

**A retrospective examination of the experience and impacts of adult
and peer online sexual victimisation in young people**

by

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**I dedicate the entirety of this PhD to every person who has
experienced child sexual abuse.**

For we are enough. And we are not damaged.

Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive global problem, and online child sexual abuse (OCSA), despite being a fast-growing form of CSA, has continued to receive relatively limited research attention in comparison to sexual abuse experienced without the facilitation of technology. The aim of this PhD programme is to advance knowledge of OCSA by examining the pre, peri, and post online sexual victimisation experienced by young people before the age of 16 using a retrospective mixed methods approach. This was achieved by exploring the initiation and development of online exploitative relationships, examining the scope of different forms of OCSA, quantifying components of the online grooming process and factors predicting sexual abuse following online grooming, and examining the aftermath of OCSA in terms of disclosure of the abuse and its psychosocial impacts in adulthood through a series of three studies. Study 1 used a focus group design to explore young people's online experiences and interactions with adults and peers. The results revealed four themes consisting of: i) gendered perceptions and experiences of online sexual harm; ii) experience indicative of online grooming by online adult acquaintances; iii) peer perpetrated OCSA; and iv) the psychological impact of OCSA. Using an online questionnaire, Study 2 confirmed that different forms of OCSA (e.g., unwanted online sexual exposure, engagement in unwanted online sexual activities) and online grooming resulting in sexual abuse were common. This suggests young people experience multiple forms of OCSA and highlights the importance of concurrently examining different types of online sexual victimisation to better understand this form of abuse. The experience of grooming tactics and unwanted online exposure as predictors of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances support existing qualitative evidence and provide quantitative evidence on the online grooming process. Study 2 also demonstrated, for the first time, that peer norms can increase vulnerability to OCSA and found that descriptive norms predicted different aspects of online grooming activities. Using an online questionnaire, Study 3 was the first study to examine the long-term impact of OCSA on psychosocial well-being and the related influence of disclosure in adulthood. The experience of OCSA was found to

adversely relate to depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as lower self-esteem, compared to those who had not experienced this form of abuse. This confirms previous findings on the adverse effects of OCSA on young people and shows that the effects can persist into adulthood. This is consistent with the literature on the long-term effects of CSA and reiterates that OCSA is no less serious or less abusive than offline CSA. The link between specific types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and OCSA is an important contribution as they demonstrate both direct and indirect trauma is associated with OCSA and add to a growing body of literature on poly-victimisation across the online and offline environments. Study 3 also extends existing knowledge of sexual re-victimisation by demonstrating the co-occurrence of online and offline CSA and that OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers was most commonly experienced. These results indicate that young people are being sexually re-victimised before they reach adulthood. These findings can inform clinical practice by emphasising the need to consider vulnerability factors across different domains in order to identify at-risk young people and protect them from further harm. A complex relationship emerged in relation to the influence of disclosure on long-term psychosocial well-being, and self-blame was found to predict post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom severity regardless of whether OCSA had been disclosed. This programme of research developed new knowledge suggesting that vulnerability to OCSA, as well as its experience and impacts, are influenced by social factors and cultural contexts (e.g., gendered sexual norms, peer norms). The role of social stigma about OCSA, negative reactions to disclosure, and self-blame in determining PTSD symptom severity in adulthood and preventing disclosure are also noteworthy contributions to the undeveloped literature on OCSA disclosure. Collectively, the findings underscore the importance of addressing social inequality and social attitudes to prevent exposure to OCSA and to facilitate a safe climate to promote disclosure, which can in turn mitigate the impact of this form of childhood abuse.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Online adult acquaintance	Adults who were met online
Online child sexual abuse (OCSA)	An umbrella term for child sexual abuse facilitated by technology, perpetrated by adults and/or young people. This also includes in-person sexual abuse following online communication.
Online grooming	The experience of grooming tactics by online adult acquaintances that lead to online and/or offline sexual abuse
Online sexual solicitation (OSS)	Receiving requests online to engage in sexual activities, sexual talk, or to give personal sexual information that is unwanted from peers or, whether wanted or not, from adults.
Sexually explicit materials	Photos and videos depicting a young person or young people in sexually suggestive, semi-nude, nude, or engaging in sexual acts. This encompasses materials that are self-produced by the young person and shared with an adult, shared with peer(s) voluntarily but later misused, or shared with peer(s) under pressure or coercion.
Unwanted online sexual exposure	The experience of being exposed to sexual content without asking for it. This can include receiving unwanted sexual comments online, receiving photos or videos without asking for them, or seeing someone engaging in sexual activities via live chat without agreeing to it. This can be related to adults and/or peers.
Verbal sexual coercion tactics	Coercion tactics which are used via online communication to pressure a young person to engage in sexual activities. These tactics can be subtle and/or direct, including pressure, persistence, emotional manipulation, and blackmail (e.g., threats of non-consensual sharing or physical harm).
Victimisation through non-consensual sharing	This form of OCSA refers to the victimisation of having sexually explicit materials shared without consent. The material(s) can be originally sent by the victim voluntarily, under pressure, or created or obtained by the perpetrator with or without the victim's knowledge. The perpetrator can be an adult or a young person.
Young person / young people	Someone under the age of

Abbreviations

CSA	Child sexual abuse
CSAM	Child sexual abuse materials
HSB	Harmful sexual behaviour
IIOC	Indecent images of children
IPV	Intimate partner violence
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer
OCSA	Online child sexual abuse
OSS	Online sexual solicitation
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE LITERATURE

Child sexual abuse (CSA) covers a range of offending behaviours and types of offenders and can occur online via online communication, offline, or moving between both (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), 2022). CSA involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). The sexual activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration; non-penetrative sexual activities such as masturbation; non-contact activities such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images; watching sexual activities; encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways; or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023).

The most recent figures released by the UK's National Strategic Assessment of serious and organised crime show the biggest group of offenders in the UK are those that abuse children (National Crime Agency (NCA), 2023). It is estimated that there are between 680,000 and 830,000 UK-based adult offenders who pose varying degrees of sexual risk to children, equivalent to 1.3% to 1.6% of the UK adult population (NCA, 2023). According to the Luxembourg Guidelines (ECPAT International, 2016), which establish agreed upon international definitions for key terms, acts, and behaviours of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, online child sexual abuse (OCSA) can be any form of sexual abuse of children that has a link to the online environment. While OCSA is not a new and distinct form of sexual abuse, technology affords more ways and channels through which CSA can occur. Specifically, the Internet and communication via internet-connected devices, hereinafter referred to as online communication, make it much easier to commit different forms of CSA in ways that are not possible without technology (Quayle, 2020). There are also distinctive

features and complexity associated with CSA that are facilitated by online communication (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017).

This section provides how OCSA is defined in this research. (O)CSA can be perpetrated by adults and peers. Relating to adult perpetrated OCSA, any form of (online) sexual activity between a person under the age of 16 and an adult, someone aged 18 and above, is illegal in the UK. Therefore, any historical online and offline sexual activities involving an adult are considered (O)CSA in this research.

Relating to peer-on-peer OCSA, while online sexual activity between consenting young people can be developmentally appropriate, young people can also be pressured or coerced by peers into online sexual activity, exposed to unwanted sexual content and activities, and have sexually explicit materials of themselves non-consensually taken and/or shared by another young person (Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2023a; Hollis & Belton, 2017; Vaswani et al., 2022). Accordingly, peer-on-peer unwanted, coerced, or non-consensual online sexual activity is now recognised as sexual abuse. Furthermore, consensual sexual activity between young people can also lead to later sexual victimisation. For example, sexually explicit materials voluntarily provided to a peer can then be non-consensually shared (Finkelhor, Turner, Colburn, & Mitchell et al., 2023b). Sexually explicit materials, whether or not provided voluntarily, can also be used as blackmail for further sexual or non-sexual activity (Wolak et al., 2018). The misuse of sexually explicit materials indicates that young people can also be subjected to sexual abuse by peers despite the sexual activity being previously consented to.

Harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) are sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people under the age of 18 that are developmentally inappropriate, that may be harmful towards themselves or others, or that may be abusive towards another young person or adult (Hackett, 2014). By the same token, online HSB includes all sexual acts using the Internet or technology that are harmful to the young person and/or others (Belton & Hollis, 2016). Since

the literature suggests that online HSB are becoming normalised and trivialised (Agnew & McAlinden, 2021), it would seem plausible that consensual online sexual activity with peers at the time may be recognised as abusive in retrospect. As such, retrospective online sexual experiences with peers before the age of 16 that are considered by participants who are now adults as unwanted, pressured, and/or coerced, and victimisation through non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit materials are considered OCSA in this research.

A note on terminology

Young people and peers

Relating to the terminology used to describe children and adolescents, there are varied ways to describe individuals up to the age of 18, depending on the context. For example, Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a person below the age of 18 years (United Nations, 1989). On the other hand, the World Health Organization refers to individuals aged between 10 and 19 as ‘adolescents’ (World Health Organization, n.d.). Yet in clinical practice, adolescence is usually categorised into early, mid, and late adolescence to reflect the biology, psychological, and social development of different developmental stages (Christie & Viner, 2005). Similarly, inconsistent use of age terms and descriptions has also been noted within the literature of OCSA. While the grey literature tends to examine the experience of OCSA up to the age of 18 (Economist Impact, 2023a; May-Chahal et al., 2018), empirical studies often have a varying age inclusion and do not always include participants up to age 18 (Barroso et al., 2023; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018a; Gassó et al., 2020; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022).

Although the UK legal definition describes someone under the age of 18 as ‘a child’, the legal age of consent to sexual activity is 16 (Home Office, 2020). Since this research concerns OCSA and the retrospective design examined the experience of OCSA up to the age of 16, the terms *young people* and *young person* were used to describe someone who is under the

age of 16, to align with the legal age of consent to sexual activity. *Peer(s)* is also used to describe a young person under the age of 16. *Child* and *children* were also used to correspond with the legal terms in describing sexual abuse against children.

Perpetrator/ Offender/ Abuser

Due to the self-reported nature of this research, it is not possible to determine whether the OCSA reported in this research was formally disclosed to law enforcement and recorded as a crime. Accordingly, it is acknowledged that the person who carried out the abuse should be legally referred to as an 'alleged offender' in line with the Luxembourg Guidelines (ECPAT International, 2016). However, this research is conducted from the perspective of the person who reported that they have been sexually victimised. Therefore, it is deemed ethically inappropriate for the researcher to use terms that can appear to question whether the abuse has indeed happened. This is because the use of *alleged offender and/or alleged perpetrator* may unintentionally invalidate and question the credibility of participants' experiences and compound the feeling of not being believed (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Both of which can add to the barriers to disclosure and impede recovery (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Furthermore, a layperson may misinterpret the meaning of 'alleged' in the sense that the abuse might not have taken place and encourage victim-blaming attitudes when it only indicates that the person is not formally charged. Therefore, the terms *perpetrator*, *offender*, and *abuser* are all used interchangeably in this research.

The dynamics involved in peer-on-peer OCSA are also considered. The dual responsibility of protecting both the young perpetrator and the victim, and the fact that the sexual act may not be intended to be abusive or harmful are both acknowledged. However, since this research could not establish the intent of the young person displaying the HSB, but the young person who experienced the harmful sexual act is nevertheless victimised, *online sexual victimisation and/or abuse* are used interchangeably to describe the experience of OCSA perpetrated by peers as well as by adults.

Victim

This research is also conscious that there can sometimes be negative connotations associated with the term *victim*, and *survivor* is preferred (Police Foundation, 2022). However, *victim* is used in this research to illustrate that the person has been sexually abused and that a sexual crime has been committed against this person.

Definitions of the different terminology used in this programme of research are provided in the glossary.

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the role of technology in advancing CSA. This is followed by a discussion of the different types of OCSA. The development of knowledge about OCSA in terms of the ways in which young people can be sexually abused online and the understanding of the relational dynamics between the victim and the perpetrator has vastly advanced since this research programme began in 2012. Nevertheless, this research set out to examine the experience of online grooming resulting in sexual abuse. Therefore, an overview of the literature on online grooming, including groomer taxonomies, the grooming process, and its prevalence, will be covered in this chapter. The aim of providing a synthesis of the online grooming literature is to outline key issues in this topic and draw out knowledge gaps in understanding OCSA as this programme of research developed. This is followed by a discussion of vulnerability factors in increasing young people's risk of OCSA and the impact of OCSA.

1.1 Young People and Their Online Use and How It Increases Their Risk of Online Abuse

The development of information and communication technology (ICT) has significantly changed the way we socialise, where communication using smartphones and Internet enabled devices is now fully integrated into how we connect with others and meet new people. Particularly among young people, there is prolific evidence to suggest that the use of ICT to

communicate and stay in touch with others is preferred over offline/ in-person communication, with recent estimates reporting that 94.6% of young people use social media (Plaisime et al., 2020). Further evidence on young people's increasing use of the Internet comes from the EU Kids Online 2020 study, which surveyed Internet access, risks, and safety among young people aged 9–16 from 19 European countries. The survey revealed that over 80% used a smartphone to access the Internet at least once a day in 11 of the participating countries, and the amount of time spent online each day almost doubled compared to the findings of the previous EU Kids Online survey in 2010 (Smahel et al., 2020). In the UK, 99% of young people aged 3–17 went online in 2021, and the majority of children under 13 have their own profile on at least one social media app or site, despite the fact that most platforms have a minimum user age of 13 (Ofcom, 2022a). Previous reports on young people's online experiences also found more than half of the 12–15 age group had a negative experience, such as being contacted online by someone they did not know who wanted to be their friend (Ofcom, 2021).

Paradoxically, the EU Kids Online 2020 survey highlighted that many young people have yet to receive online safety advice despite spending increasingly more time online (Smahel et al., 2020). Parental knowledge and supervision of online safety also appear lax in the UK, as indicated by the fact that just four in 10 parents knew the minimum age requirement for using most social media, and four in 10 would also allow their child aged 8–11 to use social media (Ofcom, 2022a).

Microsoft's Global Online Safety Survey 2023 (2023), which surveyed young people of 16 countries across Asia-Pacific, Latin America, North America, and Western Europe, found that 49% of boys and 63% of girls were worried about online sexual risks. At the same time, young people can overestimate their ability to keep themselves safe online. For example, Ofcom (2022a) found that despite 74% reporting confidence in their ability to spot fake information or social media profiles, less than one in 10 were able to correctly identify misinformation without making mistakes. Similarly, young people often overestimate their ability to detect potential

online sexual harm from strangers (Groenestein et al., 2018). Together, a lack of education and a false sense of security can lower young people's inhibitions towards potential online harm, which in turn increases their risk of online sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020).

1.2 Recognition of OCSA

Unlike cyber-dependent crimes, cyber-enabled crimes are traditional crimes that can be increased in scale or reach by the use of computers, computer networks, or other forms of ICT (McGuire & Dowling, 2013), and sexual offending against children is one of the most widely described cyber-enabled crimes (McGuire & Dowling, 2013; NCA, 2023). CSA and grooming predate the Internet, and this form of child abuse has been researched for decades (Ringenberg et al., 2022). Notably, the widespread use of online communication since the late 1990s has led to a considerable increase in professional and public concerns about the use of ICT to commit CSA (Atkinson & Newton, 2010; Beech et al., 2008; Jewkes, 2010; Jung et al., 2012; Seto, 2013; Wolak et al., 2010). In the UK, concerns about the use of ICT in facilitating CSA were evidenced by the establishment of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), which is dedicated to finding and removing child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) from the Internet in 1996, Childnet in 1997, and the setup of the Internet Taskforce on Child Protection in 2001 by the Home Office (Ainsaar & Lööf, 2011). Concerns about the use and impact of ICT in facilitating CSA were further evident by the various publications of government commissioned reports such as the Byron Review (Byron, 2008), the Sexualisation of Young People Review (Papadopoulos, 2010), and non-governmental organisation reports by child protection charities such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Barnardo's.

A decrease in international crime statistics for in-person CSA was observed to coincide with an increase in OCSA (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006; Ly et al., 2016). Consequently, early research

into the then-new phenomenon was concerned with the extent to which online sex offenders, particularly if offenders who use CSAM represented a new type of sex offender or whether they reflected the transformation of conventional sexual offending through the adoption of new technologies (Henshaw et al., 2017; Seto & Hanson, 2011).

A prominent argument on whether the Internet has inherent properties that encourage the commission of CSA is the disinhibitory effect of human behaviour as a result of the identity anonymity offered by the online world as opposed to direct, face-to-face situations (Seto & Hanson, 2011; Suler, 2004). Arguably, the properties of the Internet would be insufficient to explicate offending behaviour, as theories of sexual offending suggest that the act is consequential of a number of interacting causal variables (e.g., An Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending, Ward & Beech, 2006), with an emphasis on the role of cognitive distortions in the initiation and maintenance of sexual offending (Ciardha & Ward, 2013). In support, a study comparing circumstances preceding and after online sexual activities between adult-adult and adult-minor dyads found that a combination of situational factors such as alcohol intoxication and negative emotional states, coupled with intense sexual arousal and shame, increased individuals' proclivity to engage in online sexual interaction with minors (Bergen et al., 2015). A finding further weakens the assertion that the anonymity of the Internet alone would encourage online child sexual offending.

1.3 The Role of Technology in Enhancing CSA

Traditionally, CSA usually involves abusers known to the young person, such as family members or individuals who are in a position of trust or authority in the community (e.g., teachers, sports coaches, care professionals) who are known to the victim's family or surrounding adults (McNeish & Scott, 2023; Winters et al., 2022). Therefore, in addition to grooming the young person, the grooming process also requires grooming the environment to gain trust of the young person's family members and those surrounding the young person who

may act as gatekeepers of access (Winters et al., 2021). This serves to legitimise the time spent with the young person without raising suspicion. Meanwhile, offenders must risk assess to minimise detection of the abuse.

Yet, the evolution of the Internet and technology has drastically changed the way grooming and CSA occur (Quayle, 2020). Not only does the growth of online spaces allowing one to connect with others provide abusers opportunities to initiate contact with young people with the intention to sexually abuse them, but online communication has also changed the way CSA can be committed (IICSA, 2020). First, online communication makes it possible for abusers to approach young people who they do not know in person, and to simultaneously select, interact with, and sexually abuse multiple victims at one time (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Quayle et al., 2014). Convicted online child sex offenders have highlighted the instant accessibility of the Internet to connect with others (mostly) without time or geographical restrictions, provide infinite options of victim access and selection (Gottschalk, 2011; Quayle et al., 2014). While situational/opportunistic offenders can offend by seizing an opportunity to sexually abuse young people they do not know on impulse (Mitchell et al., 2005), and CSA in institutional contexts frequently involves multiple victims (McNeish & Scott, 2023), it was impossible for traditional offenders to simultaneously abuse multiple victims who they did not know in person before the Internet.

Second, whereas online chatrooms were the primary means of contacting potential victims (Briggs et al., 2011; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007b), the continued growth of social media, gaming platforms, and instant messaging apps now offer numerous ways for abusers to contact and sexually offend against young people through text, voice messages, voice and video calls, as well as content sharing, including photos and videos (IICSA, 2022). To illustrate the scale of the use of social media platforms to sexually offend, the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which operates the reporting mechanism CyberTipline, received over 32 million reports of suspected OCSA in 2022 (NCMEC, 2022).

Over 21 million of these reports were made by Facebook alone, and other Meta-owned platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp were also among the most reported online platforms, with over five and one million reports made, respectively (NCMEC, 2023a). Similarly in the UK, where the means of communication was known, Meta-owned platforms accounted for 47% of online grooming offences in 2022/23, and Snapchat was one of the most used means of online communication used in online grooming (26%) (NSPCC, 2023). Significantly, the number of online platforms where children were groomed doubled from 70 different apps, games, and websites in 2012/22 to 150 in 2022/23, and offenders often used multiple online platforms to contact the same victim (NSPCC, 2022; 2023). The growth indicates that online grooming is increasingly becoming a cross-platform problem, and the concurrent use of multiple means of online communication is only made possible by the existence of ICT. Importantly, these findings also indicate that offenders are changing their behaviours in response to young people's use of new platforms as they emerge.

The prolific use of online communication to groom for the purpose of offline sexual abuse is also evidenced by an audit of examinations carried out by a forensic paediatric medical service in Australia following allegations of sexual assault, which revealed that cases of sexual assault involving online communication have increased from 4% between 2007 and 2013 to 14% in the period of 2014 to 2020 (Rowse et al., 2022). The analysis found that Snapchat and adult dating apps were used in over three-quarters of technology-facilitated sexual assaults in 2019/2020 (Rowse et al., 2022), and almost one-in-five of the sexual assaults involved online communication, with the majority of sexual assaults occurring at the first face-to-face meeting following a variable period of online communication (Rowse, 2023). Together, these findings indicate that the scale of the misuse of online platforms to commit CSA appears to be global and highlight that young people are also being groomed by adults online for the purpose of offline sexual abuse.

Third, akin to traditional CSA, the introduction of sexual activity requires some degree of planning and risk assessment to avoid detection. Early evidence of online grooming reveals that although online offenders also risk assess, such as by checking the whereabouts of the young person's family members or asking the young person to save their contact information in a different name, to minimise the discovery of the abuse (Black et al., 2015; O'Connell, 2003), the online environment allows offenders to assess risk immediately and introduce sexual topics in a much more expedited manner in comparison to offline offenders (Black et al., 2015; Quayle et al., 2014). Crucially, the accessibility of portable Internet-connected devices could mean risk assessment becomes less important to commit OCSA as communication via portable devices provides more privacy in comparison to communication via the use of a computer. In support, a survey of young adults aged between 18 and 20 from 54 countries found that 62% of the incidents of unwanted exposure to sexual content (occurred before the age of 18) took place over personal mobile phones, and over 80% received the content via private messaging and image sharing services rather than open forum social media (Economist Impact, 2023a). Meanwhile, offenders are also taking advantage of technology intended to protect online privacy, such as Virtual Private Networks (VPN), end-to-end encryption¹, and cryptocurrencies, to avoid detection as their knowledge of countermeasures increases (Europol, 2023; IICSA, 2020; Police Foundation, 2022).

Importantly, online communication allows for contactless CSA, where the young person can be sexually abused through exposure to sexual content, engaging in sexual conversations, and/or sexual acts without physical contact with the abuser(s) (IICSA, 2020). Simultaneously, the production of CSAM no longer requires the abuser and the victim to be physically present in the same location, as these materials can now be self-generated by the young person as well as produced by the abuser through capturing images from videos or recording video calls without the victim's awareness (Finkelhor et al., 2023b; IICSA, 2020). In comparison to offline

¹ The content of the communication can only be seen by the sender and recipient, and not by any others – including the providers of the platforms themselves.

grooming, the advancement of technology has also expedited the introduction of sexual abuse, as young people can now be exposed to sexual content within seconds of contact with the abuser through online communication (NCA, 2021). Analysis of online grooming chatlogs found that the majority of offenders broached the subject of sex within the first 20% of contact time with the victim (Black et al., 2015). Furthermore, the NCMEC (2016) found that 80% of the young people were blackmailed within the same day after the sexually explicit material was acquired by the abuser. Most recently, Global Threat Assessment 2023 reported that young people could be exposed to a high-risk grooming conversation in just 19 seconds after receiving the first message from the abuser (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). The evidence therefore demonstrates how OCSA can escalate quickly in a time scale that is not achievable in offline CSA.

The integration of livestreaming in almost every social media platform, gaming platforms, video recording functions in message apps, and video call software is further advancing the ways in which CSA can be committed online, and reports from law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organisations suggest CSA via livestreaming is on the rise (NCA, 2023; IWF, 2022a). Livestreaming of CSA is the real-time production, broadcasting, and viewing of CSA (Drejer et al., 2023). Livestreaming extends the way contactless CSA can be committed by allowing the sexual abuse to be viewed by multiple abusers simultaneously. The instantaneous nature of contact also permits abusers watching the livestream to partake in the abuse by directing the victim(s) to perform sexual acts on themselves.

In addition to the involvement of multiple offenders, livestreaming can also involve multiple victims, where the victim(s) could be made by the offenders watching the live abuse to engage in sexually abusive acts towards another young person, such as siblings or peers (NCA, 2021; IWF, 2023b). Conversely, abusers who are physically present with the victim(s) can livestream the abuse and receive direction from other viewing abusers. Footage of the abuse can be recorded as still captures or stored as video, thereby allowing further child sexual offences to

take place. For instance, footage of the abuse can be used to escalate sexual abuse through the threats of non-consensual sharing to pressure the victim to comply with more sexually abusive activities (NCA, 2021; 2023). Distribution of these CSAM indicates that young people can also become victims of non-consensual sharing and are at risk of re-victimisation by multiple unknown offenders who watch the livestreaming or footage of the abuse.

More recently, technologies such as generative AI and extended reality (XR) have been identified as new emerging risks for young people online. Global Threat Assessment 2023 found that cases of generative AI to create CSAM have been increasing (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). Similarly, XR, which creates an environment or experience that combines virtual and physical realities through the use of computers or wearable devices such as virtual reality headsets, has been identified as an evolving CSA threat in the UK (NCA, 2023) and worldwide (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). Since XR provides the ability to manipulate or merge virtual and physical worlds and is an increasingly standard addition to technology already in use, simulating abuse on the virtual representations of young people may thus act as an early pathway for contact CSA offending (NCA, 2023).

The discussion therefore illustrates how the Internet and online communication have lowered the barriers to commit CSA in ways that were impossible without technology, and that the ways children can be sexually abused continue to grow as technology advances.

1.4 Defining OCSA

One major limitation in the study of OCSA is the different terminologies used by researchers, policy makers, and legalisation. These include OCSA, *online child sexual exploitation and abuse* (OCSEA) (ECPAT International, 2022a), *online-facilitated child sexual abuse* (May-Chahal et al., 2018; IICSA, 2022), and *technology-assisted child sexual abuse* (TA-CSA) (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). The use of TA-CSA has been advocated by some

researchers, as this term encompasses CSA that is initiated offline and further facilitated by technology, such as the filming of offline CSA and sharing of these CSAM online, or by abusers who know the victim in person and use online communication to enhance the grooming and sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). As such, this term is suggested to better reflect how sexual abuse can move between offline and online contexts with the assistance of technology (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017).

This research recognises that OCSA can occur solely online without contact with the abuser or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between the abuser and the victim. As such, the online and offline boundaries are often blurred. However, since this research examined contactless CSA experienced via online communication and in-person sexual abuse following online communication, with a specific focus on the experience of online grooming by adults who were originally met online, the term 'online' is intended to indicate that the abuse was initiated online. Therefore, OCSA is used as a collective term to describe the different forms of CSA experienced via online communication, involving adult or peer perpetrators, in line with the Luxembourg Guidelines (ECPAT International, 2016).

In the UK, OCSEA is used by the Home Office to describe the viewing and sharing of CSAM, the grooming of children online, and the livestreaming of child sexual abuse (Home Office, 2020). Although online child sexual exploitation is a form of CSA, this is often distinguished by its additional commercial or transactional element (ECPAT & WeProtect Global Alliance, 2022; Home Office, 2020). While the power imbalance between the victim and the abuser, the promise of a relationship, and the offer of material goods are often features of online grooming, the complexities involved in (online) child sexual exploitation may warrant a separate examination (Hanson, 2016). As a result, the term OCSEA was not adopted here because commercial exploitation was not specifically examined in this research. Thus, this research acknowledged that some instances of OCSA reported by participants could be a result of

online sexual commercial exploitation. Nevertheless, the use of OCSA, minus the inclusion of *exploitation*, resembles the preferred term by the UK government.

1.5 Forms of OCSA

Until the beginning of the 2000s, the problem of online sexual offending against children was mostly confined to the production, possession, and distribution of CSAM online (ECPAT International, 2020). However, as illustrated by the discussion thus far, the dynamic nature of ICT has evolved and expanded how child sexual offences can be committed, where abusers can now directly and indirectly sexually abuse young people. These include the production and distribution of CSAM, online grooming leading to online and/or offline sexual abuse, livestreaming of CSA, non-consensual sharing of CSAM, threats of non-consensual sharing of CSAM, and young people selling sexual services online (ECPAT International, 2020; Fredlund et al., 2018; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Whether or not coerced, young people can also be exposed to sexual content such as receiving sexual photos, videos, or watching sexual acts via webcam, engage in sexualised interactions such as sexual talk or sexual activity, and share self-produced sexually explicit materials (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023; Kloess et al., 2017a).

The diversity of OCSA can be further illustrated by 1) the age of the abuser (e.g., adults or peers perpetrated) and 2) how the abuse is experienced, that the abuse can be initiated offline and further facilitated by online communication, initiated online and progress to offline/in-person abuse, as well as confined to the online environment (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Webster et al., 2012). The intention of the abuse can also be financially motivated for some offenders, especially those involved in commercial sexual exploitation and serious and organised crime (Elliot & Beech, 2009; NCA, 2023). In the case of non-consensual sharing involving peer perpetrators, the act is not always intended to be sexually abusive but can be regarded as “fun” or to gain social status among peers (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021;

Ringrose, Regehr, & Milne, 2021a). Nevertheless, the person whose sexually explicit materials was non-consensually shared has been victimised, and the act is sexually harmful for both the victim and the young person who carries out the act (Hackett et al., 2019).

There are also indirect ways to sexually abuse young people online. For example, CSAM is often shared at many levels, from closed communities on the dark web to the open web (Europol, 2023). Consequently, the same CSAM is often re-circulated and encountered by investigators over many years, despite the material having previously been removed. Thus, the victim is re-victimised each time the material is shared and viewed (Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P), 2021; Europol, 2023). In addition to the viewing and distribution of CSAM, offenders may also use online platforms to develop and maintain networks with others with a sexual interest in children, which can reinforce and validate an individual's motivation to offend and promote sexual offending (Beech et al., 2008; Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Shelton et al., 2016).

The ReDirection Project reported that 46% of adults who use CSAM via the dark web self-reported being in contact with other CSAM users (Insoll et al., 2021). Compared to individuals who have no contact with other CSAM users, those who are in contact with other CSAM users are also more likely to have contacted children online after viewing CSAM (Insoll et al., 2022). Although contact with children online in itself is not a crime, the act of initiating contact suggests that interactions with other CSAM users may increase the risk of further offending behaviour. Indeed, a recent literature review of offender-focused research on CSAM highlighted that direct communication on online platforms eases the transfer of CSAM between offenders and makes online grooming for the purpose of sexual abuse easier (Cale et al., 2021). Similarly, examinations of dark web chat room discussions of those who have a sexual interest in children and those who use and distribute CSAM concluded that these communities normalise sexually abusive behaviour, which in turn perpetuates the cognitive distortion that CSA is acceptable and justified (Huikuri & Insoll, 2022).

The different forms of OCSA described in this section thus illustrate how the Internet provides a space for abusers to expand and diversify their offending behaviours, both directly and indirectly, with or without physical contact with the victim, as well as to network with other abusers.

1.6 Production of CSAM

In an effort to clearly distinguish CSAM from legal pornography, scholars and policy makers have argued that the term “child pornography” is misleading. This is because *pornography* implies consensual production of sexually explicit materials involving adults, and children cannot consent to sexual activity. Rather, such material is both a form of sexual abuse against a child and recorded evidence of the abuse (ECPAT International, 2022b). Therefore, terms such as *child sexual abuse images* or CSAM are preferred as they better characterise sexually abusive materials of children that are made, used, or viewed by adults (Martellozzo, 2019).

Yet, as photo sharing became easier and more common, young people began to share sexually explicit materials of themselves and the exchange of sexually explicit materials of self has become a common practice, with peer norms amplifying the pressure to engage in this potentially harmful online sexual practice (Quayle, 2022). Consequently, CSAM are no longer necessarily produced by adults. In fact, an inventory of the International Child Sexual Exploitation Image Database found that 40% or more of all content in the archive between 2010 and 2015 was self-produced by the young person depicted in the material (Quayle et al., 2018). The volume of self-generated materials has also increased with the rapid growth of online communication. For example, the IWF saw a 168% increase from 2020 to 2021 (IWF, 2022a), and classified 78% of the reports they assessed in 2022 as self-generated (IWF, 2023a). It is worth noting, however, that the increase may reflect the impact of COVID-19 has on OCSA, which will be discussed in Section 1.12.

Furthermore, the NCMEC's Child Victim Identification Program, which serves to identify victims of CSAM, found that 11.64% of the materials were self-produced with no involvement of online grooming (NCMEC, 2023b). This suggests that materials that might have been produced within developmentally appropriate contexts are also appearing on the Internet. Although the context of how the material was produced cannot always be ascertained, i.e., whether the material was originally generated by the young person voluntarily for a peer, under pressure from a peer, or for an adult, the high volume of CSAM available on the Internet indicates that the young person depicted in the material has been a victim of non-consensual sharing and a victim of CSAM, possibly without knowing that they have been sexually victimised in multiple ways.

Youth produced sexually explicit material creates a variety of complexities. In the UK, taking, making, sharing, and possessing indecent images² and pseudo-photographs³ of people under 18 is illegal under Section 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978, and these materials are referred to as Indecent Images of Children (IIOC) (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020). Accordingly, it is an offence for a person under the age of 18 to create and/or share sexual imagery of themselves. It is also an offence for a person under the age of 18 to possess and/or share sexual imagery created by another person under the age of 18. While generating and sharing sexually explicit materials voluntarily with a peer can be developmentally appropriate behaviours, and young people ought not be criminalised for these non-malicious online sexual activities (Quayle, 2022), youth produced materials can also be non-consensually produced by peers and produced and shared under pressure and coercion by peers (Finkelhor et al., 2023b).

² Indecent is not defined in legislation but can include penetrative and non-penetrative sexual activity.

³ A pseudo-photograph is an image made by computer graphics or otherwise which appears to be a photograph.

In light of these changing dynamics, the term *image-based sexual abuse* (IBSA) has been proposed to cover the broader spectrum of image abuse, including those involving peer perpetrators. IBSA encompasses three categories of victimisation: 1) non-consensual taking and making of images; 2) non-consensual distribution of images; and 3) threatened image distribution (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2022). Although the IBSA conceptualisation includes conventional CSAM made by adults, some scholars pointed out that it does not explicitly include youth produced images that are voluntarily shared with adults or as part of commercial exchange (Finkelhor et al., 2023b; Pedersen et al., 2023). This present research further argues that since young people cannot consent to sexual activity with adults, the non-consensual focus of IBSA may unintentionally imply that sexually explicit materials that were voluntarily shared with adults are somehow less abusive and undermine the seriousness of these behaviours, despite this being a form of CSA. Consequently, Finkelhor et al. (2023b) expanded the conceptualisation of IBSA and proposed the use of *Image Based Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children* (IBSEAC) to encompass both adult produced CSAM and youth produced CSAM with peers and adults. The recognition that any sexual activity involving adults is abusive, and the emphasis on the non-consensual as well as pressured nature of peer perpetrated OCSA are therefore consistent with how OCSA is conceptualised in this present research.

Concerning the production of sexually explicit materials by young people, the discussion thus far elucidates the complexity of the creation and use of CSAM. While terms such as *self-* or *youth-* produced or *generated* images have been widely used to describe CSAM produced by the young person depicted in the material (Europol 2020b; IWF, 2023b), these terms can problematise developmentally appropriate behaviour. This is because they do not sufficiently differentiate materials produced and shared consensually with, or without pressure or coercion from peers, as well as materials produced as the result of interactions with adults.

Therefore, descriptions of *self-* or *youth-produced* or *generated material* are not used in this research because these terms may imply culpability on the part of the young person for having shared the material in the first place and contribute to victim-blaming when they have in fact been victimised (Quayle, 2022). In the same vein, because this research examined OCSA from the victims' perspectives, the use of IIOC was avoided as this is a legal term and the creation and sharing of sexually explicit materials by the victim is not intended to be sexually abusive. Instead, the term *sexually explicit materials* (photos and/or videos) was used to describe materials produced by young people that are later misused to avoid conflation with developmentally appropriate production. However, the term CSAM is used when discussing sexually explicit materials of young people that are available on the Internet to denote its criminality, as each young person depicted in the material available online has been sexually abused, irrespective of how the material was produced in the first place.

1.7 Prevalence of OCSA

Similar to the long-standing challenge of underreporting of CSA (Alaggia et al., 2019), estimating the prevalence of OCSA using official and empirical evidence is both met with challenges and will be discussed here. Estimating the prevalence of OCSA is also dependent on the young person's awareness and recognition of the problem, as well as their knowledge or availability of support mechanisms to facilitate disclosure (Bryce, 2010). Similarities between online grooming and both general online relationship formation and developmentally appropriate sexual experimentation may further hinder recognition of the problem, particularly in cases where the young person is unaware of conversing with an adult or someone with a sexual motive.

Issues of Reliance on Official Statistics

Following the Patrick Green case and other cases involving grooming using the Internet, *sexual grooming* was introduced in Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Although Section 15 acts as a proactive strategy for protecting young people from potential sexual abuse, it is only an offence if the adult intends to meet, arranges to meet, or travels to meet the child with the intention of committing a sexual offence. As such, it criminalises the act of meeting a child rather than the grooming process per se. Effectively, the act fails to consider the nature of online grooming, where sexual abuse can take place in contactless forms such as exposure to sexual material, sexual communication, or engagement in sexual activities. Furthermore, the stipulation that there must be two occasions of communication with the child prior to the travel fails to consider the empirical evidence suggesting sexual activities can be introduced very early on in the interaction (Kloess et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013). For these reasons, Section 15 received much criticism (Craven et al., 2006; Gillespie, 2002). Following the success of the NSPCC's "Flaw in the Law" campaign in 2014 (NSPCC, 2014), Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 inserted a new offence, *Sexual Communication With a Child*, into the Sexual Offences Act 2003 as Section 15A, which came into force on 3rd April 2017 (Sexual Offences Act, 2003).

The acknowledgment of communication "for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification" effectively criminalises sexual grooming as opposed to just the end result, i.e., meeting the child in person, as previously defined in Section 15. Nevertheless, official figures are likely to be an underestimation, as the Home Office Counting Rules dictate that only the most serious offence is recorded when it concerns the same victim and offender (Home Office, n.d.). Accordingly, if a young person was groomed by an adult online and was subsequently sexually assaulted in person, the grooming offence would not be recorded because the sexual assault is a more serious offence. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that the increase in other

child sexual offences, such as sexual activity involving a child under 16, may include cases of online grooming that have resulted in offline sexual abuse (see Figure 1.1 in Section 1.8).

To further add to the problem, the majority of sexual crimes against minors are not reported to law enforcement (Finkelhor et al., 2005; Kelly & Karsna, 2017). In support, Davidson and Bifulco (2010) found that the prevalence of CSA is tenfold higher than that reported by professional services and conviction rates. Underreporting is also apparent in OCSA, as research found that the majority of identified victims of online grooming did not voluntarily disclose the abuse (Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021). Similarly, young people who have experienced online sexual solicitation (OSS) perpetrated by an online stranger and victimisation through peer-related non-consensual sharing often do not disclose these experiences (Gill et al., 2022; Priebe et al., 2013).

Importantly, despite the demand on the UK police relating to OCSA has risen, the proportion of recorded offences leading to a positive criminal outcome (inclusive of a charge or summons) fell from 51% in 2014 to just 9% in 2018 (Police Foundation, 2022). While this in part reflects the proportion of OCSA involving peer perpetrators and the increasing use of 'Outcome 21'⁴, from just 0.4% in 2014 to 31% by 2018 (Police Foundation, 2022). The fact that just one in 10 cases led to a positive criminal justice outcome highlights the complexity of the investigation of OCSA and that the occurrence of OCSA is likely to be much higher than official figures suggest. Therefore, it is important to consider insights provided by studies using self-reported measures, as the voluntary nature of disclosure and anonymity can encourage adults to share their historic abusive experiences. Similarly, clear information on the procedures and parameters around confidentiality and safeguarding issues can facilitate young people disclosing their experiences (Sharrock et al., 2022).

⁴ Outcome 21 is a diversionary measure for suspects under the age of 18, which allows a crime to be recorded with no formal criminal justice action taken.

Issues of Reliance on Empirical Evidence

Meanwhile, establishing the prevalence of online grooming using empirical studies also has challenges. Until recently, most of the online grooming literature was qualitative in nature, making it difficult to establish the prevalence of sexual abuse following online grooming. On the contrary, the proliferation of OSS research since the early 2000s is mostly quantitative and has consistently provided evidence that young people are being sexually approached online. For example, the first Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS), which was one of the earliest studies examining unwanted online sexual experiences in the United States, revealed that one in five young people received OSS in the previous year (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007c).

Comparable ratings were also reported by UK Children Go Online, a UK survey that investigated nine- to 19-year-olds online behaviour, where 31% reported having received unwanted sexual comments and 8% had met face-to-face with someone they first met on the Internet (age of the person not specified) (Livingston & Bober, 2004). A meta-analysis conducted by Madigan et al. (2018b) reported that 11.5% of 12- to 16- year-olds from different countries had received online sexual requests from both peers and adults, and 20.3% had been exposed to unwanted sexual content online. The review, however, did not include the use of mobile phones and only examined exposure to sexual content via pop-up windows or spam. Therefore, the prevalence of OSS is likely to be much higher given that most young people are now connected to the Internet via multiple sources, such as smartphones, social media apps, and gaming platforms (Ofcom, 2022a). Indeed, recent studies that did not limit the experience via computer use found that up to one third of girls and one fifth of boys experienced OSS (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022; Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018).

Evidently, whilst online sexual requests can be a grooming activity and constitute CSA, receiving sexual requests is not synonymous with engagement in sexual activities. Furthermore, the YISS and subsequent studies that have differentiated between OSS

received from adults and peers suggest that some of the solicitations were perpetrated by peers (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014a). This highlights that young people can engage in similar sexually exploitative behaviours as adults.

The few studies that have separately examined OSS by adults and sexual interactions with adults have revealed that a proportion of young people have been victims of both forms of OCSA. de Santisteban and Gámez-Guadix (2018b) found that 12.6% of adolescents aged between 12 and 15 have experienced OSS, and 7.9% have engaged in online sexual interactions such as sending sexually explicit material of self to an adult in the previous year. Another community sample of Spanish adolescents aged between 12 and 17 found that 39.5% have experienced some forms of OCSA, including unwanted exposure to sexual content (24.4%) and online grooming by an adult (17.2%) (Montiel et al., 2016). Furthermore, a longitudinal study over a 13-month period conducted by Ortega-Barón et al. (2022) found that the period prevalence for OSS and sexual interactions with adults was 22.9% and 13.7%, respectively. The authors also reported that nine out of 100 participants fell victim to OCSA during the examined period, including meeting adults who were first met online to have offline sexual contact.

Higher figures have been reported by a retrospective study, which found 23% of adults recalled being groomed following OSS by adult strangers online (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). Concerningly, of those who agreed to meet with the adult following online grooming, 68% engaged in physical sexual activity with the adult (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). Jeglic and Winters (2023) also found that 8.5% of in-person sexual abuse was perpetrated by adults who were first met online. Together, these findings indicate that there appear to be more young people who have been victims of OCSA involving online and offline sexual abuse than official data suggests.

Further evidence underscoring the scale of online grooming came from Bergen et al. (2013). Impersonating young people of different ages, the authors found that a high proportion of adults wanted to continue a sexual conversation with an impersonated 10-, 12-, 14-, and 16-year-old despite knowing their age (21.6%, 29.8%, 45.5%, and 73.5%, respectively). Since it is possible for one offender to sexually abuse multiple young people online at one time, the large proportion of adults who would knowingly commit CSA suggests that both self-report by young people and official data appear to underestimate the scale of this form of abuse.

The significant variations in the definitions and concepts used in the research on OCSA also make direct comparison problematic (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023; May-Chahal et al., 2018). For example, the prevalence of OSS and abusive sexual activities with adults varies considerably across studies due to the inconsistent measures used in their definitions, as well as the samples used (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Gandolfi et al., 2021; Madigan et al., 2018b). In Sklenarova et al.'s (2018) study, 40.8% of online sexual interactions involved peers that the young person had never met in person. Since estimating prevalence requires recognition of the problem, the use of deception by offenders can render the young person unaware that they are in fact sexually interacting with adults (Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). Finally, the lack of distinction between online grooming resulting in online-only CSA, offline-only CSA, or online and offline sexual abuse adds another layer of difficulty in establishing the true scale of online grooming and the different types of OCSA involved.

Existing literature indicates it is impossible to draw firm conclusions on the occurrence of online grooming from official records and academic studies. It is certain, however, that the accessibility of the Internet in recent years, coupled with the rapid development and popularity of social media, affords offenders abundant opportunities to sexually offend against young people online.

1.8 Online Grooming (Definition and Why It Is a Problem)

Sexual grooming as a construct was first identified in the early 1980s when law enforcement agencies observed that extrafamilial child sexual abusers gravitated to child-serving organisations to gain access to victims and engaged in pre-offence behaviours prior to the commission of the sexual abuse (Lanning, 2018). While there are numerous definitions for sexual grooming, there is not yet an operational definition despite this behaviour having been well studied (Winters et al., 2021). As such, there is no universally accepted definition of online grooming (Forni et al., 2020).

The European Online Grooming Project (EOGP), which is the largest online grooming study to date, defines online grooming as “the process by which a person befriends a young person online to facilitate online sexual contact and/or a physical meeting with them, with the goal of committing sexual abuse” (Webster et al., 2012, p. 30). Not specific to online grooming per se, some researchers place a greater emphasis on the grooming process itself than the sexual abuse to encapsulate its complexity. For example, Craven et al. (2006) described grooming as “a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance and maintain the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offenders’ abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their action” (p. 11). Both definitions underlie (online) grooming is a process that centres on the creation and subsequent abuse of trust with the intention of sexual abuse. Therefore, although different grooming tactics are featured in this process, which will be discussed in detail in Section 1.11, grooming may not always result in sexual abuse. Interactions during online grooming can also be non-sexual, especially when the intention is in-person sexual abuse (Katz, 2013). Thus, the criminal law can be limited in its response to grooming without sexual activity, as this behaviour is not an offence per se (McAlinden, 2006).

Online sexual solicitation (OSS) is generally defined as receiving requests online to engage in sexual activities, sexual talk, or to share personal sexual information. However, whether the requests are unwanted and the age of the person who made the requests is not always explicit and varies considerably across studies (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018b; Mitchell et al., 2013; Wolak et al., 2006; Ybarra et al., 2007). It is important to note that, regardless of whether the young person responds to the request, sexual communication with a child is a criminal offence in the UK (Home Office, 2021). Crucially, while receiving sexual requests online can occur as part of online grooming, it is not synonymous with subsequent compliance. It is engagement in sexual activities with an adult or unwanted sexual activities with a peer that is the focus of this research. Yet, OSS and online grooming have been used interchangeably in the literature despite the critical difference between the two (May-Chahal et al., 2018).

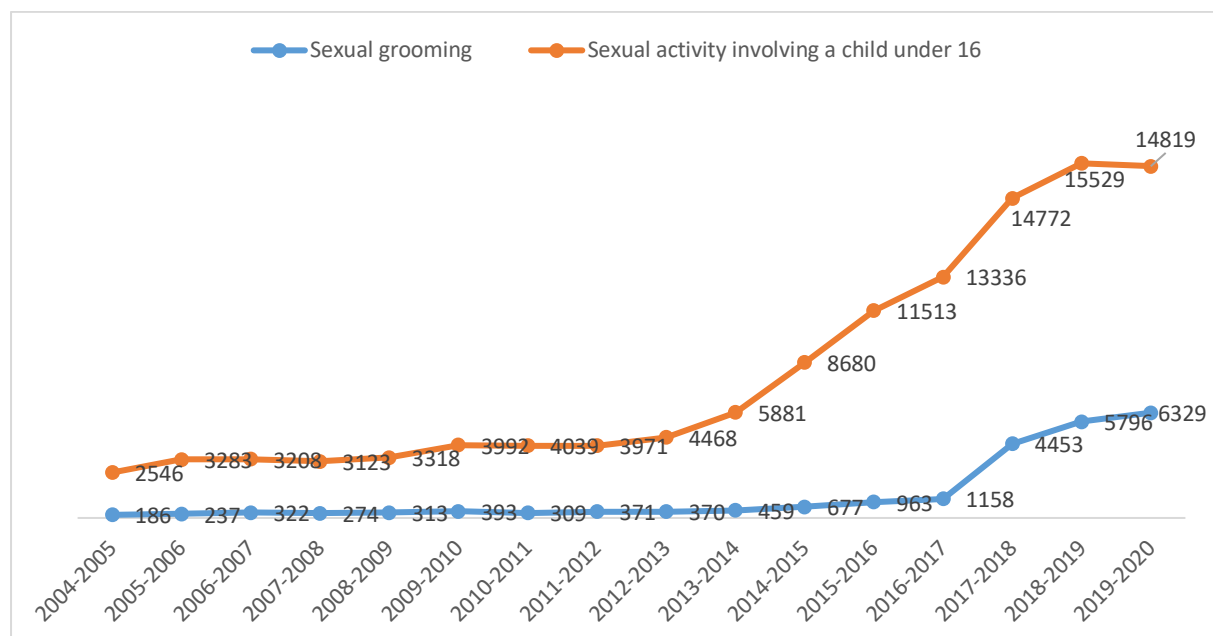
Furthermore, OSS focuses on the explicit sexual nature of interaction rather than the development of a relationship or the manipulation used to commit sexual abuse (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). Thus, OSS can occur with minimal interaction with the young person and without the perpetrator's persistence (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). On the contrary, victims of online grooming are usually groomed over varying periods before the introduction of, and engagement in, sexually abusive activities. The grooming process will be discussed in Section 1.10. Studies also suggest that while victims of OCSA display resistance to direct and explicit sexual requests by offenders, compliance is often gained through the use of implicit and explicit threats (Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023).

Therefore, to differentiate between OSS and online grooming, this research defined OSS as receiving requests online to engage in sexual activities, sexual talk, or to give personal sexual information that was unwanted from peers or, whether wanted or not, from adults. Online grooming was conceptualised as the experience of grooming tactics that lead to online and/or offline sexual abuse.

Early statistics from the Children Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (2010) revealed that online grooming was the most reported suspected child abuse received from members of the UK public, accounting for 66% of all reports. Figure 1.1 also illustrates a year-on-year increase in the number of police recorded crimes of Sexual Grooming since its introduction as an offence in England and Wales in May 2004, where the figures went from 186 cases to 6329 in 2020 (Home Office, 2021).

Figure 1.1

Police Recorded Crime by Offence in England and Wales, Year Ending March 2005 to Year Ending March 2020



Based on data from all UK police forces, the NSPCC (2023) reported that online grooming crimes have risen by more than 82% in the last five years. Consistent with this, the NCMEC (2023b) saw an 82% increase in online grooming in 2022 from the previous year. A global survey of young adults aged between 18 and 20 from 54 countries found that 29% had received sexually explicit content from an adult online and 25% had been asked by an adult to keep their online sexual interactions a secret before the age of 18 (Economist Impact, 2023a). These abusive experiences were even more prevalent in Europe, where 56% had

received sexual content from an adult and 31% were asked to keep the abuse a secret (Economist Impact, 2023b). More evidence of online grooming came from the IWF Annual Report 2022, which found a 129% increase in self-produced CSAM of primary school-aged children (aged 7–10) who were groomed into performing sexual acts on camera in comparison to 2021 (IWF, 2023a).

Despite the evidence indicating online grooming is a fast-growing form of OCSA that is affecting children of all ages and across the globe, there remains a lack of consensus on the conceptualisation of its definition (Forni et al., 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). Nevertheless, existing definitions suggest that online grooming is a manipulative process to build a trusting relationship with the victim for the purpose of sexual abuse over varying periods of time (Kloess et al., 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Webster et al., 2012). Since non-sexual grooming behaviours can be difficult to spot (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Jeglic et al., 2023), it is vital to understand the online grooming process to prevent sexual abuse from occurring, as a child is sexually abused once sexual activity is introduced. This makes it clear that online grooming cannot be comprehensively understood or prevented without understanding the interaction between the abuser and the young person. The groomer taxonomies presented in the next section further illustrate the complexity of online grooming and the necessity of examining the offender-young person dynamics.

1.9 Typologies of Online Groomers

The most common classification of online groomers differentiates offenders who use the Internet to locate victims with the aim of offline sexual abuse from those who engage in online sexual abuse only (Broome et al., 2018; Chiu et al., 2018; Seigfried-Spellar et al., 2019). McLaughlin (1998), one of the first authors to offer a typology of cybersex offenders, coined the term *chatters* for those who groom their victims, engage in cybersex, and often, but not always, try to contact them in person. *Travellers*, on the contrary, describe individuals who use

online chat as a tool to enable face-to-face encounters with their victims for sexual abuse. Using a sample of 51 convicted offenders, Briggs et al. (2011) also recognised that not all offenders were motivated by offline contact. Briggs and colleagues drew a distinction between *fantasy-driven* offenders, who aim to reach sexual climax online without an express intent to meet offline, and *contact-driven* offenders, who prepare the victims through online (sexual) interactions for offline sexual abuse. Although both studies acknowledged the potential crossover from online to in-person sexual abuse, the term *fantasy* has been argued as somehow misleading and trivialises non-contact OCSA, when the young person is nonetheless abused in the physical absence of the perpetrator (Barber & Bettez, 2014; Kloess et al., 2017b).

Recognising the nuances of online grooming, Tener et al. (2015) proposed four types of offenders based on criminogenic factors and modus operandi. They are *expert*, *cynical*, *affection-focused*, and *sex-focused*, which is characterised by the use of different grooming tactics such as patterns of online communication, use of identity fabrication, relationship dynamics with the victim, and level of sex crime expertise. The inclusion of grooming tactics to classify online groomers was significant, as the tactics used by different groups of offenders underscore the heterogeneity of the grooming process and challenge the stereotypical view that groomers are experts who use technology to identify potential victims using fabricated identities for offline sexual abuse (Tener et al., 2015).

The categorisation of groomers based on their offending behaviours also has clinical implications, as the various styles of grooming could imply different treatment needs for both offenders and victims. This approach, however, overlooks the fact that offenders are skilled at adapting their tactics in response to the young person's vulnerabilities and would therefore employ the most effective tactics to meet the victim's needs (Berson, 2003; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Webster et al., 2012). The heterogeneity of online grooming can be further illustrated by DeHart et al. (2017), who overcame the typical use of a small sample in typology

development and proposed four offender groups based on over 200 transcripts between offenders and undercover officers. Importantly, DeHart and colleagues (2017) provided evidence that a distinct group of offenders exists outside the dichotomy of online or offline sexual abuse following grooming, and identified those who engage in both online and offline sexual abuse as *Cybersex/Schedulers*. The authors also differentiated offenders who are financially motivated from those who are not.

Although research has shown that there are language-based differences between contact-driven (i.e., offline sexual abuse) and non-contact driven (i.e., online sexual abuse) online groomers (Chiu et al., 2018; Seigfried-Spellar et al., 2019), a systematic review of online groomer typologies found no clear pattern of behaviour to define non-contact driven and contact driven offenders idiosyncratically and concluded that the comprehensive approach used by the EOGP offers a better representation of online groomers (Broome et al., 2018). Based on interviews with convicted groomers, the EOGP identified three types of online groomers across eight behavioural dimensions. They are 1) previous convictions for sexual offending; 2) use of true or fabricated identities; 3) the nature and extent of indecent image use; 4) networking with other offenders online; 5) the type of offence-supportive beliefs; 6) the speed of contact made with young people; 7) how the contact was made and sustained; and 8) the outcome of the offence, i.e., online offending and/or offline meeting (Webster et al., 2012).

Intimacy-seeking groomers view contact with victims as consenting and intimate and are characterised by their time invested in building relationships with victims. Their online interactions with victims are often prolonged, with sexual content introduced slowly before meeting in person to further the 'relationship'. This group of offenders often uses their true identity, is not involved in other sexual offending behaviours, has no previous convictions, and does not network with other offenders. *Adaptable groomers* view victims as mature and capable, and adapt their grooming style and identity in response to the victim's online

presentation and reaction to the initial contact. As a result, the length of contact and introduction of sexual content vary according to each victim. This group of offenders focuses on risk management and would use multiple electronic devices to hide their digital footprints and simultaneously interact with multiple victims. In contrast, the *hypersexual* group is characterised by their extensive IIOC and extreme adult pornography collection and networking with other offenders online. Offline meetings are less prevalent as this group is interested in instant sexual gratification, which is evident by their highly sexualised contact with young people. A similar typology has also been suggested by van Gijn-Grosvenor and Lamb (2021) more recently.

