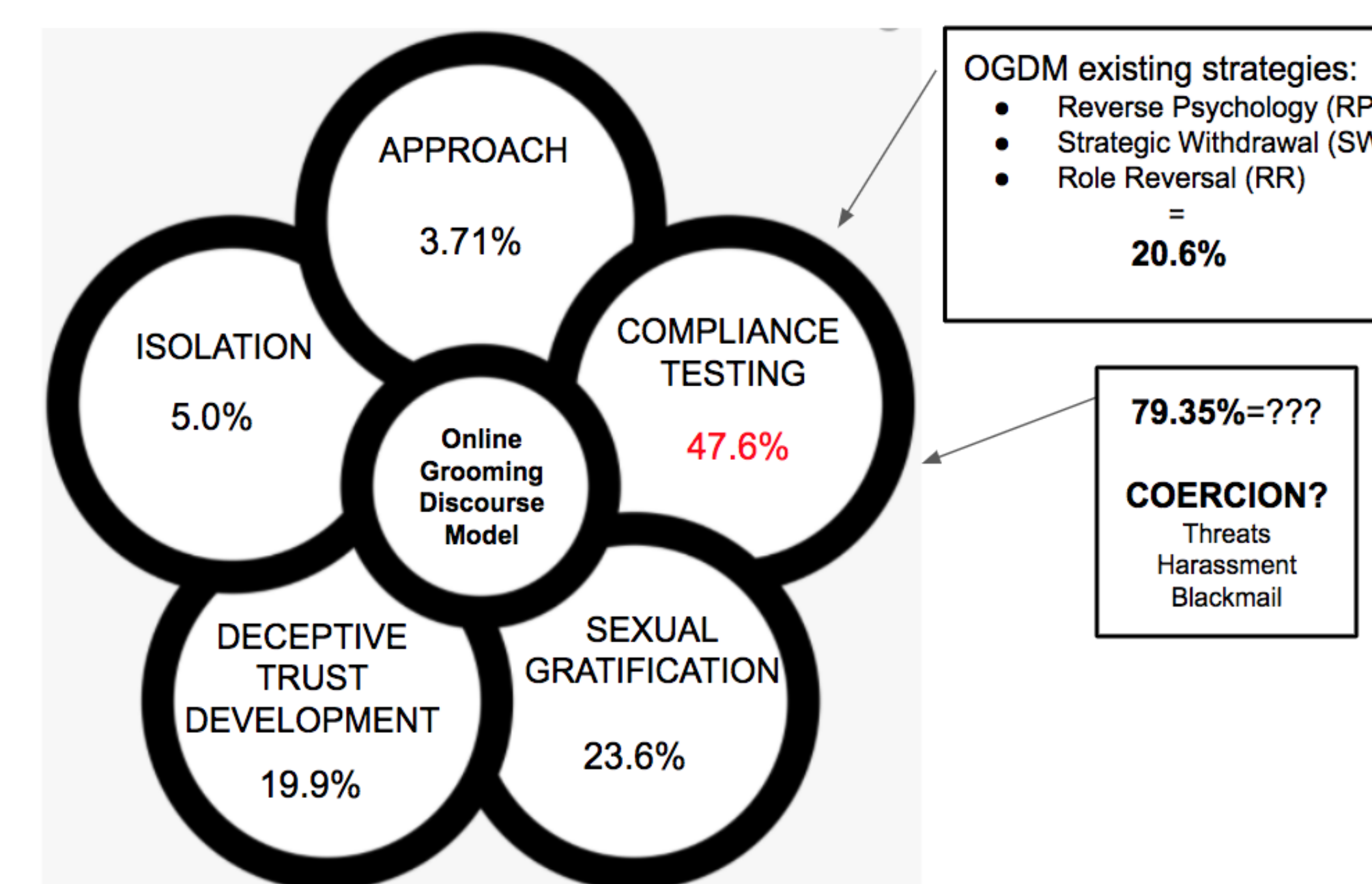
4. Interim Findings

Coding using Nvivo is underway on the anonymised transcripts of post-OCSG counselling sessions (via a UK child helpline).

Transcripts (n=30) coded against the OGDM (see fig.1) suggest a dissonance within the currently named 'compliance testing' processes. This is the most frequently mentioned category (47.6%) and yet only 20.6% appear to adhere to previously identified strategies (RP, SW, RR).

Furthermore in the sample analysed so far children make n=508 utterances related to their own behaviour showing 51.5 % '**hit**' (submission) and 48.4% '**miss**' (refusal) when talking about how they responded to the groomer's communicative strategies. References to a mix of 'hits' and 'misses' occur throughout each child's interaction. To further understand these findings the child's evaluation of OCSG will now be analysed using Appraisal theory.^{8,9,10}

Fig. 1



5. Questions for feedback

1. This study proposes to draw on Appraisal and Impoliteness theories to explore early findings that suggest a need to gain a deeper understanding of power dynamics between the (adult) groomer and child victim. What is the view of the audience about using these theories alongside each other? What are the possible affordances or challenges?

1. One of the key objectives of this research is to apply findings to inform practice recommendations for professionals and support OCSG preventive technology development - is the audience aware of routes or opportunities to help realise this objective?

6. Conclusion

1. Extant OCSG victimhood research has focused on identifying 'vulnerabilities'. The child's perspective within the OCSG process is starting to be researched but is yet to be fully explored.

1. A new approach is required. Linguistic analysis of children's talk about OCSG applying new methodologies is proposed to:

- Amplify children's voices and get closer to lived experiences of OCSG;
- Increase resonance of prevention efforts with children for greater effectiveness.

7. References

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