

Online victimization – an explorative study of sexual violence and cyber grooming in the context of social media use by young adults in Germany

Sophie Weingraber, University of Vechta

Christina Plath, University of Vechta

Laura Naegele, University of Vechta

Margit Stein, University of Vechta

1 Introduction

Sexual abuse of children and young adolescents is not a new form of violence, but as digital technologies and Internet usage are reshaping day-to-day communications, sexual approaches to minors and young adults have become much easier for offenders (Mathiesen, 2014). As Katzer (2007) already pointed out over ten years ago, young adults nowadays face a higher risk of possible attacks through the various forms of online interactions (e.g. emails, chat rooms) within a rapidly developing “digital world”. This has become an issue of especial relevance since more and more young people have access to portable digital devices, such as smartphones and tablets, not only allowing them to interact “on-the-go”, independently of place and time, but also in an unsupervised manner (BITKOM, 2017; Mpfs, 2017). In addition, higher levels of anonymity in digital interactions make it easier for potential perpetrators to conceal their actual identity and hide their intentions behind false information. In contrast to analogous forms of communication, contact with minors and young adults is no longer limited to the immediate environment, extending the potential field of offenders to people who are very little known or completely unknown (Wachs, Wolf, & Pan, 2012).

In the German-speaking context few researchers in the past have looked at cyber grooming as part of sexual violence against minors in an increasingly digitalized world. The few studies which have been carried out in the German context mainly focus on minors or do not pay much attention to new forms of digital communication such as the increasing number of social media platforms. As a result, not only is reliable data absent but little is known about the prevalence, the course of how cyber grooming is carried out and about those affected. Another complication in researching cyber grooming is the “grey area” these interactions often operate in, making it difficult to distinguish merely social interactions from sexual crimes that can be legally prosecuted. This often results in difficulties in bringing cases before a court, despite those affected reporting feeling victimized.

This article contributes to the existing literature in various ways: It aims to widen the view on cyber grooming by explicitly looking not only at minors but at the age group of younger adults and by including various new social media platforms. Furthermore, the article aims to shed some light on the so-called “grey area” alluded to above, concerning the question of when an interaction in social media turns into an act of sexual violence. In addition, the

explorative study aims for a better understanding of actual cyber grooming processes, which adolescents and young adults in particular are confronted with.

The article is structured as follows: First, the prevalence of cyber grooming in Germany is summarized, before the sample and methods are presented, followed by a discussion of the different individual perceptions of sexual violent behavior. Then, based on the collected data, the individual behavior of social media usage, the reasons for that usage and reported sexual abuse are examined. In addition, risk characteristics and mental stress factors that occur after experiencing cyber grooming are identified. The article closes with a discussion of the results and a presentation of the limitations of the study.

2 Setting the Scene – Prevalence of cyber grooming in Germany

The act of establishing an emotional connection with a minor or younger adult with the objective of sexual abuse has been widely coined under the term “grooming” (Quayle, Jonsson, & Lööf, 2012). Whereas some authors highlight the increasing “gains in power and control” within this relationship (Ospina, Harstall, & Dennett, 2010) others point to the “asymmetrical age structure” (Mathiesen, 2014) and the “inappropriate behavior prior to abuse” (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014). Adding to the complexity, the term “grooming” is not limited to sexual allusions alone, but can be much more subtle, e.g. including forms of request for personal and private information about age, residence, family, and friends. Hence the above-mentioned difficulties and “grey areas” when trying to define cyber grooming. Mathiesen’s (2014) definition adds to this by explicitly addressing the growth of digital communication: “Cyber grooming refers to an approach by adults who use online media to make targeted contact with children and young adults in order to gain their trust with the clear intention of sexual abuse” (Mathiesen, 2014, p. 18). Mathiesen further describes the high level of inherent anonymity, paired with difficulties ascertaining personal identification and the seemingly endless possibilities for offenders to engage with potential victims as characteristic features of cyber grooming attacks. This results in an even greater power imbalance between victims and offenders than is already the case within analog contexts. There are only a few studies in Germany which provide information on the prevalence of cyber grooming, the methods used by perpetrators and the consequences of cyber grooming for the victims (Vogelsang, 2017). All of these studies almost exclusively cite (sexual) violence by an adult against a minor and if they do so the focus usually excludes the fast growing digital communication taking place in social media contexts (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter). In a representative student survey (N=44,610; average age: 15.3 years; 48.7% female) about 12.8% of the students reported sexual harassment within chats and 14.9% of the respondents stated that they had been asked by a chat acquaintance to send nude photos/videos or to undress in front of the webcam (Baier, Pfeiffer, Rabold, Simonson, & Kappes, 2010). Comparable results of other studies show a total of 11.7% of reported instances of sexual harassment by email, instant messaging and chat rooms of children and young people aged 12 to 19 (n=804) (Grimm, Rhein, & Clausen-Muradian, 2008) and a huge gender-related aspect on sexual harassment on the internet (were addressed against their will in a sexual way: f: 48%, m: 25%; were asked about sexual experience: f: 34%, m: 16%; were urged to do sexual acts in front of a webcam: f: 11.6%, m: 5%; Katzer, 2007)

