

Assessing Adolescents' Perceptions of Online Sexual Grooming Risks

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Abstract

Child and adolescent sexual abuse is an escalating societal issue, with new internet technologies providing fresh avenues for the proliferation of child pornography. Numerous studies have highlighted the grave psychological impacts of online sexual abuse on minors; however, research on how youth perceive the risk of online sexual grooming is limited. Recognizing these risks is crucial for preventing adolescents from falling into these online traps. This study examines adolescents' perceptions of online sexual grooming risks using the concepts of "perceived vulnerability" and "perceived severity" from the Protection Motivation Theory. Using online and physical surveys of 15-24-year-olds, 183 responses validated the survey tool, and 385 evaluated gender differences in threat appraisal, employing a five-point Likert scale. Results indicated that adolescents, regardless of gender, generally perceived the prevalence and severity of online grooming risks as low. They believed that the likelihood of strangers online attempting to establish rapport was not high (males: $M=2.03$, $SD=1.00$; females: $M=2.01$, $SD=0.87$; $t=0.21$, $p=0.83$) and tended not to view such rapport-building efforts as sexually motivated (males: $M=2.15$, $SD=1.13$; females: $M=2.27$, $SD=1.05$; $t=-1.10$, $p=0.27$). Similarly, they considered the provision of incentives for sexual purposes by strangers as uncommon (males: $M=1.40$, $SD=0.98$; females: $M=1.23$, $SD=0.64$; $t=1.91$, $p=0.06$), and tended not to perceive monetary or material incentives as sexually motivated (males: $M=2.46$, $SD=1.37$; females: $M=2.67$, $SD=1.25$; $t=-1.57$, $p=0.12$). In terms of threat and disinhibition strategies, adolescents perceived that threats or decreased sexual sensitivity by strangers for sexual purposes were rare (males: $M=1.33$, $SD=0.84$; females: $M=1.20$, $SD=0.58$; $t=1.66$, $p=0.10$). However, when assuming strangers adopted threat or sensitivity reduction strategies, female adolescents were more likely than males to recognize these sexual intentions, although the severity appraisal for these risks remained low (males: $M=2.19$, $SD=1.18$; females: $M=2.64$, $SD=1.22$; $t=-3.66$, $p<0.001$). Regarding sexual disclosure strategies, adolescents still regarded frequent inquiries about sexual experiences or sexually suggestive messages, or online romance propositions by strangers as uncommon (males: $M=1.54$, $SD=0.87$; females: $M=1.44$, $SD=0.75$; $t=1.18$, $p=0.24$). Similarly, if strangers adopted sexual disclosure strategies, females were better at identifying these sexual motives, but the perceived severity of these risks was still low (males: $M=2.45$, $SD=1.22$; females: $M=2.86$, $SD=1.16$; $t=-3.42$, $p<0.001$). In conclusion, adolescent awareness of online grooming risks is generally low. It is advised that educational programs targeting potential grooming strategies be implemented to enhance awareness among youth.

Keywords

Adolescent Health, Sexual abuse, Online Sexual Grooming, The Protection Motivation Theory, Threat Appraisal