As outlined in Section 1.3, the evolution of technology has modified the way OCSA can be committed. Thus, these typologies may no longer reflect recent experiences of online grooming. For example, the duration of online grooming resulting in online or offline sexual abuse was previously reported to last from 10 days to up to 7 years (Joleby et al., 2020; Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2014b). Yet, the Global Threat Assessment 2023 reported that the average time for young people to have engaged in a high-risk grooming conversation was 45 minutes, and that this could occur in just 19 seconds after receiving the first message (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). Although it cannot be ascertained whether these conversations involved any sexual content, the significant reduction in time suggests that offenders are spending less time grooming and opting for a direct approach. Meanwhile, grooming techniques such as deception are increasingly used by criminals with financial incentives, where organised criminals particularly target boys by luring them into believing they are sharing sexually explicit materials of themselves with a young female or adult woman and then threaten to distribute these materials in exchange for money (Europol, 2023; NCA, 2023; NCMEC, 2022). The use of grooming tactics by organised criminals thus suggests that online grooming leading to sexual abuse is now being committed on a much larger scale than individual offenders could.

Another point to consider in relation to online groomer typologies is the debate on the crossover between CSAM use and contact sexual offending. Early discussion was concerned with whether CSAM users would progress to commit contact sexual abuse and vice versa. Despite the literature suggests a different offender profile between contact and CSAM offenders in terms of demographics, criminal history, recidivism, substance misuse, and level of education etc., and that the majority of CSAM offenders are not involved in further sexual offending (Faust et al., 2015; Steel et al., 2021). Self-reports from CSAM users do not appear to support this assertion.

For instance, Seto et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis reported that recidivism among CSAM offenders was low (4.6%), with 3.4% committing a new CSAM offence and 2% committing a contact sexual offence in up to a 6-year follow-up period since the CSAM index offence. This is contrasted with 42% of CSAM users self-reporting that they had sought direct contact with children online after viewing CSAM (Insoll et al., 2022). Although it is not known whether the online interactions with children were sexual in nature, the finding indicates that viewing CSAM may escalate to further sexual offences. Indeed, some communities on the dark web have a clear hierarchical structure whereby individuals who are active in producing CSAM are especially valued (Police Foundation, 2022). Consequently, members are actively encouraged to engage in more serious online or offline abuse to produce new CSAM (Police Foundation, 2022). Thus, the transition from CSAM use to initiating contact with young people online demonstrates that online sexual offending against children is dynamic, and that networking with other child sexual abusers can validate individuals' motivation to abuse children, and potentially escalate one's offending behaviour over time.

Likewise, acquainted offenders, i.e., abusers who know the young person in person, can also use online communication to advance sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2005). A recent study by Jeglic and Winters (2023) revealed that despite less than nine percent of the victims met their perpetrators online, over half of the victims of in-person abuse

had engaged in one or more types of online communication with the perpetrator. Of those who had sent or received photos or videos, 72.9% had sent sexually explicit materials of themselves, and 80.7% had received sexual content from the perpetrators (Jeglic & Winters, 2023). The findings indicate that the risk of online sexual harm is not only posed by online acquainted offenders and that offline acquainted perpetrators are also using online communication as a tool to groom and sexually desensitise the victim prior to contact sexual abuse.

Yet, CSAM users who crossover to further online sexual abuse or in-person abuse, or conversely, offline acquainted offenders who utilise online communication to advance sexual abuse online and/or offline, are not currently represented in the existing typologies. Furthermore, since offenders can instruct others to commit in-person sexual abuse through livestreaming, remotely direct the victim to engage in live sexual acts, record the live sexual abuse for distribution, and threaten the victim with the footage of the abuse for more sexual requests (Drejer et al., 2023; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). It would be remiss to suggest that “online-only” offenders pose a lower risk of committing contact sexual offences. Rather, some of these offenders are committing further crimes by targeting vulnerable others, including adults who are financially disadvantaged, or children, to commit sexual abuse on their behalf to lower the risk of detection (Drejer et al., 2023; IICSA, 2020; Ramiro et al., 2019).

Although developing offender typologies is beyond the scope of this PhD programme, a review of the literature highlights that the online/offline distinction of grooming can be ambiguous given that the intended outcome is always sexual abuse. This dichotomy also undermines the heterogenous nature of online grooming, and potentially, the seriousness of grooming activities that occur online. Furthermore, the fact that offenders are skilled at evading detection (Europol, 2023) raises the question of whether typologies developed using official data truly reflect offender profiles, especially since the true scale of the different forms of online sexual crimes against children remains unknown (IICSA, 2020). Knowledge of offenders’ motivations

and behaviours is important in providing a referential clinical (e.g., risk management and treatment) and legal (e.g., legislation and police investigation) framework. However, the complexity of how OCSA can be committed illustrates that attempts to derive a definitive typology of online groomers, or online child sexual offenders in general, may be problematic given how perpetrators are misusing technology and online communication to facilitate the grooming process and to commit different forms of CSA.

Furthermore, considering only 7% of adults in the UK do not use the Internet, and that adult Internet users use six different online communication platforms on average (Ofcom, 2022b). It is plausible that the use of online communication by some acquainted offenders may reflect convenience instead of representing a distinct offender subgroup. For example, the use of livestreaming CSA, especially since COVID-19, may indicate that offenders are simply adapting their behaviour for practical reasons due to travel restrictions (Drejer et al., 2023). Based on 153 legal cases of CSA involving grooming in Canada, Berens et al. (2023) suggested that although there are distinct differences in offender and victim characteristics between in-person, online, and mixed groomers (those who use both online and in-person grooming strategies), grooming tactics are used by all three types of groomers. The overlapping features noted by different researchers in their online groomer typology development (e.g., degree of rapport building used, use of deception, speed of sexualisation etc.), including offenders who are direct in their sexual approach, also suggest that although these features vary in intensity, they are integral to the grooming process and that no one feature bears more significance than another. This underscores the importance of examining the grooming process in greater detail, as it is impossible to effectively intervene a process that is not fully understood.

1.10 The Process of Grooming

Grooming cannot occur without interaction between the young person and the offender. As such, attempts to understand grooming must first consider how the exploitative relationship is developed and maintained, and the grooming process will be outlined in this section.

Acting as a decoy and interacting with offenders, O'Connell (2003) proposed the first model of online grooming and outlined a seven-stage grooming process. The seven stages are: 1) friendship forming; 2) relationship forming; 3) risk assessment; 4) exclusivity; 5) sexual; 6) fantasy re-enactment; and 7) damage limitation. The early stages involve starting and maintaining the relationship to allow the offender to get to know the victim. Once rapport is built, offenders will risk assess the young person's environment, such as privacy of computer use to minimise detection. During the exclusivity stage, offenders seek to strengthen the exploitative relationship by reinforcing the idea that the relationship is special and testing boundaries by gradually introducing sexual topics and activities. Depending on the reaction of the young person to the suggested sexual activity, the offender may respond with regret or plead for acting out of character if the young person expresses discomfort. In contrast, offenders may display hesitation about engaging in sexual activities if the young person appears to be accepting of their suggestions. These responses are intended to persuade the young person into believing they have autonomy in the exploitative relationship.

According to O'Connell (2003), the introduction of sexual topics lays the foundation for subsequent stages where the intensity of sexual abuse can vary and may be legitimised as 'educational'. Once the goal of sexual abuse is achieved, offenders would either further groom the victim to minimise disclosure or adopt a "hit-and-run" approach and abandon the victim by ceasing communication. Although the stages are presented sequentially, O'Connell (2003) noted that the order and number of stages varied depending on the offender's motive, with

some offenders remaining in one stage for longer periods whilst others skipped one or more stages entirely.

The key elements described in O'Connell (2003)'s grooming process resemble the sexual grooming model proposed by Winters et al. (2020), which outlined victim selection, gaining access and isolating a child, trust development, desensitisation, and post-abuse maintenance as the five stages of in-person sexual grooming. Specifically relating to online grooming, tactics such as rapport building, sexual desensitisation, use of compliments and flattery, and risk assessment identified by O'Connell (2003) have also been substantiated in subsequent research analysing transcripts between offenders and decoys or victims (Black et al., 2015; Kloess et al., 2019; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2013). However, these studies unanimously concluded that grooming is a dynamic process that is fluid and circular without a fixed sequence, and grooming tactics are used with different frequency and intensity. In support, the literature shows that offenders would adapt their tactics to overcome victims' resistance, leaving the young person from feeling subjectively in control of the 'relationship' to feeling obligated to comply with the sexual and non-sexual abusive requests (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). Since each grooming process varies according to the offender's objectives and the perceived needs of the young person, the term 'model' has been criticised as it assumes a linear pathway through phases and that all aspects are relevant to every grooming process (Gottschalk, 2011).

Interviews with offenders revealed that in addition to the cyclical nature of the grooming process, offenders' cognitive distortions and justifications such as blaming and sexualising the victim, both of which considered by theories of sexual offending as key elements in maintaining the offending process (Finkelhor, 1984; Sullivan, 2001), also maintain the online grooming process. Importantly, these distorted perceptions feed back into the beginning of the cycle with other potential victims. Thereby creating a cycle of abuse (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Webster et al., 2012). These authors also underlined that regardless of whether the sexual

abuse was online and/or offline, in a sporadic or sustained manner, concurrent activities took place whereby the offender actively studied the structural environment and the victim's vulnerabilities. Specifically, offenders would use strategies to ensure the victim felt like an active part of the process (de Santisteban et al., 2018).

A review of the available literature leads to the conclusion that while there are discrete online grooming activities, they do not conform to any one sequence, nor are all activities evident across all cases. Rather, the overlapping features used in developing offender typologies and the recurring features identified in the grooming process highlight the centrality of grooming tactics is the sexual abuse of children. Therefore, developing further knowledge of online grooming tactics can provide a better understanding of how online grooming is initiated and maintained. This can inform prevention and early detection to educate young people and adults to identify signs of potential grooming.

1.11 Grooming Tactics

Studies comparing online and offline grooming suggested that although there are similarities between the grooming discourse in online and offline environments, certain tactics such as deceptive trust development, sexualisation, and flattery are more salient in online grooming (Black et al., 2015; Ringenberg et al., 2022). Whittle, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Beech, and Collings (2013b), in their review of online grooming characteristics, outlined that manipulation can manifest in the form of bribery, gifts, money, flattery, sexual activity, as well as threats and force. The variety of tactics employed by offenders therefore illustrates that grooming is a heavily manipulative process with the end goal of sexual abuse. The different tactics will now be discussed in turn.

Rapport Building

The initiation of grooming is often characterised by aspects of relationship building, such as discussion using general conversational topics around school, hobbies and interests, and the young person's personal circumstances (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2015). The importance of rapport building in the grooming process has been demonstrated by Williams et al. (2013), who reported that this is one of the three primary tactics employed by perpetrators within the first hour of interaction to create a seemingly safe and non-threatening environment for the young person to continue with the conversation. Analysis of the language used by offenders also highlighted that their communication focused on developing a deceptively genuine interpersonal relationship in order to facilitate trust (Broome et al., 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). This highlights that seemingly innocuous chats that resemble behaviours in typical relationship development are in fact deliberate in enabling the offender to find out the young person's vulnerability and to risk assess the circumstances, while simultaneously developing rapport (Kloess et al., 2017a; Quayle et al., 2012a). Consequently, the young person often considers the offender as a friend or someone to confide in with personal matters that are often troubling or to seek advice from (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2017a; Quayle et al., 2012b). In many cases, victims felt they were in love with the offender and believed the sexual exploitative activities were part of a romantic relationship (Katz, 2013; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014b; Wolak et al., 2004). The emotional attachment to offenders places an emphasis on how relationship building is fundamental to the initiation, development, and maintenance of the grooming process.

Identity Deception

Since it is the inter-personal dynamics that facilitate the grooming process, it is vital to understand the tactics employed by online groomers to entice and entrap victims. Traditionally, the grooming process requires close physical proximity with the young person, and the

relationships are based on power differentials (Mitchell et al., 2005). Abusers are often someone in authority, such as an older family member, teacher, coach, or priest (McAlinden, 2006). These positions imply a pre-existing hierarchy of power before the abuse. In fact, it can be argued that even in the absence of authority, the mere difference in physical size and strength between an adult and a young person in itself is a form of power imbalance, which can increase the likelihood of abuse compliance. On the contrary, online anonymity suggests the initial relationship dynamics in online grooming are more likely to start off on an equal ground. The lack of physical presence may also reduce the power imbalance even when the young person is knowingly communicating with an online adult acquaintance, who is unlikely to exercise authority during the initial phase of interaction (Black et al., 2015). Additionally, young people generally have a high level of risk awareness when navigating the online world (Bryce & Fraser, 2014). Recent studies reported that young people would use different online safety tools, such as setting social media accounts as private to prevent strangers from contacting or receiving unwanted sexual contact and content filtering to limit and/or block inappropriate content (Gill et al., 2022; Microsoft, 2023). Nevertheless, offenders could re-contact the young person through other social media accounts or under a different profile (Gill et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2023).

The awareness of potential harm, coupled with the 'stranger danger' stereotype surrounding unknown adults, can therefore act as barriers for perpetrators in gaining access to potential victims, as young people can be reluctant to interact with adult strangers online. To overcome this, tactics such as identity deception create opportunities to enable the first step of abuse, i.e., victim access. Research suggests that up to 50% of online groomers deceived the victims about their identities, including lying about their gender, age, or pretending to be a different person (Bergen et al., 2014; Briggs et al., 2011; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019; Malesky, 2007; Shannon, 2008; Whittle et al., 2014b). The timing of offenders revealing their real identity also varies; while some victims discovered the offender's true identity at the

first offline meeting (Katz, 2013), others self-disclosed during the online interactions (Quayle et al., 2014).

Choo (2009) describes the use of identity deception as a tool for building trust, which serves to lower the young person's guard as they may be more receptive to communicating with online strangers if they believe the other person is age appropriate. In support, Bergen et al. (2014) found that although any form of identity deception increased the likelihood of young people sending a sexual picture and engaging in cybersex with an adult, it had an opposite effect on offline sexual contact. Furthermore, male victims of OCSA have been found to experience more gender and age deception, where they are often deceived by adult offenders posing as young females and lured into sexually abusive activities (FBI, 2022; IWF, 2023a; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). These findings thus illustrate the effectiveness of identity deception in misleading young people to believe the sexual abuse was age-appropriate sexual activity. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that young people are not always deceived, as some offenders are upfront about their identity as well as their sexual intentions (Aitken et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2017b; 2019; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2015).

Flattery and Positivity

Irrespective of whether deceptive strategies are used, gestures intended to make the young person feel special, which can be accomplished through compliments, flattery, and affectionate expression, are well documented (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Kloess et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2013). Linguistic analysis of interactions between decoys acting as potential victims and offenders shows that flattery and compliments are frequently used in the opening interactions to elicit positive responses from the young person (Black et al., 2015).

Similarly, analysis of transcripts between offenders and victims, as well as victim accounts, found that sexual (e.g., physical appearance) and non-sexual (e.g., personality nature) compliments were used throughout the grooming process to frame and support the abuse (Kloess et al., 2017b; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014b). These compliments manipulated the young person into believing that the exploitative interactions were genuine and to engage in sexual activity with or without the abuser's request (Joleby et al., 2020; Kloess et al., 2019; Quayle et al., 2012b). Meanwhile, positive feedback such as praise or encouragement during or after sexual activity can act as positive reinforcement for further sexual abuse (Kloess et al., 2017b). In the event that the offender loses their temper or becomes coercive in response to resistance or disengagement, offenders may also use excessive affection to compensate for acting "out of character" to repair ruptures in the relationship (Aitken et al., 2018). Additionally, compliments can be used to isolate victims, where the young person may be praised for keeping the relationship a secret (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017).

Collectively, the available evidence suggests that the use of flattery serves multiple purposes throughout the grooming process. First, it strengthens and insinuates a special relationship between the dyad to prepare the young person for sexual abuse. Once sexual activity is introduced, this tactic enables offenders to gauge the victim's compliance and maintain or escalate the abuse accordingly. Crucially, regardless of when flattery is employed, this tactic provides psychological reassurance for the victim and strengthens their emotional connection to the offender. Consequently, victims are often left feeling enmeshed, which in turn enables the groomer to advance the abuse more easily and entrap the young person in the abusive cycle (Whittle et al., 2014b).

Bribery

Another commonly employed grooming tactic is bribery, whereby money or gifts are offered in exchange for sexual activities (Berson, 2003; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2007; Whittle et al., 2014b). Shannon (2008) found that up to 47% of police reports of OSS included bribery. Bribery can be disguised as seemingly legitimate and lucrative opportunities, such as 'modelling' or 'acting' in return for money or clothes worn in the photoshoot to lower the young person's wariness to the suggested activities (Ainsaar & Lööf, 2011). Since gift-giving is generally considered a thoughtful gesture and tends to elicit positive feelings in the receiver, offering money or presents can fortify the deceptively positive relationship fronted by the abuser. Meanwhile, similar to flattery, gifting can also act as positive reinforcement for abusive sexual activities to aid the maintenance and escalation of the abuse (Kloess et al., 2017b; Webster et al., 2012). Trivers' (1971) concept of reciprocal altruism suggests ulterior motives lie behind the intention of giving, as the gesture is done with the unspoken expectation that the receiver will return the favour at some stage. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to speculate that within the context of grooming, the use of bribery and flattery can become leverage for the abuser to instil a sense of psychological debt in the victim to increase compliance with the suggested sexual activities.

Sexualisation

While strategies such as deception, flattery, and bribery can enhance compliance, the speed and intensity of introducing sexual content are of equal importance. Studies suggest a variance in how the subject of sex is broached in the grooming process. For example, while some offenders were clear about their sexual intention at the initial approach or introduced sexual content early on in the interaction, others spent time gaining trust from the victim and were gradual in their introduction of sexual topics (Kloess et al., 2017b; 2019; Webster et al., 2012; Winters et al., 2017). The process that offenders use to prepare victims for increasingly

intensive sexual abuse has been referred to as sexual de-sensitisation (Olson et al., 2007). For instance, in no particular order, exposure to sexual materials, sexual talk, and sending self-produced sexually explicit materials are usually found to precede masturbation while on camera and offline sexual abuse (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Katz, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; Quayle et al., 2012b). Since groomers are mostly reactive to the victim's response, introducing sexual activities at the young person's pace allows the abuser to assess the victim's reactions to the proposed sexual activity and to modify their approach accordingly (de Santisteban et al., 2018). Indeed, Villacampa and Gómez (2017) found that abuse disclosure rose to 84% when young people were asked to engage in sexual acts they did not want to. The different pace of introducing sexual topics would also explain the varying duration of grooming, as each victim and the goal of the abuser differ. These findings therefore demonstrate the effect of sexual de-sensitisation in reducing both resistance and disclosure as the abuse intensifies.

Co-occurring with sexual desensitisation, Olson et al. (2007) suggested that offenders may reframe the sexual abuse as beneficial to the young person. Reframing is also evident in online grooming, where sexual topics are often initiated through a construction thereof as a joke or a game presented in a frivolous, playful light, or in the context of providing sexual 'advice' to the young person (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2013). In support, analysis of transcripts between offenders and victims revealed that the offender's masturbation was often discursively constructed as a need out of the offender's control, therefore effectively positioning the victim as the 'facilitator' (Kloess et al., 2017a). This strategy can thus provide a false sense of autonomy and parity, making the victim feel like they are in control of the situation and disguise the nature of the sexual abuse (de Santisteban et al., 2018). These findings again underscore the scheming nature of offenders' behaviours to fulfil the purpose of their own sexual gratification.

Coercion

Due to the nature of online communication, physical coercion is not a commonly used tactic in online grooming in comparison to offline grooming. Nevertheless, verbal coercion in the form of pressure, emotional manipulation, threats of harm, or intimidation can be employed to escalate the sexual abuse when victims become non-compliant, disengage, or express desires to disclose the abuse (Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Quayle et al., 2012b; Thomas et al., 2023). Since sexually explicit materials shared electronically can be retained and live sexual activity can be non-consensually recorded (Briggs et al., 2011; Grosskopf, 2010; Krone, 2005), blackmailing victims with their own sexually explicit materials is a powerful tool to maintain and escalate the abuse, and to inhibit disclosure (O'Connell, 2003; Kopecký, 2017; Whittle et al., 2014b; Wolak et al., 2018). Conversely, psychological pressure such as questioning the victim's loyalty and love to the offender, using reverse psychology to belittle or 'dare' the young person into engaging in the suggested sexual activity, and feigning illness and suicidality to induce guilt and obligation have all been found to be equally effective in manipulating victims to comply with the sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). Playing on the victim's emotions is pivotal to the grooming process, and the use of different forms of verbal coercion, such as threats of harm or psychological pressure, demonstrates that offenders can exploit this dynamic by exercising control over the young person, whether overtly or covertly, to sustain the abuse.

Summary

The presented evidence collectively illustrates that grooming tactics are rarely used in isolation, as they complement each other to build deceptive trust in preparation for sexual abuse. Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018a) confirmed that the different tactics used by offenders fit with the theoretical model of social influence and persuasion and increased the likelihood of victims' compliance. Cialdini (2007) put forward six principles of social persuasion: reciprocity, commitment and consistency, authority, social validation, scarcity, and likeability. Within the

online environment, these are used as heuristic cues or cognitive shortcuts for decision making when evaluating messages and determining whether to comply with a request (Guadagno et al., 2013). Applying this to the context of online grooming, Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018a) found that grooming tactics such as rapport building, deception, and bribery resulted in the young person developing deep emotional involvement with the offender and becoming highly motivated to stay connected. This increased the likelihood of sexual abuse, including the instigation of sexual activity without the offender's request. Victim accounts also revealed that sexual activities were not always incited by the offender, nor did all victims view the sexual activities as abusive at the time of the abuse or with hindsight (Joleby et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2013a; Whittle et al., 2015).

Research suggests that some young people who were aware that they were interacting with adults online would directly address the age difference or discuss a future with the offender (de Santisteban et al., 2018). Some victims would also actively conceal their online and offline interactions with the offender from others without the offender's request. For example, they might request the offender to change the profile picture on their instant messaging account, lie about their whereabouts, delete messages from the conversation, or downplay the nature and extent of the relationship when telling others about it (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Katz, 2013; Kloess et al., 2017a; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014b). These vigilant behaviours suggest that young people are often aware of the inappropriateness of these interactions.

Indeed, young people reported that one of the barriers to disclose harmful online sexual experiences was admitting to others that they had been talking to strangers online or had engaged in sexual activities with adults (Gill et al., 2022; Quayle et al., 2012b). Katz (2013) also found that some victims refused to co-operate with the police investigation despite being presented with forensic evidence of the abuse. Although the resistance may act as a way for the young person to assert some form of control in this powerless situation, especially when the abuse was involuntary discovered (Quayle et al., 2012b), the reluctance displayed by

victims demonstrates the extent to which a young person can be groomed, and that the fear of judgement and self-blame felt by the victims for ‘allowing’ the abuse to happen can prevent disclosure (Joleby et al., 2020).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate grooming tactics centre on manipulation and underscore the role of these tactics in determining the progression and maintenance of abuse. Since most of the empirical evidence of grooming tactics was derived from qualitative studies, quantitative research would be useful to understand the relationship between the experience of grooming tactics and sexual abuse as a result of these tactics.

1.12 The Impact of COVID-19 on OCSA

The restrictions imposed on the public during COVID-19 displaced much of everyday life into online spaces, creating the conditions for more cybercrime victimisation (Halford et al., 2020). This is also evident in the exponential growth of the quantity and severity of online sexual abuse experienced by young people since the beginning of the pandemic (Europol, 2023).

UNICEF et al. (2020) reported that there were at least 188 country-wide school closures due to COVID-19, impacting more than 90% of the world’s student population. At the same time, physical distancing measures such as lockdowns, where people were asked to stay at home, and travel restrictions, where restrictions were imposed on the distance and purpose of travel, meant online communication became the only source for many to socialise and maintain a sense of normalcy. Evidently, this resulted in a surge in Internet usage during the pandemic across the globe as people were working and learning from home (UNICEF et al., 2020).

Ofcom’s Life in Lockdown study (2020) found that, due to a lack of structure and routine during lockdown, most young people spent a large amount of time online alone in their rooms. Parents also found it hard to control their child’s screen time during this period, and up to half

of parents of children aged 5-15 reported relaxing some of the rules and supervision of online activity (Ofcom, 2021). Meanwhile, increased stressors experienced by parents and caregivers also had an impact on the level of protection and supervision young people received (Gill et al., 2022; Romanou & Belton, 2020). Although not all risks translate into actual harm, a combination of increased Internet use, social isolation, and reduced supervision can heighten young people's existing vulnerability to online sexual abuse (Romanou & Belton, 2020). For example, social isolation is likely to increase young people's outreach to new contacts and groups online, which can be exploited by abusers to groom and sexually abuse children, as most forms of online sexual abuse cannot occur without interactions with others online (Europol, 2020b; UNICEF et al., 2020).

With more adults isolated at home, the overall increase in online activity also lent itself to more opportunities to sexually abuse children online. The impact of COVID-19, such as isolation, stress, and the inability to access pre-existing support (e.g., face-to-face meetings with probation officers), was routinely cited by adults who contacted Stop It Now!, a helpline for adults in the UK and Ireland who are concerned about their own or someone else's sexual interest and behaviour in children (Naldrett et al., 2021). Between June and August 2020, the service was accessed 47% more compared to the first three months of the first UK lockdown (Stop It Now!, 2021), with many of these adults expressing worries about committing child sexual offences online or having already sexually abused children via the Internet during lockdown (Naldrett et al., 2021). Indeed, there has been a significant increase in different forms of OCSA, such as the detection and reporting of CSAM on both the open and dark web, livestreaming of CSA, online grooming, and activities in online forums and dark web relating to CSA since COVID-19 (Salter & Wong, 2021).

Europol (2020b) reported that the number of referrals for CSAM they received rose sharply from under 200,000 in January to over one million in March 2020, a time that coincided with the first EU Member States enforcing their respective lockdowns. Similarly, the number of

cases investigated by the IWF in 2021 exceeded the total amount the organisation has dealt with in the entire first 15 years of its existence (IWF 2022b). Compared to the pre-pandemic level in 2019, the IWF (2022b) found a 374% increase in “self-generated” materials, and six in ten reports involved 11–13-year-old girls having been groomed, coerced, or encouraged into abusive sexual activity via camera-enabled Internet-connected devices by someone who was not physically present when the sexual abuse footage was recorded (IWF, 2022a). Reports relating to CSAM involving primary school-aged children being coached to perform sexual acts online have also increased by 1,058% since the UK went into lockdown (IWF, 2023b). Furthermore, the number of actions taken against child sexual exploitation by online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were over 30 million and 9.7 million, respectively, since COVID-19 (Meta, 2023).

While many CSAM re-circulate online (C3P, 2021), new materials have also grown since the pandemic. For example, INHOPE highlighted in their Annual Report 2022 that 84% of the CSAM reports reviewed were never-before-seen material, depicting a new child victim of sexual abuse (INHOPE, 2023). The availability and ease of accessibility of CSAM online can be further demonstrated by the fact that 14% of adults in Britain aged 18–24 and 10% of people aged 25–34 have come into contact with websites showing CSAM on the open web without actively searching for them (Savanta, 2022).

The growth of OCSA during the pandemic is also supported by self-reported data from young people. For example, *Disrupting Harm*, which examined OCSA across 12 countries, including Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, found that up to 20% of children self-reported experiencing OCSA between December 2020 and April 2021 (UNICEF Innocenti, 2022). Furthermore, Augusti et al. (2021), who examined the experience of different forms of child abuse during COVID-19 among Norwegian adolescents, reported that OCSA was the only form of abuse (relative to psychological, physical, sexual, and witnessing domestic violence) that was most likely to be experienced for the first time with the onset of the

pandemic. Moreover, Europol identified that livestreaming of CSA has become more prevalent since COVID-19 and that the production is no longer limited to Southeast Asian countries and is actively taking place within the EU (Europol, 2020a). The evidence affirms that young people of different ages and countries of residence are being sexually abused online during the pandemic.

During this time, the commercialisation of OCSA also became more widespread. Although offenders are primarily driven by a desire to obtain more CSAM than financial gain, monetisation of CSAM is increasingly evident on both the open and dark web (Europol, 2020b). In addition to financially extorting children after luring them into sending sexually explicit materials (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023), child abuse pyramid (CAP) sites are on the rise. CAP is a new type of commercial site where users are incentivised to share their personal links to invite external people to the site, and the more invites they share, the more points individuals accrue to access CSAM content. The criminals benefit from the increased web traffic and additional income from offenders purchasing CSAM (INHOPE, 2023; IWF, 2023a).

Although the growing resources allowing the public, including young people, to report CSAM and technology in identifying the materials are likely to account for the record-high number of CSAM reported and identified (NCMEC, 2023b; IWF, 2023a), the growth of OCSA highlights that restrictions on movement, accelerated by the use of technology (also see Section 1.3), have displaced offline abusers into engaging with CSAM and networking with fellow offenders and escalated existing offending behaviours of online child sexual abusers.

1.13 Victim Vulnerability

A synthesis of the literature suggests that vulnerability factors for OCSA broadly fall into personal (e.g., socio-demographic, psychosocial), relational (e.g., family), online behaviour

(e.g., time spent on the Internet, online risky behaviour), and concurrent victimisation. However, examinations of the connections between these factors and OCSA made it apparent that, much like offline childhood trauma, the risk of online sexual harm is increased by a combination of recurring and/or co-occurring risk factors involving the young person, the family, and societal influences. Accordingly, risk factors cannot be examined in isolation, and the pursuit of understanding young people's vulnerability to OCSA requires a multifaceted approach, which will be illustrated below.

Age

Age as a risk factor for OCSA has been extensively examined, with mixed evidence produced. While some studies suggest that older adolescents are more at risk than their younger counterparts (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Montiel et al., 2016), others found no age difference (Madigan et al., 2018b; Mitchell et al., 2007c; Villacampa & Gómez, 2016; Wachs et al., 2016).

A key consideration when reviewing the effect of age is that the arbitrary cut-off point for age groups used in different studies makes reliable comparisons difficult (May-Chahal et al., 2018). Importantly, findings involving identified victims do not appear to support the suggestion that the risk of OCSA increases with age. For example, a Swedish study of police reports found that over 60% of the victims were aged between 11 and 14 (Shannon, 2008), as were all the victims interviewed in Katz's (2013) study. Similarly, victims interviewed by Whittle et al. (2013a) were groomed between the ages of 12 and 14 years, whereas those included in Kloess et al.'s (2017a) study were aged between 11 and 15 when the abuse took place. Recent insights based on larger data sets also indicate that young people of different ages are vulnerable to OCSA. For example, Disrupting Harm found no clear patterns by age and noted different patterns across countries instead (UNICEF Innocenti, 2022). Moreover, findings from the IWF revealed that the trend concerning age appears to evolve year by year. The IWF found that although young people aged between 11 and 13 accounted for 81% of

the self-generated CSAM in 2021 (IWF, 2022a), this dropped to 64% in 2022 (IWF, 2023a). In contrast, there was an increase of 360% in self-generated CSAM involving primary school-aged children in 2022 compared to the same period in 2020 (IWF, 2023b). While the sharp increase in OCSA involving young children may reflect their increased access to social media despite being under the age limit (Ofcom, 2022a), these findings suggest that other factors need to be considered when examining age as a potential risk factor.

Sexual curiosity has been suggested to increase older adolescents' risk of online grooming as they are more inclined to reciprocate or engage in online sexual activities (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Quayle et al., 2012b). Meanwhile, less developed sexual understanding, cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and digital skills can all independently increase younger children's risk of OCSA, as they are less able to identify potential risks and have the coping strategies in place when faced with online sexual harm (Livingstone et al., 2011). Since online sexual abuse can be more difficult to recognise than in-person sexual abuse, and reporting the abuse requires recognition (Manrai et al., 2021). It may be even harder for younger children to recognise the experience as exploitative and to comprehend the seriousness of the interactions. Thus, resulting in the under-reporting of younger children in OCSA.

Previously, increased use and less supervised Internet access have also been suggested to contribute to the increased risk of OCSA experienced by older adolescents. However, since younger youths, including those aged under 13, are spending more time online using their own devices and are using social media despite being under the age limit (Ofcom, 2022a; also see Section 1.1). Their increased time spent online, coupled with their less developed skills to protect themselves, could make them more vulnerable to OCSA than older youths. It is also important to note that, due to ethical considerations, most empirical studies examining OCSA exclude those aged 12 and under. Accordingly, the experience of those under the age of 11 is not well understood (May-Chahal et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is increasing evidence, especially from the grey literature, to indicate that younger children are experiencing OCSA.

For example, the EU Kids Online survey, which included young people aged between nine and 16, found that the highest increase in self-reported negative online experiences, including the experience of OSS, was among 9–10-year-olds (Smahel et al., 2020). A recent study also found that 13.4% of children aged between eight and 11 have experienced grooming tactics such as receiving compliments, gifts, questions about their clothing, requests for personal photos, and requests for face-to-face meetings from unknown adults online (Tintori et al., 2023). Although it cannot be established whether sexual abuse took place following these interactions, this finding suggests that primary school-aged children are also at risk of being groomed online.

Furthermore, the NCMEC (2016) reported that children as young as eight have been victims of threats of non-consensual sharing. A snapshot study conducted by the IWF over the period of a month between October and November 2021 also found that 12% of the self-generated CSAM involved a lone child aged 3-6, where the victims appeared to be coached by someone on the other side of the camera to engage in sexually abusive activities themselves or with other children (IWF, 2022a). Significantly, nearly half of the CSAM in this age group was Category A content, which is the most severe form of CSAM. Moreover, the IWF Annual Report 2022 indicated that 70% of the CSAM content of 7–10-year-olds was self-generated as opposed to the abuser being physically present in the room (IWF, 2023a). Within the UK, one in four online grooming offences recorded was against primary school children (NSPCC, 2023). It is therefore clear that young people under the age of 11 are also being sexually groomed and abused online, and the severity of CSAM content suggests that younger children may be particularly vulnerable to OCSA of greater severity.

Gender

Consistent with the gendered experience of sexual victimisation, being female is the most frequently identified risk factor for different forms of OCSA. For example, OSS studies

generally suggest that females are more likely than males to experience this form of victimisation (Baumgartner et al., 2010; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018b; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a; 2014a; Montiel et al., 2016; Sklenarova et al., 2018). This is consistent with the generally lower male grooming victim representation in qualitative studies (e.g., Kloess et al., 2017a: 17 females, 6 males; Whittle et al., 2013a: 6 girls, 2 boys).

However, interpretation of the mounting evidence indicating OCSA is a gendered experience must be careful because a closer examination of these studies reveals a less straightforward relationship between gender and online sexual victimisation. For example, although Montiel et al. (2016) found that girls are more likely to be groomed by adults online (24.2% vs 9.4%, $p < .05$), there was no gender difference in other forms of OCSA perpetrated by adults and/or peers. Similarly, when the age of the perpetrator was unspecified, Burén and Lunde (2018) found that while girls were significantly more likely to be asked and pressured to send sexually explicit materials of self, nearly a third of the boys in the sample also reported these experiences. A large-scale Portuguese study also found that while young males were significantly more likely to have non-consensually shared private sexual materials with others, gender differences were not observed for victimisation through non-consensual sharing (Barroso et al., 2021).

The gender difference where girls are more likely than boys to be victims of OCSA appears to be less evident in non-Western countries (Chang et al., 2016). This is also supported by Wachs et al. (2016), who compared the experience of online grooming between Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and Thailand, and found that the gender difference was only observed in the Western sample and was not noted among Southeast Asian adolescents. The authors also found that Asian adolescents were more likely to experience online grooming than Western adolescents. Since the examined Western countries are high-income countries, it seems plausible that socioeconomic status could be another contributing risk factor for

OCSA. Indeed, *Disrupting Harm* found that both girls and boys are experiencing OCSA in fairly equal proportions across the 12 lower- and middle-income countries it examined (UNICEF Innocenti, 2022).

Globally, 48% of young adult males reported they had experienced some form of OCSA perpetrated by either peers or adults before the age of 18 (Economist Impact, 2023a). CSAM depicting boys has also increased by 137% from 2021 to 2022 (IWF, 2023a). Previously, a meta-analysis also concluded that boys were at greater risk of experiencing OSS and that gender was the only variable, relative to age and geographical location, to significantly moderate the prevalence of this form of victimisation (Madigan et al., 2018b). The presenting evidence therefore contests that young males are less vulnerable to OCSA and highlights the need to consider other factors in understanding this form of childhood trauma.

Indeed, while boys and girls both engage in online risky sexual behaviour, the related contexts, meanings, and intentions appear to differ, which may explain the gender asymmetry observed in online grooming victimisation despite both boys and girls experience OSS. Using the exchange of sexually explicit content with peers as an example, studies have generally found girls are more likely to be asked or pressured to send, whereas boys are more likely to ask for these materials (Burén & Lunde, 2018; Cooper et al., 2016; Ringrose, Regehr, & Whitehead, 2021c; Villacampa, 2017). This contrasting experience, whereby girls, in keeping with the passive role attributed to females, are more likely to produce sexual content for consumption by boys who make the request, echoes the gender sexual norms positioning males as sexually assertive and females as sexually submissive (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). In support, Villacampa and Gómez (2017) reported that despite boys being equally likely to be approached by adults inciting sexual chat online, girls were significantly more likely to engage in these conversations. This may explain the higher proportion of girls falling victim to grooming, as it is the engagement with online sexual approaches that increases one's susceptibility to online grooming resulting in sexual abuse (Wolak et al., 2010).

Conversely, the pressure and expectations assigned by the gender sexual norm can also influence how young males perceive and experience online sexual activities. To illustrate, a Dutch national survey showed that although the levels of receiving online sexual requests from adults were similar for male and female adolescents, the proportion of males who regarded these requests as pleasant was much higher (Kerstens & Stol, 2014). Jonsson et al. (2019) also found that young males were more likely to have engaged in online sexual activities with people (adults or peers) they met online, with the majority viewing the experience as positive. Closely related, research suggests that the practice of sending and receiving sexually explicit materials derives more satisfaction for young males than females (Burèn & Lunde, 2018; Cooper et al., 2016; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). These findings suggest that the gender discourse positing males as 'sexually wanting' may increase their receptiveness to online sexual activities, which in turn increases their vulnerability to OCSA.

In support, the fact that male victims are often deceived by offenders disguising as females (NCMEC, 2022; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016) suggests that this grooming tactic appears to be effective in obscuring young males' ability to recognise sexually exploitive encounters online. Furthermore, studies that have examined commercial sexual exploitation tend to find young males self-reporting selling sex for pleasure (Fredlund et al., 2018) and are less likely to view sex in exchange for money as exploitation (Edinburgh et al., 2015; ECPAT International, 2021). The evidence therefore suggests that a willingness to engage in online risky sexual behaviour can heighten males' risk of OCSA.

The exploitation of gender sexual norms can be further evidenced by the fact that interactions with male grooming victims were often found to be more sexually direct and intense in comparison to female victims (Aitken et al., 2018; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). Since the speed and intensity of sexual content are usually introduced in response to the young person's acceptance of the suggested sexual activity, the direct sexual approach used to groom males suggests that their receptiveness to online sexual

activities could leave them experiencing more intense sexual abuse in a shorter period of time. Supporting this, the IWF (2022a) found that Category A CSAM content was disproportionately higher for male victims (53%, compared to 17% of females), despite there being only 1% male victim representation. The evidence thus suggests that young males could be subjected to more severe OCSA.

Overall, the evidence indicates that young males are no less vulnerable to OCSA. However, since online sexual requests are usually defined as unwanted, males may not relate to these experiences when they are less likely to find online sexual advances to be unwelcoming or upsetting (Barbovschi et al., 2021). Similarly, the sexually active stance imposed by gender sexual norms can contribute to males being less likely to regard online sexual interactions as problematic, especially if these interactions are masked as those engaged with age-appropriate females. Consequently, this can result in the underreporting of OCSA by males. Paradoxically, heterosexual masculinity is also a significant barrier for males to disclose sexual abuse because the experience of sexual victimisation does not align with the idea of masculinity (Easton et al., 2014; Hunehall Berndtsson, 2022; Sivagurunathan et al., 2019). The harmful impact of traditional gender norms is evident across different cultures and has been identified to increase boys' risk of CSA and poor help-seeking behaviour (Nodzinski & Davis, 2023). For example, in countries where same-sex sexual contact is illegal, boys disclosing sexual abuse by a male offender could face prosecution even as a victim (ECPAT International, 2022a).

Spenard and Cash (2022) found that gender stereotypes also extended to adults' ability to recognise grooming behaviours. It was found that individuals were better at recognising grooming involving a female than a male child, and when the abuser and the victim are of opposite sexes compared to a same-sex adult-child dyad. The misperception that CSA is a gendered experience can also obscure professionals' ability to recognise and adequately respond to males' experiences of sexual abuse, which in turn discourages disclosure (ECPAT

International, 2021; Moss et al., 2023). In parallel, victims of CSA have cited the view that girls are more negatively impacted by sexual abuse than boys can prevent males from disclosing the experience (ECPAT International, 2022a). Furthermore, the pervasive belief that males have more agency in the choices they make in sexual encounters can fuel the assumption that when subjected to sexual abuse, they are somehow willing participants. Therefore, perpetuating the gender-based stigmatisation for male victims when accessing services for support (Kavenagh et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Drawing a conclusion, this section seeks to highlight how gender-specific attitudes and behaviours relating to online sexual activity and sexual abuse can increase male and female vulnerability to OCSA and response to their victimisations in different ways. Although gender is one of the most examined risk factors for OCSA and females are usually found to be more vulnerable than males. The presented evidence argues that the underrepresentation of male victims is likely to be a result of the harmful gender norms as they influence how male (O)CSA is experienced, recognised, and perceived on both individual and societal levels (Josenhans et al., 2020). Consequently, the underdeveloped knowledge of male experience of OCSA can limit the understanding and prevention efforts, especially given they can be harder to identify.

Sexual and Gender Identity

Existing evidence suggests that young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), as well as those who are unsure about their sexual orientation, are more likely to experience online sexual harm and abuse than heterosexual young people (Economist Impact, 2023a; Mitchell et al., 2014a; Rice et al., 2015; Vaswani et al., 2022). Meanwhile, LGBTQ youths also engage in more online risky sexual behaviours that can increase their risks of online grooming and other forms of OCSA. For example, studies suggest that this group is more likely to use the Internet to seek sexual and romantic partners, exchange self-produced sexually explicit materials, look for information relating to sexual

health or sexuality, and speak to others in the community using private messages to avoid homophobia, stigma, and peer rejection that may otherwise result from face-to-face interactions (Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014b; Rice et al., 2015; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Stonewell, 2017; van Ouytsel et al., 2019).

Moreover, non-binary and non-heterosexual young people are more likely to appraise online friendships as better than in-person friendships in providing emotional support (Ybarra et al., 2015) and regard online risky sexual practices such as receiving sexual content as positive (Economist Impact, 2023a). These perceptions can thus lower their awareness of the potential sexual harm associated with these risky behaviours, especially if they believe it would be safer to explore sexuality online. As illustrated earlier, offenders often act as supportive figures and actively study the vulnerability of the young person to meet their emotional and possibly sexual needs (also see Section 1.11). Therefore, abusers may exploit LGBTQ youths' tendency to engage with people online to mask the purpose of the interactions and the nature of the sexual abuse, placing this group of youth at greater risk of OCSA.

A closer examination of the relationship between sexuality and engagement in online risky sexual behaviour is not straightforward. Ybarra and Mitchell (2016) found that although the rates of online sexual conversation and sending sexual pictures were higher for LGB youths compared to heterosexual youths, the increased likelihood of meeting sexual partners online was only observed between non-heterosexual and heterosexual males, and non-heterosexual females were not found to be more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to look for sexual partners online. Similarly, differences between sexualities within the same gender have been found in young people's offline sexual behaviours (Ybarra et al., 2016). Together, the findings suggest that the sexual behaviours of non-heterosexual youths are also influenced by the gender sexual norms.

Previous studies suggested that non-heterosexual youths report more psychiatric symptoms and have lower self-esteem when compared to heterosexual youths (Priebe & Svedin, 2012). Meanwhile, psychosocial functioning such as poorer mental health, lower self-esteem, and a perceived lack of social support can moderate the experience of online sexual victimisation (Mitchell et al., 2014a; Ybarra et al., 2004; 2015). Furthermore, methodological differences should be considered when evaluating the role of sexual and gender identity as risk factors for OCSA. To illustrate the problem, Rice et al.'s (2015) finding that bisexual youth reported higher rates of being approached online for sex was based on comparisons drawn between the three groups of heterosexuals, gay/lesbian/questioning, and bisexual young people. In comparison, Mitchell et al.'s (2014a) findings that lesbian/queer girls were most at risk of OSS were drawn from a nuanced comparison comprising both sexual orientation and gender identity. The different sexuality groups examined and compared by researchers therefore illustrate the difficulty to ascertain whether certain gender or sexuality groups may be more vulnerable to OCSA than others. Importantly, studies have often combined gender and sexual minority youths into one group, despite gender and sexual identity are distinct concepts (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016). Thus, research will benefit from examining gender and sexual identity separately to understand the unique risks the different groups may face online.

Online Behaviour

Online behaviours such as frequent use of the Internet, online risky behaviours (e.g., posting and sharing personal information online, interacting with strangers online, having unknown people in friends list), and online risky sexual behaviour (e.g., exchange of self-produced sexually explicit materials) have all been independently associated with online sexual victimisation (Aljuboori et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2023; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix., 2018b; Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2001; 2008). However, it should be noted that online risky behaviour and risks encountered by young people online do not

always result in harm (Stoilova et al., 2021). Studies suggest that young people generally do not deem unwanted online sexual encounters as upsetting or harmful (Gill et al., 2022; Livingstone et al., 2011). Instead, young people reported that they learn how to navigate the online space following exposure to online hazards and engage in digital safety skills, such as using the block or report function to stop further unwanted requests or changing the social media account settings to private to prevent strangers from being able to contact or send inappropriate content (Gill et al., 2022; Livingstone et al., 2011; Ofcom, 2023). Despite these safety measures, it is clear that young people still fall victim to OCSA.

Focus groups with female adolescents in the Netherlands illustrated that although the majority would screen the profile of an online stranger and evaluate their risks by using content and language cues, more than half overestimated their ability to assess whether the online stranger is a peer or an adult with possible sexual intentions (Groenestein et al., 2018). Similarly, interviews with online grooming victims revealed that being aware that it was risky to befriend strangers online did not deter young people from meeting the abuser offline (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Furthermore, some studies showed that most young people who had engaged in online sexual activities with people they met online, including adults and those engaged with peers under pressure, did not view the sexual interactions as exploitative (Jonsson et al., 2014; 2019; Sklenarova et al., 2018). Consistent with this, online grooming victims often felt able to engage in sexual activities at their own pace, where some might proactively initiate sex with the perpetrator because they believed they had control over their sexual agency (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Yet, young people often feel unable to disclose the abuse when they acknowledge that they have been victimised, as this involves telling others they have been communicating with strangers online, a behaviour they thought others would disprove of (Gill et al., 2022; Quayle et al., 2012b). This predicament places young people who have already been abused at greater risk of further sexual harm.

Meanwhile, there is a plethora of evidence to suggest online risky sexual behaviour and online sexual victimisation are associated with behavioural (e.g., offline risky sexual behaviour), psychological (e.g., pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities), and social factors (e.g., relationships with parents), and that the effect of these factors is also moderated by age (Gassó et al., 2019; Jonsson et al., 2019; Klettke et al., 2014; Mori et al., 2019). Furthermore, offline childhood adversity has been associated with engagement in online sexual behaviours and online sexual victimisation (Choi et al., 2023; Jonsson et al., 2019; Noll et al., 2013; 2021). In line with this, Whittle et al. (2014a) suggested that online grooming victims with different vulnerability profiles (i.e., online behavioural risks, multiple long-term risks, and trigger events) responded to the abuser for different reasons. Overall, these results indicate that online sexual risks and harms are also intertwined with pre-existing offline risks and online behaviours in increasing young people's risk of OCSA.

Family

With regard to the role of family as a protective factor, different studies have reported familial relationship problems such as high conflict with parents, poor emotional bonds with carers, low parental supervision, and having a single parent are associated with different forms of OCSA (Barroso et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2007; Ybarra et al., 2007). In line with this, researchers have identified relationship instability within the family, including parental separation, being in a reconstituted family, and turbulent family relations, as precipitating factors for the onset of online grooming and subsequent sexual abuse (Joleby, Landström, Lunde et al., 2021a). In support, online grooming victims reported that the deceptively warm and caring interactions prompted them to interact with the offenders in the first place as it provided a stark contrast to their difficult family life (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; ECPAT International, 2022a; Kloess et al., 2017a; Whittle et al., 2014a).

Nevertheless, Whittle et al. (2014a) found that although parental protection was a key factor, situational vulnerability such as a temporary loss of this protection (e.g., a family member passing away or parents consumed with work or illness) could lower a young person's resilience to online grooming. A recent study by Aljuboori et al. (2021) also revealed that high perceived family support only acted as a protective factor among female adolescents. This suggests that protective factors may not interact in the same manner for males and females in mitigating OCSA. Although a positive family environment and friends' support have been found to buffer the effect of individual risk factors, such as emotional problems and sensation seeking, in reducing exposure to online harm (Kvardova et al., 2021), the evidence presented in this section illustrates that protective factors are not static, and that fluctuations in protection levels can increase a young person's risk of OCSA. Crucially, an ongoing difficult home environment and poor parental support may be indicative of other adversities in the young person's life.

Poly-Victimisation

There is a large body of literature suggesting that CSA is associated with different types of childhood adversity (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020; Källström et al., 2020). This well-documented link has also been replicated in the literature of OCSA, where victims of different forms of OCSA, including online grooming, OSS, and victimisation through non-consensual sharing, are found to be poly-victimised across different types of offline childhood adversity (Barroso et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2023; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Jonsson et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018b; Ybarra et al., 2007). The evidence on concurrent offline childhood trauma and OCSA therefore suggests that OCSA is intertwined with offline victimisation.

Furthermore, cyberbullying has been found to increase the likelihood of OCSA (Dahlqvist et al., 2022; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018b; Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Wachs et al., 2016). The significance of cumulative trauma in

increasing young people's risk of OCSA can be further demonstrated by Montiel et al. (2016), who found that 35% of the young people in their study have been poly-victimised online, and 88% experienced both sexual and non-sexual online victimisations. The co-occurrence of online and offline victimisation suggests that the experience of one adversity can increase the risk of another in both online and offline contexts.

Psychosocial Well-Being

Grooming victims have often described the feeling of something "missing" (Quayle et al., 2012b) or being at "a low point" (Whittle et al., 2014a) preceding the onset of online grooming. Similarly, psychosocial vulnerabilities such as isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem, and poor psychological health have also been cited by victims in promoting engagement with the abuser when they were approached online (ECPAT International., 2022a; Joleby et al., 2020; 2021a; Kloess et al., 2017a; Whittle et al., 2014a). However, while empirical studies have reported associations between depression symptoms and OCSA (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018a; Chang et al., 2016; Guerra et al., 2022; Ståhl & Denhag, 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018), establishing the role of psychosocial well-being as a risk factor is difficult for several reasons. First, the nature of cross-sectional studies means the direction of these relationships remains unclear, as it cannot be ascertained whether the depression symptoms increase the risk of OCSA or if they are consequential to the experience of OCSA. Second, the relationship between OCSA and poorer psychological functioning has been shown to be gender-specific, where the effect is more marked among females (Guerra et al., 2022; Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018). Third, as discussed in the section above, childhood adversity can also increase the risk of OCSA. Thus, taking into account the extensive evidence on the negative impact of offline childhood adversity on psychosocial well-being in both the short and long term (Arnou, 2004; Bulik et al., 2001; Green et al., 2010; Shonkoff et al., 2012), it would seem plausible that the experience of other childhood adversity can compound the effect of OCSA. This is supported by Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor (2007d),

who found that among the 73% of their sample who experienced comorbid online and offline victimisation, all types of online and offline victimisation were related to depression symptomology. More recently, Reer et al. (2021) also reported that online risky sexual behaviour (i.e., willingness to engage in the practice of sending sexually explicit materials), online sexual victimisation, and psychosocial well-being were inter-correlated.

Summary

Overall, a review of the different factors in increasing young people's vulnerability to OCSA demonstrates that socio-demographic factors such as age, sexual and gender identity, and family circumstances are closely related and influence young people's engagement in online risky (sexual) behaviour. The literature also identifies that pre-existing vulnerability, such as mental health difficulties and offline childhood adversity, can prompt young people to seek comfort in the online space. and it is engagement in online risky behaviour that can increase young people's vulnerability to online sexual harm. Moreover, researchers who have developed young people's online risk profiles demonstrated that the degree of risk taking in online and offline behaviours both contribute to the risk of online sexual victimisation (DeMarco et al., 2017). These findings highlight that the dynamic interplay of the offline and online environments must be concurrently considered, as it is the engagement in online risky behaviours that can increase young people's vulnerability to OCSA. This raises the importance of recognising the complex layers of influences and the accumulation of risk factors over time as contributors to a young person's vulnerability. At the same time, the evidence also highlights that the potential moderating effect of gender and sexual identity cannot be overlooked and requires further examination.

However, since the presented evidence was gathered from studies examining different forms of OCSA, the interpretation of these findings ought to be cautious because there may be different risk factors associated with different forms of OCSA. This is supported by de Santisteban and Gámez-Guadix (2018b), who found that young people who reported sexual

interactions with adults presented a different risk profile than those reporting OSS. This underscores the relevance of distinguishing between OSS and sexual interactions, a distinction that has not always been made in existing research. Moreover, considering that OCSA can be perpetrated by peers and/or adults in different contexts (e.g., online vs. offline acquaintance, intimate partner, friend, etc.) (Ehman & Gross, 2019; Finkelhor et al., 2022), it is possible that there could be distinctive risks associated with each type of OCSA depending on the victim-perpetrator dynamics. While this is not currently well understood, a rare study that examined offender characteristics found that the offender's age and gender had a different effect on male and female victims' depression symptoms (Guerra et al., 2021). To further add to the issue, the varying definitions used to define different types of OCSA by researchers are also problematic, and the methodological issues in the study of OCSA are acknowledged and were also addressed in the design of this research (see Chapter 2).

The different factors related to OCSA indicate that no one factor appears to be more important than another in increasing a young person's vulnerability to this form of abuse and highlight the challenge of predicting the risk of OCSA. While identifying risk factors is important to protect at-risk individuals from experiencing OCSA, there is also a great urgency to fill the gap in understanding the long-term psychosocial impact of OCSA.

1.14 Impact of OCSA

It is important to note that OCSA rarely occurs in isolation, and young people often experience different forms of OCSA as part of the abuse. To illustrate, victims of threats of non-consensual sharing are often manipulated or pressured into sharing the sexually explicit materials in the first place, who are then subjected to further sexual abuse to prevent these materials from being distributed (Wolak et al., 2018). As outlined in Section 1.11, the experience of online grooming relies heavily on the manipulation of trust and repeated sexual victimisation in different forms and entails both psychological and sexual exploitation of a young person.

Despite OCSA being regarded as a growing public and clinical concern, professionals' understanding of this form of abuse and its associated risks remains poor (El-Asam et al., 2021). UK and Canadian research involving practitioners working with young people also underscored a lack of training and confidence in working with OCSA cases (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Quayle et al., 2023). Consequently, this narrow understanding can result in the misconception that OCSA is less serious and less impactful in comparison to CSA experienced in person and is therefore deemed a lower clinical priority by services (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). The negative implications of these views are also evidenced by the lack of referral pathways or interventions tailored to the needs of those affected by OCSA, resulting in staff using similar approaches regardless of whether technology was involved in these abusive experiences (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Lindenbach et al., 2022; Quayle et al., 2023).

At the time this research was developed, few studies had specifically examined the impact of OCSA. Nevertheless, a UK study comparing the impact of online and offline-only CSA revealed that psychological difficulties, including self-harm and suicidality, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, were comparable between the two groups (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Since then, Joleb, Lunde, Landström et al. (2021b) have found that in addition to self-harming and/or suicidal behaviour and poor mental health, victims of OCSA also experienced sleep problems and a range of interpersonal difficulties, including withdrawal, trust issues, and difficulties at school. Victims of online grooming also commonly blamed themselves for 'allowing' the abuse to happen and were fearful that the sexually explicit materials involved in the abuse would be circulated or viewed by others in the future (ECPAT International & WeProtect Global Alliance, 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2020).