An expert report to the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues in Germany by Dekker, Koops and Briken (2016) notes the lack of existing studies on cyber grooming occurring within peer groups or perpetrated by minors, both in the German-speaking and international context. For the German context, around 4% of the 10-18-year-olds (n=688) had

experienced sexual harassment within social media by people close to their own age (BITKOM, 2017), 35.8% of the teenagers (n=1,076) were affected by sexual violence in the internet by class-mates and nearly 35% girls and 10% boys of the total sample (n=2,651) reported forms of sexual violence via the internet (Maschke, & Stecher, 2018).

If we take a comparative cross-country perspective view on cyber grooming, even fewer studies exist. There is one large-scale study by Livingstone and colleagues (2011) that reports online risk factors for children across 25 European countries. The study shows that on average 14% of the study's participants (N=25,142, age = 9-16) had received sexual messages on the internet in the past 12 months. Another cross-country study focuses on the relation between cyberbullying victimization, self-esteem and cyber grooming victimization across four different countries (Germany, the Netherlands, the United States and Thailand). Wachs and colleagues (2016) found that 18.5% of the total sample of 2,162 adolescents between 11-19 years had at least one contact with a perpetrator. With a focus on online media behavior, studies show that German adults are worried that they may be exposed to harassment when using the internet. According to the DIVSI Milieu study (2016), 16% (N=1,605) respondents from the age of 14 years on acknowledged the general risk of being offended or harassed on the internet. While 637 of these respondents use social networks (to chat, 59%; to make new friends, 38%), only four percent of all respondents report that they are worried about becoming a victim of sexual violence via social media themselves. The connection between the use of social media and one's fear of sexual assault – albeit quite weak in this study – should nevertheless be of interest (DIVSI, 2016). A different group of studies are prevalence studies, that examine the stress factors caused by such attacks, but there are no current long-term studies available (Dekker, Koops, & Briken, 2016).

As stated in definitions of cyber grooming, it can be assumed that any contact for children with adults that are unknown to them via through social media and which include the intention of rapprochement, is of an abusive nature. However, the same situation has to be evaluated differently for peers (meaning younger adults of the same age group) who use digital communication, e.g. through social media, to make new friends, flirt or get new information from their community (Livingstone, 2008). In this context, this form of digital communication is not necessarily synonymous with abusive behavior since the asymmetry in power and age between the parties does not exist. But when we focus on cyber grooming attacks in social media on young adults or peers – in order to clear up these “grey areas” – we have to ask which actions in digital communication are understood as sexual violence. In particular, the coercive or abusive use of information obtained must be seen as a characteristic of sexual violence. So, the difference between cyber grooming and sexual violence when focusing on young adults is that cyber grooming has the character of an approach that turns into acts of sexual violence. As the subjective experience of cyber grooming is often not taken into consideration – and people might interpret the same communication differently – it remains difficult to define the point at which a simple conversation turns into harmful cyber grooming. To be distinguished from this are acts of sexual violence, which describe the (unwanted) sexual approach and grooming of persons, which includes the sending and sharing of pornographic and intimate material, verbal sexual assaults, as well as the incitement to sexual acts via social media. Nevertheless, unwanted violent sexual acts also occur in the communication and interaction between peers and young adults but which have seldomly been looked at by researchers so far (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012).