Links between poorer psychosocial well-being and OCSA have also been found in quantitative studies. For example, Mitchell et al. (2007a) found that young people who were sexually

solicited online were almost two times more likely to report depression symptomology and had higher substance use compared to those who had experienced other forms of online victimisation. Similarly, a Swedish study reported that girls who had experienced unwanted OSS were twice more likely to report depression symptoms compared to non-victimised girls (Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018). Increased depression and anxiety symptoms and self-injurious behaviours have also been found to be significantly associated with the experience of OCSA (Guerra et al., 2022; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021). Moreover, a rare longitudinal study found that young people who had experienced OSS or online sexualised interactions with adults reported poorer physical health, psychological well-being, and peer relationships than those who had not had these experiences (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022). The elevated risk of poorer health outcomes associated with OCSA therefore underscores its detrimental ramifications. Yet, research examining the impact of OCSA remains scant, and the long-term impact of OCSA in adulthood has received no attention to date.

1.15 Disclosure of OCSA

Another area that is closely related to the impact of OCSA is the disclosure of the abuse. The well-developed literature on CSA disclosure suggests that disclosure and reactions received to disclosure can have significant implications for individuals' well-being in both the short and long term (Broman-Fulks et al., 2007; McElvaney, 2015; McElvaney et al., 2020; McTavish et al., 2019; Palo & Gilbert, 2015; Ullman, 2003). Yet, research relating to both the prevalence and experience of OCSA disclosure remains significantly underdeveloped. Therefore, research on this aspect of OCSA is urgently needed to understand its impact on the abused person's well-being.

While the experience of OCSA is deeply personal, support from others is pivotal in recovery from abuse, and family (where abuse is not perpetrated by a family member) and social support can ameliorate the impact of OCSA (ECPAT International, 2022a; Hamilton-

Giachritsis et al., 2017). Yet, a large volume of studies on CSA demonstrates that social and cultural responses to sexual abuse have important influences on the decision to disclose as well as how the person is received by others when this happens (Alaggia et al., 2019; Kennedy & Prock, 2018; Lev-Wiesel & First, 2018). The perceived and actual reactions to disclosure received by the abused person can have important implications for how they process their experiences and post-abuse coping (Broman-Fulks et al., 2007; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Ullman, 2003; Ullman & Filipas, 2005a). This illustrates that the interactions between individual, family, community, and cultural contexts can all influence the decision to disclose and the experience of disclosure. This highlights the utility of using an ecological approach to understand the complex relationship between individual and external factors in understanding the experience and impacts of OCSA.

1.16 An Ecological Approach to Understand the Vulnerability and Impact Of OCSA

While several demographic, psychological, and behavioural variables have been identified as increasing young people's vulnerability to OCSA, the presented evidence highlights that the inconclusive results relating to individual factors are likely because they interact with each other in increasing a young person's risk of online sexual harm. The influence of gender sexual norms on young people's online sexual behaviour also highlights societal influences on young people's online sexual behaviour. Yet, existing research has largely focused on risk and protective factors at an individual and interpersonal levels. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model, where risk and protective factors at individual, family, community, and society levels are viewed as all involved in increasing a young person's risk of abuse, would be fitting to understand how risks accumulate and interact to contribute to vulnerability to OCSA. The model, which includes social, economic, and political structures, reflects the dynamic and interactive relationships within and among these 'ecosystems' in which children are embedded in. This model assumes that individuals' behaviours can only be understood by taking into account factors at the microsystem (involving family peers, school), mesosystem

(relationships between systems), exosystem (systems indirectly related to a child), and macrosystem (concerning beliefs, values, laws of society, and culture) levels. In essence, Bronfenbrenner's division of ecological space can be visualised as concentric circles of context set in an overarching system of time (chronosystem). The model thus allows for simultaneous consideration of 1) the child and their family context; 2) the larger social systems of influence within which the family is embedded; and 3) the overarching cultural values and belief systems. The interlinked effect of the different systems is therefore fitting to understand the different factors that increase a young person's risk of OCSA, and how these factors can attenuate or compound the impact of the abuse.

1.17 Aims of the Programme of Research

Acknowledging the various gaps identified in the literature outlined in this Chapter, the overall objective of this research programme was to advance knowledge about the experience and impacts of OCSA. The specific aims were:

- 1) To examine how online relationships were formed between young people and online acquaintances in order to identify similarities and differences between developmentally normative and exploitative online interactions.
- 2) To quantify components of the online grooming process and factors predicting the frequency of online grooming experience, including those resulting in sexual abuse.
- 3) To examine the long-term impact of OCSA and whether this differs between OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers, and the impact of disclosure.

The first aim was addressed by Study 1, which used a qualitative methodology (focus groups) to retrospectively examine young adults' online encounters with online acquaintances. This specifically focused on examining the experiences of coercion, receiving flattery, and sexual

requests, as these experiences are indicative of online grooming. A detailed rationale for the study, the related results, and their implications are presented in Chapter 3.

Study 2 addressed the second aim. It used an online questionnaire to retrospectively examine the prevalence of different forms of OCSA and specific online grooming tactics. It also investigated the influence of peer norms, the experience of online grooming tactics, verbal sexual coercion, and different forms of OCSA (e.g., unwanted online sexual exposure) in predicting the frequency of different aspects of online grooming, which included the experience of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. A detailed rationale for the study, the related results, and their implications are presented in Chapter 4.

Study 3 addressed the third aim. It used an online questionnaire to examine the long-term impact of OCSA on victims and the co-occurrence of offline childhood adversity. It also investigated whether the impact of victimisation differed between OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers. The study also explored the prevalence of disclosure, reactions to disclosure, and its impact on psychosocial well-being in adulthood. A detailed rationale for the study, the related results, and their implications are presented in Chapter 5.

Methodological issues in existing research on OCSA were also considered, and how they were addressed in the three studies is outlined in Chapter 2.

Using an ecological approach, this programme of research aimed to develop a greater understanding of the influence of social contexts and factors (e.g., gendered norms, peer norms) on young people's vulnerability to OCSA, the ways in which it is experienced, and its impacts. This adds knowledge beyond the current focus on demographic characteristics (e.g., gender) and online behaviours as risk factors for OCSA. It also addressed the influence of offline childhood adversities, societal stigma, and responses to OCSA disclosure on the impact of OCSA, all of which are under-researched aspects of this form of child abuse. As social

factors are dynamic and can be addressed at different levels, this programme of research aimed to contribute to the study of OCSA beyond examining demographic and abuse characteristics. Building on the extant literature on CSA, this research emphasised the role of the larger community in prevention and response to OCSA, as well as mitigating the factors increasing vulnerability and creating a safe and supportive environment for disclosure and recovery.

At the same time, the use of a non-clinical young adult sample aimed to address the lack of quantitative knowledge on the experience of online grooming resulting in sexual abuse, as research at the time was predominately qualitative and relied on the use of identified victims. Importantly, a larger sample size yielded by the use of a non-clinical sample can expand knowledge of OCSA involving identified victims to provide more in-depth knowledge on the prevalence of this form of abuse and to quantify the online grooming process. Moreover, it allowed comparisons to be drawn between individuals who have and have not experienced OCSA to investigate the long-term impact of this form of abuse and to examine OCSA disclosure, both of which cannot be achieved using identified victims. Furthermore, acknowledging the growing evidence on the experience of different forms of OCSA identified by individual examination of the different forms of online sexual victimisation, this research overcomes this limitation by concurrently examining different forms of OCSA to explore whether these experiences are linked, as suggested by the well-developed knowledge on sexual re-victimisation in the CSA literature.

CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research programme was to advance knowledge of OCSA by examining the pre, peri, and post experiences of OCSA. Achieving this requires an understanding of the initiation and development of online exploitative relationships, the scope of the problem, factors that increase vulnerability to online grooming, and the aftermath of OCSA in terms of disclosure and the long-term psychosocial implications of the abuse. Yet, the identified knowledge gaps in this research area meant that neither the single use of quantitative nor qualitative methods could adequately address these questions. Therefore, a mixed methods approach comprising focus groups and online questionnaires was considered most appropriate for answering these questions.

2.1 What Is a Mixed Methods Approach

Qualitative methods are increasingly used in mental health and social research in the form of mixed methods designs that focus on collecting, analysing, and merging both quantitative and qualitative data into one or more studies (Palinkas, 2014). The central premise of these designs is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of the research issue than either approach alone and draws upon the strengths and perspectives of each method (Creswell et al., 2011; Smajic et al., 2022). In such designs, qualitative methods are used to explore and obtain depth of understanding, while quantitative methods are used to look at the relationships between variables, test and confirm hypotheses, and obtain breadth of understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Östlund et al., 2011; Palinkas et al., 2011). Based on these premises, a mixed methods approach was considered the most appropriate for the aim of this research programme, and the rationale for doing so is outlined below.

2.2 Rationale for Using a Mixed Methods Approach

Although qualitative methods are distinguished from quantitative methods by features of design (e.g., reliance on small samples, purposive sampling, emphasis on naturalistic inquiry, and an iterative approach), data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups, participant observation), and data analysis (e.g., grounded theory, phenomenology, holistic perspective), they share scientific rigour with quantitative methods (Palinkas, 2014). Qualitative methods are often found to be especially useful during the initial stages of research because they enable researchers to acquire some understanding of the issue (i.e., to obtain 'pilot' data) when there is too little previous research or an absence of theory to allow the identification of hypotheses to be tested (Palinkas, 2014).

Whilst OSS studies are predominately quantitative in nature and have focused on establishing prevalence and identifying risk factors, early studies of online grooming were almost exclusively qualitative because of the difficulty of accessing large sample sizes. Although both areas were crucial in contributing to knowledge of OCSA, receiving sexual requests does not imply subsequent compliance, a position firmly taken by this research programme. In support, research suggests that young people are generally able to keep themselves safe online despite the sexual approaches made by adults (Bryce & Fraser, 2014). As such, the relationship between the experience of being approached and subsequent interactions that result in sexual activities with adults was not understood. Meanwhile, the intimacy-seeking groomers typology identified by the EOGP (see Section 1.9), which resonates most with the conceptualisation of grooming, highlights that sexual activities are often introduced after rapport is built.

The similarities between the development of online exploitative and normative relationships can thus make it difficult for young people to recognise potentially exploitative online encounters, leaving them at risk of being groomed and sexually abused. Meanwhile,

knowledge of how young people develop online relationships with peers who are met online was also underdeveloped. Therefore, insights into any potential differences between young people's online interactions with online acquainted adults and online acquainted peers can be used to inform education to improve young people's ability to recognise online exploitative behaviours and, in turn, prevent OCSA. A salient strength of qualitative research is its focus on the context and meaning of human experiences for the purpose of inductive research (Creswell et al., 2011). Since online (exploitative) relationships cannot occur without interactions, Study 1 addressed this knowledge gap by using a qualitative design to explore these experiences. The naturalistic inquiry emphasised by qualitative research designs minimises researchers' manipulation of the study setting and places fewer prior constraints on the research outcomes.

In contrast, quantitative research is a mode of inquiry often used to test theories or hypotheses, gather descriptive information, or examine relationships among variables (Greiffenhagen et al., 2011). These data can help establish (probable) cause and effect, yield efficient data collection procedures, create the possibility of replication and generalisation to a population, facilitate the comparison of groups, or provide insight into the occurrence of experiences (Creswell et al., 2011). Relating to Study 2, owing to the nature of qualitative research in online grooming, existing findings of the online grooming process are largely descriptive, and the link between characteristics of online grooming, such as grooming tactics, and the outcome of grooming has yet to be empirically tested. Furthermore, the examination of the role of peer norms would also require a large data set that cannot be achieved through a qualitative design. Therefore, the examination of the prevalence of online grooming resulting in sexual abuse and predictors of the online grooming experience would require a quantitative approach.

Concerning Study 3, the very limited evidence on OCSA disclosure suggests that disclosure of this form of abuse is low (Katz et al., 2021). The prevalence, however, is not known due to

the qualitative nature of existing studies (Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021). Therefore, a priority of Study 3 was to examine the prevalence of OCSA disclosure to fill this notable gap in the literature. Inferences about the relationship between OCSA disclosure and psychosocial well-being can be drawn from the extant quantitative and qualitative research on CSA that has examined the rates of disclosure, reactions to disclosure, and their effects on psychosocial well-being (Alaggia et al., 2019; Hébert et al., 2009; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2018; Ullman, 2003). However, examination of OCSA disclosure prevalence, the disclosure experience, and its relationships with psychosocial well-being necessitates a quantitative approach.

The utility of using a mixed methods approach in studying OCSA has been demonstrated by the important contributions made by the few studies combining qualitative and quantitative designs. For example, Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2020) triangulated qualitative and quantitative data to explore the impact and response to online and offline-only CSA. The findings of the study challenged the misconception that OCSA is a less serious form of CSA compared to that experienced offline and provided evidence for the additional impacts that are specific to OCSA. Using a different mixed methods approach, Joleby et al. (2021a) also concluded that OCSA should not be treated as less severe than offline CSA and identified vulnerability factors for OCSA through reviewing court verdicts on legal cases of OCSA in Sweden. Similarly, another mixed methods approach study conducted by Joleby et al. (2021b) highlighted that the use of coercion and pressure involving real victims was more frequent compared to findings derived from the analysis of transcripts involving decoy victims. The implications of these studies therefore underscore the benefits of combining the two research methods to advance knowledge on this unresearched topic.

In summary, the use of qualitative methods in Study 1 facilitated a deeper understanding of young people's experiences of online relationship formation with adults and peers, as well as harmful online sexual experiences. This provided a guiding framework for the development of

Study 2 and Study 3. Meanwhile, the quantitative methods used in Study 2 and Study 3 allowed the examination of different forms of OCSA, variables predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, the long-term impact of OCSA, as well as the impact of disclosure on PTSD symptom severity in adulthood. Therefore, a mixed methods approach was a practical and effective means of addressing the complexity and multifactorial nature of OCSA in this research.

2.3 Rationale for Using Focus Groups in Study 1

Some researchers have challenged the use of groups as inappropriate for researching sensitive issues and advocate for one-to-one interviews based on their relative intimacy, confidentiality, and lack of perceived pressure (Greenbaum, 1998; Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999; Sherriff et al., 2014; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Others claim that the interpersonal dynamics within a group can provide a supportive forum and enable participants to gain mutual comfort and reassurance (Seymour et al., 2002; Ybarra et al., 2014). Given that sexual victimisation is often stigmatised, which impacts disclosure, similarities in participants' experiences can reduce feelings of isolation and empower a greater sense of support. It is therefore possible that focus groups could be beneficial rather than harmful, an effect that would not be possible to achieve through individual interviews.

Indeed, studies comparing findings from focus groups and individual interviews found that focus groups can have the advantage of generating more sensitive and personal disclosures, with some sensitive themes only occurring in the focus group context (Guest et al., 2017; Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999; Oliveira, 2011). Focus groups also promote a more egalitarian form of discussion as the controlling influence of the researcher is diluted through group interaction (Hyde et al., 2005; Owen, 2001). The collective discussion and interaction between participants have been found particularly helpful in identifying issues in under-researched or sensitive topics such as sexual behaviour (Frith, 2000; Oliveira, 2011; Ybarra et al., 2014).

Because Study 1 involved potential discussions of online sexually exploitative experience, the use of focus groups was chosen over individual interviews as the former entails less direct questioning, therefore reducing pressure on individuals to respond to every question and allowing greater openness in responses (Basch, 1987). Regarding group composition, Roller and Lavrakas (2015) outlined that whilst heterogeneity in a group discussion can uncover deeper insights into the topic examined, homogenous group composition, such as participants of the same gender and similar age groups, is more suitable for investigating sensitive topics. This is because participants belonging to the same group may have similar frames of reference and thus feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts with people who have lived through the same experience (Greenbaum, 1998; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). This is relevant to the study of OCSA as the literature generally suggests gender differences in how young people behave online and that online sexual victimisation tends to be more frequent in females (see Section 1.13). Meanwhile, the dramatic development of ICT in the past few decades and its integration as part of social lives could mean that individuals growing up in different eras were likely to have different experiences of the internet. Accordingly, the group composition was chosen to be single gender and of a similar age group. Furthermore, Sim (1998) suggested that the homogenous nature of group membership can encourage individual members to voice their views. As such, the option of taking part in the study as a group of friends was also provided to optimise the advantage of using a focus group.

In sum, since Study 1 intended to examine similarities and differences in the development of typical and exploitative relationships, the interpersonal and interactive nature of focus groups, enhanced by a homogenous group composition, was deemed most suitable to stimulate discussion to add knowledge to this underdeveloped area.

2.4 Rationale for Using Thematic Analysis

Different qualitative analysis approaches, including Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2012), Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), and Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2014; Starks & Trinidad, 2007), were considered for analysing the data in Study 1. Each has different aims of analysis as well as methods to analyse.

Grounded theory aims to develop theory that is developed from the data itself to identify theoretical constructs and relationships between them that, taken as a whole, suggest a theory or process (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although this is a useful approach to help construct theory inductively with little existing knowledge or expectations of what the data will reveal, the approach was not suitable for Study 1, as its aim was not to develop a theory of how online relationships are formed.

IPA is concerned with exploring individuals' perceptions of their personal and social world and the way they make sense of their lives and experiences (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2012). While IPA and Thematic Analysis are similar in the sense that both approaches can be used to explore subjective lived experiences, IPA comes with a specific phenomenological theory. This means the understanding of each participant's case comes before the cross-case analysis. Thematic Analysis, on the other hand, examines the subjectiveness of individual cases but interprets the meaning of these experiences collectively as a whole (Braun & Clark, 2006). Accordingly, Thematic Analysis is also more theoretically flexible and can therefore be more easily combined with other methods in mixed methods research. Furthermore, although the interpersonal nature of online interactions means each encounter will be different, the lack of knowledge about the formation of online relationships warrants an understanding of these experiences in general rather than a focus on specific lived experience. For this reason, IPA was not suited to the aims of Study 1.

Discourse Analysis emphasises the role of language in participants' narratives and perspectives in creating and enacting identities and activities (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This approach focuses on analysing the use of verbal and non-verbal communication and considers the social context in which communication occurs to reveal the social-psychological characteristics of the person or people involved (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). As such, this approach is interested in the different elements of the content of communication rather than its structure and effects on interactions.

Given that contextual cues, which are used to enhance understanding of interpersonal interactions, are often opaque or non-existent in the online environment, where interactions are mostly text-based communication (although also accompanied by the use of photos or videos), linguistic approaches such as Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis have been used to examine transcripts of offender and decoy-victim interactions to offer insights into the typical language patterns and functions that characterise online grooming (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017). Other linguistic analyses, such as the move analysis framework (Chiang & Grant, 2017; 2019) and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020), have also been used to examine the frequency of language and deceptive personas used by offenders in the grooming process. However, analysis of the language used by focus group participants cannot answer the research question related to their experiences of online relationships, therefore Discourse Analysis was not considered appropriate.

Thematic Analysis is related to summarising and identifying broad themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, its analytical focus centres on the co-production of perspectives in group contexts rather than on the perceptions of specific individuals. Data analysis is inductive, and the themes identified are strongly linked to the data because assumptions are data driven (Braun & Clark, 2006). Alternatively, this approach can be used deductively to analyse data using a pre-determined theory.

This present research utilised Thematic Analysis because it is used to identify patterns within a dataset and has the flexibility to explore rich and detailed qualitative data. The lack of a theoretical understanding of how online relationships are initiated and maintained, as well as whether experiences differ between those formed with adults and peers, meant that Study 1 was exploratory. The use of Thematic Analysis allowed the process of coding to occur without attempting to fit the data into a pre-existing model or framework to answer these research questions (details of the analysis are included in the Data Analysis section of Study 1). Therefore, it was deemed the most appropriate approach for the purpose of Study 1 because there were few pre-determined expectations about what the data would reveal in relation to the research questions.

The researcher acknowledges that Thematic Analysis has been renamed Reflective Thematic Analysis since the completion of Study 1. Braun and Clarke (2019) place additional emphasis on the researcher's personal beliefs that may have influenced the process of data collection and interpretation. Although Study 1 drew on earlier descriptions of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), reflexivity was nevertheless an important aspect of the analysis as it is generally recommended in qualitative analysis (Greiffenhagen et al., 2011; Östlund et al., 2011). This can be illustrated by the fact that the researcher was mindful of not interpreting the results to fit with the significant growth in knowledge on the topic since the completion of Study 1.

2.5 Using a Non-Clinical Population

Except for the few vignette studies that examined the attribution of blame in online grooming (Rogers et al., 2011) or a layperson's ability to prospectively identify online grooming behaviour (Winters & Jeglic, 2016; 2017), most of the knowledge about online grooming resulting in sexual abuse that existed in the early stages of the current programme of research came from the forensic/clinical population. Generally, research on the grooming process falls

into two main categories. Firstly, there are interview studies. These draw on interviews with offenders (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019; Quayle et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2012), victims (Quayle et al., 2012a; Whittle et al., 2014a), or comparing accounts between offenders and victims (Whittle et al., 2015). Secondly, there are studies that analyse transcripts from online sexually exploitative interactions. Analyses of naturally occurring interactions between offenders and victims are rare, and those that do exist were mostly contributed by Kloess and colleagues in the UK (e.g., Kloess et al., 2017; Kloess, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2019a; Kloess, Larkin, Beech et al., 2019b). Instead, most studies examined chat logs between offenders and decoy victims using data provided by the Perverted Justice Foundation, an American vigilante organisation committed to exposing online child sex offenders by training adult volunteers to pose as a young person and converse with offenders (e.g., Black et al., 2015; Chiang & Grant, 2017; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2013; 2017).

The extent to which existing knowledge was derived from forensic samples can be illustrated by the fact that the first online grooming model was based on interactions between the author posing as an 8, 10, or 12-year-old, and adults online (O'Connell, 2003). Similarly, knowledge on topic areas such as disclosure (Katz et al., 2021), vulnerability (Whittle et al., 2014a), and impact (Joleby et al., 2020) of online grooming was also acquired from identified victims through interviews or case reviews. Whilst first-hand online grooming accounts are instrumental in adding knowledge to this underdeveloped research area, they come with several limitations. First, the difficulty of accessing data meant studies using a forensic or clinical sample usually had a small sample size (except for Winters et al. (2017), who examined 100 transcripts involving offenders and decoys). Second, although some grooming tactics have been largely agreed between studies involving genuine victims and decoy victims, decoy victims cannot initiate contact with the offender and must wait for the interaction to turn sexual to avoid entrapment. Therefore, the decoy would just 'play along' and ultimately agree

to meet in person, where the offender would be arrested at the in-person meeting (Black et al., 2015).

Yet, the passive role assumed by decoy victims fails to consider the fact that young people are often active agents in negotiating their online sexual experiences. In support, interviews with online grooming victims as part of the ROBERT project revealed that some victims took an active role in establishing the relationship with the abuser, including the initiation of sexual activities with the offender (Quayle et al., 2012b). Consistent with this, later studies that have interviewed online grooming victims found that these young people often reported having some degree of autonomy in exploring their sexual curiosity and were able to negotiate what type of (abusive) sexual activities they would and would not engage in, until the situation became out of control where coercion and threats were used by the offenders to make them engage in sexual activities (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Joleby et al., 2020).

The absence of the use of overt persuasion and extortion in interactions between offenders and decoy victims has also led some researchers to question the validity of these data as a proxy for naturally occurring interactions between offenders and genuine victims (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Schneevogt et al., 2018; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). The issue of data validity involving adult decoys was raised by Chiang and Grant (2019), who published the first linguistic study to analyse naturally occurring sexually exploitative conversations between offenders and genuine victims. The authors noted that the persuasive and coercive linguistic moves used by the offender were not identified in their previous examination of transcripts involving offenders and decoy victims (Chiang & Grant, 2017).

Indeed, there are key distinctions between decoy and genuine victims that may account for the differences observed in offenders' use of tactics. First and foremost, although decoy victims cannot initiate contact with the offender, they are indirectly and actively trying to get the offender to be sexually explicit and to arrange an offline sexual encounter. Therefore,

decoy victims would be willing to maintain conversations even when the interactions might be uncomfortable for a real young person. This contrasts with genuine victims who would display a degree of resistance to the offender's sexual advances (Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). Thus, the compliance of decoy victims seems to create a situation where there is no need for offenders to employ coercive and forceful tactics.

Another distinction is that decoys are prevented from sharing sexually explicit material with offenders, despite it is common for online grooming victims to engage in this behaviour, where these materials are often subsequently used as leverage by the offender to escalate the intensity of the sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Joleby et al., 2021a; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). On the contrary, the lack of online sexual activity between offenders and decoy victims leaves no record for the offender to use against the decoys to pressure them into further sexual abuse, which is likely to result in the use of other strategies. Crucially, unlike actual victims, the decoys are not emotionally attached to the abuser as a result of the manipulative grooming experience and sexual abuse (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Joleby et al., 2020; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014b). The absence of emotions indicates that interactions between offenders and decoys are less likely to provide insight on the experience of grooming from a young person's perspective.

While the study of chatlogs involving decoy victims has the advantage of using a much larger sample size than those involving genuine victims (e.g., Schneevogt et al. (2018) and Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2020) examined 622 Perverted Justice chatlogs), and the larger data set can inform computational models for detecting online grooming language and support the development of training resources to raise awareness of the typical language structures that characterise the way online groomers communicate; both of which are otherwise unlikely to be met by the small scale nature of naturally occurring data. This study argues that online sexually exploitative interactions involving adult decoys are fundamentally different from those involving genuine young people. The 'formulated' progression involving decoy victims, in the

absence of active agency and conflicted emotions often felt by the young person, contradicts the cyclical nature of grooming (see Section 1.10). Consequently, the interactions between offenders and decoy victims are unlikely to be truly representative of interactions between offenders and genuine victims, and the study of online grooming warrants a non-clinical sample who may, or may not have, encountered online sexually exploitative interactions.

Indeed, the use of non-clinical samples has become increasingly popular (e.g., de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018a; 2018b; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022). Therefore, without overlooking the contribution of existing qualitative studies involving the forensic/clinical population, the present research suggests that examining online grooming within the general population also has its utility. First of all, the Internet makes it possible for any young person to be approached by an offender. Closely related, it must be acknowledged that young people engage in various forms of online risky (sexual) behaviour, such as talking to strangers online and exchanging sexually explicit materials, that can increase their susceptibility to online grooming and other forms of OCSA (see Section 1.13). Second, studies revealed that many grooming victims did not view the experience as abusive or acknowledge that they had been groomed, including those who had received psychological support since the abuse was identified (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Quayle et al., 2012b). Furthermore, there is ample evidence from the CSA literature to suggest disclosure of CSA is often delayed or not reported to authorities (e.g., see McElvaney (2015); Tener and Murphy (2015) for reviews). Therefore, the lack of insight that abuse had taken place, along with the lack of disclosure, suggests that this group of young people would not be known to authorities or services and are therefore unrepresented in existing research (except for recent studies examining different forms of OCSA using a non-clinical young people sample, e.g., Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022).

Finally, another limitation of using identified victims is that the recognition of abuse implies support would have been offered to these young people following discovery, irrespective of

whether the person is help-seeking (which has other clinical implications). As such, their perceptions of the abuse and its impact may be different from those who have yet to disclose or address the OCSA experience.

Considering the limitations of the use of clinical samples and the existence of “unidentified” victims whose voices are left unheard, this research focused on the use of a non-clinical population to examine the experience of online grooming and other forms of OCSA. The inclusion of a non-clinical sample can expand knowledge of OCSA involving identified victims and provide them with an opportunity to reflect, voice their experiences, and potentially encourage disclosure of abuse. Furthermore, since not every young person who is approached by adults online will be sexually abused, the use of a non-clinical sample allowed insight to be developed about the experiences of non-victimised individuals and their experiences of online relationship development to address the aim of Study 1. At the same time, a non-clinical sample allowed the examination of OCSA prevalence in Study 2 and Study 3, as well as comparisons of psychosocial well-being between individuals who have and have not experienced OCSA in Study 3. Neither of which can be achieved using a clinical sample. Furthermore, recruitment from a non-clinical population can yield a larger sample size that would allow Study 2 and Study 3 to examine the prevalence and disclosure of OCSA, establish factors predicting online grooming, and examine the long-term impacts of this form of abuse.

2.6 Retrospective Design Using a Young Adult Sample

Unlike studies involving grooming victims that are retrospective in nature, studies of other forms of OCSA, such as OSS and unwanted online sexual exposure victimisation, are usually cross-sectional studies involving young people aged up to 16 or 18 years old (Reed et al., 2020). Whilst these studies are useful for determining prevalence and factors influencing the related outcomes (Wang & Cheng, 2020), the time frame for measuring prevalence of

victimisation, or behaviours that increase the risk of victimisation, is usually limited to a period of between six months and a year (Reed et al., 2020). However, since abusive experiences accumulate with age, the limited time frame cannot capture experiences outside of the period examined. A drawback that can only be overcome using a young adult sample and a retrospective design.

Concerning peer perpetrated OCSA, Study 1 and subsequent research indicate that the pervasiveness of online harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) has resulted in its normalisation among young people (Ringrose et al., 2021a). This also impacts disclosure, as Ringrose and colleagues (2021a) found that rates of reporting online sexual victimisation to social media platforms, parents, or school were very low. Building on this, normalisation of online HSB suggests that young people may not always realise the online sexual activities they were exposed to or engaged in, even when under pressure, were indeed abusive, just as grooming victims do not always acknowledge they have been abused (Quayle et al., 2012b). In support, research has suggested that the negative perceptions or consequences of abusive sexual experiences are often not fully realised until later in the adolescents' lifespan (Gruenfeld et al., 2017; Lev-Wiesel et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2018). Therefore, a retrospective design examining different forms of OCSA experienced before the age of 16 allowed adult participants to reappraise their early online sexual encounters and acknowledge abusive interactions that might not have been previously recognised. This can provide a better insight into the scale of the problem that cannot otherwise be gained from using an underage sample.

Relating to the disclosure of OCSA, it is well established that CSA disclosure is often delayed until adulthood (McElvaney, 2015; Tener & Murphy, 2015; Wallis & Woodworth, 2000). Therefore, examination of OCSA disclosure among adults could potentially allow for a more balanced comparison between the disclosed and the non-disclosed groups, as the rate of disclosure would be, in theory, higher than if it were examined before adulthood.

Participants' welfare is always a priority. In addition to the ethical considerations involving young people taking part in research, there are safeguarding issues to consider due to the nature of the research examining potential OCSA. Besides, different organisations supporting recruitment will each have their own safeguarding policy. These factors are likely to result in a longer time required to gain approval from both the University and individual organisations, which can be impractical within a timed PhD programme. Adding to this, the lack of response from schools and colleges when Study 1 recruited individuals aged 16 and above, despite no parental consent being required, highlighted that this topic can face additional barriers when recruiting young people from the education sector.

However, retrospective examination of adverse childhood events is not without limitations. One of which is recall bias, or the possibility that some of the examined events may have been forgotten or misremembered due to the time lapse between childhood and adulthood (Althubaiti, 2016). Relating to OCSA, this research argues that unless the abuse took place when the participant was an infant or a toddler, which is unlikely considering OCSA involves the use of digital communication, the likelihood that the event would be forgotten is low. Furthermore, since the present research examined the occurrence of childhood trauma without asking for details of these events, the suggestion that significant direct (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse) or indirect (e.g., parental divorce, witnessing household violence) trauma could be forgotten is also contested. Supporting this, Hardt and Rutter's (2004) review concluded that, while little weight can be placed on the retrospective reports of details of early experiences, recall bias is insufficient to invalidate the retrospective examination of major adversity. Meanwhile, despite recall bias also being impacted by current mental health (Dalglish & Werner-Seidler, 2014), a population birth cohort study concluded that retrospectively reported child abuse was not biased by depression in adulthood (Pereira et al., 2021). This finding further strengthens the validity of research that relies on adults' retrospective reports of childhood abuse. Lastly, while a recent study by Gemara et al. (2022) highlighted that OCSA victims were often reluctant to discuss details of the abuse during

forensic interviews, this was not considered to be an issue as details of the abuse were not examined and participants also had the right to not answer specific question(s) and/or to withdraw.

Although little is known about the validity of retrospective examination of OCSA, the extensive research on CSA utilising adult samples (Alaggia et al., 2019; Easton, 2019; Sivagurunathan et al., 2019) suggests there is little reason to discredit adult reports of historical online sexual victimisation. Furthermore, without discounting any childhood abuse experience, “forgotten” OCSA incidents may indicate that these were isolated experiences that the person did not find distressing enough to remember. Accordingly, these biases are suspected to be negligent for the individual’s psychosocial functioning.

Altogether, this research argued that the lack of childhood lifetime prevalence figures for OCSA warranted a retrospective examination of OCSA using a young adult sample of individuals who are aged 18 and above, a research method noted to be slowly emerging in other studies (Finkelhor et al., 2022; 2023a; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2023). Concerning this programme of research, retrospective self-report offered an opportunity for young adults to reflect on historical online sexual activities and to evaluate whether they experienced unwanted online sexual activities or abuse before the age of 16. Thus, this helps to address the identified knowledge gap related to the prevalence and disclosure of OCSA.

2.7 Age of OCSA Victimisation

In the UK, the law declares any person under the age of 18 a child and therefore has a legal right to safeguarding (British Psychological Society, 2021). As such, statutory requirements on services and agencies to safeguard children, such as Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018) and non-statutory guidance issued by the Department of

Education (2017), both define child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation as involving a child or young person under the age of 18. Yet, the legal age of consent for sexual activities is 16. Therefore, while this research recognised the vulnerability of those aged between 16 and 18, it examined OCSA experienced up to 16 years of age to be in line with the legal age of consent to sexual activities. This is also consistent with most studies examining childhood traumatic events (Pereira et al., 2021). This upper age limit also gives time for individuals who are now adults to reflect on earlier experiences.

2.8 Measurement of OCSA

Researchers have consistently highlighted that the lack of standardised measurements in examining different forms of OCSA is an underlying cause of the varied prevalence rates reported between studies (Bryce et al., 2023; Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023). Despite scales having been developed, such as the Online Victimization Scale (Tynes et al., 2010) and the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021), there is yet to be a consistent approach to examining OCSA. For example, while some studies used general items such as “In the past 12 months, how often have you been sexually harassed (via online interaction)” (e.g., Ybarra et al., 2015), others were more specific in the types of activity experienced (e.g., “In the past year, did anyone on the Internet ask you to do something sexual that you did not want to”) (e.g., Marret & Choo, 2017). This is important as the different ways used to measure the experience have implications for the prevalence rates reported. Referring to the two aforementioned studies, Ybarra et al. (2015) found a total prevalence of 5.4%, whereas Marret and Choo (2017) found 19.1% of their sample had experienced unwanted online sexual requests. Although the discrepancy could be related to the two studies being conducted in different countries and at different times, the prevalence difference also suggests that participants will respond better to questions that are more specific.

Furthermore, studies using the same measures can also yield considerably varying results. For instance, a much lower prevalence (< 10%) was reported by the Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS; Mitchell et al., 2013), which developed the items used by Marret and Choo (2017). The YISS, consisting of three cross-sectional studies conducted in 2000, 2005, and 2010, was one of the pioneering studies to examine young people's online sexual victimisation using a nationally representative sample in the US (Mitchell et al., 2013). A closer examination of the two studies revealed that the different study designs are likely to account for the difference in prevalence reported.

First, Mitchell and colleagues (2013) presented their findings by separating the three types of unwanted online requests into requests 1) to talk about sex, 2) for sexual information, and 3) to do something sexual, whereas Marret and Choo (2017) calculated their prevalence inclusive of all three types of unwanted online sexual requests. Second, the age inclusion differed between the two studies. The YISS used the age range between 10 and 17 years old, and Marret and Choo (2017) included young people aged between 15 and 16. Since late teens have been identified as more vulnerable to online sexual victimisation (see Section 1.13), this age group could explain the inflated prevalence reported by Marret and Choo (2017). Third, the method of data collection was also different between the two studies (telephone surveys vs self-administered paper-and-pencil questionnaires). Notably, the time lapse between the two studies would also account for the discrepancy in the rates reported, as technology has significantly advanced how people socialise using digital communication in the last two decades. Therefore, young people who took part in the YISS were likely to have had a very different online experience compared to those who took part in Marret and Choo's study (2017). All of these factors are likely to contribute to the difference found between the two studies.

Yet, this inconsistency was not isolated, as a review of the literature highlighted variations in relation to item measurement, age inclusion, and time period data collection across studies

(Reed et al., 2020). Crucially, most of the available studies examined online sexual requests and pressured online sexual activities, and the present research adopts the stance that receiving requests or being pressured does not indicate compliance. Accordingly, there is a lack of understanding of young people's experiences of online sexual activities that were engaged under pressure from peers or any sexual activities involving adults.

Whilst it was beyond the scope of this research programme to develop a standardised measure of OCSA, meticulous steps were taken to address these issues where possible. First and foremost, different contexts relating to the OCSA examined in this research were clearly defined (see Appendix 6 and 14 for Study 2 questionnaire and Study 3 questionnaire instructions, respectively). The retrospective nature of the study also made it possible to prompt participants to reflect on experiences that they might not have instinctively regarded as unwanted.

Additionally, it was noted from previous studies that the medium in which these experiences took place also varies considerably. Where some studies have no mention of the context in which victimisation took place, others have limited these experiences to those that occurred via social media or via Whatsapp (Sánchez et al., 2017). Other earlier studies only examined unwanted online sexual exposure via pop-up windows (Madigan et al., 2018b), a criterion that is highly likely to underestimate the scope of the problem as it excludes any unwanted exposure that was perpetrated by another person. To address these issues, a definition of the online environment, including a list of different online platforms and online communication channels, was provided to participants before they answered the questionnaire in the present research (see Appendix 6 and 14 for the instructions used in Study 2 and Study 3, respectively). Although the list is not exhaustive, the present research argues that the list of online communication channels would prompt participants to reflect on their historical online experience comprehensively in comparison to previous research.

In response to the evidence of the prevalence of peer perpetrated OCSA found in Study 1 and the then emerging evidence on this form of abuse in the research literature, OCSA perpetrated by peers was emphasised in terms of its unwanted nature to differentiate these experiences from developmentally appropriate sexual interactions. The measures also specified that these experiences did not occur within a romantic relationship to distinguish them from those that took place within an intimate partner violence (IPV) context. Meanwhile, acknowledging that young people do not always view sexual activities engaged in with adults as unwanted, OCSA involving adults was measured using neutral language (e.g., “I agreed to meet someone I met online in person, despite knowing s/he was 18 or above”).

2.9 Ethical Considerations

The nature of this research topic entails many ethical considerations, including those relating to safeguarding, welfare, participation, and representation. In recognition of this, ethics was viewed as an ongoing reflective concern and not just a discrete procedural requirement. This ensured that participants’ well-being was prioritised through the design and conduct of the individual studies in this programme of research.

Previous studies on the harms and benefits of researching sensitive topics, such as violence and childhood sexual trauma, suggest that while minor negative effects immediately after participation were found in some studies, these were short-lived, and individuals who have experienced traumatic events generally reported that taking part in this type of research was beneficial (Black et al., 2006; Cook et al., 2015; Jefferson et al., 2021; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022). Furthermore, Kirkner et al. (2019) reported that participants who reported gaining insights from answering survey questions relating to sexual victimisation were more likely to seek additional help to address ongoing trauma-related problems following participation. This suggests that insights gained from taking part in trauma research may

facilitate help-seeking behaviour for some. The available evidence therefore indicates that trauma research is not inherently harmful when ethical measures are in place to protect the researchers and participants from harm (Jefferson et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, collecting data on this topic presents a number of challenges that require careful consideration. This is because this research involved potential disclosure of (O)CSA (in Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3) and childhood adversity (in Study 3). Therefore, an overriding ethical concern was to ensure a rights-informed and rights-respecting approach that prioritised the safety and well-being of all who were involved in the research process, including prospective participants that came across the study and chose not to take part.

A key consideration was the sample used for the nature of this research. This research used a non-clinical sample of young adults (aged 18 and above) to examine OCSA experienced before the age of 16. In addition to the rationale provided earlier for using this population (see Section 2.5 and 2.6), there are also several ethical advantages that support this decision. Participants' age and safeguarding were primary concerns. The nature of online self-completion makes it impossible for researchers to identify and safeguard participants under the age of 16 who disclose experience of sexual abuse. Meanwhile, young people have cited confidentiality as a key consideration for taking part in surveys about CSA because disclosure of the abuse could instigate safeguarding procedures (Sharrock et al., 2022). The lack of clarity about who may receive the information about abuse can result in a sense of lack of control over the disclosure experience and compound the difficulties already experienced by the young person (Sharrock et al., 2022; Quayle et al., 2012b). On the contrary, conducting research with individuals aged 18 and above has fewer safeguarding constraints and has been suggested to encourage participants to respond more openly as their anonymity and confidentiality are protected (Sharrock et al., 2022).

Relating to the ability and willingness to report experiences of abuse in a survey, young adults have recommended that asking about experiences across their developmental years could reduce the burden on recall of precise timeframes and avoid giving the impression that abuse that had continued over longer periods or was less recent was considered less important (Sharrock et al., 2022). As such, a retrospective examination of lifetime OCSA (up to the age of 16) would lessen the risk of individuals who have experienced this form of abuse feeling dismissed as a result of not being able to share their experiences. This would help to protect participants' emotional well-being while reducing the distress associated with recalling specific timeframes of abuse.

Regarding recruitment, online recruitment of a non-clinical sample via social media, as opposed to recruitment from named organisations, is likely to have increased the potential for recruitment beyond identified victims. This is important for participant representation as a wider reach of audience provided opportunities for individuals who might not have previously shared their abuse, and for those who might not have recognised the experience as abusive to reappraise historical online sexual experiences with peers and adults. Although there is a plethora of studies that have examined the barriers to CSA disclosure (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019; Brattfjell & Flåm, 2019; Easton, 2019; Solberg et al., 2021), the act of taking part in a qualitative study is itself a form of disclosure. Thus, the voices of individuals who have yet to tell anyone about the abuse and the reasons for not disclosing are scant and urgently needed. Therefore, the quantitative examination of non-disclosure of OCSA in Study 3 is important as it provided equal opportunities for individuals who have experienced OCSA to share their experience, regardless of whether disclosure has been made.

Radford's (2018) review of survey methodology on CSA highlighted that the breadth of definition of sexual abuse (e.g., how sexual contact is defined, whether the experience was wanted or unwanted, age differences between the perpetrator and victim), and wording of questions, such as how individuals are asked about experiences of sexual abuse, are all highly

likely to influence responses. Similarly, the lack of specificity in defining OCSA has also been noted (Bryce et al., 2023; Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023). To distinguish between developmentally appropriate and abusive sexual experiences involving peers, unwanted sexual activity with peers was defined in this research. It was also made clear that these experiences could include those that are only deemed unwanted and/or pressured in hindsight. Providing definitions not only addressed previous methodological limitations and helped address the aims of the research, but it also sought to ensure that participants could answer questions with a shared understanding. Importantly, since individuals may not necessarily recognise or label their online sexual experiences as sexually exploitative or abusive, terminology such as *sexual victimisation*, *grooming*, and *sexual abuse* was not used in the recruitment materials, topic guides, focus groups, and questionnaire items to avoid labelling these experiences.

Relating to recalling details of abuse, Sharrock et al. (2022) highlighted that questions relating to the perpetrator(s) can be particularly challenging to answer, and recommended that descriptions such as “an adult” or “a family member” were sufficiently broad enough for participants to answer questions relating to the identity of the abuser. Therefore, information relating to the perpetrator was specified in this research. For example, the age of the perpetrator (above vs below the age of 18) was specified where the relationship with the perpetrator was examined.

Furthermore, although previous research recommends that participants respond best to questions that are behaviour specific (Craner et al., 2015), items assessing OCSA are often ambiguous and measured using a single item. To overcome these limitations and minimise distress for participants, items addressing OCSA in the present research were neutrally worded yet behaviour specific. An example item of *unwanted online sexual exposure* was “Someone continued sending me sexual or obscene material such as pictures, jokes, memes or videos after I had asked them to stop”. Recognising the heterogeneity of OCSA and the

advantages of greater specificity in measurement, multiple items were used to measure the different forms of OCSA where possible. Furthermore, a distinction was also made between passive (e.g., unwanted online sexual exposure) and active (e.g. pressured online sexual activities) forms of OCSA.

The balance between asking participants to recall details of their abuse and their willingness to respond to a survey asking for specific information about the abuse was also considered. Young adults have expressed mixed views about response options. Some welcome a tiered approach with fewer specific response options and optional follow-up questions, as this offers more autonomy relating to what the individual is comfortable sharing. Others preferred to select responses to closed questions because this requires less reflection on the details of the experience (Sharrock et al., 2022). For the purpose of this research, neither Study 2 nor Study 3 intended to examine details of the abuse. As such, open-text responses are not fit for purpose, and the collected data would not have answered the research questions. Taking into account the scale of this research, and that not every participant would have experienced OCSA, and not every participant who has experienced OCSA would share details of the abuse. The option of open-text with a potential low response rate would therefore reduce the sample size and the meaningfulness of any analysis.

Furthermore, the inclusion of open-ended questions will invariably increase the likelihood of unanticipated responses, including potential disclosure of ongoing child abuse (Lloyd & Devine, 2015). For example, a participant might disclose that their abuser has ongoing contact with young people. Although there is no safeguarding procedure relating to participants who are aged 18 and above, researchers have a duty of care to protect participants' welfare regardless of their age, and the nature of online self-completion makes it impossible for the researcher to follow up on these concerns as individual participants cannot be identified.

Therefore, while insights about abusive experiences are invaluable, it is important to balance the desire to provide autonomy for participants to share details of the abuse against the need to keep information to that which is strictly needed to protect participants' welfare. Accordingly, closed questions were deemed more appropriate to minimise distress and harm to participants whilst ensuring that the data collected is justified and meaningful to the research questions. However, establishing prevalence was not the sole purpose of asking sensitive questions relating to OCSA in this research. For example, the data collected in Study 3 also aimed to examine how participants were affected by the abuse and factors that might influence the impact of the abuse.

It is acknowledged that questions addressing childhood adversity may cause additional distress to participants. However, individuals who experience CSA often experience other forms of childhood adversity (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020; Källström et al., 2020). As highlighted in Chapter 1, there is emerging evidence to indicate OCSA is also associated with offline adversity and non-sexual online victimisation such as cyberbullying (e.g., Barroso et al., 2021; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Therefore, best practice is to concurrently examine different forms of victimisation (Hillis et al., 2016; Meinck et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2014), as did in Study 3, to understand the relationship between online and offline childhood abuse.

The ethical implications of the options for administering the questionnaire, i.e., online self-completion vs. pen-and-paper administration in the presence of the researcher, were also considered. Online self-completion was chosen for both ethical and practical reasons. From an ethical perspective, online survey provides a greater sense of privacy and control over the time individuals take to consider study participation and where and when to complete the survey, which may increase the openness of reporting (DiLillo et al., 2006; ONS, 2022). In support, young adults have reported that the presence of a researcher could potentially make participants feel intimidated or rushed, especially since disclosure of abuse can heighten the abused person's sense of vulnerability (ONS, 2022). Practically, online self-completion was

also a better fit for online recruitment and the research topic. Furthermore, Study 3 was conducted at the height of COVID-19 in 2020 when lockdown was imposed in the UK. Thus, it was not possible to meet participants in person.

The online questionnaires used in the present research were designed for use on both mobile phones and desktop devices to maximise accessibility and flexibility. A “save and return” function was also available to avoid the burden of completing the questionnaire in a single setting. The opportunity to take a break from the questionnaire is particularly important to support individuals who might have found the questions upsetting to mitigate the risk of traumatisation. Furthermore, instructions for deleting browser history were provided to offer extra privacy protection.

One must also consider that online self-completion could exclude individuals with no independent access to the Internet. However, those who do not have access to the Internet are not the intended audience of this research, which examined online sexual victimisation. Although some victims of OCSA reported avoiding the use of the Internet following their experiences of abuse (ECPAT International, 2022a), it was beyond the scope of this research to understand this specific consequence of OCSA. Another key ethical issue in relation to data collection is the choice of focus groups over individual interviews, which has been discussed earlier in Section 2.3.

The well-being of participants and prospective participants was another major concern. Meaningful informed consent was achieved through transparent and accessible written materials and an additional verbal explanation prior to confirming consent for Study 1. The Participant Information Sheet (PIS) for the three studies explicitly stated that some of the questions were sensitive and could cause distress. It also stated that specific details of the events would not be asked about. Participants were advised that their welfare was a priority, to be mindful that being asked about past stressful events could be distressing, and not to take part if doing so could induce harm. The option to rescind consent was available on each

page of the questionnaires, and the withdrawal link directed participants to the debrief page, where support resources via facilitating agencies and the University (if applicable) were provided. Given the nature of the online study, where physical copies of the PIS and debriefing sheet could not be provided, electronic versions were available for participants to download and retain. To maximise participants' choice and control over their degree of engagement, participants were reminded that they could choose not to answer particular questions if they did not want to.

One previous study suggested that individuals who have more characterological self-blame have more negative reactions to a survey examining sexual trauma (Kirkner et al., 2019). Therefore, in response to the measurement of self-blame relating to OCSA in Study 3, participants were advised that the statements assessing self-blame were neither factual nor reflective of why the events (abuse) had happened. Lastly, all necessary ethical approvals were obtained from the University prior to the start of each study, and data protection and security policies were complied with.

Collectively, the discussion illustrates the active steps taken in the design and conduct of the three studies to maximise benefits and minimise potential distress for participants as a result of taking part in this research.

2.10 Conclusion

Altogether, the different issues considered in the present research were aimed at addressing the various methodological problems and ethical considerations identified in the literature. Meanwhile, refinements were also made within this programme of research to address any shortcomings and ensure that the questions asked were fit for purpose. The use of definitions and descriptions of behaviour specific experience were imperative to ensure participants

understood the questions asked. This approach enabled a more accurate picture of the scale of the different forms of OCSA examined and addressed these significant gaps in the literature. Having provided a literature review to identify issues and knowledge gaps in understanding OCSA (see Chapter 1) and a justification for the methodological rationale for the studies in this programme of research, Study 1 will be presented in the next Chapter.

CHAPTER 3 STUDY 1

Retrospective accounts of young adults' experiences of online grooming tactics by online adult acquaintances and peer-related online sexual victimisation

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature review provided in Chapter 1 demonstrates that online grooming is a heavily manipulative process that cannot occur without interaction between the offender and the young person (see Section 1.10 The Process of Grooming and Section 1.11 Grooming Tactics). Yet, the use of the Internet makes it almost inevitable for young people to be approached by offenders and increases the risk of grooming resulting in sexual abuse. Therefore, any attempt to understand the offender-victim relationship must first consider the formation of the relationship.

Benefits and Caveats of Online Communication

Having been born into an online world where many have never known a world without smartphones, most young people are active online from a very early age (Ofcom, 2021). For this generation, activities such as meeting people online, finding new friends with similar interests, and receiving emotional support are thus normal and can have benefits for widening their social circle as part of their developmental needs (Dedkova, 2015). Research into the benefits of online communication for young people's well-being has suggested benefits such as increased self-esteem, social capital, the opportunity for self-disclosure, and more confidence in identity experimentation (Best et al., 2014). The benefits can therefore act as a driving force to engage in online interaction.

Young people reported they interact with unknown people online for different reasons, including social connectedness and romantic purposes, and would meet these online acquaintances in person (Mýlek et al., 2023; Peter et al., 2006). For example, a survey by the Centre for Cyber Safety and Education (2019) with US fourth to eighth graders found that 40% had used the Internet to connect with a stranger, with 11% going on to meet the online acquaintance in person. Higher figures have been found in Europe, where the EU Kids Online 2020 study found that between one in four and one in two young people had communicated online with someone they had not met face-to-face before. Around one in six reported going on to meet these online acquaintances in person. However, it should be noted that although meeting online strangers in person may seem like an obvious risk, an average of 70% of young people across the 19 countries surveyed who had met an online acquaintance in person reported they were happy after the meeting, with very few young people finding the experience upsetting (Smahel et al., 2020).

Online interaction with others is a precondition for online grooming. Although most young people did not report experiencing harm from online interactions with strangers, including those resulting in-person encounters (Marret & Choo, 2017; Smahel et al., 2020), research in the last decade has consistently suggested that interactions with strangers online increase the likelihood of online approach made by adults, including those of a sexual nature (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Savoia et al., 2021). Previously, Mitchell et al. (2008) reported that young people who interacted with people they met online, regardless of whether personal information was shared, had higher odds of experiencing online sexual solicitation (OSS). Other studies also found that engagement in sexual and non-sexual online risky behaviour (e.g., sharing personal information) increased the risk of receiving sexual requests online (DeMarco et al., 2017).

While risk does not always lead to harm, and there are mediating factors where one young person may be harmed and another not (Davidson et al., 2016), online interactions with

strangers can nevertheless result in significant harm, such as the experience of online grooming and subsequent online and/or in-person sexual abuse (Jonsson et al., 2019; Katz, 2013; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). Young people can also be deceived into believing they were communicating with someone age-appropriate when the offender was in fact an adult. For example, Marret and Choo (2017) found that 26.7% of their sample of young people aged between 12 and 18 only discovered the online acquaintance who claimed to be underage was in fact an adult when meeting offline. Of those who had met with an online acquaintance face-to-face, over half experienced more than one type of physical and/or sexual abuse in these offline meetings. Similarly, young people can also be deceived into engaging in age-appropriate online sexual activities, which lead to them being sexually and emotionally abused (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018a; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). Furthermore, a review of the cases of children who underwent forensic medical examination following allegations of sexual assault revealed that 82% of these occurred at the first face-to-face meeting following online communication, with 74% of cases involving vaginal penetration by penis (Rowse et al., 2022). The available empirical and forensic evidence therefore indicates that young people can be subjected to both online and in-person sexual abuse following online interactions with adults.

Meanwhile, there is evidence to suggest that the Internet influences the manner in which people communicate and develop relationships. For example, the absence of non-verbal cues in online communication can reduce many of the barriers that individuals experience in face-to-face contact (e.g., appearance, possible stigmas) that might prohibit a relationship from forming. Online anonymity may also result in individuals becoming more intimate in a shorter amount of time or divulging more personal details about themselves to an online stranger (Jiang et al., 2011). Congruent with this, research reveals that the majority of young people find online communication easier and tend to disclose more online than offline (Smahel et al., 2020). Paradoxically, the anonymity afforded by the Internet can make it difficult for young people to ascertain the real identity of online acquaintances but easier for offenders to use identity deception (see Section 1.11 Grooming Tactics). Consequently, young people's

willingness to interact with strangers online, coupled with their tendency to disclose more personal information than they would in person, can be exploited by offenders who may pose as someone underage and mislead the young person into believing they are communicating with someone who is age-appropriate (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Katz, 2013).

Importantly, a review of the benefits and harmful effects of online communication and social media among young people concluded that the main benefits of online social networking were indirect and informed by perceptions of perceived social support (Best et al., 2014). As illustrated in Chapter 1, the grooming process centres on deceptive trust building, where the offender often acts as someone who is caring and supportive when they initially approach the young person (Katz, 2013; Thomas et al., 2023; Whittle et al., 2014b; 2015). Consequently, the perceived benefits of social and emotional support gained from these online interactions can create a false sense of security when the relationship is in fact exploitative and harmful.

Similarities Between the Grooming Process and General Relationship Formation

While sexual approaches by adults online can be direct (Kloess et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2012), most victim accounts of the grooming process revealed that early interactions largely involved discussion of neutral content, and sexual topics were only broached once the offender had assessed that the young person felt comfortable with them (Katz, 2013; Kloess et al., 2017; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016; Whittle et al., 2015). In support, analysis of conversations between offenders and decoy victims identified that compliance testing was evident throughout the grooming process (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). Interviews with convicted online groomers also revealed that offenders would adapt their tactics to correspond to the needs and vulnerabilities of the young person to ensure that the victim felt like an active part of the abuse (de Santisteban et al., 2018). These purposeful non-sexual interactions, such as conversations about the young person's general life, thus allow the offender to assess the

victim's vulnerability while simultaneously portraying themselves as someone who is sympathetic to the young person's circumstances in order to obtain trust.

The focus on rapport building and trust in the grooming process (Aitken et al., 2018; Ioannou et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2013) has been further illustrated by Broome and Davies' (2020) psycholinguistic examination of the language used by online groomers. The authors found that the focus of development of interpersonal relationships was above engagement in sexual abuse in these exploitative interactions. The available evidence therefore highlights that the initiation and early experience of the online grooming process appear to mirror those of general friendship and romantic relationship formation. In support of Broome and Davies' (2020) findings on the prominent use of positive emotional language, Black et al.'s (2015) analysis of transcripts of the grooming process also found no difference in the use of friendship- and relationship-forming words throughout the process. This finding further strengthens the suggestion that the grooming process shares similarities with the development of developmentally appropriate relationships.