Against this background several research gaps appear in the German context: First, as the means of digital communication changes rapidly and the share of younger adults owning digital devices is on the rise, various social media channels should be taken into consideration when aiming to gain an understanding of the prevalence of cyber grooming in Germany. Second, in addition to cyber grooming between offenders and victims with large age asymmetries, it remains of interest whether acts of sexual harassment and cyber grooming might also be found in communication between peers. Third, up until now the cyber grooming concept used in many of the existing studies takes the subjective perspective of victims into account. As a result, it remains unclear to what extent young adults perceive certain acts of communication as harassment.

3 Methods and Sample

A total of 300 young adults in Germany ($n_w=208$; $n_m=90$; $n_{\text{other gender}}=2$) were asked retrospectively about their internet behavior, their understanding of and experiences with cyber grooming and sexual violence in social media via an online questionnaire. Of these, 269 were between 18 and 25 years old ($MD_{\text{age}}=21.7$ years; $SD_{\text{age}}=1.83$ years), eight persons were younger than 18 years, and 23 persons were over 25 years old. The questionnaire was distributed via social media (especially “Facebook” and “WhatsApp”) by students from the University of Vechta (Germany). The sample is characterized by a comparatively high level of education (highest qualification: Master's degree: 1.3%; Bachelor's degree: 9.3%; general qualification for university entrance: 49.7%; defined qualification for university entrance: 17.0%; General Certificate of Secondary Education: 20.3%; Certificate of Secondary Education/special school: 1.3%; no school-leaving certificate: 1%). Most participants study at a university, followed by participants who are employees (student: 52.0%; employee: 22.3%; trainee: 11.3%; pupil: 9.7%; others: 3.0%; unemployed: 1.7%). Furthermore, almost all participants are native German speakers (93.3%). Informed consent was obtained from all participants to be included in the study.

The data was evaluated using the statistical analysis program “SPSS”. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the individual usage behavior of social media, the reasons for usage, and reported sexual violence within social media. Group comparisons and correlation measures (chi-square test and contingency coefficient for nominal scaled variables, Mann-Whitney-U-tests and Spearman's Rho for ordinal scaled variables, T-test and Pearson's correlation coefficient for metric variables) were calculated; significance was also checked ($\alpha=0.05$).

4 Results

4.1 Subjective perception of sexual violence

When examining the subjective perception of sexual violence in social media, the data highlights the importance of looking at the specific content of the interaction. Whereas asking for sexual preferences (49.3%), the receiving of photos (80.1%) and the pressure to send photos (91.9%) is widely recognized to be sexually abusive, 16.6% of the respondents already perceive asking for personal data (e.g. age and address) as sexually offensive (table 1). Furthermore, only half of the respondents perceive being asked about sexual preferences as an act of sexual violence. However, there are also respondents who do not agree that pressing somebody to undress in front of a webcam should be interpreted as sexual violence. When looking at gender differences in this regard it can be determined that significantly more men

(35.6%) than women (18.8%) agree with the statement that experiencing verbal sexual harassment is not encroaching behavior.

Table 1: Definitions of sexual violence in social media by the participants

Forms of sexual violence in social media ^a	N	%
...asking for address and age	49	16.6
...asking about sexual preferences	146	49.3
...experiencing verbal sexual harassment	229	77.4
...sending nude photos to me without my consent	237	80.1
...blackmailing me with a naked photograph	268	90.5
...disseminating photos without my consent in which I am lightly dressed or naked	272	91.9
...forcing me to send a nude photo of myself	272	91.9
...forcing me to undress myself in front of the webcam	260	87.8

Comments. Based on the question: What do you understand by sexual violence in social media? Multiple answers were possible.

^a Dichotomy group shown in table form at value 2.

If we take a closer look at the second table, gender-specific differences in the perception of sexual violence in social media can be pointed out for certain items (table 2). The results show that there are significant gender differences between the first four items. In particular, a medium level of gender differences ($p < .001$; $C = .246$) appear when asked if sending nude photos without consent is perceived as sexual violence. However, the other items indicate a weak ($C = .183$ or $.192$) or no gender difference. What is especially interesting is that there are no further gender differences when greater pressure on the victim is exercised (e.g. “forcing me to send a nude photo of myself” or “forcing me to undress myself in front of a webcam”).