Social Exchange Framework

A social exchange framework is any model or theoretical approach that focuses on the material or symbolic exchange of resources between individuals and/or uses the concepts of costs, rewards, reciprocity, and equality (Ahmad et al., 2023). Homans (1958) first proposed the idea of social behaviour as exchange in the literature, and many other researchers have since expanded the parameters of this fundamental concept. The most basic premise of any social exchange framework is that individuals remain in relationships only as the perceived rewards from the relationship exceed the perceived costs of continuing to participate in that relationship (Blau, 2017; Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Prior anthropological research viewed people as independent from the actions of other actors and focused on the cognitive process involved in deriving the meaning of factors motivating behaviours (Blumer, 1986). Yet, this approach provided limited insight into the motives and outcomes produced during interactions. In contrast, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) articulates the function of social relations and their contingency on other actors, which paves the way towards understanding the rational mechanisms underpinning the decision-making involved in social exchange. Since its inception, the SET has been one of the most common frameworks for researching relationships in different contexts (Ahmad et al., 2023). It emphasises that the formation of a relationship between humans is through the use of cost-benefit analysis, along with a comparison of alternatives (Ahmad et al., 2023).

The foundation of SET rests on four core assumptions regarding human nature and the nature of relationships. The first assumption is that humans tend to seek out rewards and avoid punishments. According to the theory, reinforcement tools (i.e., the rewards, benefits, and resources of exchange) underpin individuals' motivation to engage in social interaction. A reward is an outcome of a relationship having a positive connotation, while a resource is an attribute giving a person the capability to enable the reward, stimulating people to embark on exchanging relations (Emerson, 1976). Resources can represent love, status, money, information, services, and goods (Foa & Foa, 1980).

The second assumption refers to the mechanism of exchange. The theory postulates that a person begins an interaction to gain maximum profit with minimal costs, and resources are exchanged based on a subjective cost-reward analysis (Blau, 2017). The analysis is contingent on two main conditions defining the decision of a person to exchange relations, which are: 1) the degree to which a similar performance has been rewarded to a person or other people in the past; and 2) the degree to which the result of the exchange is valuable to a person (Blau, 2017; Homans, 1958).

The third assumption is that individuals tend to calculate profits and costs before engaging with another person. According to the framework, social exchange relations are stimulated by social structures and social capital factors (Blau, 2017). The dependence of social structures reflects the contingency of the outcome of interactions on the initial relations between the parties (Blau, 2017). On the other hand, social capital represents different forms of social entities, including norms, rules, expectations, and obligations (Blau, 2017). Consequently, social capital not only facilitates but also restricts the development of social relations and their outcomes.

Finally, the fourth mechanism underpinning social exchange is reciprocity, which is posited to create obligations between the parties. SET assumes people have mental matrices on the balance of rewards and costs and embark on relationships with the expectation that the costs will eventually be returned (i.e., one will eventually receive the benefit). The lack of a specific timeframe for the return can be rooted in cultural norms or individual moral orientations revolving around the belief that the parties will reach a fair agreement in which unfair treatment by one party will be punished while fair treatment will be rewarded. On the other hand, the rule of reciprocity acts as a regulating mechanism, ensuring mutually rewarding relationships are based on the actors' interdependence (Blau, 2017). Thus, reciprocity is long-term-orientated, as reliable relations are developed through the development of trust, loyalty, and mutual commitment.

The Theory of Relational Cohesion

Due to the economic principle of cost-benefit analysis in social exchange, SET views motives, perceptions, and outcomes of social behaviour as rational and instrumental without considering the mediating role of emotions that are intertwined in the process (Lawler, 2001). Although the framework has been extensively used in understanding human relations, the fact that the foundation of online grooming lays on the manipulation of trust and emotions implies that the process is highly emotive, as reported by grooming victims (Katz, 2013). Thus, it would

be negligent to understand the formation of these online exploitative relationships without considering the role of emotions.

The theory of relational cohesion is anchored in SET but centred on an emotional-affective explanation for commitment in social exchange (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). Therefore, the premise remains that individuals are motivated to exchange with others to receive benefits otherwise unattainable. However, the theory also recognises that individuals have the ability to experience, interpret, and reproduce emotions resulting from the exchange of outcomes (Thye et al., 2002). As such, individuals experience positive emotional reactions from successful exchange and negative emotional reactions from unsuccessful exchange, and it is these emotional reactions that determine the bonds of individuals to one another and to the relationship itself.

The theory asserts that emotions are generalised responses that immediately follow a positive outcome, and these responses are themselves stimuli that lead to further cognitions and attributions (Thye et al., 2002). Specifically, relational cohesion asserts that positive emotions cause individuals to seek attribution for the cause of those emotions. Thus, individuals may attribute their positive emotions to their own actions (e.g., 'I contributed much to the exchange'), the actions of the other party (e.g., 'the online acquaintance contributed much to the exchange'), or the relations between the two parties (e.g., 'we both contributed to the exchange'). The theory presumes that since exchange is inherently a joint social activity, individuals will partially attribute their emotions to their relations. This implies that the individual will come to perceive the exchange relation itself as a salient object of awareness, and the concept of relational cohesion captures this idea. The theory claims that positive emotions induce a shift in cognitive awareness, such that individuals come to see their relation as being more important, stable, and valued over time.

Application of the Social Exchange Framework to understand the formation and maintenance of online exploitative relationships

Building on the social exchange framework that individuals relate to others on the premise of self-interest and rewards, the theory of relational cohesion would appear to complement the application of SET to understanding the formation and maintenance of online relationships, including those that are exploitative in nature.

First, given that the purpose of the exchange, including the decision to begin a relationship and to maintain the relationship, is to maximise benefits and minimise costs, and that this weighing-up process is assumed to take place prior to engagement, the online environment would be an ideal platform for social exchange. This is because it provides an opportunity to maintain social relations at a relatively low cost compared to offline relations in terms of physical, cognitive, and emotional effort. For example, unlike in-person interactions, online interactions do not require instantaneous responses and allow individuals to engage or disengage as desired. Relating to forming new relationships with strangers online, the nature of the online environment also allows one to simply ignore or disengage from others, avoid potential difficult feelings, and/or confrontations. All of which will incur a lower cost relative to the offline environment.

Closely related, children begin to develop a strong sense of self-identity and become increasingly concerned with how they are being perceived by others during adolescence (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). As social media becomes a central feature of young people's lives, the importance of social acceptance and perceived popularity extends to identity development in the online environment. Previous research suggests that adolescents who have low self-perceived social acceptance and low peer-perceived popularity have the poorest level of social functioning (McElhaney et al., 2008). In the same vein, online positive peer evaluations and

perceived popularity have been found to positively affect one's self-esteem (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Meeus et al., 2019).

However, the nature of online social networking, where information about social status such as number of friends, followers, likes, and comments can be quantified and compared, either publicly or to members of their own network (i.e., friends or followers), can create pressure for young people to keep up with social demands and to be seen favourably (e.g., being popular) (Nesi et al., 2018; Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Importantly, the accessibility of information, where judgements can be made about social status, can amplify it beyond online boundaries and encourage young people to curate one's image in its pursuit (Nesi et al., 2018). Consequently, according to the social exchange framework, the ability to increase social status at a low cost in the online space will prompt young people to engage in online risky behaviour, such as accepting friend requests from strangers, in an effort to increase their perceived popularity and peer acceptance.

Furthermore, the framework asserts that social capital, which facilitates the development of relationships, manifests in different forms, including norms and expectations. At the same time, the decision to begin a relationship is also contingent on similar experiences in the past. Acceptance of friend requests sent by online strangers (Heirman et al., 2016) and communication with online strangers (Savoia et al., 2021; Smahel et al., 2020) are both common practices among young people, with most reporting these interactions as pleasant (Smahel et al., 2020). Together, the normalcy of engaging in these online risky behaviours and their associated intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (e.g., positive experiences, increased self-esteem, popularity, and social status) suggest that social relationships can be embarked on with the aim of maximising profit with minimal costs. It is further postulated that the positive emotions elicited from these rewards will further prompt a young person to engage with online strangers. Thus, despite the fact that young people are aware of the potential risks of online

interactions with strangers, the benefits of engaging in them can seem to outweigh these potential costs.

The likelihood of developing a relationship is also dependent on the initial encounter between the parties. As discussed in Chapter 1, unlike some offenders who are direct in their sexual approaches, some groomers focus on developing rapport and trust with the victim for the goal of sexual abuse. Thus, victims of online grooming often report their early encounters with the offender as being pleasant, as the groomer would present themselves in a loving, caring, and trusting persona through the use of grooming tactics (e.g., flattery, rapport building) (Katz, 2013; Thomas et al., 2023). Accordingly, a young person is likely to be motivated by the positive emotions and rewards resulting from their interactions with the offender, especially since the costs would be relatively low at this point.

Since the framework stipulates that the decision to develop a relationship also depends on the degree to which a person values the exchange, this would appear to explain why young people with pre-existing vulnerabilities can be more vulnerable to online grooming (Whittle et al., 2014a). This is because the perceived benefits of online interactions (e.g., emotional support, companionship), along with the positive emotions, would make these online interactions more valued, as their pre-existing vulnerability suggests that alternative sources are unlikely.

Considering the role of emotions in relationship development and maintenance, the positive emotions elicited by the use of grooming tactics accumulated over time will result in a young person viewing the interactions with the groomer as valuable, explaining the strong bond previously described by some grooming victims (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2014b). Existing studies suggest that online groomers can alternate between a caring and loving persona and someone who is coercive, controlling, and threatening in response to non-compliance with sexual requests or disengagement (Joleby et al., 2021b; Kloess et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the theory of relational cohesion asserts that individuals attribute their own

actions to the emotions elicited from social exchange. Accordingly, the young person may attribute the positive emotions elicited from the offender's caring and loving persona as consequential to their compliance with sexually abusive activities. Likewise, the negative emotions elicited from threats and coercion may be attributable to their non-compliance. This would seem pertinent to the maintenance of online sexually exploitative relationships, as the social exchange framework rests on the premise that individuals are orientated towards rewards and avoid punishment.

Referencing the social exchange framework, resources including love, status (in the case of a young person viewing the offender as a romantic partner), and material goods are all 'exchanged' in an online grooming process. In the sense that grooming tactics such as flattery and rapport building and being in a "romantic relationship" are rewarding and associated with positive emotions, compliance with sexually abusive activities (whether or not the young person recognises them as such) can also be perceived as rewarding as the offender may positively reinforce these activities pre- and post-abuse (Kloess et al., 2017b). Sexual curiosity and physiological arousal suggest that sexual activity could also derive pleasure for a young person, despite the activities being exploitative (Katz, 2013). Consequently, compliance with sexually abusive activities will result in a young person receiving 'rewards' while avoiding punishment (i.e., threats and coercion) and its associated negative emotions.

The reciprocity component assumes that interdependence is manifested as mutual and complementary agreements on a long-term basis, motivating the other party to 'pay back' for receiving the resources over time (Ahmad et al., 2023). Thus, the rule of reciprocity would be particularly relevant to understanding victim's compliance with sexually abusive activities, as there is an expectation that the young person will have to 'pay back' the resources received from the offender. Indeed, victims of online grooming have reported feeling obligated to send sexually explicit materials of themselves in response to the offender sending a photo (Thomas et al., 2023). Moreover, framing the sexually abusive activities as 'equitable' has been reported

by Seymour-Smith and Kloess (2021), who found that male victims were asked to engage in sexually abusive activity in exchange for sexually explicit materials from the offender, who was posing as a teenage girl.

Although it would seem obvious that the sexual and emotional abuse experienced would outweigh the 'benefits' of staying in contact with the offender, the impact of grooming can be deeply entrenched to the extent that some victims refuse to cooperate with the investigation of the abuse (Katz, 2013). Chiu and Quayle (2022) also noted that some victims struggled to recognise the behaviour of the offender as abusive or to assign them culpability, even after receiving psychological treatment. Furthermore, victims of online grooming often described ambivalent emotions towards the offender, including feelings of love, need, fear, and anger, while enduring the abuse (Katz, 2013; Quayle et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2014b). Thus, the social exchange framework may also explain why some young people struggle to disclose the abuse, as they are emotionally heavily invested in the 'relationship'. Accordingly, ending of the 'relationship' would mean losing out on future 'rewards' and previous costs invested, both of which would result in an imbalance in the cost-benefit analysis. It would seem to be even harder for those who have been misled into believing that the sexually abusive activities are acts of 'love' to end the abuse.

Equally, for victims who attempt to break free from the abuse but are met by threats of non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit materials, the cost of compliance is likely to be viewed as incurring a 'lower' cost in comparison to non-compliance. This is because the non-compliance could risk an escalation of the use of threats and coercion and heighten the fear of the threats being acted upon. Similarly, disclosure may also be costly, as it may result in the threat of non-consensual sharing being carried out. Furthermore, disclosure will involve admitting engagement with online strangers and engaging in online sexual activities, both of which can lead to negative responses from others and have been cited as barriers to disclosure (Gill et al., 2021). This is consistent with the cost-benefit analysis, as the potential

negative reactions from both adults and peers would make it very difficult for young people to recognise disclosure as a 'better' alternative that incurs a lower cost in comparison to compliance with the offender.

Summary

Overall, the social exchange framework posits that individuals enhance a relationship and become dependent on the relationship by feeling committed. The feeling of commitment occurs when satisfaction is present, alternatives do not compare to the current relationship, and individuals are investing resources in the relationship. Thus, the framework would seem particularly relevant to understanding the initiation and maintenance of the online grooming process from the perspective of a young person. This is because the resources received from the offender and the promise of a romantic relationship could elicit positive emotions to motivate the young person to stay in contact. These feelings may be further intensified by the view that the 'relationship' is of a romantic nature. Since the framework views social interactions as based on the mutual flow of resources or behaviours of value over time, this would also explain compliance with sexually abusive activities or activities that the young person is not comfortable with, as they may feel 'obliged' to reciprocate the resources received from the abuser.

Arguably, online grooming, whether resulting in sexual abuse or not, is not a mutual exchange between the abuser and the victim due to the power imbalance. However, the manipulation of trust and emotions for the goal of sexual abuse can mask the nature of these exploitative interactions. The existence of sexually explicit materials, whether shared by the young person or non-consensually produced by the abuser, could also complicate the prospects of ending contact due to the repercussions of the sexual materials being made public, which is assumed to be associated with a high cost. Taken together, this discussion highlights the relevance of the social exchange framework to understanding the initiation and maintenance of OCSA across different contexts.

Verbal Sexual Coercion

Sexual coercion is described as sexual experiences that occur against a person's will as a result of verbal pressure or physical force by another person (DeGue et al., 2010). Although the use of physical force is not possible in the online environment, verbal coercion is frequently used to pursue unwanted sexual activity in general (DeGue et al., 2010; Fair & Vanyur, 2011). Verbal coercion in both subtle and direct forms, including pressure, persistence, emotional manipulation, and blackmail (e.g., threats of non-consensual sharing or physical harm), is also evident in the grooming literature (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Joleby et al., 2021b; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). It is important to recognise that young people are not always compliant with the offender's request and can display resistance to the suggested sexual activity directly, such as by saying no to the request or challenging the offender to leave the conversation. Conversely, they may resist indirectly, such as by using an excuse or ignoring the request (Katz, 2013; Kloess et al., 2017a; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023).

Analysis of transcripts of interactions between offenders and victims highlights that the dynamics often changed from initially being non-engaging to compliance following the use of psychological pressure such as persistence, persuasion, or threats if the young person did not comply (Kloess et al., 2017a; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). Verbal coercion in the form of threats of harm or intimidation can also be employed to escalate sexual abuse in response to the young person's refusal to engage in the suggested sexual activity or desire to disclose the abuse (Quayle et al., 2012b; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). Offenders may also blackmail the young person with their own sexually explicit material for further sexual or non-sexual activities (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). However, understanding of young people's experience of online verbal sexual coercion was limited when this study was developed.

Study 1 Rationale

At the time Study 1 was developed in 2013, research pertinent to online grooming had largely focused on stages of the grooming process and typologies of offender characteristics and motivations (Briggs et al., 2011; Seto et al., 2012). Consequently, the dynamics of the relationship between the victim and offender in the process remained poorly understood.

Given that interactions with offenders are a prerequisite to online grooming, developing knowledge of how young people form relationships online is crucial. This is particularly relevant as meeting new people online and forming developmentally appropriate relationships, including those of a romantic nature, is an integral part of young people's social development. Accordingly, the similarities between the grooming process and the general relationship formation suggest that examining the formation of general relationships with age-appropriate others can provide insight into how normative relationships with peers differ from exploitative relationships with adults. The knowledge acquired can provide insight, identify aspects that contribute to the initiation and maintenance of online grooming, and inform educational and preventive measures, such as understanding the early signs of online grooming.

Within the small body of literature examining the online grooming process at the time when this study was designed, most studies were based on clinical samples involving identified victims (e.g., Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2013) or convicted offenders (e.g., Quayle et al., 2012a; Webster et al., 2012). Studies had yet to examine the experiences of online grooming using a non-clinical sample, and no research had compared young people in this population and their experiences of forming normative and exploitative relationships online. Thus, focus groups were used to explore a non-clinical sample of young adults' historical online interactions with others.

The aim of Study 1 was to retrospectively examine similarities and differences between the initiation of online relationships with peer and adult online acquaintances. It specifically focused on examining experiences of coercion, use of flattery, and sexual requests, as these experiences could be indicative of the experience of online grooming.

The research questions were:

Before the age of 16:

- 1) What were participants' expectations when they were approached by online acquaintances?
- 2) How did these online acquaintances behave to convey their intentions of befriending participants?
- 3) How did participants determine the intentions behind these online interactions and behaviours?
- 4) How was trust developed in these online relationships?
- 5) Did participants feel pressured to disclose personal information?

3.2 METHODOLOGY

Design

Focus groups consisting of same gender participants were chosen, and the rationale for this design has been discussed in detail in Section 2.3.

Participants

Recruitment criteria included individuals who were 16 and above in further education or University students below the age of 25. The UK Children Go Online project reported that 75% of 9–19-year-olds had Internet access at home and 92% had accessed the Internet at school between 2003 and 2005 (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Similarly, the Oxford Internet Survey, which is an ongoing survey of Internet use in Britain since 2003, reported that 98% of individuals aged 14 and older in full-time education were Internet users in 2003, and 94% of those aged 14–17 were using the Internet in 2005 (Dutton et al., 2005). Since Study 1 data was collected in 2014, the upper age limit of 25 was deemed appropriate to examine the experience of online interactions with others retrospectively, as this age group would have likely accessed the Internet before they turned 16 in 2005. While this cut-off point meant this age group would have comparatively limited online experiences compared to their younger counterparts, research at the time often suggested that older teens had more access to the Internet and were more at risk of OCSA (Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2007b). Therefore, although research has since highlighted that children and younger teens also experience online sexual victimisation, the age limit of 25 was justified based on the available knowledge at the time.

Age 16 was chosen as the lower age limit because this does not require parental consent to participate. Participant age was not collected as it was suggested by the University Ethics Committee that this demographic information was not necessary for the purpose of the study. Gender was the only demographic information collected, and participants indicated whether they would like to take part in the female or male focus group. The final sample consisted of two focus groups. The male group consisted of four participants who did not know each other prior to the study, and the female group was attended by a group of friends of four. All participants were University students.

Procedure

All participants were recruited via advertisements displayed on the University campus and in the University email bulletin (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the advert). The focus groups were conducted on campus. All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix 2) prior to consenting to the study. It was made explicit in the consent process that, while participants were free to withdraw from the group, withdrawal of data after the focus group had taken place was not possible. This is because removal of individual contributions can compromise the integrity of the data collected and the dialogue that occurred in the group, thus reducing the ability for meaningful interpretation of the inferences drawn from the transcripts (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Moreover, identifying individuals from the recordings would also be difficult, as the recording was anonymised.

Participants were fully briefed about issues relating to the inability to guarantee confidentiality in a group setting and the need for the researcher to break confidentiality where ongoing criminal or safeguarding activity was concerned. To minimise breaches of confidentiality, participants were reminded at the start and end of the focus group to be respectful of fellow participants' confidentiality, and to refrain from communication about the session outside of the group (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Group etiquette, such as not talking over each other, was also introduced at the start of the group. Debriefing was provided at the end of the focus group, and a copy of the debriefing sheet was also provided (see Appendix 3). Participants received a five-pound Amazon voucher as a token of appreciation for their time. First year psychology students also had the option of receiving eight SONA points. SONA points were mandatory as part of the research method module for first year psychology students. Each group lasted approximately an hour and a half, and the focus groups were recorded by Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.

Materials

The focus group agenda (see Appendix 4) was designed to provide initial prompts for a semi-structured conversation within the group. It consisted of five general questions associated with young people's online behaviour and experiences. Each was characterised by an open-ended general question (e.g., how much would people trust the person they are interacting with?) and several subsequent probe questions (e.g., what is important in informing such judgements?) to aid further elaboration of responses. Sequencing of the questions was shaped by the flow of the conversation. This aimed to facilitate discussion and enable relevant issues to emerge without significant input from the researcher. The semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to follow up on issues that participants considered important in relation to the key topics and to clarify meaning with the participants during the interviews. The focus groups were guided by the principle of 'critical respect' (Gill, 2007), where participants' accounts were taken seriously while maintaining an understanding of the interview encounter, and the young adults' accounts were produced in a particular social and cultural context.

Data Analysis

The data was open-coded, and the analytical focus centred on the co-production of perspectives in the group context rather than on the perceptions of specific individuals. A predominately inductive approach was adopted, and the themes identified were strongly linked to the data because assumptions were data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the process of coding occurred without attempting to fit the data into a pre-existing model or framework. However, it is important to note that this is not entirely possible, as researchers are theoretically embedded and socially positioned. Therefore, deductive analysis was also employed to ensure that the open coding allowed for the identification of themes that were meaningful to the research questions posed. The use of deductive analysis allowed the researcher to bring a theoretical or conceptual framework to the data set and analysis to

ensure that the themes identified could be interpreted through a particular framework. This was reflected in the identification of gender sexual norms as a governing framework for young people's online sexual practices and experiences. The six-stage analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed and is illustrated in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

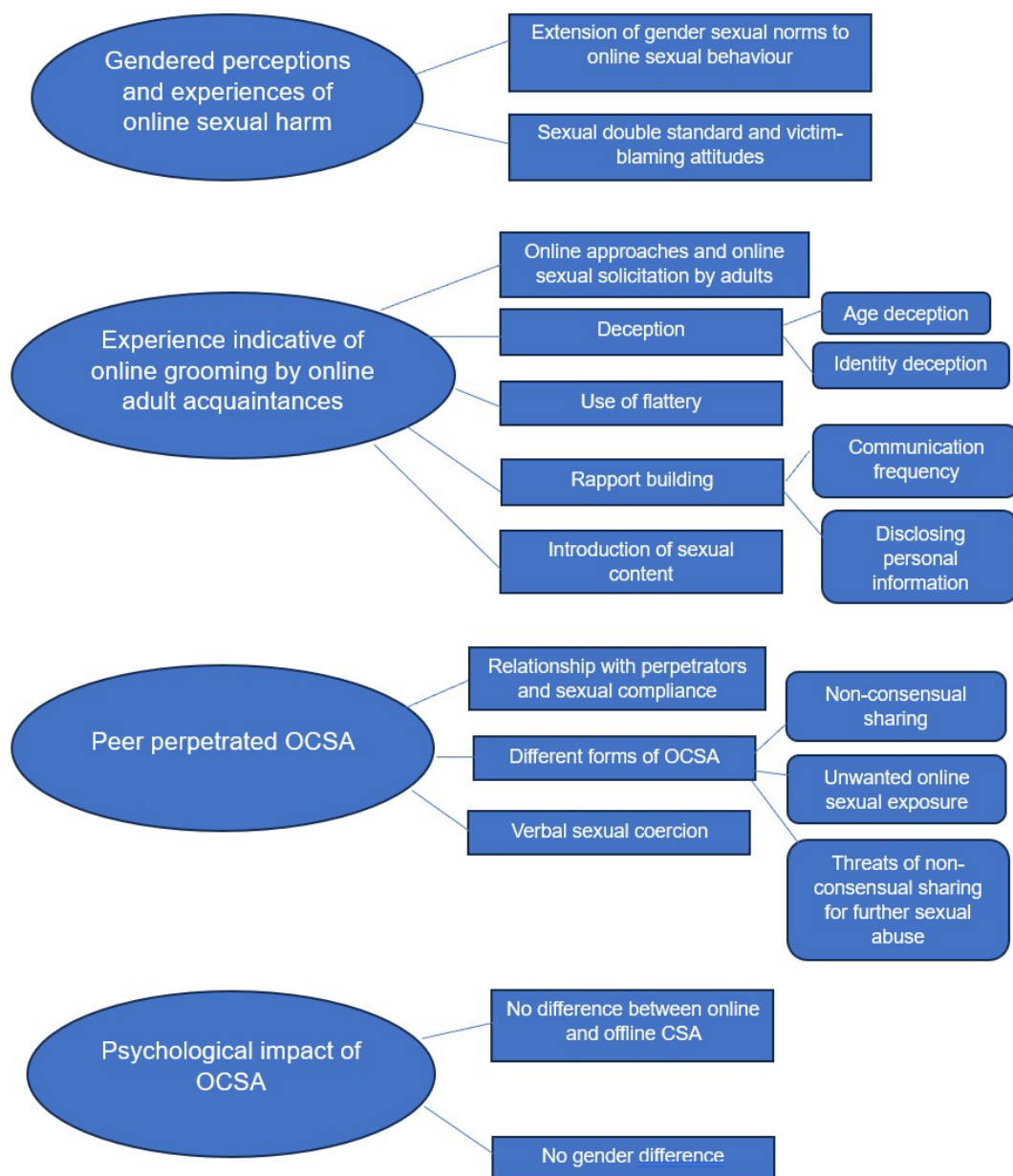
Phase 1	Familiarisation with data. This involved reading, re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas and transcription of each focus group.
Phase 2	Production of initial codes from the data that were considered significant to young adult's retrospective online experiences.
Phase 3	Searching for themes emerging from the different codes.
Phase 4	Reviewing the themes to ensure each theme represented coherent patterns and re-reading the data to assess whether the themes represent the young people's experiences and whether any additional data were missed in earlier coding stages.
Phase 5	Defining and naming themes. This is to ensure limited overlap between themes, as there is a need to consider the themes themselves and each theme in relation to the others.
Phase 6	Producing the report. This is the final part of the analysis where each theme is elaborated, and vivid extracts are selected from participants' accounts to capture the essence of the research question and relevant literature.

3.3 RESULTS

Four overarching themes were identified. They were: 1) gendered perceptions and experiences of online sexual harm; 2) experience indicative online grooming by online adult acquaintances; 3) peer perpetrated OCSA; and 4) psychological impact of OCSA (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

A Thematic Map of Young Adults' Experience of Online Sexual Abuse Before the Age of 16



Theme 1: Gendered Perceptions and Experiences of Online Sexual Harm

The focus groups commenced by asking participants to discuss their perceptions and experiences of meeting people online to set the context for the group discussions. It was apparent for both the male and female focus groups that the experience carried a sexual connotation, and interactions with online acquaintances were expected to be sexual. The nature of the experience, however, was different for the two genders.

For female participants, the expectations of interactions with online acquaintances were somewhat sexually deviant:

“Yeah, I expect them to be pervert or something” (Female 2)

“Obviously give them the benefit of the doubt but I’m not, I won’t be surprised if they are weird or pervy” (Female 4)

Such an expectation may explain why meeting people online was something to be wary of:

“I’m just very sceptical about it [meeting people online]” (Female 1)

“Because you don’t really know who’s behind the screen, so it’s better to keep everything open and then just hope that they’re not that person.” (Female 2)

In comparison, the topic of Internet chat rooms was immediately brought up when male participants discussed their experiences and perceptions of meeting people online, and the experience was discussed in the context of using the Internet for sexual activities, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

Male 1	<i>To get sex</i>
Researcher	<i>Okay. Just for sex?</i>
Male 1	<i>Sex is really easy</i>

Male 2 *I think it is very easy on the Internet to just find people, like sex or send nudes or stuff*

It seems that for male participants, the accessibility and availability of sexual opportunities online was abundant:

“for me, there’s always someone willing to do what you’re looking for, like in the market place (laughs). You want something and you’ll find it” (Male 4)

The introduction of talk about sexual activities without prompting from the researcher suggested that while the experience of meeting people online centred on sexuality, male participants viewed the online environment as providing an opportunity to pursue sexual needs. This placed females on the receiving end, which was evident by the anticipated unwanted sexual advances experienced by female participants.

Unwanted sexual exposure, such as receiving unwanted sexually explicit photos, was a regular occurrence for female participants, as illustrated in Excerpt 1 below:

Excerpt 1

Researcher *Have you received any pictures?*

Female 1 *YEAH!*

Group in hysterical laughs and all talked at once, hands clapping

Female 3 *LOADSSS*

Female 4 *Yea, I’ve had a lot of screenshots*

Female 2 *Same! Same!*

Similarly, unwanted online sexual requests, such as being asked to send sexually explicit materials, appeared to be taken for granted as an expected part of being online and normalised:

“but they [boys] expect it [sexually explicit materials] from everyone,” (Female 3)

“coz there’re so many girls, so yeah, they know they can move on.” (Female 4)

The talk about participants’ online experiences and interactions with others thus echoes traditional gender sexual norms, which ascribe sexual agency as a male trait and sexual passivity as a female trait (Hird & Jackson, 2001).

Sub-theme: Extension of gender sexual norms to online sexual behaviour

The extension of traditional gender sexual norms to young people’s online sexual behaviour and experiences was further depicted by a discussion among male participants of their views on males sending sexually explicit materials to females without being asked to:

“I have a friend, she was telling me ‘Oh I’m chatting to these nice guys’ and everything. And then eventually he sent her a picture of his penis and that broke everything. But I think for guys it wouldn’t be such a big deal [to receive sexually explicit materials without asking].”

(Male 1)

The normalisation of sending sexually explicit materials without being asked was echoed by other members of the male group:

“I mean obviously we know what he’s after, but I don’t think it’ll be like a deal breaker” (Male

2)

The trivialisation of unwanted online sexual exposure, that it was not a “*big deal*”, suggests there was an implicit assumption that this practice was not viewed as a form of harmful sexual behaviour. The discourse revealed there ought to be a ‘mutual understanding’ that these

online interactions would eventually lead to some form of online sexual activity and should be anticipated by the recipient as “*we know what he’s after*”.

Importantly, the accountability of the person sending the material was not addressed throughout the discussion, and the focus remained on the recipient’s ‘overreaction’ in response to receiving such materials, which was further voiced by another participant:

“1% [of females] receive nude pics would react badly ‘So you don’t have any respect for yourself?’ as if it was the perviest thing!” (Male 4)

Indeed, the jovial reactions of female participants in response to receiving sexual materials without request (see Excerpt 1 above) appear to imply that this form of sexual victimisation was equally trivialised by them. Thus, it appeared that young people regard this form of OCSA as part of everyday experiences that do not warrant action. These attitudes can inadvertently reinforce the problematic gender sexual norms where women are expected to be sexually submissive (Budde et al., 2022; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021) and explain why some young males seem perplexed when females spoke up against this form of sexual victimisation.

Together, these findings suggested that sending and receiving sexually explicit materials without request was expected and accepted as part of online interactions by young people. This dynamic is consistent with previous research, which suggested that the practice of sending, receiving, or being asked to send sexually explicit materials is inextricably linked to social expectations of gendered sexual behaviours, positioning females as sexually submissive and males as sexually dominant (Aanstassiou, 2017; Cooper et al., 2016; Dobson, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2021a). Consequently, these attitudes may guide how young people construct their online sexual practices and mask the harmful nature of these behaviours. This can have implications for both the young person who engages in OCSA and young people who encounter these experiences.

Sub-theme: Sexual double standard and victim-blaming attitudes

Despite male participants' expectations that the exchange of sexually explicit materials is part of a natural progression of online interactions, they also negatively sanctioned females who agreed to sending sexually explicit materials of themselves after being asked to do so:

"You'll ask for a photo and they either send it or they won't, and then you know what kind of person they are and that, and that I bet she will build your response." (Male 1)

The dichotomy of females who would and would not agree to sending sexually explicit materials was also echoed by other members of the group:

"If they do send the [sexually explicit] photos then you know that they're on the other side"
(Male 2)

The views indicating that females who agreed to send sexually explicit materials were judged for doing so are consistent with previous studies reporting that despite males and females both engaging in the exchange of sexually explicit materials, only females are stigmatised for engaging in this behaviour (Endendijk et al., 2020; Lippman & Campell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013).

Importantly, this double standard also extended to victims of non-consensual sharing, where victim-blaming attitudes were apparent towards female victims only:

"When I was in year 9. This girl in year 11 they broke up. She like, they had a picture of her, it went round that school they all know about it, and then as soon as you get that reputation. She didn't even do anything." (Female 2)

Although it was acknowledged that the victim was not culpable, getting *“that reputation”* indicates that there was a degree of negative connotation and victim-blaming.

Victim-blaming attitudes were also evident in other incidents of non-consensual sharing discussed by participants:

“He sent a picture of her breasts around school and then we were like ‘Oh my god she’s a slut’ she’s this and that. And then he was like if you don’t want it to be worse, cause she was a virgin, he was like gimme your virginity”. (Female 3)

The participant continued to share that the girl was threatened with a weapon and subsequently raped by the peer who had previously non-consensually shared the picture of her breasts in school. Yet, despite the multiple forms of sexual abuse involved including non-consensual sharing, threats of non-consensual sharing for further sexual abuse, use of physical violence and rape, the victim was labelled with derogatory terms such as *“slut”* by peers.

Indeed, there was a consensus among female participants that sexually explicit materials should not have been sent in the first place, labelling the behaviour as *“very very dangerous”* and *“serious”*:

“Don’t encourage, don’t start.” (Female 1)

“Sometime guys see it (sexually explicit materials) and they will expose you (share the materials non-consensually).” (Female 3)

By contrast, attitudes towards sharing self-produced sexually explicit materials were notably different among male participants, who did not view this online risky sexual behaviour as having many repercussions for them:

“You don’t know the other person (...) despite there being all these warnings ‘Oh if you put the picture online and then everyone will see them’. It’s not, it’s not in the front of your mind.”

(Male 3)

“It’s honestly never really been something in my head if I had put (sexually explicit) pictures like that online, then I always have my face crop out of them of something.” (Male 4)

When these materials were non-consensually shared, neither male nor female participants assigned culpability to the perpetrators. However, the perceived seriousness of this form of OCSA was described differently by male participants, who appeared to minimise the seriousness of this form of OCSA because they could not be identified from these CSAM:

“If they do post it online then it’s just a random penis or a random butt someone on the Internet that can easily not be mine.” (Male 2)

For female participants, victim-blaming attitudes were more prominent in the case of victimisation through non-consensual sharing or threats of non-consensual sharing, where the culpability was assigned to the victim for sending the sexually explicit material in the first place:

“You shouldn’t. It’s like you’ve given them that...that power. They’re gonna wrap you up longer” (Female 4)

In comparison, victim-blaming was not noted towards male victims of non-consensual sharing, and sympathy was expressed instead:

“She took a picture of his...whatever...and then put it on the boys’ college bathroom. School, everywhere posted it up. It was bad, it was really bad.” (Female 1)

The contrasting responses suggested that, despite the act of non-consensual sharing being acknowledged as inappropriate, only female victims were denigrated, as illustrated by the damage to reputation and peer disapproval. This finding indicates that the sexual double standard persisted even within the context of online sexual victimisation, where females are negatively appraised in comparison to their male counterparts for engaging in the same behaviour (Burèn & Lunde, 2018; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose, Regehr, & Whitehead, 2021b). This orientation is founded on traditional gender assumptions about male and female sexuality, where gender stereotypes favour both the attribution of responsibility to the female victim and overlook the responsibility of those who perpetrated the boundary violation. The differing reactions towards male and female victims were consistent with Endendijk et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis on the sexual double standard, which concluded that although gender roles have become less strict in most modern Western societies, this has not led to less differentiation in the norms for the sexual behaviour of men and women. Rather, the asymmetrical modes of judgement at play when males and females are subjected to boundary violations (i.e., non-consensual sharing victimisation in this context) are seen as being a normative part of young people's reality and being dominated by gender stereotypes.

Further examples illustrating young people's online sexual experiences being framed and governed by the gender sexual norms were apparent when the male focus group assumed the gender of the young person who was sexually solicited online to be a girl and commented that the victim "*was kinda asking for it*". When the group discovered that the victim was in fact a boy and did not go online for a while following the experience, the group responded with laughter and commented that the reaction was "*pretty coward*".

The reactions displayed by male participants towards male sexual victimisation suggested that when sexual experience deviates from the gender sexual norms, male victims can also face stigmatisation. Indeed, a mismatch between masculinity and sexual victimisation has been frequently cited as a significant barrier for males to disclose CSA and to seek help (Easton et

al., 2014) and prevents young males from talking about their online sexual victimisation (Hunehäll Berndtsson, 2022). Meanwhile, the differing responses between male and female participants to male sexual victimisation indicate there appears to be a gender difference in victim-blaming attitudes.

Theme 2: Experience Indicative of Online Grooming by Online Adult Acquaintances

Acknowledging that young people who experienced OCSA do not always recognise the experience as abusive (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Quayle et al., 2012b), terminology such as online grooming and victimisation was not introduced to the focus groups when exploring participants' experiences of meeting people online. Nevertheless, personal accounts and narratives of peers shared by participants revealed that many of the interactions with online adult acquaintances (i.e., adults who the participants met online) involved the use of deception, flattery, rapport building, and sexualised conversation, all of which are commonly cited online grooming tactics.

Sub-theme: Online approaches and online sexual solicitation by adults

Firstly, online approaches, including those of a sexual nature, made by adults who the participants did not know were commonly experienced by both male and female participants when underage:

“Oh yea like I get often. Anyone my age usually. We always get man in their 40s, 50s, 60s that um, try. You know to engage with you, but you obviously just ignored them. Unless you're into older erm. And then some of those ask if you wanna get paid for sex as well.”

(Male 3)

This experience was even more common among female participants, who unanimously agreed that these experiences were “*just a regular*” and described a plethora of experiences similar to those reported by online grooming victims. Although none of the participants reported they had engaged in sexual activity with online adult acquaintances following online interactions, their experiences of grooming tactics as part of their interactions with online adult acquaintances indicated that many of these encounters resembled those of online grooming resulting in sexual abuse.

Participants recalled that accepting friend requests from strangers online and adding people they had no connection with were both common online behaviours when they were young:

“Back in the day you accept e-v-e-r-y-body, and now no way!” (Female 3)

Female 1 *I added so many people*

Female 4 *SAME!*

Female 1 *People that I didn’t know and I started talking (giggles)*

Female 2 *And you keep talking to all of them*

Consistent with the speculation that the pressure of social acceptance and the rewards associated with increased social status online could motivate young people to accept online friend requests and interact with these online acquaintances, popularity appeared to be a motivating factor for why participants engaged in these online risky behaviours:

“(Popularity) will come first.” (Female 1)

“(Peers) Asked how many friends you have.” (Female 3)

“(Accepting friend requests) like getting numbers and like followers. More friends, more like, more commenting.” (Female 4)

Paradoxically, these socially acceptable behaviours appeared to increase participants' risk of online grooming, as evidenced by their experience of an array of online grooming tactics.

Sub-theme: Deception

All female participants shared that they had been deceived by an online adult acquaintance about their age or identity, both of which are deception tactics commonly identified in the online grooming literature.

Age deception

Some participants reported being approached by adults who were forthcoming about their age and used pictures visually depicting an adult-looking person:

- Researcher *Do they [adults approaching participants online when they were underage] have their own picture on?*
- Group *Yeah!*
- Researcher *So they won't hide about their age?*
- Group *NOOO*

Others described adulting pretended to be underage despite using their own photos:

"Like there was this one guy he was like 27 and I was like...14 at the time and he was telling me like he was my age (...) I bit of me believe him, just a little bit of me. I was just like maybe he really is and my friend was like 'Come on, don't be stupid'. He looked young (...) I did used to think he looks a bit older and then me and my friend, we investigated and we found he had a child" (Female 2)

These contrasting experiences were in line with previous studies reporting that age deception is not always used by adults when they approach young people online (Bergen et al., 2014; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019; Whittle et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Instead, Quayle et al. (2014) reported that the use of deception varied according to the type of access required, such as the perceived victim's need or to gain access to Internet platforms with age limitations.

The account also appeared to suggest that the adult's youthful appearance somehow overshadowed the participant's suspicion about his true age, as the participant was initially reluctant to take her friend's advice and intended to stay in contact with the 27-year-old.

Indeed, further group discussion revealed that young people differentiated between approaches made by 'older' and 'younger' looking adults:

"If it's like a younger guy then will be like 'yehhhh' (giggles). If it's like a(n) older guy then be like 'NOOO', coz it's like 'Oh no!'." (Female 1)

Thus, it appeared that pretending to be younger or looking younger can be advantageous for adults to establish initial contact with young people, as approaches made by 'older' looking adults were generally not well received:

"Sometimes, sometimes it's people [older looking adults] that you don't want to come, come"
(Female 4)

The distinction between 'younger' and 'older' looking adults can be problematic, as the narratives above illustrated that participants were excited by the approach and did not object to approaches from those who looked younger. This response might be because they do not fit with the 'dirty old man' sex offender stereotype often portrayed by the media (McAlinden,

2006). As a result, young people may perceive online interactions with ‘young’ adults as less risky and are less guarded to these approaches, which in turn increases their vulnerability to online grooming resulting in sexual abuse. Indeed, some researchers have reported that adults older than 26 years old only comprised a small proportion of OCSA offenders (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Villacampa & Gómez, 2017). A finding lending further support that the lower perceived risk of harm of ‘younger’ adults could increase young people’s risk of sexual victimisation (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). This argument can also be substantiated by the participant’s willingness to stay in touch with the 27-year-old despite having doubts about his true age. This supports the assertion that age-related deception can aid easier access to potential victims, as young people tend to be less vigilant towards online strangers who are perceived to be of similar age.

Although no sexual activity took place between the participant and the 27-year-old, Katz (2013) reported that young people were less likely to respond negatively when the offender revealed they were older than previously claimed as the grooming relationship intensified. This indicates that once access is gained, other grooming tactics used to strengthen the bond with the young person may outweigh the initial resistance to interact with adults, whether old or young-looking. The deception used by the 27-year-old online acquaintance would seem to suggest that the contact could become sexually exploitative should the participant maintain contact.

Identity deception

The present study also found that impersonation of someone of a more attractive character, such as good looks or wealth, aided adults in approaching participants online:

“I didn’t know him in Instagram. I didn’t know that he was rich. He was a good-looking guy and I’ll speak to him and we’ll skype together. And until today I don’t know how he got my skype to be honest.” (Female 3)

Although the participant had no prior knowledge of the impersonated person, it appeared that the identity was chosen because of his wealth and physical attractiveness. These qualities were also deemed by other group members to be a determining factor in whether to accept friend requests from adult strangers online. Therefore, it appeared that young people's online risk appraisal could be compromised by the physical attractiveness of an online stranger, just as they lowered their guard towards younger looking adults.

Consistent with previous findings that online groomers could create further false identities to prevent the young person from ending the relationship (de Santisteban et al., 2018), the participant reported that the imposter continued to lie and claimed to be the cousin of the impersonated person when confronted about his identity:

"I found him [the person whose identity was stolen] on Instagram and then I messaged him saying 'So are you the guy [the person whom participant had been in contact with]?', he was like sorry? so I messaged the other guy [imposter] 'Oh no it is me but I'm his cousin."

(Female 3)

This narrative depicting the online adult acquaintance stealing someone's identity and creating further false personas to cover their lies demonstrated the extreme lengths online groomers would go to establish and maintain a relationship with young people online.

Other examples of identity deception using lucrative cover stories were also shared by female participants:

"For me, it were. He gave me his models um. Skype, as well as talking, so I have a meeting about me being a model (...). He didn't go on camera 'I'm busy, I'm at work', so I thought hmmm, a bit dodgy(...). I was like I'll see what's going on but my dad found out." (Female 4)

In this example, it appeared that the initial contact was motivated by the adult's modelling profile, and the prospect of the participant becoming a model was used as further cover to progress to more intimate contact (e.g., video calls) with the participant. This form of deception is consistent with previous studies reporting that the promise of model work was a method to entice online grooming victims (Kloess et al., 2019; Shannon, 2008). Furthermore, similar to the narrative involving the 27-year-old online adult acquaintance, this participant also intended to stay in touch with the adult, albeit having doubts about his credentials, and the contact was only terminated because the relationship was discovered by her father. Participants' desire to stay in contact with these online adult acquaintances demonstrated that despite being risk aware, young people would still knowingly engage in online risky behaviour when there was an incentive to do so (Chiu & Quayle, 2022), and illustrated the effectiveness of grooming in enticing a young person to maintain interactions.

These narratives suggest that despite participants' aversion to approaches made by adult strangers online, deception of age and identity was effective in befriending potential victims. Tactics such as lying about being younger or appealing qualities, such as physical attractiveness and the promise of fame, appeared to lessen young people's hesitance to accept friend requests from adult strangers. It also prompted them to engage in further online risky behaviours by maintaining contact, both of which could increase their vulnerability to online grooming. These findings can be interpreted using the social exchange framework. Studies have reported that the visual nature of social media means people tend to focus on attractiveness and display material goods as status measures (Nesi et al., 2018). Consequently, online approaches made by good-looking and/or young-looking, wealthy adults would motivate participants to accept these online friend requests, as these positive impressions were likely to inflate the perceived rewards in social exchange and could have elicited positive emotions in the participants.

Sub-theme: Use of flattery

Consistent with online grooming studies reporting that flattery was frequently used by offenders in their initial approaches (Black et al., 2015; Joleby et al., 2021b; Whittle et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013), participants recalled receiving compliments from online adult acquaintances:

“They’ll be ‘Oh you’ve got nice pictures. Can we be friends?’.” (Female 4)

However, contrary to previous suggestions that flattery elicited positive responses, the use of compliments was unwelcome and had an opposite effect on participants:

“Getting messages from people [adult strangers online] and I’m like ‘ewwwww’ (sound of disgust).” (Female 1)

The difference found could be related to the different sample used in the present study compared to previous research. Previously, the positive effect of flattery was reported by identified online grooming victims who were sexually abused. Yet, sexual abuse was not reported by participants in this study. Thus, the opposite effect of flattery on participants highlighted that the use of compliments alone was insufficient for ‘older’ looking adults to initiate victim access and underscored the importance of the concurrent use of other tactics to manipulate young people in the grooming process.

Sub-theme: Rapport building

Indeed, consistent with the literature citing rapport as a crucial aspect of the online grooming process (Aitken et al., 2018; de Santisteban et al., 2018), the importance of the quality of the relationships with online acquaintances was emphasised by participants:

“Not the way they look, but the way they talk to you.” (Female 2)

Although the comment may initially appear to contradict the emphasis on physical attractiveness as a reason to interact with adults online (see sub-theme Identity deception above), this finding highlighted the crucial role of rapport building in the online grooming process as physical appearance appears to become less pertinent as the relationship intensified.

Communication frequency

When “*the way*” in which online adult acquaintances communicated was explored, participants revealed that frequent, prolonged communication and instant replies were all regarded as signs of a person showing interest. These behaviours elicited positive responses and encouraged participants to stay engaged, as demonstrated by the excerpt below:

- Female 2 *Talk to you first thing in the morning (...) during the day*
- Group concur*
- Female 4 *They message you all day*
- Female 1 *Yeah that’s the one*
- Female 3 *Or when you really do not have anyone around you*
- Group in agreement*
- Female 3 *Giving you attention and that person makes you feel special, you*
feel like they’re dedicating their time to you, to me
- Group concur*
- Researcher *So apart from that, what other things might they do? Would they be*
really quick in replying your messages?
- Group *YEA (all at once)*
- Female 2 *It has to be like ‘doo doo doo’ (imitating fast typing sound)*
- Female 1 *Literally like on your mobile phone all day.*

Social connectedness, such as feelings of belonging and closeness to others, as well as perceived support, are key social determinants of adolescent mental health and well-being (McLoughlin et al., 2019). Meanwhile, loneliness and a lack of support have been identified as risk factors for online grooming (Whittle et al., 2014a). In support, the excerpt illustrated the impact of frequent communication on those who lacked social support, as this behaviour was considered as someone “*dedicating their time*”, which made participants “*feel special*”. This prompted participants to engage with the person. Similarly, the intense contact described by participants was also in line with that reported by online grooming victims (Whittle et al., 2014b). These findings highlighted that frequent communication was an effective tactic for keeping the young person engaged and replicated previous findings citing social isolation as a risk factor for online grooming.

Similarly, developmentally appropriate needs such as romantic interest could also be exploited by online groomers to lure young people to stay in touch:

“I don’t really know how we actually became friends on Facebook, but we became friends and he just messaged me one time and then we started talking. And he was the only guy at the time that would show me ANY attention innit. So I was hyping.” (Female 1)

This participant also commented that there was “*not a lot going on in my life*” at the time when she was approached on Facebook, which would seem to suggest that she might have been less likely to interact with the online acquaintance if her romantic needs were met offline.

The excitement elicited by online approaches described by participants has been previously reported by online grooming victims who were sexually abused (Joleby et al., 2020). Furthermore, consistent with previous studies identifying that victims were often emotionally vulnerable when they were first approached by the offender online (Katz, 2013; Quayle et al., 2012b), emotional vulnerability was also evident in the current sample. Participants’ accounts

suggested that interactions with online acquaintances elicited positive emotions, particularly among those whose emotional needs were not fulfilled offline. Therefore, although none of the participants reported experiencing sexual abuse following interactions with online acquaintances, it would be reasonable to posit that these online adult acquaintances were in fact exploiting participants' vulnerability, and the attention given to the participants was used as a tactic to encourage them to stay engaged. Thereby, increasing their vulnerability to OCSA as the deceptively trusting relationship progressed.

Furthermore, tactful use of persistence was not negatively perceived but was instead seen as an affirmation that the person was keen and interested. This again encouraged participants to build a relationship with an online acquaintance:

"If it's the right kind of persistence...it's somehow healthy." (Female 2)

Together, these findings indicated that those whose emotional needs were not met in the offline environment could become less guarded and more susceptible to the attention given by online strangers.

Since interpersonal interactions are assumed by the social exchange framework to be driven by the maximisation of benefits, the companionship, attention, and prospect of a romance offered by an online acquaintance who showed an interest and would engage in frequent and prolonged communication would have offered participants rewards and positive emotions at a low cost. In line with the assertion that the likelihood of a person investing in a relationship is contingent on whether the interactions are viewed as valuable and whether alternatives are available, the present findings found that those with pre-existing vulnerabilities (e.g., feelings of loneliness, a lack of support network) responded positively to these online encounters. Meanwhile, the cost-reward analysis suggests that the more often individuals receive a reward, the more likely they are to engage in future actions under similar conditions. Thus, it

is speculated that communication frequency would have intensified any positive emotions derived from these online interactions and encouraged participants to stay in contact to continue receiving the rewards. Paradoxically, the emotional attachment, which is considered a cost according to the framework, would have increased the participants' vulnerability if these interactions were in fact exploitative.

Disclosing personal information

Participants' reluctance to disclose personal information to online acquaintances demonstrated an awareness of potential online harm:

"Totally in like different opposite country, world or whatever it maybe. It could be some old guy, you know, and you're talking to him, and he's making him looks like he's a 16-year-old boy, 15, 12 year old." (Female 1)

"Some of them they do like, they want to get into your pants and stuff or whatever it is, so you can't really trust people who you meet online." (Female 4)

However, it also became evident that the act of disclosure by online acquaintances prompted participants to reciprocate the gesture:

Female 1 *It was weird, but when the person opens up to you, like opens up to you. When they say 'Oh like I'm going through some stuff', then automatically (interrupted)*

Female 2 *You want to trust that person*
Group concur

Female 3 *You just want to open up to them*

Female 2 *Coz it's like they told me after I told you as well*

- Female 1 *And then it's just like 'Oh you want my number? You want to talk about it?' and stuff like that*
- Researcher *So you would offer them a chat?*
- Group *Yea*
- Female 4 *Coz then it's just, it's more intimate innit, when you're on the phone it's more intimate than talking online, and if they tell you something is going on then you just want to show that you care*
- Group agreeing*
- Researcher *This is interesting because you said that [quoting previous comments that one cannot trust people online as it's ALL LIES]...but what if people are just making things up?*
- Female 1 *That's the thing you don't know*

Whilst this finding contradicted previous suggestions that being a supportive figure and sharing a young person's problems were strategies used to gain trust (Olson et al., 2007; Whittle et al., 2014b), the present findings highlighted that disclosure of personal troubles could also be used in reverse to lower young people's guard. This confirms the suggestion that offenders are skilled in choosing tactics that correspond to the young person's need to maximise likelihood of engagement, as evident by participants' willingness to share their phone number to provide emotional support to the online acquaintance, despite their awareness of the potential risks of sharing personal information. Indeed, O'Connell (2003) previously reported that the difficult circumstances of the offender elicited empathy from the young person. This is similar to online groomers targeting young people's emotional vulnerability to facilitate trust in order for rapport and intimacy to be established (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2007). Analysis of chatroom transcripts has also identified generating commonality as an important element of rapport building used by groomers (Williams et al., 2013). Therefore, it would seem plausible that the act of sharing personal difficulties could be intended to collect

information about the young person to establish commonality with the intention of gaining trust and strengthening the rapport.

The rule of reciprocity, which is crucial for social exchange, assumes that humans assign meaning to exchanges and change their subsequent interactions based on a reciprocity balance (Blau, 2017). This was evident by the shift in participants' perceptions and subsequent behaviour noted in the excerpt above, where the perception of the risk associated with disclosing personal information was lowered after the online acquaintance had "*opened up*". This prompted participants to want to trust the person in exchange. Similarly, given that online approaches elicited excitement and subsequent interactions were positively received, the cost-reward analysis would suggest that participants would be likely to want to engage in these social exchanges to continue receiving these benefits, especially when the frequent and intense communication appeared to intensify these rewards. Meanwhile, although participants were reluctant to share personal information with online strangers, which would otherwise be a cost invested by the participant, the framework also asserts that individuals are expected to return the cost at some point. This might explain participants' willingness to overcome their reluctance to share personal information, such as their circumstances and personal contact number, with the online acquaintance to return the rewards they had been receiving. Since rewards are not immediate and social exchange is built on a long-term basis, individuals might choose to take the risk and invest in the exchange in the hope that rewards will be returned at some point.

Sub-theme: Introduction of sexual content

All female participants reported that their sexual history had been probed by online adult acquaintances when they were underaged, which is illustrated in the edited excerpt below:

- Female 1 *It starts off with 'Are you a virgin?'*
- Female 4 *Straight up!*
- Female 3 *'Can I ask you a question please, hope you won't mind' (imitating a male adult voice), some personal questions*
- Female 1 *So you know that's coming yea*
- Female 2 *'Oh what have you done with the guy' and then*
- Female 3 *From then they'll know what their next approach is. If it's a yes, 'oh what have you done?'. If it's a no, 'oh you want to? When am I gonna see you?'*
- Female 4 *'I wanna be the one for you'*
- Group concur*
- Female 1 *'oh let me be the one that takes it'*
- Female 3 *'I'll be gentle'*
- Female 2 *'I'm serious'*
- Female 4 *'I'm a nice guy oh you know, I wanna be with you. I like you.'*
- Female 3 *It's all lies*
- Female 1 *My stepbrother taught me the tactics. He's just like you do this, you do this. I would see him did that to other girls also*
- Researcher *What do you mean you see him do this to other girls?*
- Female 1 *My stepbrother, we're the same age. So I would see him talk to other girls and moves that he's made. The same approach that he used other girls that's how other guys approached me*
- Researcher *And he would do it to younger girls?*
- Female 1 *Yeah.*

These shared experiences suggested that being asked about sexual history and exposure to sexual topics were common interactions with online adult acquaintances. Although this experience was not reported by male participants, previous studies generally suggested that girls are more likely than boys to experience OSS (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2014a; Sklenarova et

al., 2018). However, disclosure of sexual abuse can also be more difficult for males than for females due to the mismatch between the experience and gender sexual norms (Hunehäll Berndtsson, 2022). Consequently, it is possible that male participants did not feel comfortable sharing these negative sexual experiences in a group setting, especially when stigma towards males' experience of sexual victimisation had previously been invalidated in the group discussion (see sub-theme Sexual double standard and victim-blaming attitudes in theme 1).

The speed of the introduction of sexual content also replicated those reported in the online grooming literature, where sexualised content can be introduced at the initial approach as well as when the victim is progressively sexualised (Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003; Webster et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013). This again highlighted that, despite none of the participants' interactions resulted in sexual activities with online adult acquaintances, their experiences were nonetheless similar to those of online grooming victims. Previous studies suggested that some online groomers spent time building rapport before sexual content was introduced (Webster et al., 2012). Thus, the present findings that participants were willing to maintain contact despite feeling suspicious of the online acquaintance's identity (and were in fact deceived) and to engage in further online risky behaviours (e.g., disclosure of personal information) once they felt trust had been established with the online acquaintance suggest it is plausible that these online interactions could subsequently become sexually abusive. Additionally, the excerpt above also provided evidence of peer-on-peer online harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) as it illustrated that young people were also using the same tactics as adults to lure peers to engage in sexually abusive activities, which will be discussed in Theme 3.

Although none of the participants' online interactions with adult online acquaintances resulted in online and/or offline sexual abuse, their experiences of deception, rapport building, flattery, and sexualised conversations resembled the tactics reported by identified online grooming victims or decoys in their interactions with the abuser (e.g., Black et al., 2015; Joleby et al., 2021b; Whittle et al., 2014b). Whilst it must be reiterated that the present study could not verify

if the end goal of these online interactions was CSA, the data suggested that many young people may have been unknowingly groomed by adults online and that these interactions do not necessarily result in sexual abuse. The present findings therefore highlighted the benefits of studying online grooming using a non-forensic sample and the need to broaden the conceptualisation of online grooming as it may not always involve sexual activities.

Theme 3: Peer Perpetrated OCSA

Sub-theme: Relationship with perpetrators and sexual compliance

Participants' accounts revealed that most of the online sexual coercion experienced before the age of 16 was perpetrated by peers rather than online adult acquaintances. It was also apparent that relationship with the coercer had an influence on participants' compliance with the unwanted online sexual request. The edited excerpt presented below depicts a narrative of peer-perpetrated online sexual coercion and its impact on the participant:

Female 1 *There was this guy, same high school so he was like in my year group. We like kinda close friend, like a group of my close friends. And then online he messaged me, he did not act like that [in person] I was a bit confused. We got talking. We got really really close, and then he said I want to see you on Skype and I was like no I don't want to come on Skype. He was like 'Send me a picture'. I was like here we go again. I was like no no. He was like 'Oh everyone's doing [sending picture]'. I was like 'Oh god' so,*

Researcher *You mean sexy picture?*

Female 1 *Yeah. So I googled a picture and sent him and he was like 'You're so fit'. I cropped the head out.*

Researcher *Why do you feel like you have [to send a sexually explicit picture]*

- Female 1 *He kept on going about it. He would text me, message me on my phone, on my msn, on my, say if we're skyping, he'll be like proper all the time, all the time, proper like*
- Researcher *bombarding you?*
- Female 1 *YEAH OH GOD! What am I gonna do? So I googled and sent him a picture*
- Female 2 *Why didn't I think of that!*
- Female 1 *Like proper pressurising me. It's bad, it's so so bad. Coz it was like if I wasn't thinking and I got pressured, I would have done it.*

It appears that despite the participant having declined the request to send a self-produced sexually explicit photo, the perpetrator's persistence placed her under immense pressure so that she felt she had to send "a" photo of an underage girl who resembled her physique to stop the harassment. The reaction from the fellow participant (Female 2) on hearing a Googled photo was sent instead also seemed to imply that she might have had similar encounters. However, she might have sent self-produced sexually explicit materials after being repeatedly pressured. Similarly, participant Female 1 said that she "*would have done it*" if she "*wasn't thinking*". This demonstrates the powerful impact of verbal coercion on gaining sexual compliance in the online environment and is consistent with the literature describing the pressure faced by young females to send self-produced sexually explicit materials (Ringrose et al., 2021b; van Ouytsel et al., 2017).

In contrast to the submissive response to online sexual advances made by peers whom the participants knew in person (hereafter referred to as acquainted peers), participants unanimously expressed that they would not comply with sexual requests made by online adult acquaintances who they did not know in person:

- Female 1 *Oh no. I would have been rude!*

- Female 2 *So will I.*
- Female 3 *You just be like 'No. Why will I do that?'*
- Female 1 *Swearing, fffing and jffing like 'Urgh you're disgusting pervert!'*
- Female 4 *Don't talk to him again*

The assertive responses to online sexual requests made by online adult acquaintances, including hostility, assertive rejection, and ceasing contact, suggested that participants were able to reject online sexual advances. This also supports the findings of Lenhart et al. (2011), who reported young people feeling bolder and more empowered in online spaces.

Yet, participants viewed that there would be more repercussions if the requester was known to the young person in person:

"It's worse in real life. Coz if you know and then I'll send you stuff. It's more intense because they know close friends." (Female 3)

Although it could not be determined whether the compliance was related to having a pre-existing relationship with the offender, the age of the offender, or an interactive effect of both, the different responses to online sexual requests made by online adult acquaintances and acquainted peers suggested that young people could be more vulnerable to unwanted online sexual requests made by acquainted peers, as they appeared to be less able to reject these requests despite having the skills to do so.

Sub-theme: Different forms of OCSA

Further to the experience of online sexual advances made by peers, other forms of online sexual victimisation by peers, including non-consensual sharing, unwanted online sexual

exposure, and threats of non-consensual sharing for further sexual abuse, were also discussed in the focus groups.

Non-consensual sharing

Further to the narrative depicted in Theme 1, where the girl had a picture of her breasts circulated in school by her boyfriend, non-consensual sharing was also described as taking place on social media following the breakup of romantic relationships:

“My friend, she sent a picture to her boyfriend in Switzerland. When they broke up, it’s on Instagram. Naked. Instagram. NAKED” (Female 2)

Meanwhile, young people were also sharing OCSA materials non-consensually on the open web:

“There’s this bit [on] a really famous website, where guys actually expose girls. There’s like fourteen-year-old girls giving like...fellatio and just inappropriate stuff” (Female 4)

Although it could not be established from these accounts whether the production of sexually explicit material was consensual at the time, assuming that the exchange of sexually explicit material is common practice within a developmentally appropriate context as suggested by the literature (Anastassiou, 2017; Döring, 2014), these results highlight that young people can still be at risk of OCSA despite the exchange of sexual materials being consensual at the time. The fine line between developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour and potential boundary violations can thus make it difficult for young people to navigate their sexuality online, especially when girls are often blamed for sharing the material in the first place and subsequent victimisations relating to the shared material. This is consistent with evidence that the experience of exchanging sexually explicit materials among young people is gendered and influenced by the sexual double standard, with young females being more pressured and at

greater risk of the negative consequences (Burén et al., 2022; Lippman & Campell, 2014; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019).

Unwanted online sexual exposure

Similarly, unwanted online sexual exposure was frequently experienced by participants and their peers before the age of 16:

“I’ve got my friend once in high school, where this guy was like harassing her for sex. It’s like ‘come over to my house, come over to my house’. She kept saying no. He said okay. He sent her a picture of him in a bath. It was like argh!” (Female 1)

In addition to receiving sexually explicit materials without asking for them, different narratives where male peers were heard or seen masturbating during phone or video calls were shared by participants, despite there being no sexual connotation in the preceding conversations:

“Just general conversation. I think I was talking about dance or something like that, so I was just talking to him and this guy FULLY masturbated.” (Female 4)

“I was talking about FOOD!(...) There’s been a facetime, there’s been a phone [call] he stripped naked for me.” (Female 2)

Further conversation revealed that both male peers persisted with sexual advances after being rejected and eventually masturbated in front of the participants without their consent:

“He was like ‘Let’s have phone sex, let’s have phone sex’ da da da da , ‘Oh you should do something [sexual acts]. I was just like ‘Nah I can’t do this’ and I just laughed. [the male peer] ‘You should do something’. I was like no I won’t (...) and then afterwards, I knew! He’d switched off his light and he will do whatever he will do. I’ll be like ‘okay bye’. The first time I didn’t know what he was doing, then realised, oh his guy masturbates!” (Female 1)

Whilst it was clear that the participant did not want to engage in sexual activities with the male peer, the narrative did not appear to indicate an intention to cease contact with the perpetrator either. Instead, the participant removed herself from the situation by ending the call to allow the perpetrator to “do whatever he will do” after learning that the peer would masturbate during these interactions. Therefore, although the participant did not comply with the sexual requests, the seemingly indifferent response to the repeated OCSA, including unwanted sexual exposure, unwanted sexual requests, and persistent verbal pressure, was consistent with studies suggesting that peer perpetrated OCSA is perceived as part of everyday experience and did not warrant actions or sanctions, such as ending the friendship or reporting the abuse (Aghtaie et al., 2018; McCarry & Lombard, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2021b). The normalisation of peer perpetrated OCSA and the minimisation of its seriousness can mask its abusive nature. Consequently, young people may repeatedly place themselves in these vulnerable situations, which in turn increases the likelihood of re-victimisation, as evident by the participant’s experience.

Threats of non-consensual sharing for further sexual abuse

Similar to adults who would blackmail young people with their sexually explicit materials to facilitate further sexual or non-sexual abuse (Kopecký, 2017; Walsh & Tener, 2022; Wolak et al., 2018), narratives shared by participants indicated that young people are also engaging in this form of OCSA. The threats of non-consensual sharing often result in the victim suffering multiple forms of sexual abuse, crossing between the online and offline environment, or vice versa, and sometimes involving more than one perpetrator:

“(Another friend) told me that basically this girl. They recorded her, they were lined up and they made her like kneeled down and all the guys came, and then because oh! Someone else has the video of her fingering herself.” (Female 2)

“So she was like I want to break up with you, and he (boyfriend) was like ‘why would you if I’ve got video of you giving fellatio to five of my friends’ and she stayed with this for like a WHOLE year afterwards. Just because of that video”. (Female 3)

Interviews with young adults who have been threatened by someone to expose their sexual images for additional sexual demands found that social responses are central in these experiences. The fear of disappointment and punishment from others or being severely judged has been found to prevent victims from disclosing the abuse (Walsh & Tener, 2022). Indeed, victim-blaming attitudes, especially towards female victims, were noted in the present study (see sub-theme Sexual double standard and victim-blaming attitudes in Theme 1). Relating to the social exchange framework and the theory of relational cohesion, the potential costs of the threats being carried out, which may include damage to reputation, judgement from others, and the anxiety of repeated victimisation each time someone sees the image, may thus be perceived to incur a much higher cost than compliance with the sexual demand.

Sub-theme: Verbal sexual coercion

The participants’ accounts demonstrated that different types of verbal sexual coercion, such as persistence, coaxing, and psychological pressure, were also commonly used by young people to pursue unwanted online sexual activities:

“I didn’t know what to do. I was put on the spot. ‘Where’s [participant’s brother name]?’ ‘Where’s your brother like?’. I was so confused. He was like ‘Relax man, chill like, you’re acting like you haven’t done stuff’. And then he was like ‘you take off your clothes’. I was like ‘I don’t feel comfortable.’” (Female 1)

“I remember the days I used to like you’ I was just like I was talking about FOOD! After he was just like ‘So what are you doing’, ‘I’m in bed I need to go to bed man’, he was like ‘Oh (participant’s name) I just wish I could there.’” (Female 2)

Both of the male peers proceeded to remove their clothing and masturbated via video or phone calls. Of significance, the question in relation to the participant's brother's location indicated that young people would also risk assess the environment, like adult offenders do, to ensure the victim was alone at the time of the abuse (Aitken et al., 2018; Black et al., 2015).

The use of persistence, coaxing, and psychological pressure indicated that verbal sexual coercion was used by peers in these experiences of OCSA. Livingston et al. (2004) asserted that the use of verbal sexual coercion differed according to whether there was a sexual history between the dyad in a sexually coercive situation. The authors suggested that positive persuasion (e.g., 'sweet talk') is often used where there is no sexual precedence, whereas negative persuasion (e.g., use of threats) is more commonly used when there is a sexual history. This would explain the absence of negative persuasion in these narratives, as there was no prior sexual activity between any of the participants and the peer perpetrator. On the contrary, the use of negative persuasion was evident in the narratives of peers' experiences of OCSA, where evidence of sexual activities depicting the victim was used to escalate the sexual abuse.

Similarly, the online grooming literature suggests that tactics that grant victims a certain degree of control, such as non-threatening seduction and minimisation of sexual activity, both of which were also evident in participants' personal accounts, can be used to create a false sense of autonomy to disguise the nature of sexual abuse (Quayle et al. 2012b). The use of psychological pressure, persistence, coaxing, the lure of establishing a more committed relationship, and risk assessment reported by participants therefore provided evidence that some young people were using similar tactics as adult offenders to pursue unwanted sexual activities online (Thomas et al., 2023). Significantly, the current findings highlight that verbal coercion may just be as powerful as physical coercion to obtain sexual compliance in the online environment.

Theme 4: Psychological Impact of OCSA

Irrespective of whether the sexual abuse was experienced online or offline, its negative psychological impact on the young person was clear in participant accounts, with no gender difference observed.

Sub-theme: No difference between online and offline CSA

Relating to the impact of verbal sexual coercion, the experience of coaxing and psychological pressure experienced in person was comparable to those experienced online:

“You know he [known peer who sexually touched the participant’s private body part without consent] just used his words, he was like ‘I thought we were good friends’, ‘I thought you’d expect more from me’ erm, ‘I’m not gonna hurt you’, you know, all of this riffraff. Arghhh the way he was saying as well (...) it made me feel guilty, it made me feel bad. And that’s what made me did what I did [complied with the unwanted sexual activity].” (Female 4)

The pressure of verbal coercion was also echoed by another participant who complied with unwanted sexual requests made by an acquainted peer online:

“I was pressured... don’t get me wrong I could have said no, but no was not in my vocabulary.” (Female 1)

The feelings of “*bad*” and “*guilty*” resulting from the experience of verbal coercion underscored the salient impact of verbal sexual coercion on gaining sexual compliance in the absence of threat or force. These findings challenge the hierarchical categorisation of sexual coercion, whereby physical coercion is often regarded as more serious than non-physical coercive sexual tactics (Fair & Vanyur, 2011)

Sub-theme: No gender difference

In addition to the feelings of confusion, fear, and guilt described by female participants during and following experiences of sexual abuse described above, psychological distress was also reported by the male participants:

“We did actually mention after we block him [the person who inundated participant and his friends with sexually aggressive and explicit emails] why didn’t we just do that before (...) there was a point where it stopped getting funny and we just start to get half bored and half scared of it.” (Male 2)

The impact of this experience carried into young adulthood as the participant shared that *“I think I’m never gonna be able to watch that film [which has the screenname of the perpetrator again]”*.

Although the participant and his peers eventually blocked the perpetrator, it appeared that they were only able to do so after the abusive interactions became too overwhelming. Similar feelings were also reported by those who experienced sexual coercion in person:

“I done it [complied with the sexual request] to make myself feel better, but then just, they don’t work coz I ended up feeling terrible. I was walking home and I think I started crying. I realised that ‘Oh no. This is not, that’s not what I wanted to do. I didn’t want to do that’. And I felt really bad so then I just stop talking to him, and then when see him, I’d go opposite way.”

(Female 4)

Likewise, avoidance was reported by those who had been approached by adults online:

“One of my friends told me like this story where they’d been approached then sort of just panic. Shut off the computer and didn’t go online for like a week.” (Male 3)

The avoidance of perpetrators as a result of in-person or online sexual victimisation furthered the evidence that sexual abuse, whether experienced online or offline, has a similar impact on the victim (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). The current findings thus re-iterated that OCSA is not less serious than that experienced in person.

Furthermore, non-sexual approaches made by online adult acquaintances could also cause psychological distress and heighten participants’ sense of vulnerability:

“When I get messaged by older people, I feel a bit disgusting, I feel easy even though I’m not giving up anything to them, but I just feel a bit easy coz I feel like do I look like I’m that?”

(Female 4)

“It’s because they think you’re young, you’re vulnerable so assume you doesn’t know anything.” (Female 3)

The comment appeared to denote a derogatory tone, implying that young people are approached by adults online because of the way they present themselves online (e.g., by looking “easy”). This victim-blaming attitude could potentially remove accountability from the perpetrator and, in turn, increase self-blame, as illustrated by the quote. These emotions also echoed those commonly reported by online grooming victims for complying with the offender and ‘allowing’ the sexual abuse to happen (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017).

Although the present study recognises individual differences in trauma processing (i.e., people react differently to trauma), the psychological distress reported following minimal non-sexual interactions with adults suggests that the consequences of online grooming resulting in sexual abuse are likely to be more detrimental, as the manipulative process can leave the young person feeling 'enmeshed' and believing they were an active part of the abuse (Whittle et al., 2014b). Thus, the 'participation' dynamics can act to compound the silencing of the abuse and trigger or increase the feelings of self-blame, shame, betrayal, and fear. In turn, these psychological difficulties could lead to further mental health difficulties, including self-harm and depression (Hanson, 2017).

3.4 DISCUSSION

This qualitative study was intended to retrospectively explore the initiation of online relationships between young people and peer and adult online acquaintances to identify similarities and differences in the formation of developmentally appropriate and exploitative online relationships. The group discussions were initiated by asking about participants' experiences and perceptions of meeting people online, and it was clear that these online interactions were highly sexualised from the outset. This was evident from participants' personal and peers' experiences of different forms of OCSA. These accounts were unexpected but deemed important and were explored accordingly. This approach followed the methodological principle of focus groups, as it allowed the researcher to examine issues that were pertinent to young people's online experiences. Thus, while themes such as *conflicting ideas of trust* and *online danger awareness* were also identified from the data, this chapter focused on the findings that informed the subsequent development of the research programme.

Two notable findings of this study were the experience of online grooming tactics without the experience of sexual abuse and the effect of these experiences on the participants. Within this

sample, although no participants reported that they had engaged in online and/or offline sexual activities following interactions with online adult acquaintances, all female participants had experienced varying degrees of online grooming tactics as part of their online interactions with online adult acquaintances. This suggested that some participants could have been unknowingly groomed. Despite having doubts about the online acquaintance's identity and being deceived, participants' desire to maintain these online interactions against their own intuition and advice from peers was clear. This is similar to previous research revealing that some online grooming victims were willing to continue with the sexual contact with the abuser after they revealed their real identity (Quayle et al., 2014). Thus, the present finding furthers the evidence that deception is an effective tactic for befriending potential victims.

The absence of sexual abuse could also be related to the fact that these interactions were terminated by the participants after interception by peers and/or parents. This is consistent with previous studies identifying talking to peers about online experiences, having supportive peers, and parental supervision as protective factors for OCSA (Aljuboori et al., 2021; Guerra et al., 2022). Thus, it would seem plausible to postulate that these interactions could eventually become sexual as the grooming process advanced if these online interactions were to continue.

Rapport building is fundamental to the online grooming process, and participants' accounts revealed that even for those who were reluctant to engage with online adult acquaintances, adults who adapted to the young person's needs could still build a rapport to intensify the interaction, which prompted participants to engage in online risky behaviour (e.g., disclosing personal information). The rapport building process described by participants highlighted that there are similarities between the online grooming process and the general process of relationship development. These findings also echoed the literature suggesting online grooming victims often perceived the offender as a friend or a trusted person rather than an abuser (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2014b). These data support the literature highlighting the skilfulness

of online groomers in entrapping young people in these exploitative relationships (de Santisteban et al., 2018). OSS was the only form of adult perpetrated OCSA reported in this present study, and consistent with recent studies, participants demonstrated that they were able to keep themselves safe by ignoring these requests (Gill et al., 2020). In contrast to the direct sexual approach in OSS, participants appeared to be more vulnerable to online grooming tactics, which are subtle yet highly manipulative. Thus, these seemingly general relationship building experiences could mask the exploitative nature of online grooming, making it challenging for young people to recognise they are being groomed, especially in the absence of sexual activity (Bryce, 2010).

Although there is not yet a standardised definition of online grooming, the experience is generally conceptualised as involving elements of sexual abuse. However, since most of the online grooming literature is derived from offenders or identified victims, sexual abuse would undoubtedly be evident in these accounts. Yet, the current findings indicate that online grooming can be experienced in the absence of sexualisation and sexual abuse. This suggests that the prevalence of young people who might have experienced online grooming is likely to be higher than official or empirical data suggests. This highlights the need to examine the transition from online grooming interactions to sexual abuse to understand what protects young people from this process.

Notable differences were identified between adult perpetrated and peer perpetrated OCSA in the present study, and a summary is provided in Table 3.2. The finding that participants and their peers experienced more OCSA perpetrated by acquainted peers than online adult acquaintances was consistent with Mitchell et al. (2014a), who reported that young people were more likely to receive unwanted online sexual advances from peers they knew in person. Furthermore, the different forms of peer perpetrated OCSA reported in the present study (e.g., unwanted online sexual advances), as well as the use of verbal coercion to obtain sexual compliance and risk assessment, suggested that young people were perpetrating OCSA in

similar ways as adult offenders (Thomas et al., 2023). While these findings are consistent with recent research suggesting that peers represent the majority of OCSA offenders (Finkelhor et al., 2022; 2023a), these were considered important findings at the time, as few studies differentiated between adult and peer perpetrated OCSA when this study was conducted.

Table 3.2

Characteristics of Adults and Peers Perpetrated OCSA

	Adult perpetrator	Peer perpetrator
Relationship	Online acquaintance	Offline acquaintance
Type of OCSA	Online sexual solicitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwanted online sexual advances • Unwanted online sexual exposure • Non-consensual sharing • Threats of non-consensual sharing • In-person sexual abuse following threats of non-consensual sharing
Use of coercion	No (likely because none of the participants had engaged in sexual activities with the adult perpetrators)	Yes, both subtle and explicit coercion tactics
Use of deception	Yes, but not always	No (likely because all peer perpetrated OCSA involved offline acquaintances)

This study also found that different forms of image-based abuse were perpetrated by young people. Of importance, the results also revealed that the abuse often crossover between the online and offline contexts and vice versa, where victimisation through non-consensual sharing online or threats of non-consensual sharing could lead to in-person sexual abuse. Similarly, young people could also be filmed engaging in sexually abusive activities involving more than one peer and later being threatened with the evidence of the abuse for further sexual harm. These findings indicate that CSA can be experienced simultaneously in both online and offline environments and within the context of romantic and non-romantic relationships, both of which have been reported by other studies since the completion of this study (Project deShame, 2017; Ringrose et al., 2021c). Furthermore, the present evidence

highlighted that not only are young people perpetrating OCSA, but some are also engaging in these harmful behaviours in groups.

The multiple ways of victimisation beyond digital means, including at school and in other in-person environments, can complicate the experience of OCSA perpetrated by peers, as the pre-existing relationship makes it more difficult to ignore, block, and delete these unwanted encounters from acquainted peers compared to online acquaintances (Project deShame, 2017). This was also apparent in the current study, where despite having the ability and confidence to reject unwanted sexual advances made by online adult acquaintances, participants complied with unwanted online sexual advances made by acquainted peers and maintained subsequent contact with these peers. This often resulted the participants being sexually re-victimised as they placed themselves in the same situation without taking action about the abuse (e.g., ending the friendship). The pervasiveness and normalisation of peer-on-peer OCSA has also been reported by recent research (Lewis, 2018; Reed et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2023).

Since online verbal coercion was evident in most of the peer perpetrated OCSA narratives shared by participants, it would seem possible that young people may fear that the coercion can extend to in-person interaction, which would be more difficult to decline as it could further escalate to physical violence. This was evident in the narrative where the victim was raped with a weapon by the peer perpetrator, who threatened her with non-consensual sharing. Thus, future studies should examine whether compliance with unwanted sexual requests is influenced by the age of the perpetrator (adult vs peer) or the relationship with the perpetrator (online vs offline acquaintance) to inform prevention strategies to protect young people against OCSA perpetrated by adults as well as peers.

The absence of the use of verbal coercion by adults found in this study does not suggest that coercion is not used in online grooming. Rather, since no sexually abusive activities had taken

place between the participants and the online adult acquaintances, the lack of use of verbal coercion supports the suggestion that coercion is mostly employed after sexually abusive activities occur (e.g., Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). This is because sexually explicit materials depicting the victim, whether sent by the victim or non-consensually produced, give the offender leverage to blackmail the victim into further abusive activities. This was evident in the use of verbal coercion by peers to escalate the sexual abuse found in this study. Nevertheless, the experience of verbal sexual coercion, such as coaxing or psychological pressure, in the absence of force or threat, was no less effective in gaining compliance. This highlights the need to examine verbal sexual coercion within the context of OCSA to understand how certain tactics are used to facilitate the abuse.

Importantly, the comparable psychological impact of CSA experienced in person and online found in this study underscores the urgent need for society to recognise the seriousness of OCSA and to respond to this form of sexual abuse in the same way as offline CSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017).

Application of the Social Exchange Framework

The experience of being approached by online adult acquaintances and subsequent interactions, as well as compliance with unwanted sexual requests with acquainted peers, could both be interpreted in reference to the SET and the theory of relational cohesion.

Except for OSS made by online adult acquaintances, participants' accounts suggested that they valued online interactions with online adult acquaintances and that these interactions mostly had a positive impact on how they felt about themselves (e.g., that someone showed an interest). These perceived rewards appeared to encourage them to continue with these online interactions, and on occasions, they would return the cost by offering emotional support and engaging in further online risky behaviour. The framework would also explain the assertive

rejection of direct sexual approaches made to online adult acquaintances, as the cost of engaging in these exchanges would be too high, especially since the female participants were wary of the potential online risks and did not appear to be actively seeking sexual experiences online. Consequently, engaging with the received sexual request would seem to have a high cost with little to no perceived rewards for the participants. Similarly, this framework could also offer an insight into why some participants did not terminate the friendship with the peer perpetrator, as there could be higher stakes involved, such as having to explain to mutual friends why the relationship ended. Furthermore, the disclosure of unwanted sexual advances is likely to carry negative connotations for females and their reputation, which is likely to be perceived as highly costly.

Implications of Gender Sexual Norms on Young People's Online Sexual Practices

Narratives about males experiencing OCSA were much less frequent in the data than those involving females. This is consistent with research suggesting females are more vulnerable to OCSA in general (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Economist Impact, 2023a; Project deShame, 2017; Reed et al., 2020). However, this finding is not to suggest young males do not experience OCSA. Rather, the gender sexual norms may account for the discrepancy as sexual victimisation mismatches with the sexual prowess assigned to males, a position that resonates with the sexualised view of online interaction expressed by the male participants. In support, Hunehall Berndtsson (2022) reported that heterosexual masculinity prevents young males from recognising and identifying online harmful sexual practices and from talking about their experience of sexual victimisation. Previous findings also suggested that groomers often posed as females when approaching male victims (Whittle et al., 2014b). It is therefore possible that male participants have encountered online sexually exploitative approaches, but the view that the online environment provides abundant opportunities to pursue sexual activity and the potential identity deception used by offenders make them less able to identify these behaviours. Indeed, Bennett and O'Donohue (2020) reported that the tendency for females to

be guarded around sexual approaches has led to them outperforming males in detecting grooming behaviour. Meanwhile, gender sexual norms as a significant barrier for males to disclose CSA may also explain the discrepancy in the experiences of OCSA shared by participants, especially since unhelpful reactions to male sexual victimisation were also voiced in the male focus group.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that unwanted online sexual advances made by adults or peers were embedded in participants' digital lives and, to some extent, normalised and expected. This is consistent with the literature (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Jeffrey & Barata, 2019; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). The taken for granted representations of the different forms of sexual victimisation, such that these behaviours do not warrant reporting or discontinuing the exploitative relationship with the perpetrator, thereby allowing repeated victimisation, have since been reported in other studies (Dobson, 2019). Similarly, the finding that young females were often pressured into engaging in unwanted online sexual activities and were condemned by both male and female peers for doing so, even when faced with further sexual victimisation, is in line with other researchers suggesting that online sexual practices, including online HSB, are deeply rooted in gender sexual norms where sexual double standard plays an important role (Burén et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). The evidence underscores the extent to which gender sexual norms govern young people's online sexual behaviours and experiences.

It is important to note that peer perpetrated OCSA is harmful to both the perpetrator and the victim. Yet, there is increasing evidence that online HSB is trivialised by professionals working with young people, with little repercussions assigned to the perpetrator and victim-blaming assigned to the victim (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Quayle et al., 2023). These attitudes are likely to reinforce the normalisation of online sexual harm held by young people while encouraging victim-blaming by placing responsibility for (preventing) the abuse with the victim, rather than the perpetrators, which can have serious implications for young people's healthy sexual development as these harmful attitudes may carry into adulthood.

Strengths and Limitations

The data was collected in 2014 and was written up retrospectively. Therefore, the researcher was mindful of subjective bias, where interpretation of the data might be unconsciously fit into more recent research evidence related to some of the themes identified (Galdas, 2017). It is argued, however, that the present findings confirm that key findings such as the normalisation of OCSA, peer perpetrated OCSA, and the extension of gender sexual norms in shaping these experiences are supported (Project deShame, 2017). Similarly, more recent research examining the impact of OCSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017) and the prevalence of peer perpetrated OCSA (Finkelhor et al., 2022) is also consistent with the current findings.

Since young people may not necessarily recognise their experiences as exploitative, terminology such as victimisation and grooming was purposefully avoided to label narratives of OCSA shared within the group. This also minimised the social desirability bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2019) or the pressure on participants to disclose these experiences. Importantly, the data highlighted that online grooming experiences do not always result in sexual activities. Thus, participants might not relate them to their exploitative experiences if these terminologies were used.

One of the possible limitations of the focus groups is that they encourage uniformity of responses. For instance, participants may perform their gender identity (e.g., ideal femininity) to the wider group (Nayak & Kehily, 2006). However, this contradicts the various accounts of sexual victimisation shared by female participants. The desire to conform was likely to be buffered by the female focus group being a group of friends, as studies generally suggest that young people are most likely to disclose negative online sexual experiences to their peers (Katz et al., 2021; Priebe et al., 2013). Thus, participants were likely to be more comfortable discussing these experiences in this group setting.

The gendered sexual practices that emerged from the present study also demonstrates that the use of single-gender groups was advantageous, as this might have created a safer space for participants to talk about their online sexual experience compared to a mixed-gender setting. The researcher was also mindful of the potential gendered implications of a female researcher interviewing males about sexual behaviour. However, previous research has demonstrated that gender dynamics do not limit male participants from discussing sexually degrading practices with female researchers (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011).

However, the dichotomy of the male and female genders, based on the assumption of heterosexuality, was recognised as a limitation of the present study. The focus group discussions centred around heterosexual interactions and did not explore the experience and impact of gender norms and roles for young people who identified as LGBTQ. Indeed, as previously discussed in Chapter 1, young people identified as LGBTQ are often found to be more at risk of online sexual victimisation than heterosexual young people (Economist Impact, 2023a; Sklenarova et al., 2018). Yet, the majority of existing research on young people's online sexual behaviour has predominately focused on cisgender sexual norms (except for van Ouytsel et al., 2019). Thus, the role of gender identity and sexuality in influencing LGBTQ youth's online sexual experience and online sexual victimisation remains poorly understood and will need to be investigated by future studies. Heterosexual males may also benefit from being interviewed individually rather than in a group setting to overcome the barrier of social expectations relating to males' sexual victimisation to understand their experience of OCSA (Easton & Parchment, 2021). Nevertheless, the advantage of using focus groups was evidenced by the accounts collectively produced by participants, which underscored that OCSA perpetrated by peers or adults was pertinent to young people's online experiences and shaped the discussion of the issues explored in the group.

Recruitment was difficult, and the researcher was cognisant of the number of focus groups conducted and the number of participants who took part in each group. Nevertheless, the use

of small groups has been found to facilitate studies of sensitive topics and can be particularly important to facilitate disclosure and discussion (see Section 2.3 for a detailed discussion). Therefore, the number of participants who participated in the focus group was deemed sufficient for the topic researched. While more data would allow data saturation, the overlapping themes suggested sufficient data was generated from the number of groups used for the analysis. Lastly, it was deemed necessary to include lengthy excerpts as the interactional dynamics capture vividly the collective perspectives and experiences shared by participants (Grønkjær et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This qualitative study indicated that, within this sample of University attending young adults, different forms of OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers were commonly experienced by the participants and their peers before the age of 16. None of the online interactions with online adult acquaintances resulted in online and/or offline sexual abuse, but descriptions of these interactions involving identity deception, flattery, bribery, and rapport building were indicative of online grooming. This finding indicates that the online grooming experience do not necessarily result in sexual abuse. This warrants a quantitative examination of the prevalence of online grooming tactics and a closer examination of the online grooming process to better understand this form of CSA. It is also significant that the majority of OCSA experiences were perpetrated by peers who were known to the young person. There was also clear evidence of young people using verbal coercion to pursue unwanted online sexual activities and that peer perpetrated CSA often crossed over between online and offline environments. Young people were also found to be engaging in similar tactics as adult offenders. Yet, neither peer perpetrated OCSA nor the use of verbal coercion were well understood at the time Study 1 was completed.

The impact of OCSA was distressing and comparable to the impact of offline CSA, with no gender difference observed. Yet, there is currently a limited understanding of the impact of OCSA. At the same time, the prevalence of OCSA perpetrated by peers highlighted the need to examine the nuances of OCSA in relation to the age of the perpetrator. For these reasons, Study 3 examined the long-term impact of OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers.

Consistent with the literature on online grooming, where the use of grooming tactics is crucial for offenders to approach potential victims and facilitate sexual abuse, the present study found that grooming tactics were frequently experienced by participants as part of their online interactions with online acquaintances. Yet, the present finding highlighted that the experience of grooming tactics did not always result in sexual abuse. This raised the question of what other online experiences could increase young people's vulnerability to online grooming resulting in sexual abuse. Therefore, based on the knowledge of the online grooming process derived from the qualitative literature, Study 2 examined the prevalence of online grooming tactics, verbal sexual coercion, and other forms of OCSA and the relationships between these variables and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Taking into account the influence of peers on young people's online sexual behaviour and the lack of understanding of risk factors beyond the microsystem in the ecological model, the role of peer norms and their relationship with online grooming was also examined in Study 2.

CHAPTER 4 STUDY 2

Examining the prevalence of different forms of OCSA and predictors of online grooming activities using a young adult sample

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Transition from Online Approaches by Adults to Sexual Abuse

The examination of online sexual solicitation (OSS) primarily focuses on receiving sexual requests from adults online (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Wolak et al., 2007). Although these behaviours are illegal and the young person can feel distressed as a result of these encounters, existing studies suggest that young people are generally able to ignore these requests, and participants' accounts in Study 1 also supported this. Without normalising the experience of OSS, as this is a form of OCSA, this study contends that receiving sexual requests should be distinguished from engaging with the requests. Importantly, findings from Study 1 highlighted that OSS by online adult acquaintances (i.e., adults who were met online) did not lead to further sexual interactions with these adults. Rather, it was the non-sexual interactions, such as rapport building, intensive communication, and the use of deception (e.g., age or identity), that encouraged interactions with online adult acquaintances and acquaintances whose age participants were unsure of. Although none of these online interactions resulted in sexual abuse, which is likely attributable to the fact that the interactions were terminated through interception by family and/or peers or following discovery of the use of deception, the intentions to maintain contact with online adult acquaintances were clear. The experience of online grooming tactics therefore highlights the need to examine the online grooming process in a non-forensic population to understand the factors that may predict online grooming resulting in sexual abuse. For the purpose of this Study, the term *online*

grooming activities encompasses the experience of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

Existing studies revealed that many young people experienced physical sexual assault in the first face-to-face meeting following online communication (Katz, 2013; Marret & Choo, 2017; Rowse, 2023). While it is not always clear from these studies whether the young person was already experiencing OCSA prior to the face-to-face meeting, the evidence suggests that agreeing to meet with an online (adult) acquaintance appears to be associated with offline sexual abuse. To understand the nuances of the online grooming process, the present study separately examined the predictors of the experience of being asked by online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse following online interactions with online adult acquaintances before the age of 16.

Online Grooming Tactics

Despite the fact that no online grooming experience will be identical, accounts from offenders and victims, as well as linguistic analysis of offender-victim and/or offender-decoy interactions, suggest that online grooming tactics such as deception, flattery, bribery, and threats and coercion are often used in varying degrees throughout the process (Black et al., 2015; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018a; Kloess et al., 2019; Whittle et al., 2013; 2014b). Study 1 also provided evidence that grooming tactics were commonly experienced as part of young people's online interactions with online acquaintances. Yet, the scale of the experience of online grooming tactics is poorly understood, as most of the knowledge is derived from qualitative research involving identified victims. To address this, the present study examined the prevalence and types of online grooming tactics experienced by young adults before the age of 16. It also examined whether the experience of online grooming tactics would predict sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances to add to the currently lacking quantitative evidence related to this form of OCSA in the literature.

Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure and Pressured Online Sexual Activities

In addition to the use of grooming tactics, unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured sexual activities have been identified as elements of the online grooming process (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Whittle et al., 2014b). Existing literature suggests that while some offenders make their sexual intentions clear, others gradually sexualise the victim to ensure compliance with the abusive activities (Chiang & Grant, 2017; Kloess et al., 2019; Lorezno-Dus & Izura, 2017; Whittle et al., 2014). Offenders have also been found to subtly or overtly pressure victims to engage in different online sexual activities during the process of sexualisation to intensify the sexual abuse (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Joleby et al., 2021b; Shannon, 2008). Yet, when this study was conducted, studies had yet to quantitatively examine the experience of unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured online sexual activities, or the relationships between these two distinct forms of OCSA and online grooming.

For the purpose of this study, unwanted online sexual exposure is defined as the experience of being exposed to sexual content without asking for it. This can include receiving unwanted sexual comments online, receiving photos or videos without asking for them, or seeing someone engaging in sexual activities via live chat without agreeing to it. The experience of pressured online sexual activities can include sending self-produced sexually explicit materials under pressure, being pressured into talking about sex online, as well as being pressured into engaging in online sexually abusive activities such as the victim removing their own clothing or sexual touching of themselves. The inclusion of different types of unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured online sexual activities is important to encapsulate the diversity of these harmful online sexual experiences. This also overcomes the limitation of measuring these experiences by using a single item.

Research studies also indicate that unwanted online sexual exposure can also be experienced by young people from peers, and that this is normalised among young people (Ricciardelli &

Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose, Regehr, & Whitehead, 2021c). The literature suggests that young people are engaging in different forms of OCSA, including sending sexually explicit materials of themselves without the recipient's consent, actively seeking sexually explicit materials from peers in ways that make them uncomfortable, and coercing peers into engaging in unwanted online sexual activities (Belton & Hollis, 2016; Lewis, 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Project deShame, 2017; Vaswani et al., 2022). For example, in a large Portuguese study of young people aged between 12 and 20 years old, Barroso et al. (2021) found that 4.8% had sent sexual content to someone without the recipient's consent, and 4.3% reported receiving sexual content without asking for it. These findings are consistent with the results of Study 1, which highlighted that young people are also experiencing OCSA perpetrated by peers.

Online sexual activity with peers can be part of healthy sexual development, and young people have reported that it has positive aspects, such as enhancement of personal relationships (Raine et al., 2020). Therefore, it is asserted that consensual sexual activities with a peer should be distinguished from doing so under pressure or coercion, as the unwanted nature qualifies the experience as victimisation, even if the person is age appropriate. Yet, at the time of Study 2's development in 2018, few studies had examined whether online sexual activity engaged in with peers was voluntary or pressured (Cooper et al., 2016; Molla-Esparza et al., 2020), and thus knowledge about peer perpetrated OCSA was much less developed.

Furthermore, research at the time also tended to focus on the examination of the exchange of sexually explicit material. As a result, the experience of unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured online sexual activity received little attention, which makes establishing a prevalence of the different forms of OCSA a challenge. Based on these gaps in the literature, the present study examined the prevalence of different types of unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured online sexual activities perpetrated by adults and/or peers, as well as the relationship between these two distinct forms of OCSA and online grooming.

Verbal Sexual Coercion Tactics

Since the present study examined different forms of OCSA, it also sought to examine the types of verbal sexual coercion tactics encountered when being pressured into engaging in unwanted online sexual activities. The online grooming literature highlights that offenders use various strategies to overcome victim resistance to comply with sexual abuse, including persistence, expressing disappointment or sadness, pressuring or begging, etc. (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2021b; Kloess et al., 2017b; 2019). These strategies centre on manipulating the young person and overcoming their resistance. At the same time, direct approaches such as threats, intimidation, and overt persuasion can also be employed to incite more extreme sexual acts and/or to escalate sexual abuse when the victim becomes non-compliant, or to prevent abuse disclosure (Chiang & Grant, 2017; 2019; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021).

Similarly, as illustrated above, young people can also be coerced or pressured by peers into engaging in online sexual activities. In support, Study 1 revealed that young people frequently experienced verbal sexual coercion as part of their online interactions with peers, and some had engaged in unwanted online sexual activities following being pressured. More evidence came from Jonsson et al. (2019), who reported that nearly 10% of young people who met people (age not specified) online for the purpose of engaging in online sexual activity felt persuaded or coerced during these encounters.

Despite the growing evidence that young people are experiencing verbal sexual coercion in the online environment from peers, sexual coercion was predominately examined within the context of adolescent intimate partner violence (IPV) at the time when this study was conducted (Kistin et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2017; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019). As such, verbal sexual coercion experienced online was poorly understood. Importantly, there was no research that examined the type of verbal sexual coercion tactics experienced online. To

address this under-researched topic, the present study examined the prevalence and types of verbal sexual coercion tactics experienced that led to engagement in unwanted online sexual activity before the age of 16. Taking into account the use of coercion identified in the qualitative online grooming literature (e.g., Kloess et al., 2017b), the present study also examined the relationship between the experience of verbal sexual coercion and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

Victimisation Through Non-Consensual Sharing

Research suggests that young people who share self-produced sexually explicit material, whether voluntarily or under pressure, can be at risk of victimisation through non-consensual sharing (Anastassiou, 2017; Barroso et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2021; Walker & Sleath, 2017). They can also be blackmailed or threatened by adults and/or peers with their own sexual materials for further sexual or non-sexual abuse (Kopecký, 2017; Madigan et al., 2018a; Walsh & Tener, 2022; Wolak et al., 2018). As demonstrated in Study 1 and previous studies (van Ouytsel et al., 2017), the motivations for non-consensual sharing can also be malicious or for revenge after a romantic breakup. However, young people have also described other motives for non-consensual sharing, such as for 'fun', to impress peers for having received such materials, or for no reason at all, with a small proportion not recognising any wrongdoing (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; van Ouytsel et al., 2017). Regardless of the motivations, this form of OCSA is highly traumatising and has been linked to poorer mental health (Finkelhor et al., 2023a; 2023b; Gassó et al., 2020; Wachs et al., 2021). Additionally, victims often experience further victimisation, such as social shaming and bullying in the aftermath (Setty, 2019; van Ouytsel et al., 2017).

Further to the violation of trust and privacy, the removal of material from the Internet is extremely difficult (Joleby et al., 2020). Even when the material is shared via phone messages, digital circulation makes it possible for recipients to make and save copies of the material,

making it virtually impossible for it to be completely removed or unseen (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Consequently, victims are re-victimised each time the material is viewed or re-circulated. Victims of non-consensual sharing and threats of non-consensual sharing often described self-blame for sending the material, despite the act being consensual at the time, and the struggle of having to live with the constant fear of pictures from the abuse resurfacing, as they can neither be certain when the materials may appear nor who they are being abused by (Joleby et al., 2020; Walsh & Tener, 2022). Yet, knowledge of young people's victimisation through non-consensual sharing was less developed at the time when Study 2 was developed. Therefore, Study 2 also examined the prevalence of this form of OCSA and its relationship with sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

Peer Norms

It is widely acknowledged that social contexts and interpersonal relationships contribute significantly to the process that shape young people's sexual behaviour (Crockett et al., 2003; Steinberg, 2011). Although parents remain an important proximal socialising agent (van de Bongardt et al., 2014), young people seek information and guidance from social sources and assume norms for what is appropriate or inappropriate, expected, accepted, or condoned (Hergovich et al., 2002). As the peer groups' importance increases for development and adjustment during adolescence, so does the importance of the norms and influences that operate at the peer group level. Consequently, peer norms become directive, and have been identified as an important influence on young people's sexual development and behaviour (Buhi & Goodson, 2007). They have also been found to be an important factor in predicting young people's engagement in risky behaviour (Ciranka & van de Bos, 2021).

The ecological framework places an emphasis on the inter-relationships between individual and social factors in increasing young people's risk of harm. Relating to OCSA, the literature and Study 1 suggest that young people's online sexual behaviours are guided by gender

sexual norms, which are embedded within social contexts. However, it remains unclear how these heterosexual gender norms are applied to young people who do not identify as gender binary or heterosexual. Therefore, the role of peer norms was considered, as they are also embedded in the personal and social contexts and may therefore provide an insight into the social influences on young people's experiences of OCSA.

The Social Norms Approach

One of the theoretical approaches to understand the homophily effect (i.e., young people's behaviours tend to be similar to those of their peers) is the Social Norms Approach (SNA) put forward by Cialdini and Trost (1998). The SNA has its origins in a study conducted by Perkins and Berkowitz (1986), which observed that University students tend to overestimate their peers' alcohol consumption. Since then, public health interventions have incorporated social norms to address a wide range of public health issues, including tobacco use, drunk driving, drug use, alcohol consumption, risky sexual behaviours, and more recently, sexual victimisation and intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention (Banyard et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2018).

The SNA articulates that behaviour is influenced by perceptions of behavioural norms. It also views significant others (e.g., peers) as crucial role models for behaviour and places emphasis on social frames of reference as powerful in regulating individuals' decision-making and behaviours (Chung & Rimal, 2016). This approach aims to understand environmental and interpersonal influences, such as peer influences, in order to change behaviour and regards it as more effective than a focus on the individual. Peer influences are affected more by perceived norms (i.e., what is viewed as typical or standard in a group) than by the actual norm (i.e., the real beliefs and actions of the group). The gap between perceived and actual norms is a misperception, and this forms the foundation for the SNA (Dempsey et al., 2018). The SNA posits that one's behaviour is influenced by misperceptions of how peers think and

act. Overestimations of a problem behaviour among peers will cause an increase in a young person's problem behaviour. Conversely, underestimations of problem behaviour among peers will discourage subsequent engagement. Accordingly, the approach states that correcting misperceptions of perceived norms will most likely result in a decrease in the problem behaviour or an increase in the desired behaviour (Dempsey et al., 2018).

Cialdini and Trost (1998) differentiated between descriptive norms, which are perceived prevalence of a behaviour, and injunctive norms, which refer to the perceived approval or disapproval of a behaviour. People adapt their behaviours in concordance with perceived peer norms for many reasons, and one frequently referenced mechanism is the anticipation of social rewards for compliance with social norms and sanctions for violations (Bell & Cox, 2015). Thus, the perception that a behaviour is prevalent or accepted among peers would motivate young people to engage in the same behaviour.

Peer norms and young people's sexual behaviour

Research has shown that young people's sexual behaviour and attitudes are also influenced by the perception of their peers' sexual behaviours. Existing research found that young people who perceived their peers to be engaging in more sexual behaviours, to be more approving of having sex, or to be engaging in more risky sexual behaviours were more likely to be engaging in or approving of the same behaviours themselves (Bhushan et al., 2021; Potard et al., 2008; van de Bongardt et al., 2015; 2017). On the contrary, knowledge of the relationship between peer norms and young people's online sexual behaviour is comparatively less developed. Nevertheless, there is growing evidence to indicate that the effect of peer norms extends to young people's online sexual behaviour. One of the earliest studies conducted by Baumgartner et al. (2011) found that both descriptive and injunctive norms for online risky sexual activities (e.g., searching for a sexual partner, sending nudes, and talking about sex) predicted increases in young people's online risky sexual behaviour over time. Similarly, a longitudinal study demonstrated that young people who perceived that their peers would send

sexually explicit materials to strangers online were subsequently more likely to do the same (Baumgartner et al., 2010). Baumgartner et al. (2015) also reported that those who perceived that peers were posting sexualised photos online (e.g., in swimwear or in a sexualised manner) were more likely to post pictures depicting themselves in the same sexualised manner. Similar results have been replicated in more recent studies (Doornwaard et al., 2015; Maheux et al., 2020; van Ouytsel et al., 2017). The evidence therefore demonstrates that young people's beliefs about peers' engagement in and approval of online sexual behaviour affect their propensity to engage in the same behaviours themselves.

Social norms based intervention

The SNA's primary assumption is that misperceptions of social norms drive the engagement in negative behaviours, but such behaviours can be mitigated by challenging the misperceptions through informational feedback about actual reported norms. As such, interventions based on the SNA aim to reduce negative and promote positive behaviours by challenging these misperceptions of social norms (McAlaney et al., 2010). The SNA makes several assumptions about the influence of these social normative perceptions on behaviours: i) perceived norms are consistently associated with behaviours; ii) individuals tend to misperceive by underestimating or overestimating their peers' behaviours and attitudes; iii) such misperceptions are associated with increased or decreased engagement in those behaviours; and iv) interventions that correct such misperceptions should promote more positive behaviours (Dempsey et al., 2018).

Relating to sexual violence, negative norms such as youths' perceptions of peers' endorsement of rape myths or support for the use of violence have been found to be associated with greater IPV perpetration (Collibee et al., 2021). Interventions addressing norms that promote negative or risky behaviours through the perceptions of peer support or endorsement and positively framed norms, such as norms that support talking about healthy

relationships, have also been found to enhance prevention (Collibee et al., 2021; Orchowski, 2019).

Taking into account the effect of peer norms on young people's online sexual behaviour and the applicability of SNA to a wide range of public health issues, including addressing bullying victimisation and sexual violence (Banyard et al., 2020; Perkins et al., 2011), the SNA may also have a role in preventing OCSA through the promotion of online safety behaviour. Online grooming is a public health issue (Forni et al., 2020), in which social norms appear to justify and normalise the experience of online approaches made by online adult acquaintances (also evident in Study 1's findings). Since online risky sexual behaviour has been identified as a risk factor for OCSA (see Online Behaviour in Section 1.13 for details), the perception that peers are more approving of, or frequently engaging in, online risky sexual behaviours is likely to increase a young person's propensity to engage in online risky sexual behaviours, which can in turn increase vulnerability to OCSA.

Furthermore, the results of Study 1 and the available literature suggest that both the perpetration and experience of online sexual victimisation are normalised among young people (Mishna et al., 2023; Ringrose et al., 2021b). Therefore, the perception that online sexual victimisation is prevalent, or that the experience is regarded as common among peers, may influence how young people interpret and respond to exploitative interactions that can lead to online sexual victimisation. For instance, the perception that online sexual victimisation is common and/or normalised may decrease young people's ability to recognise interactions that are potentially exploitative or harmful, or that the experience is indeed abusive. Consequently, perceptions pertaining to online harmful sexual experiences will have an impact on young people's responses to these encounters, which can influence victimisation, re-victimisation, and disclosure of abuse. This was illustrated in Study 1's findings, whereby the trivialisation of sexual harm, such as being repeatedly pressured to engage in online sexual activity or being exposed to peers' masturbation, did not warrant participants speaking up

against these experiences or ceasing contact with the perpetrator. Thereby, they placed themselves in similar situations that led to re-victimisation. Yet, the relationship between different peer norms and online sexual victimisation has not been examined to date.

Descriptive norms vs injunctive norms

A primary difference between descriptive norms and injunctive norms is that the former typically do not involve social pressure to conform or social sanctions for non-compliance among group members (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Thus, injunctive norm salience may be particularly relevant to the understanding of young people's behaviours because it relates to their desire to be socially rewarded by their peers and to avoid social sanctions (Potard et al. 2008). Yet, descriptive and injunctive norms are not always examined concurrently, which makes drawing comparisons between the two somewhat difficult. Crucially, there is currently no understanding of the relationship between peer norms and OCSA perpetrated by adults. Therefore, drawing on the evidence that peer norms influence young people's (online) sexual behaviour, the present study investigated the role of historical descriptive norms and injunctive norms and their influence on the experience of online grooming activities (i.e., the experience of being asked by online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances) in three ways.

First, it examined whether the perception of peers' engagement (descriptive) and approval (injunctive) of online risky sexual behaviour would be related to these experiences. Extending the literature on the effect of peer norms, peer norms related to online sexual victimisation by peers and peers' perpetration of OCSA were also examined. This study postulated that normalisation of online sexual victimisation or online harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) may desensitise a young person's response or judgement when confronted with adult online sexual exploitation. For example, young people who believe peers are regularly experiencing sexual victimisation online may normalise these sexual exploitative experiences in general, subsequently failing to recognise the abuse when they are being victimised themselves. In a

similar vein, the perception that online HSB is common and/or accepted may skew the perception of the seriousness of these abusive behaviours. Consequently, descriptive norms and injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation and online HSB perpetration may increase young people's vulnerability to online grooming, as normalisation of these experiences may result in young people finding sexual activities with adults less problematic.

Other Factors Influencing Online Sexual Compliance

The literature has identified different patterns of perpetrator-victim relationships for familial and external offline CSA (Plummer & Cossins, 2018), but the relationships between online perpetrators and victims were less well understood at the time when the present study was designed (Cooper et al., 2016). Study 1 revealed that despite participants facing pressure from both adults and peers to engage in online sexual activities, engagement with these unwanted sexual advances appeared to be influenced by the relationship with the person making the request. The findings shows that participants were more likely to comply with unwanted sexual activities with acquainted peers but were able to reject sexual advances made by online adult acquaintances. Building on these results, the present study investigated whether factors such as the perpetrator's age (peer vs adult) and relationship with the perpetrator (offline acquaintance vs online acquaintance) would influence young people's compliance with unwanted online sexual activities before the age of 16.

Sexual Refusal Assertiveness

Borrowing from the literature on offline sexual victimisation, sexual refusal assertiveness has been consistently linked with safer sexual practices for young people (Widman et al., 2018). It has also been identified as a protective factor against sexual victimisation (Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2011; Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013). Sexual refusal

assertiveness is generally conceptualised as assertiveness in refusing unwanted sexual activity, and individuals who found it difficult to decline unwanted sexual advances were more likely to be sexually victimised (Rickert et al., 2002). Furthermore, this factor has also been found to mediate the relationship between CSA and sexual re-victimisation (Livingston et al., 2007; Santos-Iglesias & Sierran, 2012; Ullman & Vasquez, 2015). The available evidence therefore suggests that understanding the relationship between sexual refusal assertiveness and online sexual behaviour can be important for the development of effective interventions to reduce online sexual victimisation.

The topic, however, has been predominately studied within the context of adult offline sexual victimisation, and there is currently little known about the relationship between sexual refusal assertiveness and young people's online sexual victimisation. There is some evidence from qualitative studies suggesting that while some young people are able to decline unwanted online sexual requests from peers, many respond indirectly by changing the topic, finding an excuse, or negotiating to avoid complying with the request (Mishna et al., 2023; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Furthermore, narratives from Study 1 also demonstrated that young people did not appear to be able to reject unwanted online sexual advances made by peers. Therefore, the present study asserted that the examination of young people's ability to decline sexual requests in the online context is important, as those who are less assertive are likely to struggle to decline online sexual advances, which increases their vulnerability to online sexual victimisation. To address this, the present study explored the relationship between historical sexual refusal assertiveness and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances experienced before the age of 16.

Aims of Study 2

Based on these identified gaps in the current literature, the primary aim of Study 2 was to add quantitative evidence to the understanding of different forms of OCSA and factors that predict

receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances by examining the following:

- The prevalence of the experience of different forms of OCSA including unwanted online sexual exposure, pressured online sexual activities, and victimisation through non-consensual sharing.
- The prevalence of the experience of verbal sexual coercion and grooming tactics by online adult acquaintances.
- The influence of sexual refusal assertiveness and online grooming, and whether lower sexual refusal assertiveness would be related to the frequency of experiences with online grooming.
- The influence of descriptive norms and injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour, online sexual victimisation, and online HSB on the experience of online grooming activities.
- Predictors of 1) requests made by online adult acquaintances to meet in person and 2) sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances following online interactions using variables including the experience of OCSA, verbal sexual coercion, online grooming tactics, peer norms, sexual refusal assertiveness and age and relationship with the person making the online sexual request.