Table 2: Gender differences in the subjective perception of sexual violence in social media

Forms of sexual violence in social media	C	X ²
...asking for address and age	.192	.003**
...asking about sexual preferences	.209	.001**
...experiencing verbal sexual harassment	.183	.005**
...sending nude photos to me without my consent	.246*	.000**
...blackmailing me with a naked photograph	.029	.884
...disseminating photos without my consent in which I am lightly dressed or naked	.069	.491
...forcing me to send a nude photo of myself	.029	.878
...forcing me to undress myself in front of the webcam	.070	.476

Comments. All results are significant for ** $p < .05$. All results have weak ($C < 0-0.25$), middle ($C > 0.25-0.66^*$) or high correlations ($C > 0.66-1^{**}$).

4.2 Frequency of social media platform usage according to victimization

The sample is characterized by a high affinity to social media. For example, all participants have at least a minimum of one social media account within the platforms examined in this study. The frequency of usage varies according to the platform (see table 3). Almost all participants use “WhatsApp” at least daily. About 70% operate on “Facebook” daily, while “Instagram” and “Snapchat” are characterized by the greatest polarization. Of the sample,

62.3% and 57.4% use “Instagram” and “Snapchat” intensively, while about 30% of the sample are non-users. “YouTube” shows the most even distribution across all categories of usage. On the other hand, a large majority states that they never use “Twitter”, portals with explicitly formulated dating functions and “ICQ”, whereas “Skype” has a good two-thirds share of non-users.

Table 3: *Frequency of social media platform usage*

social media platform	several times a day		once a day		several times a week		several times a month		never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
WhatsApp	292	97.3	5	1.7	0	0	0	0	3	1.0
Facebook	167	55.7	47	15.7	30	10.0	24	8.0	32	10.7
Instagram	149	51.0	33	11.3	16	5.5	6	2.1	88	30.1
Snapchat	138	46.6	32	10.8	23	7.8	14	4.7	89	29.7
YouTube	77	26.2	54	18.4	63	21.4	45	15.3	55	18.7
Twitter	10	3.5	6	2.1	3	1.0	26	9.1	241	84.3
Dating Portals	4	1.4	7	2.5	6	2.1	12	4.2	255	89.8
Skype	2	0.7	1	0.3	11	3.8	74	25.6	201	69.6
ICQ	0	0	0	0	1	0.3	7	2.5	277	97.2

Comments. Sorted in descending order according to first category. Differences of N=300 are due to missing data. Valid percentages were shown.

In addition to the frequency of usage, a central aim of the study is to identify those social media platforms in which the risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence is increased (table 3). First, it should be noted that 20% of participants say they have already experienced sexual assault via social media. In table 4 the reported attacks of these 20% are depicted according to the respective social medium as well as the percentage share of the affected group (column “Number of affected persons”). The comparison between the number of affected participants per medium and the ratio of affected persons to the total number of users allows comparisons in several respects. Most of those affected persons (48.2%) reported having experienced attacks on “Facebook”. In total, these make up about 10% of those who say that they use “Facebook” (see table 4). In contrast, the absolute number of people affected by the social media “ICQ” and Dating-Portals is much lower, but a much larger proportion of users are affected. Thus, although on a small scale, all “ICQ”-users report attacks. For the Dating Portals the share of the affected persons at approximately two thirds is also clearly high.

Table 4: *Share of affected users per medium and their percentage of the total sample*

Social media platforms	Share of affected users (%)	Relationship between the percentage of affected users and total sample (%)
Facebook	48.2	10.1
WhatsApp	42.9	8.1
Dating Portals	33.9	65.5
Snapchat	21.4	5.8
Instagram	17.9	4.9
Skype	17.9	11.4
ICQ	14.3	100

Twitter	1.8	2.2
YouTube	0	0

Comments. Sorted in descending order according to first category. Differences of n=60 are due to missing data. Valid percentages were shown.

4.3 Victims of cyber grooming concerning gender and age

When looking at victims of cyber grooming, 20% of the participants of the study report that they have experienced cyber grooming in the context of social media (n=60). Of the victims, 53 are female, five male and two did not specify their gender. The questionnaire obtained five items that differentiate between the questions being asked with regard to sexual violence (table 1 and 2). An overview of the items included in the cyber grooming scale is shown in table 5. In most cases of the category “affected persons” it can be determined that they have already received nude pictures. It cannot be assumed whether the participants perceive this question as cyber grooming. For this reason, they were asked if this had ever happened to them without them giving their permission.