4.2 METHODOLOGY

Participants

The age eligibility criteria were between eighteen and thirty years of age. Thirty was chosen as the upper age limit because this study focused on online sexual behaviour, and individuals in this age range would have grown up with the development of the Internet and were likely to

have had online communication as an important part of their daily lives. Study 2 data was collected in 2018, thus participants who were at the upper age limit of 30 would have turned 16 in 2004. The rationale for the use of this upper age limit was previously explained in the *Participants* sub-section in Section 3.2 of Study 1. For the purpose of the questionnaire, participants were also required to be able to read and understand English.

Three hundred and four participants responded to the online survey. 18.09% ($n = 55$) did not complete the questionnaire, and 25% ($n = 75$) had missing values. The final sample consisted of 173 participants (completion rate: 56.90%).

Table 4.1 shows the demographics of the participants retained in the final sample. The sample predominately consisted of females (85.5%), with an overall mean age of 22.5 ($SD = 3.49$). Due to the small number of males represented in the sample as well as the possibility that being gay could be synonymous with being lesbian, gay and lesbian were combined as a group. Participants recruited via the University research participation pool were awarded 0.5 credit for their participation. The amount of incentive offered was in accordance with University's policy (0.5 credit for 15 minutes of participation time).

Table 4.1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	N=173	
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	24	13.9
Female	148	85.5
Neither	1	0.6
Prefer to self-describe	0	0
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	130	77.4
Gay/ lesbian	7	4.2
Bisexual	27	16.1
Other	4	2.4

Procedure

Using a convenience sample, participants were recruited via advertisement display (see Appendix 5) on the University campus and online social media (e.g., Twitter), and a University research participation pool for Psychology students. The link and QR code provided on the advertisement and Twitter account brought potential participants to a page displaying the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix 6). Individuals who wished to proceed were asked to click the arrow at the bottom of the page. Consent was gained by agreeing to proceed. This opened the questionnaire. Definitions and examples of online communications were provided prior to answering the main body of the questionnaire to ensure participants understood the context of the items. A withdrawal option was available on each page of the questionnaire, and the withdrawal link directed participants to the debrief page. Copies of the PIS and debriefing sheet (see Appendix 7) were available for download for participants' reference. The debriefing sheet further explained the study and included the researchers' contact details and contact details of relevant organisations that offer free support should participants feel affected by the content. Data from partially completed questionnaires were not saved. The questionnaire could be completed on computer devices and was mobile compatible.

Ethical Considerations

The PIS explicitly stated that some of the questions were potentially sensitive (e.g., asking about unwanted online sexual requests) and could cause distress. Individuals were advised not to take part if this might be a problem. It also stated that should participants experience distress as a result of participation, sources of help and support were provided on the debrief page. Debriefing was provided regardless of progress of completion. Section 2.9 in Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion on ethical considerations.

Measures

Participants were asked about their age, gender, and sexuality. Four response options were provided for gender, which included male, female, neither, and to self-describe with free text. Sexual orientation was self-described with free text. This demographic information was collected to examine the effect of socio-demographic factors on early online sexual victimisation, if the sample size allowed. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire in relation to their behaviours in the online environment only (see Appendix 6 for a copy of the questionnaire).

For all measures, item scores were used individually to establish prevalence, and the sum of all items for each variable was used as a predictor in the regression model. A summary of the measures is presented in Table 4.2.

Unwanted online sexual exposure

Frequency of unwanted online sexual exposure was measured by four items ($\alpha = .74$). Types of unwanted sexual exposure examined included unwanted conversation of a sexual nature, receiving sexual material without request, viewing others engaging in sexual activities. Example items included '*Videos of a sexual nature were sent to me without me asking for them*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of unwanted online sexual exposure.

Table 4.2

Summary of Study 2 Measures

Measure	Measure description	Items N	Scale of Measurement	Perpetrator age	Relationship with perpetrator
Unwanted online sexual exposure	Frequency of experience of unwanted sexual exposure (e.g., unwanted conversations of a sexual nature)	4	1 = Never to 5 = Always	Unspecified	Unspecified
Pressured online sexual activities	Frequency of experience of pressured online sexual activities (e.g., pressured into engaging in sexual acts).	5	1 = Never to 5 = Always. Further option: ' <i>This happened but I did not feel pressured</i> ' was included as it was possible that young people had engaged in online sexual activities without being pressured.	Unspecified	Unspecified
Verbal sexual coercion tactics	Four types of verbal sexual coercion tactics: 1) Psychological manipulation, e.g., ' <i>I was questioned about my sexuality or attractiveness</i> '. 2) Verbal pressure, e.g., ' <i>He/she kept nagging me</i> '. 3) Use of threats or blackmail using participants sexually explicit materials, e.g., ' <i>Someone used sexual images or videos of me to threaten or blackmail for more sexual activities</i> '. 4) Alcohol and drug intoxication ' <i>I was too intoxicated by drugs or alcohol when being asked to refuse</i> '	10	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	Unspecified	Unspecified

	Administration of this measure was omitted for those who did not feel pressured to engage in all of the five types of pressured online sexual activities.				
Non-consensual sharing victimisation	Non-consensual sharing victimisation is measured by a single item, ' <i>I had sexual images of myself shared with others without my permission</i> '.	1	1 = Never to 5 = Always.	Unspecified	Unspecified
Requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person	Examined frequencies of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and agreeing to the adult in person. Example items included ' <i>I was asked by someone who was 18 and above to meet in person</i> '.	3	1 = Never to 5 = Always	Adults	Met online
Sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances	Online and offline sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Example items included ' <i>I engaged in online sexual activities with someone who was 18 and above</i> '.	2	1 = Never to 5 = Always	Adults	Met online
Online grooming tactics	Three types of grooming tactics: 1) Positivity, e.g., ' <i>Adults used a lot of flattery (e.g., telling me I'm attractive, my photos are nice etc.)</i> '. 2) Identity deception, e.g., ' <i>Someone pretended to be my age despite being an adult</i> '. 3) Bribery, e.g., ' <i>I was offered money, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or things I wanted in exchange for sexually explicit photos or videos of me</i> '.	8	1 = Never to 5 = Always.	Adults	Met online

Willingness to engage in online sexual activities with adults	Example item ' <i>I didn't mind engaging in a sexual relationship with an older person (18 and above) as long as he/she cared about me</i> '.	3	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.	Adults	Unspecified
Willingness to engage in online sexual activities with peers	Example item ' <i>I felt more comfortable engaging in digital sexual activities if the person was similar to my age</i> '.	2	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	Peers	Unspecified
Online acquaintance	Sexual compliance with sexual requests made by online acquaintances. Example item ' <i>It was easier to ignore sexual requests made by people I had only met online</i> '.	1	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	Unspecified	Met online
Offline acquaintance	Sexual compliance with sexual requests made by offline acquaintances. Example item ' <i>I was more likely to agree to sexual requests if the person was someone who I knew offline (e.g., a friend, someone I knew from school, community, etc.)</i> '.	3	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	Unspecified	Knew in person
Sexual refusal assertiveness	Ability to refuse online sexual requests. Example item ' <i>If I didn't want to do it, it didn't matter if the person was someone I only met online or someone I knew offline</i> '.	2	1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.	N/A	N/A
Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour	Perception of peers' engagement in online risky sexual behaviour. Example item included ' <i>Talked to people that they had only met online about sex</i> '.	2	1 = Never to 5 = Always	N/A	N/A

Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation	Perception of peers' experience of online sexual victimisation Example item included ' <i>Sent photos or videos of parts of their bodies because they felt pressured</i> '.	5	1 = Never to 5 = Always	N/A	N/A
Descriptive norms for online HSB	Perception of peers' engagement in online HSB Example item included ' <i>Shared sexual images or videos of others without the consent of those involved</i> '	4	1= Never to 5 = Always	N/A	N/A
Injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour	Perception of peers' approval of online risky sexual behaviour. Example item included ' <i>It's common to exchange sexual images/videos between two people</i> '.	1	1= Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	N/A	N/A
Injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation	Perception of peers' approval of online sexual victimisation. Example item included ' <i>Most people know someone who has been threatened or blackmailed for sexual requests</i> '.	1	1= Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	N/A	N/A
Injunctive norms for online HSB	Perception of peers' approval of online HSB. Example item included ' <i>Most people would carry on talking about sex even when he/she has been asked to stop</i> '.	4	1= Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree	N/A	N/A

Pressured online sexual activities

Frequency of pressured online sexual activities experienced was measured by five items ($\alpha = 0.78$). The types of pressured online sexual activities examined included being repeatedly pressured to talk about sex and being pressured into engaging in sexual acts. Example items included '*I sent semi-nude/ nude selfies because I felt under pressure*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of pressured online sexual activities. The option *This happened but I did not feel pressured* was also included, as it was possible that young people had taken part in online sexual activities as part of normal developmental behaviour without being pressured.

Verbal sexual coercion tactics

The frequency of verbal sexual coercion tactics experienced online was measured by 10 items ($\alpha = 0.88$), which measured four types of verbal sexual coercion tactics: 1) Psychological manipulation; 2) Verbal pressure; 3) Use of threats or blackmail using participants' sexually explicit materials; and 4) Alcohol and drug intoxication.

There was no validated scale that measured verbal sexual coercion tactics experienced online at the time of study development. Therefore, the scale was composed by reviewing existing measures of unwanted sexual experiences in physical contexts. These included the Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV, Koss et al., 2007), the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2, Straus et al., 1996), and items used in Struckman-Johnson et al.'s (2003) study measuring tactics of post-refusal persistence, as well as the coercion tactics featured in the literature on online grooming (e.g., Joleby et al., 2021b).

The four sub-scales:

- 1) Psychological manipulation was measured by four items ($\alpha = 0.82$), such as '*I was questioned about my sexuality or attractiveness*'.
- 2) Verbal pressure was measured by two items ($\alpha = 0.77$) such as '*He/she kept nagging me*'.

3) Threats of non-consensual sharing was measured by three items ($\alpha = 0.88$), including threats to share participants' sexual material for sexual and non-sexual matters, such as '*Someone used sexual images or videos of me to threaten or blackmail for more sexual activities*'.

4) Alcohol and drug intoxication was measured by a single item. Exploitation of the intoxicated is frequently included in existing sexual coercion scales (e.g., Struckman et al., 2003), but its use has yet to be examined in the online environment. The single item assessed if participants had engaged in the pressured online sexual activities because they were too inebriated to refuse.

Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated more experiences of online verbal sexual coercion tactics. Administration of this measure was omitted for those who did not feel pressured to engage in all the five types of pressured online sexual activities.

Non-consensual sharing victimisation

Frequency of victimisation by non-consensual sharing was measured by a single item, '*I had sexual images of myself shared with others without my permission*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of non-consensual sharing victimisation.

Requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person

Frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person before the age of 16 was measured by three items ($\alpha = .67$). Example items included '*I was asked by someone who was 18 and above to meet in person*'. Responses were rated on 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person.

Sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances

Frequency of sexual abuse following online interactions with online adult acquaintance was measured by two items measuring online and offline sexual activities with adults before the age of 16 ($\alpha = 0.76$). Example items included '*I engaged in online sexual activities with someone who was 18 and above*'. Responses were rated on 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of CSA by online adult acquaintance.

Online grooming tactics

Frequency of online grooming tactics was measured by eight items ($\alpha = 0.80$) measuring three types of grooming tactics: 1) Positivity; 2) Identity deception; and 3) Bribery.

The three sub-scales:

1) Positivity was measured by two items ($\alpha = 0.61$), such as '*Adults used a lot of flattery (e.g., telling me I'm attractive, my photos are nice etc.)*'.

2) Identity deception was measured by four items ($\alpha = 0.79$), such as '*Someone pretended to be my age despite being an adult*'. Although the removal of '*Someone lied to me about their gender*' improved the Cronbach Alpha value to .82, the item was retained as the online grooming literature has cited deception of gender as an online grooming tactic (e.g., Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021).

3) Bribery was measured by two items ($\alpha = 0.85$), such as '*I was offered money, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or things I wanted in exchange for sexually explicit photos or videos of me*'.

Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of experiencing online grooming tactics.

Age of the person making the online sexual requests

To examine whether the decision to engage in online sexual activities would be influenced by the age of the person making the sexual request, willingness to engage in online sexual activities with adults and peers were examined separately.

Willingness to engage with someone age appropriate was measured by two items ($\alpha = 0.47$), such as '*I felt more comfortable engaging in digital sexual activities if the person was similar to my age*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated more willingness to interact sexually with someone underage online.

Willingness to engage with adults online was measured by three items ($\alpha = 0.74$), such as '*I didn't mind engaging in a sexual relationship with an older person (18 and above) as long as he/she cared about me*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated more willingness to interact sexually with an adult online.

Relation with the person making online sexual request

To examine whether the decision to engage in online sexual activities would be influenced by the relation with the person making the sexual request. Sexual compliance in relation to requests made by online acquaintance (people who were met online) and offline acquaintance (people who were knew in person) were examined separately.

Online acquaintance was measured by a single item, '*It was easier to ignore sexual requests made by people I had only met online*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a higher likelihood of complying with online sexual requests made by online acquaintances.

Offline acquaintance was measured by three items ($\alpha = 0.44$), such as '*I was more likely to agree to sexual requests if the person was someone who I knew offline (e.g., a friend, someone I knew from school., community, etc.)*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a higher likelihood of complying with online sexual requests made by offline acquaintances.

Sexual refusal assertiveness

Ability to refuse sexual requests was measured by two items ($\alpha = 0.70$), such as '*If I didn't want to do it, it didn't matter if the person was someone I only met online or someone I knew offline*'.

Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a higher ability to decline online sexual requests.

Descriptive norms

Descriptive norms measured the perception of peers' experience of different types of online sexual behaviour by asking participants how often their peers engaged in 1) online risky sexual behaviour, 2) online HSB, and 3) experienced online sexual victimisation before the age of 16.

1) Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour were measured by two items ($\alpha = 0.67$), such as '*Talked to people that they had only met online about sex*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher endorsements of peers' engagement in online risky sexual behaviour.

2) Descriptive norms for online HSB were measured by four items ($\alpha = 0.79$), including non-consensual sharing perpetration, and talking in a sexualised manner despite the other person had expressed discomfort. Example items included '*Shared sexual images or videos of others without the consent of those involved*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from

1= Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher endorsements of peers' engagement in online HSB.

3) Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation were measured by five items ($\alpha = 0.77$), including receiving comments of a sexual nature about one's body or appearance; sending self-produced sexual materials under pressure; being recorded engaging in sexual acts without consent and being threatened or blackmailed by own sexual materials. Example items included '*Sent photos or videos of parts of their bodies because they felt pressured*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Higher scores indicated higher endorsements of peers' experience of online sexual victimisation.

Injunctive norms

Injunctive norms measured the perception of peers' approval of different types of online sexual behaviour by asking participants how likely their peers would agree that 1) online risky sexual behaviour, 2) online HSB, and 3) online sexual victimisation were acceptable before the age of 16.

1) Injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour were measured by a single item '*It's common to exchange sexual images/videos between two people*'. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1= Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a higher perceived approval of online risky sexual behaviour.

2) Injunctive norms for online HSB were originally measured by six items. However, the removal of items '*Sexually explicit materials shared between two people are not to be shared with others*' (which was reversed scored) and '*It's the sender's fault for sending sexual images or videos*' improved the Cronbach alpha value from 0.41 to 0.63. The two items were therefore removed. The final measure consisted of four items and example items included '*Most people would carry on talking about sex even when he/she has been asked to stop*'. Responses were

rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a higher perceived approval of online HSB.

3) Injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation were measured by a single item '*Most people know someone who has been threatened or blackmailed for sexual requests.*' Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1= Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a higher perceived approval of online sexual victimisation.

Power Analysis

A power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) was conducted for the two planned multiple regression analyses predicting the frequency of receiving requests by online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by adult acquaintances. The results indicated that the minimum sample size needed for the study was 131 to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium effect size at a significance level of criterion of $\alpha = .05$ (Cohen, 1962). Thus, the obtained sample size of $N= 173$ was adequate to test the study hypotheses.

Data Screening

Prior to the analysis, the data was screened for accuracy, missing data, outliers, and normality (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). First, data entry was inspected to identify any data entry errors and out of range values. This was followed by checking of missing values and patterns.

Missing data

A Missing Value Analysis was conducted to identify the amount and pattern of missing data. All missing values were represented by the value 99 in the dataset. For the variable *pressured online sexual activities*, the option '*This happened but I did not feel pressure*' was represented

by value 218 in the data set. This indicated participants who reported that they did not feel pressured in the measured types of pressured online sexual activities. These participants were not asked to complete the subsequent verbal sexual coercion tactics measure as it was not relevant to their experiences.

The analysis showed that the data set included missing values. All but one variable had less than 3.5% missing data. It has been recommended that less than 5% of missing data is deemed an acceptable amount as it does not significantly impact the results (Schafer, 1999). Although '*Pressured online sexual activities*' had missing values of 20.2%, this variable was not removed as the high percentage was consistent with the number of participants who had chosen the '*This happened but I did not feel pressure*' option in response to the relevant items. The results of the missing value analysis for each variable are presented in Appendix 8.

Relating to missing values in individual cases, the missing value patterns indicated that only 1 case had more than 3 missing values. The rest had less than 2. Therefore, no cases were deleted as a consequence of substantial missing values.

Little's test of Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) was not significant, $c^2 (df = 298) = 272.70, p = .85$. This suggested there was no pattern in the missing data.

Outliers

Visual inspection of boxplots revealed outliers for some of the variables (see Appendix 9). This showed that different forms of OCSA, including unwanted online sexual exposure, non-consensual sharing victimisation, sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, and online grooming related experiences, including the experience of grooming tactics and receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person, contained outliers. Concerning the age and relation with the person making sexual requests, being asked by a young person, online acquaintance and offline acquaintance contained outliers. Relating to peer norms,

descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation and online HSB perpetration and injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour also contained outliers.

According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), outliers can be addressed by altering the scores so that the outlier is one above the highest score within the range. However, this option was not considered due to the nature of the data addressing online sexual victimisation. This is because altering the scores would mean altering the representation of the participants' experience of online sexual victimisation and related factors that might have increased the vulnerability of OCSA. Furthermore, since none of the outliers were out of range scores, it was considered appropriate and ethical to honour participants' contributions through accurate representation.

Data were assessed for multivariate outliers using a Mahalanobis Distance Test (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) for each of the regressions conducted (i.e., *Receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person* and *Sexual abuse by online adult acquaintance*). Three multivariate outliers were identified for each of the regressions. However, taking into consideration the nature of the data collected and that none of the outliers represented out of range scores or data entry errors, the highest score could be indicative of participants' experiences of victimisation, so it would be theoretically relevant to keep them in the dataset. As such, these multivariate outliers were considered natural variation and are legitimate anomalies (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), as they may imply that some of the online sexual victimisation experiences or related perceptions were interlinked. Therefore, multivariate outliers were retained for both regressions to truly represent participants' experiences.

Normality distribution

Inspection of normal Q-Q plots and histograms suggested that most of the variables did not appear to be normally distributed (see Appendix 10). Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests of normality confirmed that all variables were non-normally distributed. These were unwanted online

exposure ($D(121) = .23, p < .001$), pressured online sexual activities ($D(121) = .17, p < .001$), non-consensual sharing victimisation ($D(121) = .50, p < .001$), the experience of online sexual coercion ($D(121) = .11, p < .001$), receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person ($D(121) = .13, p < .001$), sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances ($D(121) = .36, p < .001$), and online grooming tactics ($D(121) = .17, p < .001$).

Factors influencing sexual compliance relating to the age and relationship with the requester were also non-normally distributed. These were adults ($D(121) = .12, p < .001$), peers ($D(121) = .21, p < .001$), online acquaintances ($D(121) = .29, p < .001$), and offline acquaintances ($D(121) = .09, p < .001$).

Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour ($D(121) = .22, p < .001$), online sexual victimisation ($D(121) = .16, p < .001$), online HSB ($D(121) = .14, p < .001$), and injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour ($D(121) = .28, p < .001$), online sexual victimisation ($D(121) = .24, p < .001$), and online HSB ($D(121) = .11, p < .001$) were all non-normally distributed. Lastly, sexual refusal assertiveness ($D(121) = .15, p < .001$) was also non-normally distributed.

All forms of OCSA, including unwanted online sexual exposure, pressured online sexual activities, non-consensual sharing victimisation, and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, and related experiences such as receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and online grooming tactics, were positively skewed.

This is consistent with the nature of the data examining the experience of sexual victimisation in a non-clinical population. The negatively skewed variables, such as sexual refusal assertiveness, were also in line with expectations, as this indicates that most participants were able to refute online sexual advances. Similarly, the negatively skewed data concerning peers being the sexual advancer appeared to suggest that participants found it more difficult to

decline online sexual requests made by another young person, which is also consistent with the literature and Study 1's findings. Lastly, the skewness of descriptive norms and injunctive norms was not considered unusual or alarming considering all of these variables addressed harmful online sexual behaviours. Skewness and kurtosis values are reported in Appendix 11.

Transformation is not recommended for variables prone to be naturally skewed, as they may pose problems with the interpretability of results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Furthermore, Schmidt and Finan (2018) argued that outcome transformations can bias results, and regression models with a non-normal distribution can produce valid results without performing outcome transformations. For these reasons, transformations were not performed to avoid biasing the results.

Multicollinearity

The majority of correlations between the study variables were not large enough to be of concern (see Appendix 12 for the correlations table). However, a strong correlation was observed between descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation and descriptive norms for online HSB perpetration ($r = .78$) and between descriptive norms for online HSB and descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour ($r = .68$). Although bivariate correlations greater than .70 have been suggested to be problematic and that one of the two variables should be omitted from the model. However, given that the variables examined perceptions relating to different types of online sexual behaviours, it was considered theoretically important to keep these variables to understand the role of peer norms in online grooming.

Data Analysis

SPSS was used for data analysis. Overall agreement or frequency was computed for all items examining the prevalence of the different forms of OCSA, descriptive norms and injunctive

norms, factors influencing online sexual compliance, and sexual refusal assertiveness (see individual Tables in the results section below).

Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted prior to each regression analysis to determine relevant independent variables to enter as predictors of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, respectively. The significance criterion was set at $p < .001$. This significance level was chosen to ensure that only variables that were statistically highly significant were included as predictor variables. Enter method multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine predictors of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances separately.

4.3 RESULTS

Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure

Unwanted online sexual exposure (age of perpetrator unspecified) was a relatively common form of OCSA before the age of 16 (see Table 4.3). Over half of the sample had been made uncomfortable by conversations of a sexual nature and had received videos of a sexual nature without consenting to them (60.4% and 52.6%, respectively). Over thirty percent (32.3%) of the sample also reported persistent exposure to receiving sexual material despite having asked the sender to stop.

Table 4.3

Frequency of Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure Before the Age of 16

Types of unwanted online sexual exposure	Never		Sometimes		About half the time		Most of the time		Always		At least once	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Made uncomfortable by innuendos of a sexual nature *	68	39.5	75	43.6	19	11.0	9	5.2	1	0.6	104	60.4
Received videos of a sexual nature without asking for them	82	47.4	62	35.8	14	8.1	10	5.8	5	2.9	91	52.6
Continued to receive sexual or obscene materials despite having had asked the sender to stop	117	67.6	40	23.1	12	6.9	4	2.3	0	0.0	56	32.3
Saw someone engaging in sexual activities via webcam, live chat or videos, without agreeing to it *	93	54.1	58	33.7	13	7.6	8	4.7	0	0.0	79	46.0

*1 missing response

Pressured Online Sexual Activities

Participants were asked how often they had been pressured to engage in different types of online sexual activities before the age of 16 (age of perpetrator unspecified) (see Table 4.4). Over 30% of the sample reported they had been pressured to engage in some form of unwanted online sexual activity. Being pressured into talking about sexual history or sexual life was most frequently experienced (50.1%), and 30.9% had sent sexually explicit materials of themselves under pressure. A minority reported that they did not feel pressured despite the persistence of the requester.

Table 4.4

Frequency of Pressured Online Sexual Activities Before the Age of 16

Types of pressured online sexual activities	Never		Sometimes		About half the time		Most of the time		Always		This happened but I did not feel pressured	At least once		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%	
Repeatedly pressured by the same person to talk about sex	67	38.7	65	37.6	11	6.4	7	4.0	1	0.6	22	12.7	84	48.6
Pressured to talk about sexual history or sexual life *	77	44.8	56	32.6	22	12.8	7	4.1	1	0.6	9	5.2	86	50.1
Sent self-produced sexually explicit materials under pressure *	110	64.0	38	22.1	8	4.7	6	3.5	1	0.6	9	5.2	53	30.9
Pressured to engage in online sexual activities via webcam/ video chat	115	66.5	40	23.1	6	3.5	6	3.5	0	0.0	6	3.5	52	30.1
Pressured into talking about own sexual fantasies**	106	62.0	55	32.2	8	4.7	1	0.6	1	0.6	N/A ¹		65	38.1

*1 missing response; ** 2 missing responses. ¹This item was originally included as an item of unwanted online sexual exposure, where the option "*this happened but I did not feel pressured*" was not available. However, the item was deemed more appropriate as an item of pressured online sexual activities in retrospect. Hence the missing response.

Verbal Sexual Coercion Tactics Encountered Online

Participants who reported the experience of being pressured to engage in the online sexual activities examined in Table 4.4 were asked how much they agreed they complied as a result of the sexual coercion tactics they had experienced (see Table 4.5). Psychological pressure such as being questioned about sexuality or attractiveness and the coercer becoming displeased and 'cold' were the two most cited tactics for engaging in unwanted online sexual activities (42.2% and 41.6%, respectively). Nearly forty percent (37.6%) agreed that they complied with unwanted online sexual activities after repeated verbal pressure from the coercer, and 25.4% were too inebriated to refuse. Some complied after being threatened or blackmailed by their own sexually explicit materials for more sexual and non-sexual activities (14.7% and 17.3%, respectively).

Victimisation Through Non-Consensual Sharing

Over ten percent (13.5%) of the sample had been a victim of non-consensual sharing before the age of 16 (age of perpetrator unspecified) (see Table 4.6). Nearly half (45.1%) perceived that their friends had experienced this form of victimisation, and 64.2% perceived that their friends had been a perpetrator. The discrepancy between actual and perceived victimisation of non-consensual sharing appeared to suggest an overestimation of this form of abuse.

Table 4.5

Types of Verbal Sexual Coercion Tactics Encountered Resulting in the Engagement in Unwanted Online Sexual Activities

Types of verbal sexual coercion tactics	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Psychological pressure												
Questioned about sexuality or attractiveness	66	38.2	15	8.7	19	11.0	61	35.3	12	6.9	73	42.2
Coercer became displeased, annoyed, or 'cold' ¹	70	40.9	18	10.5	12	7.0	55	32.2	16	9.4	71	41.6
Coercer expressed disappointment at participants for not complying with the online sexual requests ²	79	45.9	18	10.5	12	7.0	48	27.9	15	8.7	63	36.6
Felt guilty if did not comply	79	45.7	18	10.4	11	6.4	51	29.5	14	8.1	65	37.6
Verbal Pressure												
Coercer kept nagging	69	39.9	25	14.5	14	8.1	52	30.1	13	7.5	65	37.6
Threatened to stop talking to participants	93	53.8	23	13.3	16	9.2	31	17.9	10	5.8	41	23.7
Use of threats or blackmail using participants' sexually explicit material												
To circulate participants' sexual materials online if participants did not comply with the online sexual activities	115	66.9	16	9.3	11	6.4	20	11.6	10	5.8	30	17.4
For more sexual activities ²	115	67.3	15	8.8	16	9.4	16	9.4	9	5.3	25	14.7
For non-sexual related matters	111	64.2	19	11.0	13	7.5	22	12.7	8	4.6	30	17.3
Alcohol and drug intoxication												
Participants was too inebriated to refuse the online sexual request	98	56.6	14	8.1	17	9.8	39	22.5	5	2.9	44	25.4

¹ 1 missing response; ² 2 missing responses

Table 4.6

Non-Consensual Sharing Victimization and Perceived Prevalence and Approval of Non-Consensual Sharing Before the Age of 16

Non-consensual sharing	Never		Sometimes		About half the time		Most of the time		Always		At least once	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Self-reported victimisation of sexual images of participants shared without consent	148	86.5	21	12.3	1	0.6	1	0.6	0	0	23	13.5
Perceived prevalence of non-consensual sharing victimisation	95	54.9	58	33.5	12	6.9	6	3.5	2	1.2	78	45.1
Perceived prevalence of non-consensual sharing perpetration	62	35.8	67	38.7	20	11.6	18	10.4	6	3.5	111	64.2
	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
Perceived approval of non-consensual sharing perpetration	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	39	22.7	25	14.5	17	9.9	67	39.0	24	14.0	91	53.0

Descriptive Norms for Online Sexual Behaviour

The perception of the prevalence of online risky sexual behaviour, online sexual victimisation, and perpetration of online HSB is shown in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7

Descriptive Norms for Online Risky Sexual Behaviour, Online Sexual Victimization, and Online Harmful Sexual Behaviour Perpetration

Descriptive norms	Never		Sometimes		About half the time		Most of the time		Always		At least once	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Online risky sexual behaviour												
Sent self-produced sexually explicit materials to someone who had sent nudes to 'return a favour'	49	28.3	72	41.6	19	11.0	25	14.5	8	4.6	124	71.7
Talked to people who they met online about sex*	40	23.4	80	46.8	27	15.8	20	11.7	4	2.3	131	76.6
Online sexual victimisation												
Teasing comments of a sexual nature were made about their bodies or appearance online	43	24.9	81	46.8	26	15.0	16	9.2	7	4.0	130	75.0
Sent self-produced sexually explicit materials under pressure	59	34.1	75	43.4	22	12.7	15	8.7	2	1.2	114	66.0
Recorded engaging in sexual acts without knowing**	136	79.1	29	16.9	3	1.7	2	1.2	2	1.2	36	21.0
Threatened or blackmailed by own sexually explicit materials	112	64.7	53	30.6	3	1.7	4	2.3	1	0.6	61	35.2
Online HSB perpetration												
Continued talking in a sexualised manner despite the recipient expressing discomfort *	74	43.3	68	39.8	16	9.4	10	5.8	3	1.8	97	56.8
Asked others to send self-produced sexually explicit materials	75	43.9	68	39.8	12	7.0	13	7.6	3	1.8	96	56.2
Third person non-consensual sharing	87	50.3	62	35.8	9	5.2	13	7.5	2	1.2	86	49.7

*2 missing responses; **1 missing response

Over 70% of participants believed that their peers had engaged in some form of online risky sexual behaviour (e.g., exchanging self-produced sexually explicit materials or talking to

people whom they met online about sex). These findings suggested that online risky sexual behaviour was perceived to be highly prevalent before the age of 16.

The perception that peers had experienced online sexual victimisation was also highly endorsed. Seventy-five percent of the participants perceived that their peers had been subjected to sexualised comments about their bodies online, 66% perceived that their peers had sent self-produced sexually explicit materials under pressure, and 35.2% perceived that their peers had been blackmailed or threatened by their own sexual materials.

The perception that peers were perpetrating online HSB was equally highly endorsed. Over half of the sample perceived that their peers had engaged in some form of online HSB, with 56.8% perceiving their peers to have continued to talk in a sexualised manner despite having been asked to stop, and 56.2% perceived their peers had asked others to send self-produced sexually explicit materials.

Collectively, these findings suggested that online risky sexual behaviour, online sexual victimisation, and online HSB were all perceived to be common practices before the age of 16.

Injunctive Norms for Online Sexual Behaviour

The perception of peers' approval of online risky sexual behaviour, online sexual victimisation, and perpetration of online HSB is shown in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

Injunctive Norms for Online Risky Sexual Behaviour, Online Sexual Victimization, and Online Harmful Sexual Behaviour Perpetration

Injunctive norms	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Online risky sexual behaviour												
It's common to exchange self-produced sexually explicit materials between two people *	11	6.4	25	14.5	34	19.8	73	42.4	29	16.9	102	59.3
Online sexual victimisation												
Most people knew someone who has been threatened or blackmailed for sexual requests	25	14.5	36	20.8	33	19.1	55	31.8	24	13.9	79	45.7
Online HSB perpetration												
Would carry on talking about sex despite being asked to stop	15	8.7	39	22.5	41	23.7	65	37.6	13	7.5	78	45.1
People would give in and send self-produced sexually explicit materials after being asked a few times	16	9.2	34	19.7	36	20.8	78	45.1	9	5.2	87	50.3
People usually asked for self-produced sexually explicit materials first, before suggesting sexually activities via video or webcam	14	8.1	5	2.9	35	20.2	70	40.5	49	28.3	119	68.8

*1 missing response

Over half of the sample (59.3%) held the perception that their peers would agree that the exchange of self-produced sexually explicit materials was common, and 45.7% of the sample

perceived that their peers would have known someone who had been threatened or blackmailed for sexual requests. Peers' approval of online HSB was also highly endorsed, with 68.8% perceiving that their peers would strategically prepare others for online sexual activities and 45.1% perceiving that peers would continue to talk about sex despite having been asked to stop. Together, these findings suggested that participants perceived their peers as approving of online risky sexual behaviour, online sexual victimisation, and online HSB before the age of 16.

Factors Influencing Online Sexual Compliance

The view of whether offline acquaintances were just as likely as online acquaintances to make online sexual requests was split (41% did not agree and 37.2% agreed) (see Table 4.9). However, 81.9% reported that it was easier to ignore sexual requests made by people they met online. Moreover, 50.9% also reported that there were more negative consequences when ignoring online sexual requests made by people they knew in person, with 46.8% were more likely to agree to online sexual requests made by people they knew in person before the age of 16. Therefore, it remained unclear whether knowing the requester in person would influence participants' decisions to engage in online sexual activity.

Regarding the age of the person making the sexual request, although 82.1% preferred talking to someone similar to their age, 68% expressed a willingness to interact with adults in their twenties. Within the sample, 44.5% were willing to establish rapport with online adult acquaintances, and 37.0% agreed they would engage in a sexual relationship with an adult if they felt cared for by the adult. These findings suggested that participants were not averse to having a sexual relationship with adults before the age of 16, especially if the adults were attentive to their needs.

Table 4.9

Willingness and Compliance to Engage in Online Sexual Activities Before the Age of 16 According to the Relationship and Age of the Person Making the Sexual Request

	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Online acquaintance												
It's easier to ignore sexual requests made by people met online*	9	5.3	9	5.3	13	7.6	60	35.1	80	46.8	140	81.9
Offline acquaintance												
More likely to have agreed to online sexual requests from someone I knew in person	33	19.1	28	16.2	31	17.9	59	34.1	22	12.7	81	46.8
More negative consequences ignoring online sexual requests from people I knew in person	18	10.4	24	13.9	43	24.9	64	37.0	24	13.9	88	50.9
People I knew offline were just as likely to make online sexual requests**	26	15.1	44	25.6	38	22.1	38	22.1	26	15.1	64	37.2
Peer												
Preferred talking to someone of similar age	5	2.9	13	7.5	13	7.5	66	38.2	76	43.9	142	82.1
Felt more comfortable engaging in online sexual activities with someone of similar age	17	9.8	12	6.9	43	24.9	66	38.2	35	20.2	101	58.4
Adult												
Preferred talking to 'younger' adult than 'older' adults**	14	8.1	14	8.1	27	15.7	71	41.3	46	26.7	117	68.0
Didn't mind opening to adults if the person listened and gave lots of attention	36	20.8	27	15.6	33	19.1	59	34.1	18	10.4	77	44.5
Would engage in a sexual relationship with an adult as long as s/he cared about me	53	30.6	28	16.2	28	16.2	47	27.2	17	9.8	64	37.0

* 2 missing responses; ** 1 missing response

Online Grooming Activities Involving Online Adult Acquaintances

Table 4.10 shows the frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances before the age of 16. Within this sample, 48.6% reported they had been asked by an online adult acquaintance to meet in person, and 25.5% had agreed to meet with an online adult acquaintance in person. This suggested that of those who were asked, nearly half knowingly met the adult in person. Relating to the experience of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, 32.9% and 22.6% reported they had engaged in online and offline sexual activities with an adult before the age of 16. The results indicated that up to a third of the sample had been a victim of CSA following online interactions with online adult acquaintances.

Table 4.10

Frequency of Online Grooming Activities Involving Online Adult Acquaintances Before the Age of 16

Interactions with online adult acquaintances	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
It was common to be approached by someone over 18 online	26	15.0	24	13.9	22	12.7	57	32.9	44	25.4	101	58.3
Asked by an online adult acquaintance to meet in person			Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always	At least once				
Knowingly agreed to meet an online adult acquaintance in person	89	51.4	47	27.2	19	11.0	12	6.9	6	3.5	84	48.6
Engaged in online sexual activities with an online adult acquaintance	129	74.6	32	18.5	6	3.5	4	2.3	2	1.2	44	25.5
Engaged in physical sexual activities with an adult	116	67.1	39	22.5	9	5.2	7	4.0	2	1.2	57	32.9
	134	77.5	24	13.9	9	5.2	5	2.9	1	0.6	39	22.6

Online Grooming Tactics Encountered

Online grooming tactics encountered by participants as part of their online interactions with online adult acquaintances are shown in Table 4.11. Overall, deception was the most commonly encountered grooming tactics, with 54.9% having been deceived by an online adult acquaintance about their identity and 42.3% of the sample having interacted with adults who lied about being underage. Relating to the use of positivity, 45.7% of the sample agreed that online adult acquaintances would excessively complement their physical appearances, and 13.3% reported they had been bribed with money, illicit substances, or goods they desired in exchange for sexual activities that they would not otherwise engage in. These findings suggested that it was common for participants to experience different types of grooming tactics when interacting with online adult acquaintances before the age of 16.

Sexual Refusal Assertiveness

Table 4.12 shows that over 60% of the sample felt able to decline online sexual requests before the age of 16. However, 22.6% did not feel comfortable doing this, and 12.7% were ambivalent about whether they were able to do so. This implied that around a third of the sample was low on sexual refusal assertiveness and might be more likely to have complied with unwanted online sexual requests before the age of 16.

Table 4.11

Types of Online Grooming Tactics Encountered During Interactions with Online Adult Acquaintances

Types of online grooming tactics encountered	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Positivity												
Liberal use of flattery	32	18.5	23	13.3	39	22.5	56	32.4	23	13.3	79	45.7
The way adults talked to me made me feel special*	43	25.0	38	22.1	43	25.0	37	21.5	11	6.4	48	27.9
		Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always	At least once					
Deception												
Lied about gender	141	81.5	24	13.9	3	1.7	5	2.9	0	0.0	32	18.5
Pretended to be underage despite being an adult	100	57.8	52	30.1	10	5.8	11	6.4	0	0.0	73	42.3
Lied about being younger but later revealed true age	105	60.7	48	27.7	10	5.8	9	5.2	1	0.6	68	39.3
Lied about identity	78	45.1	66	38.2	16	9.2	10	5.8	3	1.7	95	54.9
Use of bribery in exchange for the following:												
Self-produced sexually explicit materials	148	85.5	16	9.2	6	3.5	2	1.2	1	0.6	25	14.5
Unwanted sexual activities	150	86.7	14	8.1	8	4.6	0	0.0	1	0.6	23	13.3

*1 missing response

Table 4.12

Sexual Refusal Assertiveness

Sexual refusal assertiveness	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Felt comfortable saying no regardless of how I met the person (online or offline)	10	5.8	29	16.8	22	12.7	48	27.7	64	37.0	112	64.7
Would not engage in online sexual activities regardless of how I met the person (online or offline)	7	4.1	19	11.0	31	18.0	39	22.7	76	44.2	115	66.9

Predictors of Receiving Requests from Online Adult Acquaintances to Meet in Person

The outcome variable, *receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person*, measured whether the participant had been asked by an online adult acquaintance to meet in person and whether the participant had knowingly agreed to meet with an online adult acquaintance in person, despite being aware of the adult's age. Since the experiences of unwanted online sexual exposure and/or pressured online sexual activities did not specify the age of the perpetrator, it is plausible that some of these victimisations were perpetrated by peers and/or acquainted adults. As such, these experiences would not necessarily precede receiving requests or agreeing to meet with an online adult acquaintance.

Given that sexualisation, where sexual activities gradually become more abusive, is often featured in the grooming process (see Section 1.10), these experiences could indicate an escalation where these indirect forms of OCSA are used in preparation for contact sexual abuse. Although sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances does not always crossover to in-person contact, research at the time of study development suggested that most online

grooming interactions resulted in face-to-face meetings (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2015). More recent studies also found that most young people experienced physical sexual assault at the first face-to-face meeting following online communication with online acquaintances (Marret & Choo, 2017; Rowse, 2023). However, the available knowledge when the study was being developed was almost exclusively qualitative, and these distinct experiences had yet to be quantitatively examined to understand how they could be linked to being asked to meet in person. Therefore, it was hypothesised that different forms of OCSA, such as unwanted online exposure and pressured online sexual activities, could precede receiving requests to meet in person, especially if the intention was to commit contact sexual abuse. Therefore, it is argued that the included predictor variables would precede the outcome variable.

A Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted prior to the regression analysis to determine relevant variables to enter as predictors of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person before the age of 16 (see Appendix 12 for correlations table).

The results revealed that higher frequencies of unwanted online sexual exposure ($r = .55, p < .001$), pressured online sexual activities ($r = .55, p < .001$), victimisation through non-consensual sharing ($r = .34, p < .001$), and online sexual coercion ($r = .42, p < .001$) were significantly correlated with a higher frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person.

Relating to peer norms, higher endorsement of descriptive and injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour ($r = .63, p < .001$; $r = .30, p < .001$, respectively), descriptive and injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation ($r = .50, p < .001$; $r = .32, p < .001$, respectively), and descriptive and injunctive norms for online HSB perpetration ($r = .47, p < .001$; $r = .49, p < .001$ respectively) were all significantly correlated with a higher frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person.

Higher willingness to interact with adults online ($r = .40, p < .001$) was also significantly correlated with a higher frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person.

Lastly, sexual refusal assertiveness was correlated with the outcome variable in the opposite direction, where a lower ability to refuse online sexual requests ($r = -.25, p = .001$) was significantly correlated with a higher frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person.

All of these variables were entered into a multiple regression model using the enter method (see Table 4.13).

The model accounted for 52.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .53.$, Adjusted $R^2 = .47$) and significantly predicted the experience of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person before the age of 16, $F(12,110) = 10.18, MSE = 36.25, p < .001$. The model identified that the perception that peers were more likely to engage in online risky behaviour ($B = .48, p = .002$), higher frequency of unwanted online sexual exposure ($B = .22, p = .03$), and a higher willingness to interact with adults online ($B = .16, p = .015$) predicted receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person. None of the other included variables were significant factors.

Table 4.13

Predictors of Receiving Requests from Online Adult Acquaintances to Meet in Person Before the Age of 16

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Unwanted online sexual exposure	.22	.10	.23	2.25	.03*
Pressured online sexual activities	.02	.09	.02	.23	.82
Non-consensual sharing victimisation	.76	.40	.13	1.90	.06
Verbal sexual coercion	.00	.023	.002	.02	.98
Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour	.48	.15	.35	3.23	.002**
Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation	.04	.10	.04	.34	.74
Descriptive norms for online HSB perpetration	-.09	.10	-.11	-.88	.38
Injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour	.01	.19	.002	.03	.98
Injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation	.04	.16	.02	.28	.78
Injunctive norms for online HSB perpetration	.07	.07	.09	.96	.34
Willingness to interact with adults online	.16	.07	.19	2.48	.015*
Sexual refusal assertiveness	-.10	.09	-.09	-1.17	.25

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Predictors of Sexual Abuse by Online Adult Acquaintances

A Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted prior to the regression analysis to determine relevant variables to enter as predictors of online and/or offline sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances before the age of 16 (see Appendix 12 for the correlations table).

The results revealed that a higher frequency of unwanted online sexual exposure ($r = .50, p < .001$), pressured online sexual activities ($r = .50, p < .001$), non-consensual sharing victimisation ($r = .20, p = .009$), requests to meet in person ($r = .57, p < .001$), online sexual coercion ($r = .37, p < .001$), and grooming tactics ($r = .54, p < .001$) were all significantly correlated with a higher frequency of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

Additionally, higher endorsement of descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour ($r = .41, p < .001$), descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation ($r = .23, p = .002$), descriptive and injunctive norms for online HSB perpetration ($r = .29, p < .001$; $r = .37, p < .001$, respectively), and more willingness to interact with adults online ($r = .34, p < .001$) were all significantly correlated with a higher frequency of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

A significant and negative correlation was found for sexual refusal assertiveness, where participants who were less able to decline online sexual requests were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances ($r = -.26, p < .001$). Similarly, participants who found it more difficult to ignore sexual requests made by online acquaintances ($r = -.26, p = .001$) were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

All of the above variables were entered into a multiple regression model using the enter method (see Table 4.14).

Table 4.14

Predictors of Sexual Abuse by Online Adult Acquaintances Before the Age of 16

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Unwanted online sexual exposure	.130	.064	.213	2.04	.043*
Pressured online sexual activities	.095	.059	.175	1.62	.109
Victimisation of non-consensual sharing	-.307	.259	-.088	-1.18	.24
Request to meet in person	.191	.064	.305	2.96	.004**
Verbal sexual coercion	-.004	.015	-.022	-.24	.81
Grooming tactics	.074	.035	.215	2.14	.034*
Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour	.079	.096	.093	.82	.41
Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation	-.163	.065	-.299	-2.52	.013*
Descriptive norms for online HSB perpetration	.015	.065	.028	.23	.82
Injunctive norms for online HSB perpetration	.047	.044	.100	1.08	.28
Sexual refusal assertiveness	.047	.069	.063	.69	.49
Willingness to interact with adults online	-.012	.044	-.022	-.26	.79
Ability to refuse sexual requests made by online acquaintance	-.230	.122	-.167	-1.88	.06

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

The model accounted for 53% of the variance ($R^2 = .529$, Adjusted $R^2 = .472$) and significantly predicted participants' engagement in sexual activities with adults before the age of 16, $F(13,108) = 9.317$, $MSE = 13.001$, $p < .001$. The model identified that a higher frequency of

unwanted online sexual exposure ($B = .13, p = .043$), a higher frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person ($B = .19, p = .004$), a higher frequency of grooming tactics ($B = .07, p = .034$), and perceiving peers as being less likely to experience online sexual victimisation ($B = -.16, p = .013$) predicted sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. None of the other included variables were significant factors.

4.4 DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the prevalence of different forms of OCSA in order to quantitatively examine the components of the online grooming process, and to explore the influence of peer norms on the online grooming experience by online adult acquaintances. The results revealed that different forms of OCSA (age of perpetrators not specified) were frequently experienced by participants before the age of 16. The analysis also found that there were different predictors for the frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. This highlighted the importance of distinguishing between these distinct experiences. The present study also provided the first evidence of the role of peer norms in predicting the frequency of experiencing online grooming activities.

Prevalence of OCSA

Reviews of the literature on OCSA have consistently concluded that victimisation rates vary considerably due to the types of questions used, the number of questions used, the population examined, and the time frames over which the experiences were measured (Madigan et al., 2018b; Reed et al., 2020; Walker & Sleath, 2017). As such, comparisons of figures are arbitrary. This is further complicated by the retrospective design of the present study

examining the lifetime prevalence (up to the age 16) of OCSA, as existing studies predominately used young people instead of a young adult sample.

Nevertheless, the present findings for unwanted online sexual exposure, pressured online sexual activities, and non-consensual sharing victimisation before the age of 16 were higher than those reported in the literature. While it is difficult to compare prevalence figures for unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured online sexual activities with other studies due to differences in items used, non-consensual sharing victimisation is often examined by a single item in existing studies. Compared to the 13.5% of non-consensual victimisation reported in the present study, much lower prevalences have been found in other studies (e.g., 3.4% reported by Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022; 2.9% reported by Pedersen et al., 2023). These studies, however, examined victimisation in the past 12 months using a sample of young people. As experiences (including victimisation) accumulate with age, it would not be unusual for participants in the current study to report a higher lifetime prevalence. This highlighted the need for caution when comparing the results of studies using different samples and time frames for sampling.

To illustrate the issue, for example, although Madigan et al.'s (2018b) meta-analysis reported a mean prevalence of unwanted online sexual exposure at 20.3%, unwanted online sexual exposure was defined as unintentional and accidental, such as via pop-up windows and spam emails, and did not include the use of mobile phones or sexual materials sent by another person, unlike the present study did. Offenders will quickly adapt to new technological media to exploit young people (Quayle et al., 2014), and young people with smartphones have been found to be more likely to be approached online for sex and have sex with an Internet-met partner (Rice et al., 2015). Therefore, given that Madigan et al. (2018b) only included studies published up to 2011 and there has been a significant increase in the use of smartphones and other Internet-connected devices since, the increased online exposure via multiple digital outlets would have put participants at greater risk of online sexual harm. Thus explaining the

higher figures reported in this study. Indeed, comparable figures have been reported by a more recent study conducted by Reed et al. (2019), who found that 53% of their sample aged 15–19 had received unwanted sexual messages or photos and 49% had been asked to do something sexual. These differences highlight the need for researchers to keep up with the fast-evolving digital communication and to consider the contexts in which OCSA can occur.

While the present figures could be attributed to the non-specification of the age of the perpetrator, this argument is not supported by the much lower figures reported by Finkelhor et al. (2022), who used a similar design and examined OCSA retrospectively using a young adult sample. Without specifying the age of the perpetrator, Finkelhor and colleagues (2022) reported that the prevalence of unwanted sexual talk, unwanted sexual questions, and unwanted sexual act requests was 16.9%, 18.8%, and 14.3%, respectively. This contrasts with the nearly half of the current sample having been pressured to talk about sex (e.g., 48.6% had been repeatedly pressured by the same person to talk about sex and 50.1% had been pressured to talk about sexual history or sexual life), and nearly a third (30.1%) had been pressured to engage in online sexual activities.

However, since receiving unwanted online sexual requests is distinct from being pressured to engage with these requests, this study argued that the discrepancy underscored the importance of having uniform measures and a standardised conceptualisation of different types of OCSA. Additionally, since unwanted online sexual exposure and pressured online sexual activities were both measured by multiple items in the present study, as opposed to a single item used in the majority of studies, the current findings highlight the importance of comprehensively measuring different types of activities to capture the scope of each type of OCSA.

Nearly half of the current sample (48.6%) had been asked by an online adult acquaintance to meet in person., and over half of those knowingly agreed to meet with the adult in person

before the age of 16. While it can be argued that agreeing to meet does not indicate that this has happened, previous studies using larger samples have reported similar figures (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012; Marret & Choo, 2017). The comparable prevalence reported by samples from Denmark, Malaysia, and the UK suggests that young people are having similar experiences on the borderless digital platforms. The fact that the present study specified that it was an adult asking to meet and/or agreeing to meet the adult suggests that some young people are knowingly engaging in this form of online risky behaviour. Although meeting with an adult does not imply victimisation, nor is it a crime for an adult to meet with a child, previous studies suggest most sexual assault takes place in the first face-to-face meeting (Marret & Choo, 2017; Rowse, 2023). Thus, this form of online risky behaviour could increase exposure to sexual harm, as indicated by this factor predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances in the present study.

Concerning the experience of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, up to a third of the current sample (32.9%) was sexually abused online, and one fifth of the sample (22.6%) was sexually abused in person. Again, these figures were high in comparison to previous studies reporting that up to 14% of young people had engaged in sexualised interactions with adults online (e.g., de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018a; 2018b; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022; Sklenarova et al., 2018). These studies, however, examined victimisation within samples of young people and did not always specify whether the adults were known to the young person or met online. Furthermore, while previous studies reported that less than 4% of young people who met with an online acquaintance in person experienced sexual assault, these figures were based on forced sexual activities and did not specify the age of the perpetrator (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012; Marret & Choo, 2017).

On the contrary, where a retrospective design is used, Greene-Colozzi et al. (2020) found that 38% of those who had an intimate online relationship with an adult stranger that followed a pattern of online sexual grooming met the adult in person. Of those who met with the adult,

68% reported physical sexual intercourse in these face-to-face meetings. Although the present study did not examine whether contact sexual abuse was perpetrated by the same online adult acquaintance who the participant had met in person, the results indicate that 88.6% of these face-to-face meetings resulted in physical CSA. This highlights the importance of educating young people about the risks of meeting online adult acquaintances in person.

Since some young people will willingly engage in online sexual activities with adults (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Sklenarova et al., 2018), the neutral way of addressing CSA in the present study might have allowed a more accurate capture of the scope of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Furthermore, interviews with online grooming victims suggest that they often do not fully realise the abusive nature of the experience until later in life (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Therefore, the retrospective design in the current study would have allowed participants, who are now adults, to reappraise their early online sexual encounters, which in turn provided a more accurate reflection of their experience of OCSA. Lastly, the use of an online questionnaire has advantages by increasing participant comfort in answering personal questions. Thus, the discrepancy in the prevalence between studies using young people and young adult samples highlighted the methodological issues and challenges when interpreting research evidence (Stoilova et al., 2021).

Implications of the findings of OCSA

The lack of distinction between adult and peer perpetrators in examining unwanted online sexual exposure, pressured online sexual activities, and non-consensual sharing victimisation in this study is not isolated and has been identified by Bryce et al. (2023) as an issue with existing research. Since the age of the perpetrator was not examined, it could not be ascertained whether these forms of OCSA were committed by adults or peers. Similarly, whether the perpetrator was someone the participant had met online or knew in person could not be determined. While a previous study found that a high proportion of young people had engaged in online sexual activities with peers they had never met (Sklenarova et al., 2018), it

cannot be ruled out that some of these interactions could have been with an adult pretending to be underage (Kloess et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2012). Indeed, Marret and Choo (2017) found that around a third of the young people who attended in-person meetings reported that the online acquaintance claiming to be a child was in fact an adult. Evidence of age deception was also reported by participants in Study 1. Significantly, Finkelhor et al. (2022) reported that 74.8% of the OSS incidents in their sample involved perpetrators whose identities were unknown to the victims. This highlighted the challenge faced by researchers in establishing the perpetrator's identity, as it may not always be known to the person, especially when the interaction took place online. These findings suggest that young people should be educated about the possibility that they could be communicating with adults pretending to be underage online and experience OCSA without realising it.

The present study also examined the predictors of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. The separation of the two online grooming experiences enabled a more detailed understanding of the factors influencing the different aspects of online grooming. Indeed, different factors were found to predict the frequency of receiving requests to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. The evidence of descriptive norms (i.e., the perception of the prevalence of a behaviour) also indicates that descriptive norms are related to these distinct online grooming experiences in different ways. The findings are discussed below.

Predictors of Receiving Requests from Online Adult Acquaintances to Meet in Person

The perception that peers were more likely to engage in online risky sexual behaviour, higher frequencies of unwanted online exposure, and more willingness to interact with adults online (including those of a sexual nature) were found to predict the frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person. Although the present study did not directly examine participants' engagement in online risky sexual behaviour, previous studies found

that young people who perceived that peers engaged in more (online) risky sexual behaviour were more likely to engage in the same behaviours themselves (Baumgartner et al., 2011; van de Bongardt et al., 2015). Therefore, the significance of descriptive norms could imply that those who endorsed the view were more likely to engage in online risky sexual behaviours, such as talking to people they met online about sex. Indeed, the other predictor, willingness to interact with adults online, measured receptiveness to engage in sexual activities with adults, which is a form of online risky sexual behaviour. This lends support to the assertion that perceived peer behaviour could be related to the participant's own behaviour. The perception that online risky sexual behaviour is common may normalise and lower the associated risk of these online sexual behaviours. Consequently, those who held such beliefs might be more likely to engage in online risky behaviours, including those engaged in with adults.

Previous studies have identified communication with strangers online as a risk factor for receiving sexual requests from adults (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018b; Mitchell et al., 2008). This may explain why unwanted online sexual exposure was found to be a predictor of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances. This is because receiving requests implies that participants have been communicating with an online adult acquaintance, and these interactions may provide opportunities for adults to introduce sexual content. Similarly, those who were more willing to interact with adults online would also be more likely to interact with adults when they were approached. Thus, explaining its significance in predicting a higher likelihood of being asked and agreeing to meet with an online adult acquaintance in person.

Predictors of Sexual Abuse by Online Adult Acquaintances

The current study found that higher frequencies of unwanted online sexual exposure, higher frequencies of grooming tactics, higher frequencies of receiving requests from online adult

acquaintances to meet in person, and lower estimates of peers' online sexual victimisation predicted higher frequencies of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

First, the significance of online grooming tactics in predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances was consistent with the qualitative literature identifying grooming tactics such as identity deception, use of compliments and flattery, and bribery as integral to the grooming process, and these tactics are often used simultaneously to entice victims to engage in sexual activity to maintain the cycle of abuse (Aitken et al., 2018; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Joleby et al., 2021b; Kloess et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Previous studies suggested that some young people continued to interact with the offenders, including sexually, despite learning that they had been communicating with an adult instead of a young person (Quayle et al., 2014). Relating to this study, nearly half of the sample (42.3%) reported they had been lied to by online adult acquaintances pretending to be underage. Therefore, it seems plausible that some of the participants who had been lied to were initially misled into believing they were interacting with someone who was age appropriate and were further manipulated into sustaining the contact following the discovery that the online acquaintances were in fact adults (e.g., Quayle et al., 2012b). Meanwhile, previous studies also suggest that even without the use of deception, victims can be manipulated into believing they were romantically involved with offenders as a result of being groomed and subsequently sexually abused without recognising the inappropriateness of their experiences (Whittle et al., 2015). The evidence therefore underscores how the use of grooming tactics is integral to the experience of online grooming resulting in sexual abuse.

The significance of unwanted online sexual exposure as a risk factor also replicated previous findings suggesting that, whether the abuse occurred online or offline, online grooming victims experienced unwanted sexual exposure to the point of sexual abuse (Whittle et al., 2014b). Since unwanted sexual exposure ranging from receiving sexual comments to witnessing others engaging in live sexual activities was examined, the present finding also lent support

to the boundary-pushing strategy, which asserted that sexual topics are introduced progressively to allow the offender to assess the level of sexual activity the young person can tolerate (O'Connell, 2003; Williams et al., 2013). Offenders have also self-reported that they would send sexually explicit materials that depicted a particular sexual activity to desensitise victims (Quayle et al., 2012a). The repeated exposure therefore allows offenders to maintain a sexual focus while desensitising the young person to overcome their resistance to engage in increasingly sexual activities (Kloess., 2017b; Whittle et al., 2014b). This would explain the finding that a higher frequency of unwanted online sexual exposure predicted sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances.

Importantly, since the present study did not specify whether the unwanted online sexual exposure was perpetrated by online adult acquaintances, peers, or acquainted others, the significance of the experience of unwanted online sexual exposure in predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances suggests that this form of OCSA may form a part of a continuum of online sexual victimisation. This is consistent with sexual re-victimisation identified in the literature on contact sexual victimisation, whereby individuals who have experienced sexual trauma are more likely to experience further sexual victimisation (Classen et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2019). Therefore, while the significance of unwanted online sexual exposure in predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances lent support to the sexualisation identified in the online grooming process (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Joleby et al., 2021b), it could also indicate that repeated unwanted online sexual exposure, irrespective of the identity of the perpetrator, increased the risk of young people experiencing further sexual abuse online.

Existing evidence suggests that young people have a limited understanding of the potential online sexual harm posed by peers and that repeated exposure to online sexual harm could lead to desensitisation (IICSA, 2019). This was also evident in the results of Study 1, where OCSA incidents involving peers appeared to be accepted as an everyday part of life rather

than something harmful to be acted on. These findings may provide a potential explanation for the perception that online sexual victimisation was not common among peers predicted sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, as this perception may have attenuated participants' threshold for recognising sexually abusive interactions, thereby increasing the vulnerability to sexual harm online in general.

Relating to the significance of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person, DeMarco et al. (2017) previously reported that meeting with online adult acquaintances in person predicted the frequency of offline sexual encounters with them. The current finding is also consistent with qualitative studies suggesting that most online grooming victims were sexually victimised when they met the online groomer in person and experienced both online and offline sexual abuse as a result of these interactions (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2015). Therefore, supporting the existing evidence, the present finding demonstrates that receiving requests to meet and/or agreeing to meet could increase the risk of online as well as offline CSA by online adult acquaintances.

Neither online sexual coercion tactics nor pressured online sexual activities were found to predict the frequency of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. This is congruent with the literature suggesting that the use of coercion and pressure is not featured in all cases of online grooming, especially if the victims feel bonded to the offender (Katz, 2013; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014b). Accounts from online grooming victims also revealed that sexual activities could be engaged in voluntarily because they believed they were in a romantic relationship with the offender, were in control of the relationship, or due to sexual curiosity (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Kloess et al., 2017a). Furthermore, studies using non-forensic samples have reported that only around 10% regarded their online sexual interactions with adults as negative or aggressive (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Sklenarova et al., 2018). These findings may thus imply that most young people did not experience coercion in these abusive sexual experiences.

It is important to note that manipulation tactics used by offenders often give young people the impression that they are in control of the situation (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; Whittle et al., 2014b; 2015). Therefore, it is argued that the lack of significance of verbal sexual coercion tactics and pressured online sexual activities as predictors was not indicative that pressure or coercion was not experienced, as the prevalence of online sexual coercion tactics and pressured online sexual activities reported by the sample would suggest otherwise. Rather, the finding underscored that unwanted sexual exposure and grooming tactics are central to the online grooming process in skewing the victims' perception into believing they were not coerced into sexual activity. As the verbal sexual coercion tactics measured in this study aggregated both subtle and overt persuasion and threat, it may be important for future studies to examine these tactics separately to understand how these experiences are related to the outcomes of OCSA.

Nevertheless, it must be recognised that these results do not imply that all victims "willingly" engage in sexually abusive activities or do not attempt to protect themselves from being abused. Although not examined in this study, research suggests that victims display resistance, both directly (e.g., refusing the sexual requests) or indirectly (e.g., through using 'excuses' to avoid compliance with the sexually abusive request), and would discontinue interactions when they progress to more sexually explicit requests by offenders (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Kloess et al., 2017a; Thomas et al., 2023). However, the young person's effort to end the abuse or non-compliance with the sexual abuse is usually met with the use of further manipulative tactics (Joleby et al., 2021b; Thomas et al., 2023). Crucially, where there is evidence of the abuse (e.g., sexually explicit materials depicting the victim), the use of coercion and threats of sharing these materials is likely to leave the victim feeling they have no choice but to endure the escalating psychological and sexual abuse (Jolebey et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2018; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023).

Another possible explanation for the perception that online sexual victimisation was less prevalent as a significant predictor of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances may lie in the fact that young people are much less likely to discuss online sexual behaviours with peers compared to traditional sexual topics (7% vs 50%, respectively) (Widman et al., 2021). This could reflect the negative connotations associated with OCSA. For example, where 'traditional' CSA victims are often seen as passive and vulnerable (Ellis, 2019), features of online grooming such as interactions with adults and sexualised behaviours (e.g., sending self-produced sexual materials to offenders) have resulted in some professionals noting that the victim can be seen as an 'active' participant in their exploitation and are somewhat 'responsible' for the abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). Similarly, young people, including those who have not experienced sexual abuse, reported feeling they were responsible for protecting themselves from online sexual harm, which can inhibit them from seeking support in the event of experiencing abuse (IICSA, 2019). This is consistent with the evidence that victims of different forms of OCSA often describe self-blame and blame from others (Bryce et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2020; Walsh & Tener, 2022).

Young people have also identified the sexual double standard associated with online sexual behaviour as a barrier to talking about their experience of victimisation. While females are more likely to be blamed and shamed for engaging in the same online sexual behaviours than males (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021a), young males have also reported that the gender sexual norms make it difficult for them to seek help when they become sexually victimised online as it conflicts with the concept of masculinity (Hunehäll Berndtsson, 2021). Furthermore, young people who have experienced OCSA have described the fear of being seen differently despite being victimised and would prefer not to disclose the abuse or to minimise discussion of the experience following disclosure (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Quayle et al., 2012). Since OCSA is most likely to take place privately, the potential repercussions and stigma related to this form of sexual abuse are likely to limit opportunities

for young people to openly talk about their experiences, making it difficult to accurately gauge the prevalence of online sexual victimisation experienced by peers.

The Role of Peer Norms in Predicting Online Grooming Activities

The current study was the first to examine the role of peer norms, namely, descriptive norms and injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviours, online sexual victimisation, and online HSB perpetration, on the frequency of the experience of online grooming activities. The SNA posits that peer norms are consistently associated with behaviour, and that overestimations and underestimations of a problematic behaviour will increase and decrease one from engaging in the same behaviour, respectively. The results of the study found that descriptive norms (i.e., perceived prevalence of online sexual behaviours) had different functions in protecting young people from online sexual harm.

Expanding on the established relationship between descriptive peer norms and online risky sexual behaviour (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2010; 2015), this study found that the perception that peers were engaging in more online risky sexual behaviour predicted the frequency of receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person. Since the outcome variable implies interactions with online adult acquaintances, which is a form of online risky behaviour, this is consistent with the suggestion that overestimation of a problem behaviour will increase engagement in that behaviour.

Although lower estimates of peers' online sexual victimisation in predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintance initially appear to contradict the SNA's assertion that underestimations of a problem behaviour will discourage engagement in the same behaviour, peer norms tend to examine active engagement of a behaviour, whereas victimisation is a passive experience. Rather, the perception that online sexual victimisation was uncommon might have lowered participants' awareness of potential online sexual harm, which contributed

to the experience of sexual abuse. Thus, the corresponding relationships between descriptive norms for online risky behaviour and interactions with online adult acquaintances, and between descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintance, illustrated the strength of the relationship between the perception of peers' experience of online sexual behaviour and young people's own online sexual experiences.

The finding that none of the injunctive norm variables predicted online grooming activities was consistent with previous findings showing that, especially for socially unapproved behaviour, descriptive norms are more directive for young people's (online) sexual behaviour than perceived approval among peers (Baumgartner et al., 2011; van de Bongardt et al., 2015; except for Nogueira Avelar E Silva et al., 2020, who found the effect was explained by injunctive norms only). The salience of injunctive peer norms is usually associated with observable behaviours such as dangerous driving, smoking, and classroom aggression, where there may be rewards for popularity and social hierarchy (Ciranka & van den Bos, 2021; Guimond et al., 2018). In contrast, the incentives associated with online sexual behaviour are not as straightforward because of the sexual double standard guiding these behaviours (Burén et al., 2022; Endendijk et al., 2020). For instance, Baumgartner et al. (2015) reported that girls who presented themselves in a sexual way online were evaluated more negatively by other girls but more positively by boys. The study also found that boys who presented themselves in sexual ways were evaluated positively by girls but not by boys. As discussed in Study 1, young people also reported conflicting and gendered views regarding peer approval of the exchange of sexually explicit materials, where the practice was perceived as being both accepted and rejected by peers (Burén et al., 2022). This ambivalence suggests that young people may only have vague assumptions about peer approval of online sexual behaviour, making injunctive norms difficult to gauge. Therefore, the significance of the descriptive norms found in the present study added to the cumulative evidence that perceived prevalence may be a more tangible indicator of peer norms than estimations of peer approval.

Implications of the role of descriptive peer norms

As descriptive norms were found to increase the risk of online grooming activities, the SNA suggests that descriptive norms will also have a role in protecting young people from online sexual harm. It asserts that behaviours are driven by misperceptions of social norms, and interventions that correct such misperceptions should promote more positive behaviours (Dempsey et al., 2018). Several studies have shown that interventions targeted at changing peer norms, such as providing accurate information about peers' behaviours, are effective in reducing risky behaviours (Gersh et al., 2019; Pilatti et al., 2021). Young people have also identified the importance of hearing from those who have experienced OCSA to talk about their experiences as part of education provision (IICSA, 2019). While self-protection is an important element of preventing online sexual harm, the role of descriptive norms in predicting the frequency of receiving requests from adults to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances suggests that young people will also benefit from social norms based intervention. Through these interventions, young people can be educated on peers' actual online sexual experience and the potential consequences of their online engagement with others, as the abstinence approach, which places an emphasis on personal responsibility, can have significant implications for how young people respond when they are victimised.

The way young people talk about sexual topics with peers also relates to their individual perceptions of peer norms regarding sexual behaviour. van de Bongardt et al. (2017) found that more normative talk and reinforcement were related to the perception that peers were engaging in less risky sexual behaviour, less sexually active, or less approving of sex. In contrast, an opposite relationship was found between more deviant sexual talk and reinforcement and descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Since online sexual behaviour is influenced by social and gendered contexts, efforts should be made to dispel related misperceptions and stigma to create a safe environment for young people to discuss their online sexual experiences without being shamed or blamed.

Previous studies suggested that the effect of peer norms is moderated by other factors such as peer type (e.g., distant, popular peers and close friends), gender, and the need for popularity (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Doornwaard et al., 2015; Maheux et al., 2020; van de Bongardt et al., 2015). Therefore, to better inform prevention and intervention efforts, future studies need to explore moderating factors that may amplify or attenuate the effects of peer norms on the experience of online grooming. Importantly, since the retrospective examination of peer norms may not be an accurate reflection of participants' perceived approval or perception of peers' online behaviour when they were young, it is important for future studies to investigate whether the findings of this study would replicate in a sample of young people.

Sexual Refusal Assertiveness

This study found that sexual refusal assertiveness was negatively and significantly correlated with fewer experiences of pressured online sexual activities and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Kloess et al. (2017a) found that victims of online grooming who were assertive in refusing sexual requests by the offender prevented the abuse from escalating. Therefore, it is argued that the insignificance of participants' ability to decline online sexual requests is not indicative that sexual refusal assertiveness is unimportant to protect young people from online sexual abuse. Rather, it highlights that other factors, such as repeated unwanted online sexual exposure, grooming tactics, and descriptive norms, may outweigh this protective factor. As such, it is recommended that preventative strategies will benefit from strengthening young people's sexual assertiveness skills, as the ability to resist online sexual pressure is likely to reduce the likelihood of online sexual victimisation.

Normalisation of Online HSB

This study found that the perception of peers having been victims of non-consensual sharing was three-fold higher than participants' own experience of this form of abuse. There was also

a discrepancy between perceived approval and engagement in non-consensual sharing perpetration, where despite over 80% of participants disagreeing that peers would condone it, 64.2% perceived that peers had engaged in this sexually harmful behaviour. The overestimation of victimisation, as well as the discrepancy between perceived approval and engagement in perpetration, could indicate the normalisation of online HSB. This is because these findings imply that young people viewed victimisation through non-consensual sharing was common and that peers engaged in this type of HSB despite not feeling comfortable with it. This suggestion is consistent with the growing evidence that harmful exchange of sexually explicit materials (inclusive of sending, receiving, and non-consensual sharing) is a common practice among young people, but the impact of harm is trivialised by gendered sexual expectations (Boer et al., 2021; Hunehall Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021).

Implications for Education on OCSA

Whilst the current finding may not be generalised beyond this sample, the high proportion of participants expressing a willingness to interact with adults online, including sexually (68%), highlights that young people should be educated on the illegality of sexual activity between a child and an adult, as well as the risks associated with interacting with online adult acquaintances. Education on behaviours such as identity deception, excessive flattery, and bribery as signs of grooming is especially critical, as non-sexual grooming activities can be particularly difficult for young people to recognise these exploitative interactions (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Given the significance of unwanted online sexual exposure in predicting online grooming activities, online safety awareness education should teach young people to act swiftly in response to receiving unwanted sexual materials, including how to report these incidents and to cease contact with the sender. Together, these efforts can mitigate the normalisation of unwanted online sexual exposure and prevent subsequent contact, thereby reducing the risk of sexual abuse. Informed knowledge about peers' online sexual behaviour,

along with the ability to recognise exploitative behaviour and a supportive environment to talk about online sexual victimisation, are likely to prevent OCSA. At the same time, this may facilitate disclosure among those who have been groomed and sexually abused to end these relationships and seek help.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study was not without limitations. First, although the use of self-report can underestimate the true prevalence of online sexual behaviour due to social desirability bias (King, 2022), the higher than usual prevalence found in this study would argue against the likelihood that participants had underreported their experience of OCSA. The potential of overreporting is also contested, as people who are influenced by social desirability tend to overreport culturally desired behaviours (King, 2022), and the experience of sexual victimisation is unlikely to be considered one. Instead, the higher than usual prevalence could be related to the wording of the items. Whilst this study specifically indicated an examination of young people's online sexual experiences and participants were asked to answer the questionnaire with references to their online experiences, the item measuring offline sexual activities with adults did not specify that these sexual activities were engaged with an online adult acquaintance. It is therefore possible that the contact sexual abuse was committed by acquainted adults (i.e., an adult who participant knew in person). Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest acquaintance perpetrators also utilise digital communication to facilitate sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Jeglic & Winters, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2005). Similarly, the non-specification of perpetrator age in measuring the different forms of OCSA meant that some of the reported incidents could be peer perpetrated. However, since this study was conducted in 2018, it was considered important to first establish the prevalence of different forms of OCSA. Since the findings revealed that OCSA is common, the next step would be to differentiate between these experiences to add knowledge of OCSA perpetrated by peers, adults, or by both.

Second, Ehman and Gross (2019) identified the utilisation of non-standardised measures across studies and the use of single-item measures as methodological critiques of the literature on OCSA. Although this study was also affected by this issue, efforts were made to minimise the impact. Similar to Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018b) in their development of a questionnaire for online grooming, the present study devised the measures by synthesising the literature on different forms of OCSA, OSS, and online grooming. Additionally, most measures in the present study consisted of multiple items to comprehensively capture the different forms of OCSA. Where single-item measures were used, these were common practices in research on the relationship between sexual peer norms and youth sexual behaviour (van de Bongardt et al., 2015; 2017) and victimisation through non-consensual sharing (Wachs et al., 2021). It should also be noted that although single-item measures do not possess optimal psychometric qualities, they have been shown to have comparable or equal predictive validity compared to multi-item measures in assessing unidimensional or global constructs, and have been increasingly recommended (Gardner et al., 1998; Hoepfner et al., 2011). Furthermore, the use of single-item measures can reduce the chance of common method variance, where spurious correlations are observed due to the use of the same response format rather than the content of items (Hoepfner et al., 2011). Lastly, given the length of the questionnaire, single-item measures had the practical advantage of minimising participant burden (e.g., time and fatigue in completing the questionnaire). Therefore, the appropriate use of single-item measures should not be discounted.

Furthermore, while some researchers argue that the combination of positive and negative items can reduce acquiescence bias and that the quantity of extreme responses between both types of items is similar, other researchers have cautioned against the mix of both, as the combination can affect the internal consistency of the scale (Barnette, 2000; Salazar, 2015; Sauro & Lewis, 2011; Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2018). Therefore, it is argued that the use of positively worded items in the current study was a good fit for the research question.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to quantitatively examine the online grooming process by establishing the prevalence of different forms of OCSA and the role of peer norms in predicting different aspects of online grooming activities. The findings highlighted that different forms of OCSA, including unwanted online sexual exposure, pressured online sexual activities, and non-consensual sharing victimisation, perpetrated by adults and/or peers, were prevalent. It also showed that participants experienced different types of verbal sexual coercion tactics when pressured into engaging in unwanted online sexual activities. Relating to online grooming by adults, different grooming tactics were experienced before the age of 16, and a third of the sample experienced online sexual abuse by an online adult acquaintance.

The significance of unwanted online sexual exposure in predicting both receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances highlighted that the grooming process commences when the young person interacts with the abuser. This underscores the difficulty to definitively delineating the grooming process, as the activities are indiscrete and imbricated. Congruent with the online grooming process described by the qualitative literature, this study found that online interactions with adults, grooming tactics, and unwanted online sexual exposure predicted sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Expanding on the current knowledge on socio-demographic factors as risk factors for online grooming resulting in sexual abuse, this study presented evidence on the role of descriptive norms in predicting online grooming activities. These findings highlight that prevention should focus on education about the actual occurrence of young people's online sexual behaviour and the associated risks and warning signs of online interactions with adults.

Findings from Study 1 highlighted that OCSA was prevalent and could be perpetrated by both adults and peers. In support, this study found that a high proportion of participants had

experienced different forms of OCSA. Yet, the post-experience of OCSA is extremely underdeveloped. Evidence of the detrimental consequences of CSA lasting into adulthood is well established (Hailes et al., 2019). The impact of OCSA on young people's psychosocial well-being has also been reported in a small body of literature (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017) and was evident from participants' accounts in Study 1. However, the long-term impact of OCSA is currently not understood. Meanwhile, disclosure of CSA is often delayed, and the experience of disclosure can also promote or impede recovery from the abuse (Alaggia et al., 2019). Yet, neither the rates of OCSA nor the disclosure experience have been examined. For these reasons, Study 3 concluded this programme of research by examining the prevalence of OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers separately and the role of disclosure on psychosocial well-being in adulthood to add understanding to the long-term impact of OCSA.

CHAPTER 5 STUDY 3

Understanding the long-term impact of online child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults and peers and the role of disclosure on psychosocial well-being.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing global recognition of OCSA, as well as social policy and legislative changes addressing this form of child abuse in the last two decades, knowledge of the long-term impact of OCSA remains sparse. Equally, disclosure of OCSA, which is suggested by the literature of CSA to moderate the impact of abuse on psychological well-being, is also underexamined. Therefore, the aim of Study 3 was to address the impact of OCSA and disclosure on mental health in adulthood.

Long-term Impact of CSA

The association between CSA and a wide range of psychiatric, negative psychosocial, and physical health outcomes is extensively documented (Chen et al., 2010; Fergusson et al., 2013; Hailes et al., 2019; Sahle et al., 2022). A large volume of studies has found that CSA is a substantial risk factor for a range of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), personality disorder, and substance misuse in both childhood and adulthood (Chen et al., 2010; Cutajar et al., 2010; Hailes et al., 2019). Research also revealed that CSA is associated with more frequent access to medical care and emergency services (Arnow, 2004; Bonomi et al., 2008), and victims of CSA are four times more likely to be under the care of public mental health services than those who have not been sexually abused in childhood (Cutajar et al., 2010). The extant evidence therefore demonstrates the detrimental longitudinal impact of early sexual trauma on subsequent well-being and illustrates that CSA is costly to both the individual and society.

Impact of OCSA

Existing limited research has identified that while the outcome of OCSA shares similarities with offline CSA in terms of emotional, psychological, and behavioural outcomes, there are added complexities that are specific to the role of technology as a facilitator of CSA and how it is experienced online. For instance, Internet-connected devices enabling constant access to the victim by the offender can result in further control of the young person (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Consistent with the findings of Study 1, the threats of non-consensual sharing of sexual images sent by the young person is also a powerful tool in silencing the victim and gaining further sexual compliance (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Consequently, the constant fear of the sexually explicit materials being shared online, or later resurfacing becomes a major cause of anxiety, even after the abuse has ended (Joleby et al., 2020; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the nature of OCSA, which often entails voluntary involvement on the young person's part and sometimes initiation of sexual activity by them, can have a serious impact on victims' self-blame, as they often believe they 'subjected' themselves to the abuse or could have stopped it (Joleby et al., 2020; 2021a). This perception was also echoed in the findings of Study 1. Despite the distinctive nature of OCSA relative to other forms of abuse being recognised in the current National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines for child abuse and neglect (2017), the risks and impact of offline CSA are often viewed as more serious and prioritised over OCSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Joleby et al., 2021a; Quayle et al., 2023).

Lack of Research on the Long-term Impact of OCSA

At present, research on the impact of OCSA is scant and suffers from notable limitations. First, although studies comparing the impact between offline and online CSA emphasise the need

to dispel the misperception that OCSA is less serious than offline CSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017), research is still required to understand the impact of OCSA in comparison to those who have not experienced this form of abuse. These studies also relied on small samples (e.g., seven people aged 17–24 were interviewed for Joelby et al. (2020), and a sample of 30 was included in Hamilton-Giachritsis and colleagues' study (2017; 2020)). Meanwhile, the few studies that have quantitatively compared outcomes between those with and without the experience of OCSA, including OSS, have focused on the impact of victimisation on adolescent mental health (which will be discussed below). As such, knowledge about the longitudinal impact of OCSA in adulthood is currently not known.

Current evidence consistently demonstrates that the experience of OCSA, including OSS, is linked to poorer mental health outcomes. For example, Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor (2007d) reported that the association between unwanted sexual solicitation and depression symptoms and substance use was over and above offline victimisation and other forms of online victimisation. The relationship between OSS, depression, and anxiety among young people in the general population has also been documented in more recent studies (Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018). Within the psychiatric population, Dönmez and Soylu (2019) found that the rate of PTSD development was 57.8% following the experience of OSS in the previous year. The authors also found that clinical diagnoses of depression, borderline personality disorder, and secondary psychiatric diagnosis were significantly higher in adolescents who had experienced OSS than those who had not.

Consistent with this evidence, research also found that young people who engaged in online sexual activities under pressure reported more depression and anxiety symptoms than those without this experience (Jonsson et al., 2019), and victims of OCSA were 3.77 and 2.14 times more likely to have depression and PTSD (Say et al., 2015). In addition to mental health difficulties, a wide range of detrimental psychosocial consequences following the experience of OCSA have also been reported. These include self-harm, suicidal behaviour, anti-social

behaviour, drug use, self-blame, impaired relationships with others, and low self-esteem (ECPAT International, 2020a; Guerra et al., 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Jolbey et al., 2020; 2021a).

Although a distinction must be drawn between OSS and online sexual interactions, as receiving sexual requests does not imply engagement with the requests (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018), the increased risk of developing psychiatric problems following exposure to OSS underscores the detrimental impact of negative online sexual experiences on subsequent mental health difficulties. Therefore, it is postulated that the experience of OCSA involving sexually abusive activities is likely to have a greater impact on the abused person's psychosocial well-being. Moreover, based on the extensive evidence on the long-term effects of CSA (which will be discussed below), it is reasonable to expect that the effects of OCSA will persist into adulthood.

At the time this study was conducted in 2020, no study had specifically examined the long-term impact of OCSA using a young adult sample. Acknowledging this significant gap in the literature, the first aim of the present study was to explore the long-term outcomes of OCSA on psychosocial well-being in adulthood.

Since evidence on the long-term outcome of OCSA remains sparse, the literature presented below was primarily drawn from studies concerning offline CSA.

CSA and Depression

There is a plethora of evidence to suggest CSA is an important predictor of depression across the lifespan, including later life, in both clinical and community samples (Mandelli et al., 2015; Maniglio, 2010). A nationally representative US sample involving over eight thousand participants reported that the odds for females to be clinically diagnosed with depression were 3.8 times higher compared to non-sexually abused adults (Molnar et al., 2001). There is also

physiological evidence supporting the link between CSA and depression. For example, Kendler et al.'s (2004) examination of the impact of CSA on twins found that the experience of CSA altered individuals' responses to stressful life events, and this increased sensitivity was linked to depression. Other studies also found that individuals with a history of CSA tend to have an earlier onset of depression symptoms, a more chronic course, and treatment-resistant depression (Gladstone et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2017). CSA has also been found to account for depression over and above other forms of child maltreatment, including emotional neglect, physical abuse and neglect, and verbal abuse (Zuravin & Fontanella, 1999; Molnar et al., 2001). Collectively, the evidence suggests that not only does CSA pose a major risk factor for depression, it may also represent a subgroup of the depression cohort with more severe and persistent symptoms and potentially different treatment needs.

Despite the strong evidence documenting the association between CSA and depression and the emerging evidence on the effect of OCSA on young people's experience of depression (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Guerra et al., 2021; 2022), there is currently no knowledge on whether OCSA also increases depression symptoms experienced in adulthood. For this reason, the current study examined the association between OCSA and depression in adulthood by comparing depression symptoms between adults who have and have not experienced OCSA before the age of 16.

CSA and Anxiety

Another prevalent consequence of CSA in adulthood is anxiety (Fergusson et al., 2013; Hailes et al., 2019; Lindert et al., 2014). A systematic review and meta-analysis spanning over three decades of research between 1980 and 2008 found that the lifetime diagnosis of anxiety disorder was three times higher for adults who had experienced CSA than for those with no history of abuse (Chen et al., 2010). Maniglio's (2013) systematic review, including over 3,000,000 individuals from 171 studies, also concluded that CSA is a significant risk factor for general and non-specific anxiety disorders, especially PTSD. Importantly, both systematic

reviews noted that neither gender nor abuse characteristics (e.g., abuse onset and severity) accounted for any difference. Similar findings have also been replicated in a community sample, where university attending females with a history of CSA reported higher levels of anxiety and distress in social situations and PTSD symptomology than their non-abused counterparts (Feerick & Snow, 2005).

Relating to OCSA, existing qualitative and quantitative data indicates that young people experience a high level of anxiety following abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Joleby et al., 2021a). Yet, it is currently not known whether the association between CSA and anxiety documented in the CSA literature extends to the experience of OCSA in adulthood. To address this knowledge gap, the relationship between OCSA and anxiety symptoms experienced by adults who had and had not experienced OCSA was investigated in the present study.

CSA and PTSD

PTSD is another psychiatric sequela that is highly prevalent among individuals who have experienced CSA (Chen et al., 2010; Fergusson et al., 2013). A recent umbrella review of the long-term outcomes of CSA reported that the absolute rate of developing PTSD was 38% (Hailes et al., 2019). Lifetime rates of PTSD in a nationally representative US sample were also significantly higher for adults with a history of CSA compared to those without, and the effect remained after controlling for other adverse family experiences or circumstances. The distinctive impact of CSA that contributes to PTSD has been further demonstrated by Gaon et al. (2013), who found that the effect of CSA remained the most intense throughout the victim's life, despite the different types of traumas examined all being deemed severe at the time of occurrence. As discussed earlier, there is some evidence documenting a link between OCSA and PTSD among young people (Dönmez & Soylu, 2019; Say et al., 2015). Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2017) also found that four out of five young people who had experienced OCSA reported a diagnosable PTSD score.

Therefore, building on the strong evidence on the relationship between CSA and PTSD in adulthood, as well as the limited evidence on the link between OCSA and PTSD among young people, the present study also examined the experience of PTSD symptoms among adults who had experienced OCSA to provide knowledge on the long-term sequelae of OCSA and PTSD.

The Role of Disclosure in the Relationship Between CSA and PTSD

Literature examining the relationship between CSA and the development of post-traumatic stress generally falls into three categories. These are: 1) comparison between individuals with and without CSA, or pre-trauma contextual factors such as demographics and socioeconomic status; 2) peri-trauma factors, i.e., abuse characteristics, including severity, duration, and nature of the abuse, and relations with the perpetrator; and 3) post-trauma factors such as disclosure (Bulik et al., 2001; Dworkin et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2001; McTavish et al., 2019). Although pre-, peri-, and post-trauma factors have all been demonstrated to independently relate to or predict PTSD symptom severity, a complicated relationship emerges when different trauma-related factors are concurrently examined. Yet, the significance of disclosure on post-traumatic stress over other post-trauma factors has been consistently noted (Ullman et al., 2007; Easton, 2019). For this reason, disclosure was considered in the present study.

One plausible explanation for the significance of disclosure for long-term mental health is that the act signifies the first step in help-seeking as it can instigate support and, potentially, protection from the perpetrator. Accordingly, disclosure would be expected to mitigate the long-term impact of CSA on mental health. Yet, the evidence on the impact of disclosure on mental health has been mixed. For example, while some studies suggest a trend towards fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms among those who disclose (Hébert et al., 2009), a reverse pattern has also been reported (Glover et al., 2010; Ullman, 2003; Ullman et al., 2007).

At present, knowledge about disclosure of OCSA is underdeveloped, and there is currently no evidence on how it relates to mental health. Therefore, the secondary aim of this study was to examine the role of disclosure in long-term mental health.

Reactions to Disclosure and PTSD

Disclosure is a complex process entailing more than just the act of disclosing the abuse. The literature examining the correlates and consequences of CSA disclosure suggests that its characteristics, including timing, relationship with the person disclosed to, and responses, can moderate the experience of post-traumatic stress (Bolen & Gergly, 2015; Hébert et al., 2009; Swingle et al., 2016; Ullman, 2003; 2007). The available evidence therefore emphasises the need to consider factors associated with disclosure, as the examination of its presence or absence alone is insufficient to develop a nuanced understanding of disclosure and its longitudinal impact on mental health.

Of the various aforementioned disclosure characteristics, negative reactions is the only variable that has consistently demonstrated an adverse impact on PTSD symptomology (Simon et al., 2016; Ullman & Filipas, 2005a; Ullman et al., 2016). Although individuals who disclose are likely to receive both positive and negative reactions, and that supportive response can buffer against psychological distress and dysfunction (Ullman, 2003). Both qualitative and quantitative studies revealed that individuals typically encountered more negative reactions, such as being blamed, not believed, or stigmatised, than positive reactions (Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Ullman et al., 2014; Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Filipas, 2005a). The negative reactions received can thus become a further traumatising experience in itself. In support, extant studies have demonstrated that negative reactions to disclosure are related to greater PTSD symptom severity (Glover et al., 2010; Palo & Gilbert, 2015; Ullman & Filipas, 2005a; Ullman et al., 2007; 2014). The detrimental consequences of negative disclosure experiences therefore suggest that receiving negative reactions may outweigh its benefits.

CSA, Stigma and Disclosure

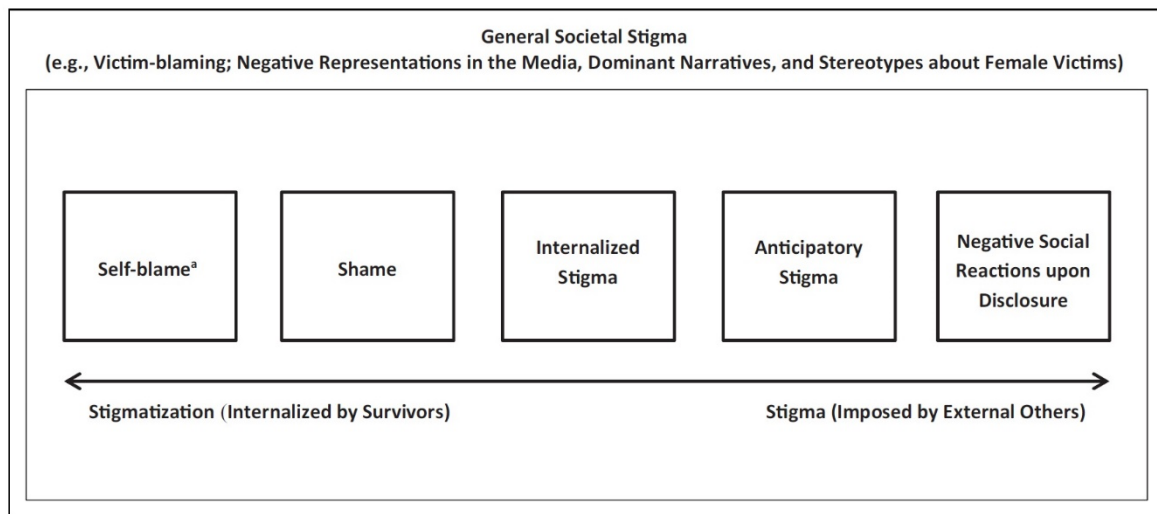
Since CSA is a crime that occurs within a societal context that heavily shapes how survivors view themselves and are evaluated by others (Alaggia et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2018), the stigma associated with CSA would thus explain negative social reactions in response to disclosure.

Goffman's (1963) hallmark work on stigma theory conceptualised stigma as a dynamic social process that discounts certain groups or individuals based on their perceived inferior moral status and rationalises animosity towards them. His work also explored how those who are stigmatised internalise this discounting as self-blame, shame, and anticipation of negative judgement by others should their secret/status be revealed. Building on Goffman's (1963) work, Finkelhor and Browne (1985) asserted that internalisation of stigma by CSA victims could not occur without prior exposure to victim-blaming messages from broader society. More recently, Kennedy and Prock (2018) summarised the overarching role of societal stigma in sexual crimes to illustrate its deleterious implications for both internalised and externalised stigma (see Figure 5.1). The bi-directional relationship between internal and external stigma therefore illustrates the significance of societal stigma in shaping individuals' thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the disclosure process, as well as how they are evaluated by others.

Indeed, stigma-related reasons such as fear of negative consequences and negative reactions from others, perceived responsibility for the abuse (e.g., feelings of self-blame, shame, and guilt), and limited support are commonly cited barriers for disclosure delay and non-disclosure (Solberg et al., 2021; Hébert et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2000) and have been found to delay disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2018). The resonance between victims' cited barriers and the spectrum of general stigma (see Figure 5.1) therefore underscores the impact of social factors on the disclosure process and experience.

Figure 5.1

Spectrum of General Societal Stigma (Kennedy & Prock, 2018)



Self-blame

Abuse-specific attributions are recognised as important for explaining adaptation following CSA, and both clinical and empirical studies suggest that self-blame for abuse is related to greater risks of poor adjustment (Feiring et al., 2010; Okur et al., 2020).

Self-blame is a form of internalised stigma and is conceptualised as a cognitive attribution whereby the survivor places blame for the abuse on themselves. Influential work by Janoff-Bulman (1979) proposed two distinct types of self-blame: behavioural self-blame and characterological self-blame. Behavioural self-blame is defined as a cognitive attribution of blame that rests on one's controllable behaviour. Therefore, it is regarded as adaptive because behaviour is perceived to be within one's control. Conversely, characterological self-blame is understood as maladaptive because character is not modifiable, and the person feels as though they deserve it when bad things happen.

Self-blame, Disclosure, and PTSD

In addition to the aforementioned association between CSA related self-blame and poorer psychological adjustment in adulthood, negative social reactions have also been found to relate to greater attributions of self-blame (Ullman et al., 2007; Ullman & Najdowski, 2011). Few studies, however, have examined the relationship between PTSD, self-blame attributions, and social reactions to disclosure simultaneously.

The social negativity hypothesis asserts that individuals give more weight to negative reactions than positive reactions, and that negative reactions can elicit strong emotions (Major et al., 1997). Closely related, the affect-matching hypothesis posits that negative social reactions have a stronger impact on the negative aspects of mental health (Barlow et al., 2019). Accordingly, negative reactions received to disclosure may reinforce or exacerbate existing feelings of self-blame and mental health difficulties, and this impact can outweigh the benefits of positive reactions. In a similar vein, given that negative social interactions predict negative outcomes to a greater extent than positive reactions, self-blame may affect social reactions in response to disclosure, as individuals who attribute more self-blame are likely to convey the feeling when disclosing the abuse. In response, support sources may reciprocate these feelings and become more blaming and less supportive, particularly if they already subscribe to the general societal stigma of CSA, and neither is a helpful response to disclosure.

Therefore, taking into account the societal stigma of CSA, its influence on self-blame, and the extant evidence on negative reactions to disclosure on subsequent PTSD symptoms, the present study postulated that PTSD symptom severity would be related to higher self-blame and more negative reactions received. Conversely, positive reactions to disclosure would have minimal impact on PTSD symptoms.

Anticipated Reactions to Disclosure

Alongside a typical long delay in disclosure, a proportion of survivors never disclose the abuse (Easton & Parchment, 2021; McElvaney, 2015; Ruggiero et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2000). Perceived negative reactions are a salient factor impeding disclosure, and both internalised and externalised stigma are implicated by broader societal stigma (see Figure 5.1), which is further supported by the resonance between the cited barriers for disclosure and actual negative reactions received when disclosing (Brattfjell & Flâm, 2019; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015). Therefore, it would seem plausible that even without actual disclosure, anticipated negative reactions (i.e., internalised stigma) may have a similar effect as actual negative reactions received (i.e., externalised stigma) on PTSD.

Self-stigma occurs when people internalise public stigma and suffer numerous negative consequences as a result, and self-stigmatisation has been suggested to be more detrimental to one's well-being than external stigma. For example, Goffman (1963) identified the internal consequences for the stigmatised individual as self-devaluation. He asserts that once labelled, individuals may conclude that they must act accordingly and take on the label as an identity. Although research on self-stigmatisation has focused primarily on disclosure of psychiatric illness, with recent research extending the harmful effect of self-stigma to individuals with an offending history (Corrigan & Rao, 2012), it would seem reasonable to suggest that non-disclosure reflects some degree of self-stigmatisation, which is linked to anticipated negative reactions and self-blame. At present, much of the literature on non-disclosure consists of qualitative studies examining barriers to disclosure and quantitative studies focused on disclosure prevalence. As a result, the role of anticipated stigma on mental health is not understood. Identifying this gap in the literature, the role of anticipated reactions to disclosure was explored in this study. It was postulated that a higher anticipation of negative reactions to disclosure would indicate a higher degree of self-blame attribution, and vice versa. Both of which are related to higher PTSD symptom severity.

Disclosure of OCSA

Contrary to the large volume of research conducted on CSA disclosure, examination of the disclosure of OCSA is scant. The limited studies examined OSS disclosure prevalence and factors associated with OSS disclosure (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Priebe et al., 2013). Receiving requests, however, does not equate to engagement, and it is the latter that is examined in this research programme. To date, few studies have examined OCSA disclosure. Katz et al. (2021) indirectly examined disclosure by reviewing case notes of young people, their parents, and practitioners working with the family at a Child Advocacy Center. The analysis underscored that the process of disclosure was challenging for both the young person and their parents, and that the majority of the abuse was either discovered by parents or as part of a wider police investigation, such as discovery from offenders' computers (Katz et al., 2021). Disclosure of online grooming has also been recently examined among Finnish young people by Juusola et al. (2021). The study found that 67% of the sample had disclosed their grooming experiences to someone, most often to a peer (93%), and that less than five percent of the sample received negative reactions to disclosure. The results of this study contradict the reluctance to disclose and the mostly negative and unsupportive reactions received by victims identified in previous studies (ECPAT International, 2020a; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021).

No study had specifically examined the prevalence of, and reactions to, OCSA disclosure at the time Study 3 was conducted in 2020. Therefore, Study 3 quantitatively and retrospectively examined OCSA disclosure to add to the significant knowledge gap about its prevalence and impact on adult mental health. It is important to understand both disclosure and non-disclosure, as knowledge of the latter can offer insight on how to better support individuals who are ambivalent about disclosure. Thus, this study was intended to first examine the prevalence of OCSA disclosure. Second, acknowledging the mixed findings about CSA disclosure and adult psychological adjustment, the present study also compared psychosocial

outcomes between participants who had and had not disclosed abuse. Third, building on the evidence on the relationship between reactions to disclosure and self-blame on PTSD symptom severity, this study examined variables predicting PTSD symptom severity in adulthood. Finally, identifying the lack of quantitative research on the role of anticipatory stigma, this study investigated the relationship between anticipatory reactions to disclosure and PTSD.

Poly-Victimisation

CSA usually occurs as part of a larger pattern of childhood adversities, and existing research has found different types of child abuse and adversities tend to co-occur and overlap. For example, the US National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence reported that 38.7% of children had experienced more than one type of direct victimisation in the past year, and 8% had experienced seven or more different types of abuse or exposure to crime over the same time period (Finkelhor et al., 2005). In support, another study examining the occurrence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) using an adult sample found that the presence of one ACE significantly increased the prevalence of having additional ACEs by up to 17.7 times (Dong et al., 2004). The rate of poly-victimisation has also been found to be comparable across continents, including the USA, India, Nigeria, South Africa, and China (Kamndaya et al., 2017). The available literature therefore provides strong evidence that the experience of one type of ACE can significantly increase the risk of poly-victimisation, and any research attempting to understand the impact of childhood trauma must not examine ACEs in isolation.

The association between ACEs of any type and adverse adult health outcomes is strongly evidenced (Gallo et al., 2018; Grusnick et al., 2020). Traumatic Stress Theory, a dominant framework for understanding the impact of poly-victimisation, proposes that victimisation is not a single overwhelming event but a condition akin to neglect or bullying (Finkelhor et al., 2007). Consequently, multiple forms of victimisation can pose a greater risk of poorer

psychosocial well-being than the experience of a single trauma. In support, research on cumulative childhood adversity has consistently demonstrated that poly-victimisation is associated with more intense psychological difficulties than a single type of abuse or no experience of abuse across lifespan. Existing research has reported a nine-to-33-fold increase in the risk of depression, anxiety, and PTSD diagnosis compared to those who had experienced a single type of abuse or no experience of childhood abuse (Charak et al., 2020; Grusnick et al., 2020; Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020; Källström et al., 2020).

Within the literature on OCSA, there is emerging evidence that it is part of a pattern of poly-victimisation of some young people across online and offline environments. For example, previous studies suggested that family difficulties can increase a young person's vulnerability to online sexual grooming (Joleby et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2013c; 2014a). Jonsson et al. (2019) also found that young people who had engaged in online sexual activities under pressure had significantly more prior experiences of different types of abuse. The available evidence therefore lends support to an association between OCSA and other forms of childhood adversity. Whittle et al. (2013a) also found that the negative impact of OCSA was greater among individuals who had multiple long-term risk factors. Thus, the limited research examining poly-victimisation within the context of OCSA indicated the importance of the present study investigating the relationship between OCSA and other ACEs that occurred before the age of 16. First, it adds to understanding the cross-over between online and offline poly-victimisation. Second, given the adverse effect of cumulative adversity, the inclusion of other childhood traumas controlled for the effect of poly-victimisation as a confounding variable when investigating the impact of OCSA.

Self-Esteem

In addition to increased rates of psychopathology, CSA has also been associated with lower self-esteem (Kim et al., 2017; Mullen et al., 1996; Trickett et al., 2001). A handful of studies

have also linked abuse-specific self-blame to low self-esteem (Feiring et al., 2002; Romans et al., 1995). Orchowski et al. (2013) also reported that individuals who received more blaming social reactions to their disclosure reported lower self-esteem. These studies therefore illustrate the importance of simultaneously examining the experience of CSA, abuse-specific self-blame, and negative reactions to disclosure to understand the relationship between CSA and self-esteem. At present, the relationship between OCSA and self-esteem is understudied. However, a similar relationship has been found by Jonsson et al. (2019), who found that young people who had engaged in online sexual activities under pressure had significantly lower self-esteem than those without this experience. Similarly, Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2017) also found that self-esteem among individuals who had experienced OCSA was in the lowest five percent of the late adolescent girl population in the UK. The authors also found that the self-blame of the OCSA was significantly related to lower self-esteem.

Yet, the impact of OCSA on self-esteem in adulthood and whether the relationship is influenced by disclosure are not known. Therefore, the present study compared self-esteem between participants who had experienced OCSA and those who had not, as well as the impact of disclosure on self-esteem.

Historical Distress About OCSA

Previous studies assessing the relationship between CSA and PTSD suggested that abuse characteristics, particularly the use of physical force, are linked to elevated psychopathology (McTavish et al., 2019). Despite the fact that abuse severity is an objective measurement as defined by the law, this study argues that categorising sexual abuse according to the use of force or physical contact can undermine the impact of OCSA, which is already misconceived as less serious compared to offline CSA. For example, Rimer (2019) reported that CSAM offenders perceive online victims as less 'real' in comparison to offline victims. Similarly, some professionals hold the view that OCSA is less serious than CSA experienced in person

(Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Quayle et al., 2023). Since OCSA can occur without physical contact with the offender, the reliance on physical contact as a key marker of abuse severity can perpetuate the misperception that OCSA is less impactful on the victim compared to the experience of in-person CSA. It must be noted that within the context of OCSA, non-contact abuse does not indicate a lack of sexual abuse, and the nature of the victim being directed to carry out the abuse on themselves has been found to be detrimental (Leonard, 2010). Additionally, the perpetrator's absence was not found to lessen the impact of OCSA, but instead strengthened the rapport with the perpetrator (Katz, 2013). Both of which are likely to have clinical implications for abuse recovery. For these reasons, the present study argues against using the measure of abuse severity when examining the impact of OCSA.

Although research suggests that relationships with the perpetrator can also influence the impact of the abuse (McTavish et al., 2019), the anonymity afforded by the Internet indicates that it is not always possible for the young person to verify the identity of the abuser (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). This is further evident by the experience of deception by online adult acquaintances found in Study 1 and Study 2.

Consequently, examination of abuse characteristics such as abuse severity or relationship with the perpetrator appears to be less fitting for OCSA. Rather, since the experience of trauma is personal and subjective, the present study examined historical distress about OCSA to investigate the relationship between distress at the time of the abuse and mental health outcomes in adulthood.

Peer Perpetrated OCSA

Lastly, despite children and adolescents accounting for more than one in three sex offences against other youths in the US (Finkelhor et al., 2009) and between one fifth and one third of all CSA in the UK are estimated to involve juvenile offenders (Hackett, 2014), the study of peer

perpetrated OCSA remained fragmented, especially at the time when this study was developed (Bryce et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there was accumulating evidence to indicate young people were engaging in various forms of OCSA (Ashurst & McAlinden, 2015; Lewis, 2018). A mixed methods UK study examining both online and offline CSA also found that the majority of sexual abuse was perpetrated by peers (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Within school settings, Allnock and Atkinson (2019) found that the prevalence of some forms of peer perpetrated OCSA had resulted in the normalisation of these harmful behaviours and experiences by both young people and educational staff. Importantly, the lack of physical aggression in OCSA in comparison to offline CSA has resulted in OCSA being viewed as a subtle form of sexual harm and being inadequately prioritised by schools. The attitudes towards OCSA were thus found to increase reluctance to report peer perpetrated OCSA (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019).

Currently, research on peer perpetrated OCSA tends to examine abuse experienced within a romantic relationship or without specifying the context in which OCSA took place. Therefore, the present study examined the prevalence of peer perpetrated OCSA experienced outside of a romantic relationship to add knowledge to this under-researched area. Recognising that abuse characteristics are often cited as moderators in CSA outcomes, the present study also compared the long-term outcomes between adult perpetrated OCSA, peer perpetrated OCSA, and OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers to investigate the role of the age of the perpetrator on the long-term outcomes of OCSA to fill this notable gap in the literature.

Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985)

Despite the distinctive nature of OCSA (National Institute for Health and Care Excellent, 2017) and its detrimental impact on the abused person (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017), there is currently no theoretical framework developed to understand the impact of OCSA as a form of trauma. Thus, this present study attempted to understand the long-term impact of OCSA by

drawing upon the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985), given its relevance in explaining the effects of CSA.

The Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) proposes four traumagenic dynamics (betrayal, stigmatisation, powerlessness, and traumatic sexualisation) that mediate the psychological outcomes for CSA victims by distorting their self-concept, worldview, and affective state. According to the model, abuse is considered a process rather than an event or events that creates cognitive distortions (Finkelhor, 1987). These distortions are proposed to relate to the emotional and behavioural difficulties seen in both adult and child victims of CSA (Finkelhor, 1987). In support, the model has been found important in explaining the experience of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and low self-esteem by adults who have been sexually abused as children (Cantón-Cortés et al., 2011; 2012; 2019) and sexual re-victimisation (Castro et al., 2019; Guyon et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2019; Senn et al., 2012).

CSA, irrespective of whether experienced offline or online, is rooted in the violation of trust and sexual abuse of a child (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; IICSA, 2022). The limited research also suggests that the impact of OCSA is comparable to the experience of offline abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). Therefore, although the model was developed in reference to offline CSA, it is clear that the impact of OCSA on psychosocial well-being in adulthood may be understood using this framework.

Betrayal

According to the model, betrayal refers to the child's discovery that someone whom the child trusted and was dependent on caused the child harm (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). The disappointment and loss of trust caused by this discovery may lead to depression, anger, and mistrust of others (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985).

Within the context of OCSA, whether OCSA is experienced following brief encounters with an online acquainted perpetrator, prolonged interactions following online grooming, or victimisation by offline acquaintances, trust has been exploited. Where grooming is involved, its complex nature often results in a delayed recognition of the exploitative nature of the interactions (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Joleby et al., 2020; Juusola et al., 2021). Acknowledgment of abuse, such as discovering that the abuser has been deceptive about their identity or intentions, can therefore leave the victim feeling betrayed (Joleby et al., 2020). The delayed recognition of abuse may exacerbate the sense of betrayal felt by the victim for 'failing' to recognise or acknowledge it sooner. Furthermore, since disclosure is most likely to be made to someone deemed trustworthy and who can offer support (Brattfjell & Flåm, 2019), negative and blaming reactions of others upon finding out the abuse may also elicit a sense of betrayal and disappointment from these supposedly supportive figures.

Chiu and Quayle (2022) reported that victims of OCSA can feel guilty for betraying the abuser's trust when the abuse was discovered. Thus, it appears that the manipulative nature of grooming can also result in victims feeling betrayed by those who discover the abuse. Since disclosures are most likely made to confidants, especially peers (Juusola et al., 2021; Priebe et al., 2013), the discrepancy between the victim's hope of receiving emotional support from peers and peers' reactions to the disclosure can sometimes lead to feelings of anger or resentment towards peers for not knowing how to provide support to them (Manay et al., 2022). Furthermore, the victim can also feel betrayed by peers who told an adult about the abuse, even when the intention was to help them (Manay et al., 2022).

Congruent with the model, the limited literature on the impact of OCSA suggests that a sense of betrayal can result in victims of OCSA feeling angry and losing trust in others. For example, victims have reported feeling angry at themselves for trusting the perpetrator in the first place (ECPAT International, 2022a). Meanwhile, accounts of OCSA victims, including those who have been victims of threats of non-consensual sharing, revealed that the loss of trust in

people can manifest in how they relate to others in both the online and offline environments (ECPAT International, 2022a; Joleby et al., 2020; Walsh & Tener, 2022).

The victims' distrust in people, feelings of betrayal, and anger following abuse demonstrate that the experience of OCSA can impact a person's worldview and affective state, as suggested by the model. Similarly, negative reactions to disclosure can also have a lasting impact on well-being, as detailed in the earlier section. The evidence therefore suggests that the betrayal dynamic is relevant to understanding the impact of OCSA on adults' well-being, regardless of whether disclosure has been made.

Stigmatisation

Stigmatisation is a process by which negative feedback about abuse is communicated to the child (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). This is then reinforced by the attitudes that the child infers from or actually hears from others, which subsequently become incorporated into the child's self-image. This distorted view can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and low self-esteem, as well as various forms of self-injurious behaviours (including self-harm, suicidal ideation, drug abuse, sex work, etc.) (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985).

Notably, stigmatisation from self and others is involved in many aspects of the experience of OCSA. First, since OCSA can be experienced without physical contact with the perpetrator, the act of sexual abuse is often carried out by the victims themselves, through sexual curiosity that is exploited by the adult or under the abuser's direction (Leonard, 2010; Joleby et al., 2020). Katz et al.'s (2021) review of OCSA case notes revealed that, irrespective of whether the perpetrator lied about being underage, victims who understood the sexual intention of the perpetrator were willing to continue with these interactions. Furthermore, victim accounts of adult perpetrated OCSA suggest that some victims, at least at the beginning of the abuse, perceived they had some agency as they were able to decline unwanted sexual activities (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Consequently, from the victims' perspectives, sexually abusive activities

were not necessarily coerced and could be instigated by the young person (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). This is also the case for OCSA perpetrated by peers following consensual sexual activity, whereby the young person fell victim to previously agreed-upon and developmentally appropriate sexual activity.

The different contexts in which OCSA can be experienced, such as through no physical contact with the perpetrator or without coercion from the adult, may be misperceived by the victim as 'voluntary' engagement. Similarly, victimisation as a result of violation of previously consensual sexual activity by peers can also make it difficult for the young person to fully identify themselves as victims of abuse, which can have serious implications for how they process the experience (Leonard, 2010). In support, victims of different forms of OCSA, including those who have become adults, frequently report self-blame for failing to better protect themselves by ceasing contact with the perpetrator (e.g., switching the computer off, blocking the perpetrator) or for being complicit in enabling or complying with the abuse, despite having often been manipulated or coerced into the sexually abusive activities (ECPAT International, 2022a; Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Katz, 2013; Leonard, 2010; Joleby et al., 2020).

Secondly, instructions from the abuser to conceal contact or abuse from others can convey a powerful message of related shame and anticipated stigma, and insinuate that the interactions are somewhat inappropriate for those who have yet to realise they are being abused (ECPAT International, 2022a; Joleby et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2014b). Pressure for secrecy without direction from the abuser also implies an awareness that interactions with the adult or the young person's behaviour is taboo (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). As discussed earlier, the role of stigma and stigmatisation in shaping self-blame, shame, and anticipated stigma in CSA victims is well established (Kennedy & Prock, 2018). Therefore, stigmatisation can also occur as a result of the implicit and explicit negative and blaming reactions from others relating to OCSA.

In addition to the victim blaming by peers noted in the results of Study 1 and the available literature, negative and unsupportive reactions are also evident from adults, including parents, school, community, and professionals' responses to young people's experience of OCSA, where the victims are often viewed as active participants or to blame for the abuse (ECPAT International, 2022a; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; 2020; 2021; Katz et al., 2021). Even within the criminal justice system, the absence of an identifiable or physically present suspect can result in the police and other practitioners mistakenly assuming the victim has greater control of the situation, which implies that the blame rests with them rather than the perpetrator (Police Foundation, 2022).