A large proportion (76.7%) of those interviewed received photos of people wearing light clothes or naked. An even higher percentage reports that they were asked to send personal data (e.g. address and age). A total of 36.7% of the respondents were already urged to get undressed in front of a webcam, as well as being forced into a real meeting. In 31.7% of cases, respondents reported experiencing verbal sexual harassment when communicating on social media platforms.

Table 5: Experienced cyber grooming

Different forms of cyber grooming experienced	N	%
...receiving photos in which one or more persons are lightly clothed or naked	46	76.7
...being approached via social media and asked for personal information	47	78.3
...being asked to perform sexualized acts (e.g. undress in front of a webcam)	22	36.7
...being forced into a real meeting	22	36.7
...experienced verbal sexual harassment	19	31.7

Comments. Multiple answers were possible. Sorted by frequency.

Furthermore, it was examined whether there are certain socio-demographic variables specific to the affected persons of cyber grooming. Factors such as age (18-25 years), qualification, use of privacy settings in social media, and gender in relation to cyber grooming were analyzed. The aim was to identify certain potential risk groups among the respondents. Overall, 6.7% of men and 23.6% of women surveyed stated that they had already experienced cyber grooming in social media. Particularly among the male respondents (n=5), the incidence of cyber grooming is extremely low, whereas significantly more female respondents (n=53) are affected. Those with a different gender orientation (n=2) are also victims of cyber grooming. A differentiated representation according to gender and forms of cyber grooming is shown in table 6.

Results of the chi-square test (coded for dichotomous variables) showed no significant relationship for the variables “qualification” and “victimization” ($\chi^2=.916$), or for using the privacy settings and victimization ($\chi^2=.215$). No major differences between age and affectedness ($r_{pb}=.916$) after the biserial correlation used for metric and nominal variables

could be observed. However, gender is one predictor for experiencing cyber grooming ($\chi^2=.001$; $C \geq 0.25$) in this study.

Table 6: Gender differences and age of experience

Gender	Receiving photos in which one or more persons are lightly clothed or naked (n=46)		Approximation via social media (n=47)		Incitement to sexual acts (n=19)		Forced you into a real meeting (n=22)		Verbal sexual assault (n=22)	
	%	χ^2	%	χ^2	%	χ^2	%	χ^2	%	χ^2
Male	4.4	.001**	3.3	.000**	1.1	.000**	2.2	.007**	1.1	=.003**
Female	19.7		20.2		9.1		9.1		8.2	
Other	50.0		100.0		100.0		50.0		50.0	
Age and frequency of experienced forms										
Adolescence	50.0		78.7		78.9		63.6		72.7	
once	19.6		10.6		13.6		31.8		15.8	
several times	28.3		66.0		36.4		36.4		57.9	
Adulthood	63.0		57.4		78.9		50.0		63.6	
once	17.4		12.8		91.0		13.6		5.3	
several times	45.7		46.8		40.9		45.5		73.7	

Comments. All results are significant for **p < .05.

According to the gender differences in relation to individual forms of cyber grooming, it can be demonstrated that a lower number of male than female respondents are affected by all forms of cyber grooming. For example, significantly more women state that they have been approached via social media (20.2%). According to this, significant gender-specific differences can be identified for all forms ($p < .05$). Retrospectively, it was recorded whether the attacks took place in adolescence (14- under 18-year-old) or adulthood. In almost all cases, except with the variable “Sending photos in which one or more persons are lightly clothed or naked”, cyber grooming was experienced more often in adolescence, although there are no significant differences in frequency. On the other hand, there are clear differences in the frequency of attacks experienced. Overall, cyber grooming is experienced not just once, but several times. This also applies to adolescence as well as to adulthood. In particular, verbal sexual assaults are experienced more than just once (youth: 57.9%; adult: 73.7%). Also, regarding the approximation via social media, the interviewees admit to having experienced this several times. If it can be assumed that the interviewees have been affected by cyber grooming several times, it must also be assumed that stress factors can also be determined over a longer period after the attacks.

4.4 Mental stress-factors after experiencing cyber grooming

Almost all of the 60 affected persons (n=57) state that they felt burdened by the cyber-grooming attacks. While 42.1% stated that they felt stressed during the online contact with the offender, the same number (42.1%) reported being troubled even days after the online

communication was broken off. In 7.0% and 8.8% of the cases, the stress factors persisted and lasted for months or longer. Overall, 46.9% of the affected female respondents (n=46) stated that they felt troubled during online communication (male: 16.7%/ n=6). But even 12.3% (n=6) of the women who were affected say that they felt troubled for months, or more than a year, after the online contact (male: n=2).

The connection between mental stress factors and experienced forms of cyber grooming is shown in table 7. Only a few of the sample stated that they felt nothing out of the ordinary (n=13) following the attacks. Primarily, the respondents stated that they had unpleasant feelings after the experience of cyber grooming (n=45). Half of the affected persons also describe feeling disgust (n=30) or some of them feelings of shame (n=20). In particular, the respondents can be seen to have experienced a loss of confidence after somebody forced them to meet in real life (28.6%). Emotions such as the desire for revenge or sadness were less often reported. Thus, hardly any depressive feelings were recorded. On the other hand, those affected were quite angry after experiencing cyber grooming (n=16).

Table 7: Mental stress-factors after experienced cyber grooming (in %)

	Receiving photos in which one or more persons are lightly clothed or naked ^a (%)	Approximation via social media ^a (%)	Verbal sexual assault ^a (%)	Incitement to sexual acts ^a (%)	Forced you into a real meeting ^a (%)	N
Nothing out of the ordinary	19.0	23.3	17.6	23.8	33.3	13
Anger	28.6	30.2	58.8	42.9	33.3	16
Anxiety	16.7	18.6	29.4	28.6	23.8	10
Unpleasant feelings	83.3	83.7	94.1	81.0	90.5	45
Depression	4.8	2.3	0	4.8	4.8	3
Disgust	57.1	55.8	58.8	66.7	61.9	30
Shame	38.1	37.2	35.3	47.6	42.9	20
Loss of trust	19.0	16.3	29.4	19.0	28.6	9
Desire for revenge	4.8	4.7	11.8	9.5	9.5	2
Betrayal	7.1	4.7	5.9	14.3	4.8	2
Guilt	9.5	9.3	11.8	19.0	9.5	3
Sadness	2.4	2.3	0	0	4.8	4
Desperation	11.9	9.3	5.9	9.5	9.5	2

^a Dichotomy group shown in table form at value 2.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this explorative study was to shed some light on the growing phenomenon of cyber grooming. In addition, in order to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of cyber grooming among peers, the study was also interested in identifying potential risk groups as well as looking at what young adults themselves perceive to be an act of sexual violence in social media communications. In addition, it was of interest to identify those social media platforms in which acts of cyber grooming are more likely to occur.

Regarding the latter, the data shows that although most participants use Facebook and WhatsApp, messenger services like “ICQ” or Dating Portals can be identified as riskier for cyber grooming to occur. For the German context this is a new finding, as no (recent) studies have found similar or contrary effects.

When looking at gender-specific differences in the perception of sexual violence in social media, the study finds a higher number of female victims in contrast to men affected. This finding aligns with earlier studies that have shown that women are significantly more impacted by cyber grooming than men. (e.g. Katzer, 2007; Livingstone et al., 2011; Wachs et al., 2012).

When looking at the subjective perceptions and how young adults are approached via social media platforms, the occurrence of receiving (unwanted) photos is particularly high. However, younger people between 14 and 18 years receive nude photos more rarely than young adults. The receiving of photos is usually accompanied by unpleasant feelings, namely of disgust, fear and desperation. These findings are supported by Livingstone and colleagues (2011, p. 58), who report in their cross-national study that 16% of “those who have been bothered by sexual images online“ were either very, or in 28% of cases, fairly upset about the images. The largest proportion was “a bit upset” (41%) and only 15% didn’t care about what they saw. The fact that perpetrators do not necessarily have to fear legal sanctions in Germany complicates the situation and could explain the high numbers of participants in this study that received photos in the past. According to § 176 StGB, paragraph 4, no. 3, acts of cyber grooming in Germany are only illegal if the victims are children under the age of 14 (Döring, 2016). As mentioned before being the receiving of such photos not only produces negative feelings but, in many cases, already crosses the line to making recipients feel violated. As little to no legal actions can be taken in such cases, victims are often only left with the professional support offered by the government, which is help offered in specialized counselling centers. Against the background of the absence of legal grounds, the rapidly changing usage of social media and the fact that specialized counseling might not be available in all regions of Germany, policy makers and social work professionals should take the phenomena of cyber grooming more seriously. This is true especially of the need to take the personal perceptions of the young adults into account and acknowledge them as experts of their own lives (empowerment approach of social work) (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Morton & Montgomery, 2013). In addition, guidebooks supporting adults to help them gain more knowledge about how to protect their children when using social media should be made more widely available (e.g. Feibel, 2009). In this context Livingstone and colleagues (2011) found that parents usually know about the internet behavior of their children and have knowledge about the existing risks in online communication. The authors conclude “that awareness-raising activities are proving successful” when aiming to prevent cyber grooming (ibid., 136). Nevertheless, existing prevention should on the one hand aim to integrate both sides – parents and children – e.g. via having children explain social media usage to their parents, but also be mindful of the different learning behavior of different age groups (e.g. young adults might not want to participate in a workshop together with their parents).

Developing media competence together could help adults to rethink their children’s use of social media platforms and their own function as role models. This perspective would support the statement by Dekker, Koops, and Briken (2016) who conclude that protection against sexual violence expressed through digitalized words only using technology and software is

inadequate and a combination of educational and awareness-raising measures amongst children, parents, teachers and social workers is preferable.

6 Limitations

Although the study brought forward important results, there are some limitations which will be discussed in the following. Due to the explorative nature of the study the sample is highly selective and not representative of the general population. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that cyber grooming also takes place amongst peers and that future research should also pay attention to its impact on young adults. In addition, the study does not discuss the effect of educational and/or social background regarding cyber grooming. One could assume that the educational background (of young adults themselves but also of their parents) influences one's digital competence, ultimately affecting the risk of becoming a victim of cyber grooming. In addition, studies in other fields have shown that members of lower social status groups are less likely to make use of professional counseling, affecting the way young adults are able to deal with the fact that they feel violated. The same goes for differences in location, as prevention programs that influence one's digital competences might not be available to people living in rural areas. It should also be noted that the study only looked at a very specific timeframe when asking for participants' experiences with cyber grooming (e.g. last three months, last two years). One could argue that the individual perception and stress levels related to acts of cyber grooming might change over time (e.g. become more traumatic) and are also affected by a person's maturity. In addition, the definition of cyber grooming or sexual violence in social media has to be further clarified ("grey areas"). As highlighted by the results of this study, the point at which one feels violated is highly personal, a fact that future studies on cyber grooming should take into account. This is true, in particular, when aiming to develop suitable guidelines for social workers and in the pedagogical field in general.

References:

- Baier, D., Pfeiffer, Ch., Rabold, S., Simonson, J., & Kappes, C.** (2010). *KFN Studie „Kinder und Jugendliche in Deutschland. Gewalterfahrungen, Integration, Medienkonsum.“* (Zweiter Bericht zum gemeinsamen Forschungsprojekt des Bundesministeriums des Innern und des KFN, Forschungsbericht Nr. 109.). Hannover: Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen.
- Bennett, N. & O'Donohue, W.** (2014). The Construct of Grooming in Child Sexual Abuse: Conceptual and Measurement Issues. *Journal of child sexual abuse*, 23(8), 957–976.
- Best, P., Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B.** (2014). Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 41, 27-36.
- BITKOM e.V.** (2017). *Zukunft der Consumer Technology – 2017. Marktentwicklung, Trends, Mediennutzung, Technologien, Geschäftsmodelle*. Retrieved April 15, 2018, from <https://www.bitkom.org/Presse/Anhaenge-an-PIs/2017/08-August/CT-Studie/170830-CT-Studie-online.pdf>
- Dekker, A., Koops, T., & Briken, P.** (2016). *Sexualisierte Grenzverletzungen und Gewalt mittels digitaler Medien. Expertise. Arbeitsstab des Unabhängigen Beauftragten für Fragen sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs* (Expertise). Hamburg: UKE Hamburg.
- DIVSI** (2016). *DIVSI Internet-Milieus 2016. Die digitalisierte Gesellschaft in Bewegung*. Hamburg: Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet (DIVSI).
- Döring, N.** (2016). Jugendsexualität heute: Zwischen Offline- und Online-Welten. In M. Syring, T. Bohl, & R. Treptow (Eds.), *YOLO – Jugendliche und ihre Lebenswelten verstehen. Zugänge für die pädagogische Praxis* (pp. 220-237). Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.

Social Work & Society ■■■ S. Weingraber, C. Plath, L. Naegele & M. Stein: Online victimization – an explorative study of sexual violence and cyber grooming in the context of social media use by young adults in Germany

Feibel, T. (2009). *Kindheit 2.0 – So können Eltern Medienkompetenz vermitteln*. Berlin: Stiftung Warentest.

Grimm, P., Rhein, S., & Clausen-Muradian, E. (2008). *Gefahr im Web 2.0. Der Umgang Jugendlicher mit gewalttätigen Inhalten und cyber-mobbing, sowie rechtlicher Einordnung der Problematik* (Schriftenreihe der NLM, Band 23). Hannover: Niedersächsische Landesmedienanstalt.

Katzer, C. (2007). *Gefahr aus dem Netz. Der Internet-Chatroom als neuer Tatort für Bullying und sexuelle Viktimisierung von Kindern und Jugendlichen*. Dissertation, Universität zu Köln.

Kloess, J., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. & Beech, A. (2017). 'Offense Processes of Online Sexual Grooming and Abuse of Children Via Internet Communication Platforms'. *Sexual Abuse*, 31(1), 73-96.

Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society*, 10(3), 393-411.

Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., & Olafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the internet. Perspective of European children. Full findings and policy implications from EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents in 25 countries*. Retrieved April 10, 2018, from [http://www.lse.ac.uk/media%40lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20\(2009-11\)/EUKidsOnlineIIRReports/D4FullFindings.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/media%40lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIRReports/D4FullFindings.pdf).

Machimbarrena, J. M., Calvete, E., Fernández-González, L., Álvarez-Bardón, A., Álvarez-Fernández, L., & González-Cabrera, J. (2018). Internet Risks: An Overview of Victimization in Cyberbullying, Cyber Dating Abuse, Sexting, Online Grooming and Problematic Internet Use. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(11), 2471.

Mathiesen, A. (2014). *Cybermobbing und Cybergrooming. Neue Kriminalitätsphänomene im Zeitalter moderner Medien* (Jahrbuch des Kriminalwissenschaftlichen Instituts der Leibniz Universität Hannover). Hannover: Leibniz Universität Hannover.

Maschke, S. & Stecher, L. (2018). *Sexuelle Gewalt: Erfahrungen Jugendlicher heute*. Weinheim: Beltz

Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., Jones, L. M., & Wolak, J. (2012). Prevalence and Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A National Study. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), 13-20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-1730>

Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest (Mpfs) (2017). *JIM-Studie 2017. Jugend, Information, (Multi-) Media. Basisstudie zum Medienumgang 12- bis 19-Jähriger in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest.

Morton, M. H., & Montgomery, P. (2013). Youth empowerment programs for improving adolescents' self-efficacy and self-esteem: A systematic review. *Research on social work practice*, 23(1), 22-33.

Ospina, M., Harstall, C., & Dennett, L. (2010). *Sexual exploitation of children and youth over the internet: A rapid review of the scientific literature*. Alberta: Institute of Health Economics.

Wachs, S., Wolf, K. D., & Pan, C. (2012). Cybergrooming: Risk factors, coping strategies and associations with cyberbullying. *Psicothema*, 24(4), 628-633.

Wachs, S., Jiskrova, G. K., Vazsonyi, A. T., Wolf, K. D., & Junger, M. (2016). A cross-national study of direct and indirect effects of cyberbullying on cybergrooming victimization via self-esteem. *Psicología Educativa* 22 (2016) 61–70.

Quayle, E., Jonsson, L., & Löf, L. (2012). *Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse: Interviews with affected young people*. Stockholm: Council of the Baltic Sea States.

Vogelsang, V. (2017). *Sexuelle Onlineviktimsierung, Pornografie und Sexting im Jugendalter – Ein Blick auf den aktuellen Forschungsstand*. Heidelberg/Berlin: Springer.

Author's Address:

Sophie Weingraber, Mag. phil.
Institution Institute of educational sciences
University of Vechta, Driverstr. 22
49377 Vechta
sophie.weingraber@uni-vechta.de

Author's Address:

Christina Plath, Dr.
Office of Equal Opportunities and faculty of Educational Psychology
University of Vechta, Germany
christina.plath@uni-vechta.de

Author's Address:

Laura Naegele, Dr.
Institute of Gerontology, Department of Ageing and Work
University of Vechta, Germany
laura.naegele@uni-vechta.de

Author's Address:

Margit Stein, Prof. Dr.
Institute of educational sciences
University of Vechta
margit.stein@uni-vechta.de