Victim blaming can also be implicit and unintentional, but nevertheless conveys the message that the young person is somewhat responsible for the experience and that abuse is 'preventable' (UK Council for Internet Safety, 2022). For example, while education about the risk of sending sexually explicit material is important, an emphasis on the action of sending implies that non-consensual victimisation would not have happened if the victim did not send it in the first place (Setty, 2019). Likewise, the focus on the risk of talking to an online stranger can remove responsibility from the adult for exploiting the child. Thus, these "should" and "shouldn't" messages can infer that young people are responsible for keeping themselves safe online and are to blame for abuse. This in turn prevents them from disclosing abuse and seeking help, as evident from the discussion above. Similarly, responses that are intended to protect the young person from further harm following disclosure of abuse can unconsciously convey victim blaming and exacerbate the harm experienced by the young person. These responses can include taking away the young person's Internet connecting device or banning or restricting Internet access, delivering online safety education immediately after a disclosure, or telling a victim what they should have done differently to keep themselves safe (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Police Foundation, 2022; UK Council for Internet Safety, 2022).

Consequently, the accumulative negative feedback about OCSA is likely to be internalised by the victim and heighten the sense of self-blame for those who disclose the abuse. This is supported by the well-established evidence on the impact of negative reactions to disclosure on well-being. At the same time, the stigma surrounding OCSA is likely to act as a barrier to abuse disclosure, and the delay in seeking help is also likely to negatively impact the victim's psychosocial well-being. Therefore, the stigmatisation dynamic may provide some insight into understanding the long-term effects of OCSA examined in the present study.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness occurs when the child's desires, wishes, and sense of productivity are countered by repeated invasions of the child's body against their will, which reinforces their self-perception as a victim (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). According to the authors, feelings of powerlessness may produce fear, anxiety, and an extreme need to control, potentially triggering compensatory responses such as sexually abusing others. Powerlessness may also have a detrimental effect on the victim's coping skills (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985).

Although the experience of OCSA may not involve physical invasion by the abuser, there appear to be different aspects of this form of abuse that can provoke feelings of powerlessness in the victim. First, most victims of OCSA reported finding the experience threatening, and many felt that they had no other choice than to comply with the abuser's requests (Leonard, 2010; Joleby et al., 2021a; Juusola et al., 2021; Katz, 2013). The sense of loss of control and powerlessness may be more profound when the young person is being blackmailed into engaging in more sexually abusive acts to prevent the threats of non-consensual sharing being carried out (Joleby et al., 2020). Likewise, the permanence of sexually explicit materials of the victims, as well as the uncertainty of not knowing whether the abuser will disseminate the abuse content, or whether content has been non-consensually produced, can all result in the

victims feeling exposed and living in constant fear as they have no control of when and who they will be re-victimised by (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Joleby et al., 2020).

Lastly, unlike offline CSA, where forensic evidence is often not available, there is often digital evidence related to OCSA. This is likely to have implications for the feeling of powerlessness relating to both disclosure and discovery of abuse. Irrespective of whether the disclosure is voluntary, the young person will have little control over how the matter is being handled, who will find out about the abuse, or the level of details of the abuse that is being uncovered (Joleby et al., 2020; Police Foundation, 2022). Therefore, while investigations are intended to offer protection to victims, it can be difficult for the victims to align with this view. The fact that the abuse is known to others, not by choice, can also be exposing for the victim, which may further diminish the little sense of control they feel they have over the abuse. Consequently, the feeling of powerlessness and the difficult emotions associated with the lack of control relating to the experience of OCSA, especially when sexually explicit materials are involved, are likely to continue into adulthood.

Traumatic Sexualisation

Finally, traumatic sexualisation refers to the process by which abuse shapes the victim's sexual feelings and sexual behaviour in a dysfunctional and developmentally inappropriate manner (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). The incorrect sexual behaviour scripts developed as a result of the abuse may result in engagement in risky sexual practices, having multiple sexual partners, sex trading, or an aversion to sex (Castro et al., 2019; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Ménard & MacIntosh, 2021; Senn et al., 2012). The impact of OCSA on the sexual development of victims is understudied. Nevertheless, victims of OCSA have reported that abuse can result in feelings of discomfort with their bodies and sexuality and sexual promiscuity. (ECPAT International, 2022a; Joleby et al., 2020).

Since the concept of traumatic sexualisation is the development of problematic sexual scripts, the present study posits that this dynamic can be interpreted through the evidence on the normalisation of OCSA and sexual re-victimisation. Existing literature suggests that normalising online harmful sexual experiences can lead to desensitisation and normalisation of these experiences (Forni et al., 2020; IICSA, 2022; Juusola et al., 2021). This is consistent with participants' accounts in Study 1, which highlighted that normalisation of OCSA resulted in sexual re-victimisation. Given that the impact of CSA on psychological difficulties can persist into adulthood, it would be reasonable to assume that the experience of OCSA, especially repeated victimisation, is likely to have a negative impact on the abused person's psychosocial well-being in adulthood.

Based on the review of the four dynamics in relation to the experience of OCSA, it seems plausible that these separate aspects will have an interactive effect in explaining the long-term effects of OCSA. For instance, the experience of OCSA and disclosure can elicit a sense of betrayal and powerlessness, both of which can result in depression and anxiety. Meanwhile, the process of stigmatisation may also be useful in understanding self-blame resulting from the stigma and anticipated stigma related to disclosure. Moreover, sexual re-victimisation may be understood through the traumatic sexualisation dynamic. Together, the model would seem relevant to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the different psychosocial well-being variables examined in the present study.

Rationale for Study 3

Despite the well-documented adverse long-term impacts of CSA, the aftermath of OCSA remains poorly understood. Taking into account the co-occurrence of childhood adversity and the relationship between social reactions to disclosure and psychosocial well-being, this study asserts that it is necessary to simultaneously examine these factors to establish a comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of OCSA. In support, there is tentative

evidence to suggest that the impact of OCSA is related to a young person's vulnerability level prior to experiencing abuse, as well as their experiences with professionals following abuse discovery (Whittle et al., 2014a). Nevertheless, no study to date has concurrently examined the long-term impact of OCSA or its disclosure on psychosocial well-being using an adult sample.

Acknowledging these significant gaps, this study had three primary aims:

1. To examine the prevalence of adult perpetrated and peer perpetrated OCSA.
2. To compare the long-term psychosocial well-being of individuals who had experienced OCSA and those without this experience (i.e., the control group). The related hypotheses were that:
 - OCSA victims would report more depression symptoms than the control group (H1)
 - OCSA victims would report more anxiety symptoms than the control group (H2)
 - OCSA victims would report lower self-esteem than the control group (H3)
 - Poly-victimisation would be more prevalent among the OCSA group than the control group (H4).
3. To examine the role of CSA disclosure, received and anticipatory reactions to disclosure, and self-blame on subsequent psychosocial well-being. The related hypotheses were that:
 - There would be a difference in psychosocial well-being and OCSA characteristics between the disclosed and undisclosed group (H5).
 - Higher levels of negative social reactions received to disclosure and self-blame would predict PTSD symptom severity for those who had disclosed the abuse (H6).
 - Higher levels of anticipated negative social reactions to disclosure and self-blame would predict PTSD symptom severity for those who had not disclosed the abuse (H7).

An understanding of the consequences of OCSA and the implications of disclosure can facilitate early and supportive disclosure, both of which can enable individuals to seek help without delay and to begin recovery. Therefore, the knowledge gained from the present study can inform clinical practice and treatment provision to identify at-risk young people and mitigate negative psychological sequelae in adulthood.

5.2 METHODOLOGY

Participants

The age eligibility criteria for the study was 18 and above, with no upper age limit. A total of 253 participants took part in the study, and 218 responses were included in the original analysis (completion rate: 86.17%). However, a decision was made to choose age 32 as a cutoff point to ensure that only participants who grew up with accessible Internet access before the age of 16 were included in the analysis as they are likely to better represent young people's online experience (see Section 3.2 Participants in Study 1 for justification for the age limit). Accordingly, participants who were aged 33 and above were removed from the analysis.

Since the study data was collected in 2020, participants born in 1988 would have turned 16 in 2004. The upper age limit of 32 also corresponded with Study 1 and 2's age inclusion. A limitation of examining and interpreting the prevalence of OCSA is that the findings would only reflect experience in reference to the examined period. Given that this research examined the experience of OCSA retrospectively, the age range of participants in the three studies (i.e., turned 16 between 2004 and 2005) minimises the challenge of interpreting findings examined in different timeframes. Accordingly, participants who were aged 33 and above were removed from the analysis.

The final sample had 197 participants, consisting of 166 females, 26 males, and five who self-described as non-binary or agender. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 32 years ($M = 22.07$, $SD = 4.21$) (see Table 5.1). Participants who were aged 19 and 18 represented the two largest age groups at 20.33% and 18.8%, respectively, and 77.2% of the sample were aged 25 and under. Those who were aged 30 and above represented 8.1% of the sample. Thus, most participants would have likely had access to Internet-connected devices and were social media users before the age of 16 (Ofcom, 2017).

Participants were asked to self-describe their sexuality, and the various responses collected were categorised in line with the sexual orientation used by the UK's Office for National Statistics (2020). The proportion of participants identified as gay or lesbian in this sample was also comparable with the UK national sexual orientation report at the time of data collection, which recorded 4.4% of the UK population aged under 24 identified with this category (ONS, 2020).

Table 5.1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	No OCSA <i>n</i> =69		OCSA <i>n</i> =128		Full sample <i>n</i> =197	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender						
Male	11	15.9	15	11.7	26	13.2
Female	58	84.1	108	84.4	166	84.3
Self-described	0	0.0	5	3.9	5	2.5
Sexuality						
Heterosexual	59	85.5	83	64.8	142	72.1
Gay/ lesbian	1	1.4	8	6.3	9	4.6
Bisexual	3	4.3	31	24.2	34	17.3
Other	4	5.8	5	3.9	9	4.6
Blank	2	2.9	1	.8	3	1.5

Procedure

The study was originally ethically approved by the University to recruit via three routes: 1) advertisements placed on the University campus (see Appendix 13); 2) an electronic database for participant recruitment for psychology students at the University; and 3) social media, including Facebook and Twitter. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the University campus, recruitment on campus was not possible. One point was awarded to students signing up via the online database in line with University guidance. No reward or reimbursement was offered to participants recruited via social media. An advertisement was placed on Facebook and Twitter inviting individuals aged 18 and above who could read English to take part in an anonymous online questionnaire examining the association between early online sexual experiences before age 16 and psychological well-being in adulthood.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the questionnaire content involving sexual and non-sexual trauma, it was explicitly stated on the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix 14) that there would be questions about early online sexual experiences with adults and/or peers and childhood stressful events (emotional, physical, and sexual) that they might have experienced. It was also made clear that specific details of the events would not be asked. Individuals were advised that their welfare was a priority and to keep in mind that being asked about past stressful events could be distressing, and not to take part if they believed doing so would cause harm. The questionnaire was only displayed to individuals who consented to taking part.

A withdrawal option was available on each page of the questionnaire, and the withdrawal link directed participants to the debrief page (see Appendix 15), where support resources were

provided. Participants were advised that the statements assessing self-blame in relation to the OCSA were neither factual nor reflective of why the events had happened, and that inappropriate behaviour is always the fault of the perpetrator. Instructions for deleting browser history were also provided to provide extra privacy protection. PIS and debriefing sheets were available for download for participants' reference.

Measures

To effectively measure the experience of disclosure and its relationship with psychosocial well-being, branching questions were used to determine which measures would be shown to participants. The questionnaire flowchart can be found in Appendix 16, and a copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 14.

Demographics

Participants were asked about their age, gender, and sexuality. Three response options were available for gender, which included male, female, or to self-describe with free text. Participants were also asked to self-describe their sexuality.

OCSA

Participants were specifically asked to reflect on online sexual activities they engaged in before the age of 16. OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers was examined separately by examining online sexual activities involving adults and unwanted online sexual activities involving peers. Unwanted sexual activities were defined as activities engaged in under pressure, force, manipulation, control, etc. Participants were also asked to include historic online sexual activities they might have enjoyed or did not mind at the time but no longer believed this was what they wanted. Previous studies were either unspecific or narrow in their definitions of online sexual activities and their context and medium. Therefore, to overcome

these shortcomings, online experiences were defined as communication or interactions via mobile phones, tablets, laptops or computers, and/or gaming sites and were inclusive of direct messaging (DM), pictures, videos, and live chat.

OCSA perpetrated by adults

The five items used in the present study were based on a review of existing research and comprehensively captured the various forms of sexually abusive activities cited in the literature. Types of OCSA measured were: 1) sending semi-nude or nude sexual pictures/videos; 2) talking about sex/ sexual fantasy; 3) engaging in online sexual activities such as masturbation over video chat or while talking or texting; 4) receiving sexual photos or videos; and 5) meeting in person for sexual activities after meeting the perpetrator online. Participants were asked how frequently they had engaged in these activities with adults or with someone whom they suspected was aged 18 and above before turning 16. Responses were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = Never to 3 = Very Often. The scores ranged from 0 to 15, and the overall score was the sum of all five items. A high score indicated higher levels of the occurrence of OCSA perpetrated by adults. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .87.

OCSA perpetrated by peers

The same five items and responses were used to assess OCSA perpetrated by peers, i.e., a person who is aged 18 and under. However, unlike the items measuring adult perpetrated OCSA, participants were asked to indicate how frequently they experienced different forms of unwanted online sexual activities under pressure. Sample items included '*sent semi-nude or nude pictures/ videos under pressure*' or '*received sexual images / videos despite asking the sender to stop*'. This was to distinguish peer perpetrated OCSA from developmentally appropriate online sexual behaviour. To separate the experience of OCSA from those that occurred within the context of IPV, it was also specified that the perpetrator was not someone that the participant was romantically involved with. The scores ranged from 0 to 15, and the

overall score is the sum of all five items. A high score indicated higher levels of the occurrence of OCSA perpetrated by peers. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .82.

The total OCSA variable was constructed by combining the scores for OCSA perpetrated by adults and OCSA perpetrated by peers.

Historical distress about OCSA

Following each of the OCSA measures, a single item was used to assess the participant's historical distress level related to the historic OCSA victimisation. The items were '*Reflecting on your interactions with adult(s), how distressing did you find these sexual experiences as a whole?*' and '*Reflecting on your interactions with others who were under age 18, how distressing did you find these sexual experiences as a whole?*' for OCSA perpetrated by adults and OCSA perpetrated by peers, respectively. Responses were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = Not distressing to 3 = Very distressing. The item was not displayed to those who answered 'Never' to all five OCSA items, as this would indicate no OCSA victimisation. A higher score indicated a higher level of historical distress towards the OCSA experience.

Distress level was the sum of distress levels towards OCSA perpetrated by adults and OCSA perpetrated by peers.

Depression

Depression symptoms in adulthood were measured by the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale Revised (CEDSD-R; Eaton et al., 2004). The 20-item scale measures the nine primary symptoms of a major depressive episode as defined by the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fifth edition (DSM-V). Like its predecessor, CESD (Radloff, 1977), the CESD-R has been suggested as an accurate and valid measure of depression in the general population and has exhibited good psychometric properties,

including high internal consistency and strong factor loadings, as well as better consistency with the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for depression (Van Dam & Earleywine, 2011). Responses were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = Not at all or less than 1 day to 3 = 5-7 days or nearly every day for the past 2 weeks. The top two responses were given the same value to correspond with the same value range on the original scale, and the score ranges from 0 to 60, and high scores indicate more depression symptoms. A cut-off score of 16 or greater indicates an individual is at risk for clinical depression. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .95.

Anxiety

Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006) consists of 7-item to assess the severity of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) in clinical practice and research. Each item asks the individual to rate symptom severity over the past two weeks. Responses were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = Not at all to 3 = Nearly every day. The total score ranges from 0 to 21, and higher scores indicate more anxiety symptoms. Scores of 5, 10, and 15 are cut-off points for mild, moderate, and severe anxiety, respectively. At a cut-off score of 10 or greater, the GAD-7 has demonstrated a sensitivity of 89% and a specificity of 82% for a clinical diagnosis (Spitzer et al., 2006). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .91.

Self-esteem

Participants' current self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The 10-item scale measures global self-worth, including positive feelings (e.g., '*On the whole, I am satisfied with myself*') and negative feelings (e.g., '*At times, I think I am no good at all*') about the self. Responses were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = Strongly agree to 3 = Strongly disagree. Items assessing negative self were reversed scored. The score ranged from 0 to 30. Scores between 15 and 25 suggest one's self-esteem is within

the normal range, and scores below 15 suggest low self-esteem. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .91.

Other childhood trauma

Other childhood trauma was assessed by the 10-item Adverse Childhood Experiences-Questionnaire (ACE-Q; Felitti et al., 1998). The measure assesses five personal childhood traumas, including physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect, and five family dysfunctions, including parental separation or divorce, domestic violence, substance use, incarceration, or if any household suffered from mental health problems or attempted suicide.

Two modifications were made to the original scale. First, to control for the effect of other childhood trauma, participants' experience of these events was lowered from age 18 to 16 to correspond with the online sexual abuse experienced. The wording of the item assessing domestic violence was also modified from "*mother or stepmother*" to "*parents or carer*" in the current study. A dichotomous response (*Yes vs No*) was used to capture each type of trauma, and one point is attributed to *Yes*. The scale has a maximum score of 10 and a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

The ACE-Q was the last measure of the questionnaire for participants who reported no OCSA experience (i.e., answered no to all OCSA questions). Therefore, the following measures were only displayed to those who had experienced OCSA (perpetrated by either adults, peers, or both).

PTSD symptoms

PTSD symptoms in response to OCSA were measured using the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R; Weiss & Marmar, 1997). The 22-item scale was selected because it

corresponds directly to 14 of the 17 DSM-IV symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including the three subscales related to PTSD: intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal. In addition, despite not being a clinical diagnostic tool, its cut-off score has demonstrated diagnostic effectiveness among the clinical and non-clinical populations (Rash et al., 2008). The instruction was modified to refer to the online sexual abuse indicated by participants in the survey. Participants were asked to rate how often each symptom has bothered them in the past month with respect to the OCSA on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = Not at all to 4 = Extremely. The scores ranged from 0 to 88, and scores higher than 24 are indicative of a clinical concern for PTSD. Cronbach's alpha for the scale in the study was .97.

Disclosure

Disclosure of OCSA was measured using a single item asking whether participants had ever disclosed or shared the experience with others, and was responded dichotomously (Yes or No). This was a filter question to determine which subsequent social reactions to disclosure to display.

Social reactions received to disclosure

The Social Reactions Questionnaire Shortened version (SRQ-S; Ullman et al., 2017) was used to assess the positive and negative reactions participants had received in relation to the OSE disclosure. The 16-item SRQ-S was chosen over the 48-item original Social Reaction Questionnaire (SRQ; Ullman, 2000) because of its length and psychometric properties as a brief alternative to measure reactions sexual assault survivors often receive from others. The SRQ-S has three primary scales: Turning Against (TA), Unsupportive Acknowledgment (UA), and Positive Reactions, with eight 2-item subscales (blame, stigma, infantilising, control, distract, egocentric, emotional support, and tangible aid). Participants were asked how often they received these reactions from others using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = Never to 4 = Always.

The timeframe of disclosure and to whom the experience was disclosed to were not specified because sexual abuse disclosure is often delayed and is an evolving process where survivors often adapt their approaches (i.e., the level of details to share) following the first disclosure. In addition, disclosure may have been made on more than one occasion. Therefore, instead of focusing on one experience, this approach allowed participants to reflect on the reactions they had collectively received. As individuals may be averaging the frequency of receiving a response across multiple people, the authors recommend using scores from primary scales instead of subscales. Responses collected were divided into positive (positive reactions) and negative reactions (TA and UA). Higher scores indicated greater endorsement of each construct (e.g., higher scores on positive reactions indicate receiving more positive reactions). Cronbach's alpha for the three primary scales was .88 and .87 for TA and UA, respectively, and .75 and .92 for positive and negative reactions received, respectively.

Anticipated social reactions to disclosure

Participants who had never disclosed the OCSA experience were asked how often they anticipated other people would respond to their disclosure. At present, anticipated social reactions to disclosure have not been quantitatively examined, and there is no measure available. Therefore, anticipated reactions were measured using the SRQ-S, with the wording of the items modified. For example, the TA item was changed from '*Told you that you were irresponsible or not cautious enough*' to '*Tell you that you were irresponsible or not cautious enough*'. The UA item was changed from '*Told you to stop thinking about it*' to '*Tell you to stop thinking about it*'. The positive reaction item was changed from '*Reassured you that you are a good person*' to '*Reassure you that you are a good person*'.

Participants were asked how often they anticipated the reactions from others using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = Never to 4 = Always. Higher scores indicated greater endorsement of each construct (e.g., higher scores on positive reactions indicate anticipating more positive reactions).

Cronbach's alpha for anticipated positive reactions and negative reactions was .83 and .93, respectively, and .91 and .84 for anticipated TA and UA, respectively. Therefore, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency.

Attribution of self-blame

Attributions of self-blame in relation to the OCSA experienced was measured by the two 5-item subscales of the Rape Attribution Questionnaire (Frazier, 2003; RAQ). The RAQ is a valid and reliable self-report measure of sexual assault survivors on attribution about why the assault occurred and assessed characterological self-blame (e.g., '*I am just the victim type*'; '*I am a careless person*') and behavioural self-blame (e.g., '*I should have resisted more*'; '*I didn't do enough to protect myself*'). Each item was answered with respect to the past 12 months on a scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5= Very often. Higher scores indicated a higher level of self-blame. Cronbach's alpha for behavioural self-blame, characterological self-blame, and the overall scale were .91, .82, and .92 respectively.

Each variable was calculated using its total score.

Power Analysis

A power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) was conducted for the two planned hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting PTSD symptom severity among individuals who had disclosed OCSA and PTSD symptom severity among individuals who had not disclosed OCSA. The results indicated that the minimum sample size needed for the study was 68 to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium effect size at a significance level of criterion of $\alpha = .05$ (Cohen, 1962). Although the obtained sample size for the analysis for the disclosed group ($n = 60$) and non-disclosed group ($n = 63$) was slightly under the

recommended sample size, the discrepancy was not deemed large enough to undermine the effects identified by the analysis.

Data Screening

SPSS was used for analyses. Prior to the analysis, the data was screened for accuracy, missing data, outliers, and normality (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). First, data entry was inspected to identify any data entry errors and out-of-range values. This was followed by checking for missing values and patterns.

Missing data

A Missing Value Analysis was conducted to identify the amount and pattern of missing data for items that were shown to all participants. This included depression, anxiety, OCSA by adults, OCSA by peers, self-esteem, and ACEs. The analysis was not conducted for all the variables because the analysis was not sensitive enough to detect missing values in a branching question design and would identify questions that were not shown to participants as missing values.

The analysis showed that the data set had missing values. Depression had 4.6% of missing values, anxiety had 2% of missing values, and self-esteem and OCSA by peers each had 1.5% of missing values. ACEs had 0.5% missing values, and OCSA by adults had no missing values (see Appendix 17 for missing values SPSS output). Relating to missing values in individual cases, the missing value patterns indicated that only one case had two missing values. The rest had one missing value or none. Therefore, no cases were deleted as a consequence of substantial missing values.

Little's test of Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) was not significant, $c^2(df = 24) = 31.63$, $p = .14$. This suggested there was no pattern in the missing data.

Pro-rating

As all the measures used in the study had good internal consistency and a high proportion of the items were completed, the data were pro-rated to preserve the data set (Mazza et al., 2015). It is generally recommended that it is acceptable to pro-rate up to 20% of the data (Mazza et al., 2015). However, since the OCSA measure only consisted of five items, pro-rating one of the five items would make up 20% of the scale. Therefore, only cases with one missing value in each scale were pro-rated and included in the analysis. Cases with two or more missing values were not pro-rated and excluded from the analysis to maintain consistency across all measures. After pro-rating, the mean score for the missing and complete items was checked and confirmed to be similar. Therefore, the data was not skewed as a result of pro-rating.

Outliers

Visual inspection of boxplots identified no outliers for depression, anxiety, PTSD, self-esteem, behavioural self-blame, characterological self-blame, received positive reactions, received TA, received UA, anticipated positive reactions, anticipated TA, and anticipated UA (see Appendix 18). Outliers were identified for variables including OCSA perpetrated by adults, OCSA perpetrated by peers, and ACEs. Given that the nature of all of the variables containing outliers addressed childhood trauma and that none of the outliers were out of range scores, this was considered acceptable and normal. Therefore, alteration of scores as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) was not considered, as this would skew the representation of participants' experiences. Accordingly, it was considered appropriate and ethical to recognise participants' contribution through accurate representation to understand the impact of online and offline poly-victimisation and disclosure on the experience of PTSD symptoms in adulthood.

Normality distribution

Due to the study design involving branching questions, tests of normality were only conducted for variables that were shown to all participants. They included depression, anxiety, OCSA perpetrated by adults, OCSA perpetrated by peers, self-esteem and ACEs. Inspection of normal Q-Q plots and histograms suggested that most of the variable did not appear to be normally distributed (see Appendix 19).

Tests of normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirmed that self-esteem was the only variable that was normally distributed ($D(196) = .06, p = .20$). The other variables, including depression ($D(196) = .10, p < .001$); anxiety ($D(196) = .12, p < .001$); OCSA perpetrated by adults ($D(196) = .23, p < .001$); OCSA perpetrated by peers ($D(196) = .25, p < .001$); and ACE ($D(196) = .17, p < .001$), were non-normally distributed.

The positive skewness of OCSA perpetrated by adults, OCSA perpetrated by peers, and ACE were consistent with expectations as these variables examined childhood trauma. Similarly, the slight positive skewness of depression and anxiety symptoms was also considered normal, as these measured mental health difficulties. Lastly, the normally distributed self-esteem variable suggests that the data set appeared to be representative. Skewness and kurtosis values are reported in Appendix 20.

Transformation is not recommended for variables prone to be naturally skewed, as they may pose problems with the interpretability of results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Furthermore, Schmidt and Finan (2018) argued that outcome transformations can bias results, and regression models with a non-normal distribution can produce valid results without performing outcome transformations. For these reasons, transformation was not performed to avoid biasing the results.

Multivariate outliers

Data were assessed for multivariate outliers using the Mahalanobis Distance Test (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) for each of the regressions (i.e., PTSD symptom severity for the disclosed group and PTSD symptom severity for the non-disclosed group). No multivariate outliers were identified for either of the regressions.

Data Analysis

SPSS was used for data analysis. Overall frequencies were calculated for OCSA (Table 5.2). To examine the association between OCSA and offline ACEs, chi-square tests were conducted (Table 5.3). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then conducted to examine the long-term impact on psychosocial well-being between four groups (no OCSA, OCSA by adults, OCSA by peers, and OCSA by adults and peers) (Table 5.4).

Relating to the impact of disclosure, t-tests were conducted to observe differences between disclosure and non-disclosure for psychosocial well-being, other childhood trauma, total experience of OCSA, historical distress about OCSA, and self-blame (see Table 5.5). Lastly, to examine the impact of PTSD, a two-block hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with PTSD symptom severity as the dependent variable for the disclosed (Table 5.6) and undisclosed groups (Table 5.7) separately. Other childhood trauma was entered into Block 1 to control for the potential cumulative effect of poly-victimisation on PTSD. All remaining predictor variables were entered into Block 2.

5.3 RESULTS

Demographics Characteristics

Chi-square of independence showed that participants' gender did not differ between non-OCSA and OCSA group $\chi^2(2) = 3.30, p = .19$ (see Graph 1 in Appendix 21). However, there was a significant association between sexuality and OCSA victimisation, $\chi^2(4) = 16.85, p = .002$ (see Graph 2 in Appendix 21). However, the sub-group sizes for the non-heterosexual groups were too small to draw meaningful comparisons. A visual inspection of the graph appears to suggest participants identified as bisexual were more likely to experience OCSA. Sexuality was then binarily coded (heterosexual and non-heterosexual), and participants who were not heterosexual were more likely to experience OCSA $\chi^2(1) = 9.51, p = .002$ (see Graph 3 in Appendix 21).

Prevalence of OCSA by Perpetrators and Types

Overall, participants experienced more types of OCSA perpetrated by adults than those perpetrated by peers, except for in-person sexual abuse (see Table 5.2). Of the five types of OCSA measured, sexual conversation was the most frequently experienced, with 45.7% of the sample having talked about sex with adults online and 40.0% with peers under pressure. It was more common to receive sexually explicit materials from adults (45.7%) or to continue receiving unwanted sexual materials from peers despite asking the sender to stop (37.5%) than to have sent self-produced sexually explicit materials to adults (31.5%) or to peers after being pressured (29.5%). Nearly a third of the sample (30.5%) had engaged in online sexual activities such as masturbation while communicating with an adult online, and 9.6% had been sexually abused in person by an online adult acquaintance. Relating to OCSA perpetrated by

peers, 20.3% had engaged in online sexual activities with peers under pressure, and 19.9% had been sexually abused in person by a peer following online communication.

Other Childhood Trauma

To examine the association between poly-victimisation and OCSA, comparisons were made between participants who had and had not experienced OCSA and their experiences of ACEs. Of the ten types of ACEs examined, participants who had experienced OCSA were significantly more likely to have experienced different types of ACEs compared to those who had not. The types of ACE included verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, witnessing domestic violence, having lived with someone who abuses substances, and having lived with someone with mental health problems or attempted suicide. In comparison to participants without OCSA victimisation, participants who have experienced OCSA also reported more experiences of physical neglect, parental separation, or divorce, as well as having a household member who went to prison. The difference, however, was not significant for these three types of ACEs (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.2

Prevalence of Different Types of OCSA by Age of Perpetrators

Types of OCSA*	Adults										Peers*									
	Never		Sometimes		Often		Very Often		At least once		Never		Sometimes		Often		Very Often		At least once	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Sent semi-nude or nude pictures/videos ¹	135	68.5	53	26.9	4	2.0	5	2.5	62	31.5	138	70.4	44	22.4	12	6.1	2	1.0	58	29.5
Talked about sex/sexual fantasy	107	54.3	66	33.5	16	8.1	8	4.1	90	45.7	118	59.9	57	28.9	16	8.1	6	3.0	79	40.0
Received sexual photos/videos ^{a,2}	107	54.3	62	31.5	19	9.6	9	4.6	90	45.7	122	62.6	46	23.6	21	10.8	6	3.1	73	37.5
Engaged in online sexual activities)	137	69.5	46	23.4	8	4.1	6	3.0	60	30.5	157	79.7	31	15.7	7	3.6	2	1.0	40	20.3
Met in person for sexual activities after meeting online ^{b,1}	178	90.4	12	6.1	5	2.5	2	1.0	19	9.6	157	80.1	29	14.8	8	4.1	2	1.0	39	19.9

*OCSA perpetrated by peer was specified as under pressure to qualify as OCSA, whereas pressure was not specified for OCSA perpetrated by adults due to illegality of sexual activities between a child and an adult.

¹ One missing case for peer perpetrated OCSA ² Two missing cases for peer perpetrated OCSA

^a Peer perpetrated item - received the materials despite having had asked the send to stop ^b Peer perpetrated item – engaged under pressure following online communication

Table 5.3

Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Experienced Before the Age of 16

Types of abuse	No OCSA n=69				OCSA n=128				
	Yes		No		Yes		No		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Verbal abuse*	18	26.1	51	73.9	63	49.6	64	50.4	$X^2(1) = 10.12, p = .001$
Physical abuse*	7	10.1	62	89.9	48	37.8	79	62.2	$X^2(1) = 16.93, p < .001$
Sexual abuse*	4	5.8	65	94.2	32	25.2	95	74.8	$X^2(1) = 11.22, p < .001$
Emotional neglect*	17	24.6	52	75.4	55	43.3	72	56.7	$X^2(1) = 6.71, p = .01$
Physical neglect	5	7.2	64	92.8	17	13.4	110	86.6	$X^2(1) = 1.69, p = .19$
Parental separation or divorce	24	34.8	45	65.2	48	37.8	79	62.2	$X^2(1) = .18, p = .68$
Witnessed domestic violence*	4	5.8	65	94.2	23	18.1	104	81.9	$X^2(1) = 5.71, p = .02$
Lived with someone who abused substances*	9	13.0	60	87.0	33	26.0	94	74.0	$X^2(1) = 4.45, p = .04$
Lived with someone with mental health problems or had attempted suicide *	24	34.8	45	65.2	64	50.4	63	49.6	$X^2(1) = 4.04, p = .04$
A household member went to prison	4	5.8	65	94.2	19	15.0	108	85.0	$X^2(1) = 3.62, p = .06$

Note. One missing case for all items.

*Significant difference between groups

Psychosocial Well-Being in Adulthood

To investigate whether psychosocial well-being and poly-victimisation differed between participants who have experienced OCSA and those who have not, a one-way ANOVA was used to examine differences between the four groups. The four groups were: participants without OCSA (no OCSA), participants who experienced OCSA perpetrated exclusively by adults (OCSA by adults), participants who experienced OCSA perpetrated exclusively by peers (OCSA by peers), and those who experienced OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers (OCSA by adults and peers). A one-way ANOVA was also used to examine whether PTSD symptoms differed between the three groups who experienced OCSA. The outcomes are reported in Table 5.4.

Depression symptoms (see Table 5.4)

There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by a one-way ANOVA. A post-hoc Tukey test revealed that participants who have experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers reported significantly more depression symptoms ($M = 25.52$, $SD = 14.74$, $p < .001$) than those who had not ($M = 15.13$, $SD = 13.82$). Although no other significant differences were observed between groups, it is worth noting that both the OCSA by adults and the OCSA by peers groups reported more depression symptoms than participants who had no experience of OCSA, and that the scores met the clinical threshold for depression.

Anxiety symptoms (see Table 5.4)

Levenes' test for equality of variance was found to be violated, $F(3,192) = 3.79$, $p = .01$. Welch's test indicated there was a statistically significant difference between groups. A post-hoc Games-Howell test revealed that participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers reported significantly more anxiety symptoms ($M = 9.24$, $SD = 5.79$, $p < .001$)

than those who had not ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 4.85$), as well as those who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults only ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 4.16$, $p = .03$). Although the OCSA by peers group reported more anxiety symptoms than the OCSA by adults group, the difference was not found to be significant.

Table 5.4

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Psychosocial Well-Being between OCSA and Non-OCSA Groups

Measure	No OCSA 35.0% ($n = 69$)		OCSA perpetrated by adults 10.7% ($n = 21$)		OCSA perpetrated by peers 7.6% ($n = 15$)		OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers 46.7% ($n = 92$)		$F(3,193)$	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Depression	15.13	13.82	22.31	14.20	20.68	15.23	25.52	14.74	6.90	<.001
Anxiety ¹	5.06	4.85	6.10	4.16	7.93	4.66	9.24	5.79	8.86	<.001
Self-esteem*	17.86	5.83	14.30	4.97	15.67	6.31	15.43	6.01	3.13	.027
Other childhood trauma ^{*,1}	1.68	1.84	2.81	2.44	3.40	2.44	3.21	2.80	5.75	<.001
									$F(2,122)$	
PTSD ^a	-	-	21.51	15.72	26.40	18.31	32.38	19.50	3.13	.005

Note. Scores meeting clinical threshold: depression 16+; Anxiety <5 Mild, <10 Moderate; Self-esteem 5-25 normal range, <15 low esteem; Other childhood trauma 4+ concerning; PTSD 24-32 clinical concern, 32+ probable diagnosis.

*One missing case in the adults and peers group ($n=91$).

¹ Levenes' test for equality of variance was found to be violated ($p > .05$), and Welch test was used.

^a PTSD measure was not administered to no OCSA group.

Self-esteem (see Table 5.4)

There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by a one-way ANOVA. A post hoc Tukey test revealed that participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers reported significantly lower self-esteem ($M = 15.43$, $SD = 6.01$, $p < .001$) than those who had not ($M = 17.86$, $SD = 5.83$). In comparison to participants with no experience of OCSA, self-esteem was also lower for participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults as well as those perpetrated by peers. The difference, however, was not found to be significant.

Other childhood trauma (see Table 5.4)

Levenes' test for equality of variance was found to be violated, $F(3,192) = 3.99$, $p = .01$. Welch's test indicated there was a statistically significant difference between groups. A post-hoc Games-Howell test revealed that participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 2.80$, $p < .001$) experienced significantly more ACEs than those without the experience of OCSA ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 1.84$). Although the other two OCSA groups reported more ACEs than participants who had not been sexually victimised online, the differences were not found to be significant.

PTSD symptoms (see Table 5.4)

There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by a one-way ANOVA. A post-hoc Tukey test revealed that participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers reported significantly higher PTSD symptoms ($M = 32.38$, $SD = 19.50$, $p = .05$) than those who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults only ($M = 21.51$, $SD = 15.72$). Although the level of PTSD symptoms reported by the OCSA by peers group met clinical concerns and were higher than those reported by the OCSA by adults group, the difference between the groups was not found to be significant.

Disclosure of OCSA and Psychosocial Well-Being

Among participants who had experienced OCSA, 50.4% had not disclosed the abuse at the time of study participation. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare psychosocial well-being, ACEs, and OCSA characteristics between participants who had disclosed and had not disclosed the experience of OCSA (see Table 5.5). The results indicated that participants who had disclosed OCSA experienced significantly more depression symptoms ($t(127) = -1.90, p = .03$) than those who had not disclosed the abuse. In relation to OCSA characteristics, participants who had disclosed the OCSA had also experienced more OCSA victimisation ($t(127) = -1.95, p = .03$) and found the abuse more distressing at the time ($t(127) = -2.48, p = .01$) than those who had yet to disclose the abuse. Although the disclosed group was also found to have higher levels of anxiety and PTSD symptoms, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of self-blame towards the OCSA, these were not found to be significantly different from the non-disclosed group.

Table 5.5

Psychosocial Well-Being, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and OCSA Characteristics Between the Disclosed and Non-Disclosed Groups

Psychosocial outcome	Disclosed (n=64)		Not Disclosed (n=65)		t(127)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Depression*	27.29	15.27	22.42	13.78	-1.90	.03	-.34
Anxiety	9.47	5.63	8.19	5.52	-1.31	.10	-.23
PTSD ¹	31.89	20.90	27.02	16.95	-1.45	.08	-.26
Other childhood trauma	3.5	2.78	2.8	2.55	-1.49	.07	-.26
Total OCSA*	7.05	4.46	5.5	4.59	-1.95	.03	-.34
Historical distress towards OCSA*	2.23	1.31	1.6	1.58	-2.48	.01	-.44
Self-esteem	14.98	6.24	15.10	5.64	.11	.46	.02
Behavioural self-blame ^{2,3}	14.23	5.92	13.17	6.12	-0.98	.17	-.18
Characterological self-blame ^{2,3}	11.89	4.61	11.08	5.51	-.88	.19	-.16
Self-blame total ^{2,3}	26.11	9.75	24.25	10.91	-1.0	.16	-.18

¹ One missing case for disclosed group ² Two missing cases for non-disclosed group ³ Three missing cases for disclosed group.

Predictors of PTSD Symptom Severity for Participants Who Had Disclosed OCSA

A Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted prior to the regression analysis to determine the relevant variables to enter as predictors for PTSD symptom severity for participants who had disclosed the OCSA experience (see Appendix 22 for correlations table). The results revealed that total OCSA victimisation ($r = .42, p < .001$), historical distress level of OCSA ($r = .39, p < .001$), other childhood trauma ($r = .43, p < .001$), behavioural self-blame ($r = .66, p < .001$), characterological self-blame ($r = .57, p < .001$), received TA ($r = .59, p < .001$), and received UA ($r = .61, p < .001$) were all significantly correlated with PTSD symptom severity. Positive reactions received ($r = .20, p = .20$) was not entered as a predictor due to its insignificant correlation with the outcome variable.

To ensure the predictors were not multicollinear, correlations between the variables were checked. Received TA was highly correlated with received UA ($r = .71, p < .001$), as was behavioural self-blame with characterological self-blame ($r = .74, p < .001$). Meanwhile, received TA and received UA were also highly correlated with negative reactions received ($r = .93, p < .001$ and $r = .92, p < .001$, respectively), as were behavioural self-blame and characterological self-blame with self-blame ($r = .94, p < .001$ and $r = .92, p < .001$, respectively). Therefore, negative reactions to disclosure received ($r = .65, p < .001$) and self-blame ($r = .66, p < .001$) were both entered as a single variable on their own instead of using the two sub-scales to predict PTSD symptom severity among participants who have disclosed OCSA.

Due to the exploratory nature of the analysis, a two-block hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with PTSD symptom severity as the dependent variable. Other childhood trauma was entered into Block 1 to control for the potential cumulative effect of poly-victimisation on PTSD. All remaining variables, including total OCSA victimisation, historical distress towards OCSA, self-blame, and negative reactions to disclosure received, were entered into Block 2.

The results revealed that at Block 1, other childhood trauma contributed significantly to the model, $F(1,58) = 12.61, p < .001$, and accounted for 16.4% of the variation in PTSD among adults who have disclosed OCSA. The model remained significant when the additional four variables were added to Block 2, $F(5,54) = 12.54, p < .001$, and explained an additional 35.9% of the variation in PTSD. Negative reactions received to OCSA disclosure ($\beta = .74, p = .009$) and self-blame ($\beta = .72, p = .008$) were significant predictors of PTSD symptom severity. Together, the five variables accounted for 53.7% (R^2 Adjusted = .49; $R^2 = .54$) of the variance in PTSD symptom severity for the disclosed group. The results are presented in Table 5.6.

The results suggested that higher levels of negative reactions received to disclosure and high levels of self-blame for OCSA significantly predicted PTSD symptom severity among participants who had disclosed the abuse.

Table 5.6

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting PTSD Symptom Severity among Participants who Had Disclosed OCSA

Variable	Model 1					Model 2				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> <i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Other childhood trauma	3.18	.89	.42	3.55	<.001	1.24	.78	.16	1.59	.12
Total OCSA victimisation						.51	.56	.11	.91	.37
Historical distress						-.74	1.69	-	-.44	.66
Negative reactions received**						.74	.27	.34	2.72	.009
Self-blame**						.72	.26	.33	2.73	.008
R^2	.18					.54				
F for change in R^2	12.61***					10.46***				

Note. Number of participants = 60
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Predictors of PTSD Symptom Severity for Participants Who Had Not Disclosed OCSA

A Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted prior to the regression analysis to determine the relevant variables to enter as predictors for PTSD symptom severity for participants who had not disclosed the OCSA experience (see Appendix 22 for Correlations Table). The results revealed that total OCSA, historical distress level of OCSA, other childhood trauma, and self-blame were significantly correlated with the severity of PTSD symptoms, as previously reported above. Anticipated TA ($r = .45, p < .001$) and anticipated UA ($r = .53, p < .001$) were also significantly correlated with PTSD symptom severity.

When screening for multicollinearity, anticipated TA was found to be highly correlated with anticipated UA ($r = .81, p < .001$). Anticipated TA and anticipated UA were also highly correlated with negative reactions to disclosure anticipated ($r = .96, p < .001$ and $r = .95, p < .001$, respectively). Therefore, instead of using the two sub-scales, negative reactions anticipated ($r = .51, p < .001$) was entered as a variable.

The final predictors entered into the model to predict PTSD symptom severity among participants who had not disclosed OCSA were other childhood trauma, total OCSA victimisation, historical distress towards OCSA, anticipated negative reactions to disclosure, and self-blame.

Due to the exploratory nature of the analysis, a two-block hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with PTSD symptom severity as the dependent variable. Other childhood trauma was entered into Block 1 to control for the potential cumulative effect of poly-victimisation on PTSD. All remaining variables, including total OCSA victimisation, historical distress towards OCSA, self-blame, and negative reactions to disclosure anticipated, were entered into Block 2.

The results revealed that at Block 1, other childhood trauma contributed significantly to the model, $F(1,61) = 14.07, p < .001$, and accounted for 18.7% of the variation in PTSD among adults who have not disclosed OCSA. The model remained significant when the additional four variables were added to Block 2, $F(5,57) = 20.07, p < .001$, and explained an additional 45.0% of the variation in PTSD. Self-blame ($\beta = .79, p < .001$) and historical distress towards OCSA ($\beta = 3.81, p < .001$) were significant predictors of PTSD symptom severity. Together, the five variables accounted for 63.8% (R^2 Adjusted = .61; $R^2 = .64$) of the variance in PTSD symptoms for the non-disclosed group. The results are presented in Table 5.7.

The results suggested that higher levels of self-blame for OCSA and higher levels of historical distress towards OCSA significantly predicted PTSD symptom severity among participants who had not disclosed the OCSA.

Table 5.7

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting PTSD Symptom Severity among Participants who Had Not Disclosed OCSA

Variable	Model 1					Model 2				
	B	SE B	β	t	p	B	SE B	β	t	p
Other childhood trauma	2.86	.76	.43	3.75	<.001	1.10	.61	.17	1.81	.08
Total OCSA victimisation						-.27	.37	-.07	-.72	.47
Historical distress						3.8	1.05	.36	3.63	<.001
Negative reactions anticipated						.08	.15	.06	.53	.60
Self-blame						.79	.21	.51	3.85	<.001
R ²	.19					.64				
F for change in R ²	14.07***					17.72***				

Note. Number of participants = 63

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5.4 DISCUSSION

The study examined the long-term psychosocial impact of OCSA and OCSA disclosure using a young adult sample with three primary aims. First, it examined the prevalence of OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers separately. Second, it examined the long-term impact of OCSA on psychosocial well-being. Third, it investigated the role of OCSA disclosure and social reactions to disclosure on psychosocial well-being in adulthood.

As hypothesised, participants who had experienced OCSA reported significantly more depression (H1) and anxiety (H2) symptoms, significantly lower self-esteem (H3), and experienced significantly more types of ACEs (H4) compared to those who had not experienced OCSA. Consistent with H5, significant differences in psychosocial well-being and abuse characteristics were found between participants who had disclosed OCSA and those who had not disclosed the abuse. Compared to participants who had not disclosed OCSA, participants who had disclosed the abuse reported significantly more depression symptoms, experienced significantly more OCSA victimisation, and found the OCSA more distressing at the time of the abuse. Consistent with H6, negative reactions to OCSA disclosure and self-blame were found to predict PTSD symptom severity among participants who had disclosed the abuse. Anticipated negative reactions to OCSA disclosure did not predict PTSD symptom severity among participants who had not disclosed the abuse. Instead, PTSD symptom severity was predicted by historical distress towards OCSA and self-blame for the undisclosed group. Therefore, H7 was partially supported.

OCSA Prevalence

In the current study, 65% of the sample had experienced at least one form of OCSA perpetrated by adults or peers before the age of 16. This finding is similar to a recent study conducted by Economist Impact (2023b), which found that 68% of young adults aged between

18 and 20 years old across four European countries had experienced some form of OCSA before the age of 18, and the 53.5% reported by Guerra et al. (2022) in a Chilean adolescent sample. The present figure is also much higher than previous studies examining the experience of OCSA perpetrated by adults or peers using samples of young people, which generally report a prevalence of less than 15% (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018a, 2018b; Jonsson et al., 2019; Microsoft, 2023; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022; Sklenarova et al., 2018). However, it is difficult to draw meaningful comparisons between studies due to methodological differences relating to definitions, measures, reference periods, and sampling strategies (also see Study 2 discussion for details).

Nevertheless, this study found that nearly one in 10 (9.6%) has been sexually abused by an online adult acquaintance in person, and one in five (20.3%) has been physically sexually abused by a peer in person following online communication. Relating to non-contact sexual abuse, nearly one in three (30.5%) participants in this sample has been sexually abused online by an adult, and almost one in five (19.9%) has engaged in online sexual activities with peers under pressure. The higher prevalence of receiving than sending sexually explicit material was consistent with existing studies reporting the same pattern (Molla-Esparza et al., 2020) and supports general findings that unwanted online sexual exposure is generally high (Juusola et al., 2021).

Although it is difficult to reliably interpret the prevalence of OCSA due to methodological issues, the examination of OCSA prevalence in the present study made several contributions to the existing literature, which will be discussed below.

Sexual re-victimisation

Overcoming the limitation that OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers is generally addressed in separate research literature (Bryce et al., 2023), the finding that OCSA by adults and peers group made up the largest proportion in the current sample (46.7%) suggested that these

experiences are inter-related. Sexual re-victimisation, where the experience of CSA increases further sexual victimisation, has been extensively documented (Arata, 2002; Classen et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2019). Thus, the repeated online sexual trauma found in the present study (as indicated by abuse by both adults and peers) extends the evidence on sexual re-victimisation between childhood and adulthood and suggests that young people are being sexually re-victimised before they reach adulthood. Furthermore, the significant association between offline sexual abuse (measured by ACEs) and OCSA found in the present study shows that in addition to being sexually re-victimised online, young people are also being sexually victimised in both online and offline environments (Hong et al., 2023).

The experience of repeated sexual trauma across different contexts may be interpreted through the traumatic sexualisation and powerlessness dynamics proposed by Finkelhor and Browne (1985), where the repeated sexual victimisation may leave the abused person feeling powerless when confronted with sexual harm, leaving them feeling they have no choice but to comply with the abuse. Meanwhile, the experience of repeated CSA may skew perceptions of appropriate sexual interactions, resulting in lower thresholds for harmful sexual interactions and activities. The normalisation of these behaviours thus increases the risk of re-victimisation, which is also evident in the results of Study 1 and existing literature (IICSA, 2022).

Differentiation between online and offline sexual activity with children

Online sexual abuse was found to be threefold greater than in-person sexual abuse in offline meetings with adults in this present study. Previously, Bergen et al. (2013) reported that knowledge of the impersonated young person being underage did not deter adults from continuing online sexual conversations with the impersonated child. On the contrary, the suggestion of offline meetings decreased according to the impersonated age (Bergen et al., 2013). Furthermore, Rimer (2019) found that, despite acknowledging the illegality of sexual activities with minors, adult CSAM offenders expressed less regard for children online compared to children offline. These findings imply that online sexual activity with children

appeared to be viewed differently, perhaps less serious, than offline sexual contact with children.

By contrast, the prevalence of online and offline OCSA was similar for OCSA perpetrated by peers. Thus, the contrast between online and offline OCSA perpetrated by adults found in the present study, along with the recent figures on online-only OCSA (IWF, 2022a; 2023a), may indicate adults' awareness of the ramifications of physical sexual activity with minors, and the much higher figures of online abuse potentially imply a minimisation of the seriousness of non-contact sexual abuse (i.e., online sexual abuse within this context). This argument also appears to map onto the lawless space theory recently proposed by Steel et al. (2023) to understand CSAM offending. Despite the examination of offenders' cognitions in facilitating offending behaviour being beyond the scope of this study, the present findings may nonetheless have implications for both the prevention of online child sexual offending and the cross-over of child sexual offending. This is because existing knowledge suggests that addressing the illegality of online sexual activity with children may strengthen the legal deterrence effect on engaging in sexual activities of any form with children.

Peer perpetrated OCSA

Previous research suggesting that peers represented the majority of OCSA perpetrators was not supported by the results of the current study (Finkelhor et al., 2022; 2023a; Guerra et al., 2021). Finkelhor et al. (2023a) reported that OCSA perpetrated by romantic partners was highly prevalent across different forms of OCSA. Thus, a possible explanation for this might be that previous studies either included the examination of OCSA experienced within the context of a romantic relationship or were unspecific, whereas the present study specifically excluded the experience of OCSA perpetrated by peers who were romantic partners.

Unknown perpetrator

Lastly, although the present study benefited from the separate examination of adults and peers perpetrated OCSA (including those who were suspected to be adults), it did not account for OCSA perpetrated by unknown perpetrators. Previously, Finkelhor et al. (2022) reported that 74.8% of OSS and 40.6% of threats of non-consensual sharing were perpetrated by someone whom the victim did not know within their US nationally representative sample. Similarly, where the types of OCSA were not specified, other studies have also found that up to 22.5% of OCSA were perpetrated by someone whose identity was unknown to the young person (Guerra et al., 2021; Juusola et al., 2021). Since the present study failed to capture the experience of OCSA perpetrated by unknown perpetrators, data from the other studies suggests that the rate of OCSA would be even higher than that currently reported in the present study.

Since it is not always possible to verify the identity of online acquaintances, knowledge of the role of unknown perpetrators may be particularly relevant to protecting children from online sexual harm, especially considering young people are overconfident in their ability to detect potential online harm (Groenestein et al., 2018; Ofcom, 2022a). Given the potential use of deception by abusers in the online space, it is crucial for future studies to explore how young people differentiate between online acquaintances and those who are considered unknown. Closely related, the experience of multiple forms of deception encountered by young people online, as found in this study and previous research, also demonstrates the importance of educating young people on potential encounters with deception and equipping them with skills and strategies to mitigate potential harm. Furthermore, Finkelhor et al. (2023a) reported that the experience of OCSA was most impactful when the perpetrator was met online and least impactful when the perpetrator's identity was unknown to the victim. This highlights the need for future research to consider the role of unknown offenders to comprehensively understand the relationship between the perpetrator's identity and the impact of OCSA. Together, the

available evidence highlights that further research on the topic of unknown perpetrators has implications for both the protection of and responses to OCSA.

Demographic differences

Although research generally suggests females are more at risk of different types of OCSA than males (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018b; Economist Impact, 2023a; Finkelhor et al., 2022), the evidence remains inconclusive and gender differences were not found in the present study. However, the current finding that all participants who identified as non-binary had experienced OCSA potentially suggests that young people who do not identify with the traditional male and female dichotomy could be more vulnerable to OCSA. Indeed, Finkelhor et al. (2022) found that individuals identified as transgender or gender fluid reported substantially higher rates than cisgender males in their experience of OCSA.

Consistent with previous studies, participants who identified as non-heterosexual were more likely to experience OCSA than heterosexual young people in the current sample (Economist Impact, 2023a; Mitchell et al., 2014a). Although the current sample was small and interpretation of the findings warrants caution, participants who identified as bisexual, gay, or lesbian were six times more likely to experience OCSA. One plausible explanation for the increased risk for LGB young people is their tendency to explore and engage in online risky sexual behaviour as part of the process of exploring sexual identity (Mitchell et al., 2014b; van Ouytsel et al., 2019). Counterintuitively, this process also increases exposure to discussion of topics involving sex, which in turn increases young people's vulnerability to OCSA (Mitchell et al., 2014a). Thus, it is important for sex education to be inclusive to meet the needs of all young people.

Although the current sample size was too small to draw meaningful sub-group comparisons to examine the effect of gender and sexual identity as risk factors for OCSA, the significant effect of sexual orientation and the potential effect of gender identity found in this study urge

researchers to examine beyond the gender and sexuality dichotomy (male vs female and heterosexual vs non-heterosexual, respectively) when considering these as risk factors. The results also highlight that the two distinct constructs require separate examination, instead of being collapsed as one factor (Economist Impact, 2023a). Overcoming these methodological limitations will advance the currently absent knowledge about whether there are differences between the sub-groups of sexual and gender identity in increasing young people's vulnerability to OCSA, and the impact of these demographic characteristics on individual responses to the aftermath of OCSA.

Long-term Impact of OCSA and Poly-Victimisation

Overall, the results indicated that participants who had experienced OCSA (inclusive of three groups: 1) OCSA by adults; 2) OCSA by peers; and 3) OCSA by adults and peers) reported more depression and anxiety symptoms, lower self-esteem, and experienced more ACEs compared to those without the experience. However, significant effects were only observed between participants who have been sexually abused by both adults and peers and those without the experience of OCSA across all the examined variables (with the exception of anxiety, where a significant effect was also found between the OCSA by adults and peers group and the OCSA by adults group). Relating to PTSD, a similar pattern emerged where participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers reported the most symptoms, and a significant difference was also found between this group and the OCSA by adults group. These findings will be interpreted below.

Depression and Anxiety

First, the association between the experience of OCSA and higher depression and anxiety symptoms is congruent with the robust evidence that CSA increases the risk of depression and anxiety in adulthood (Chen et al., 2010; Hailes et al., 2019; Maniglio, 2010; 2013). This is

an important contribution, as this is the first known study to quantitatively examine the long-term effects of OCSA in adulthood. This finding also replicated existing evidence of the detrimental impact of OCSA on young people's psychosocial well-being (Guerra et al., 2021; 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Jonsson et al., 2019; Say et al., 2015; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021) and presents evidence that these mental health difficulties could persist into adulthood.

PTSD

Concerning the relationship between OCSA and PTSD, this study found that participants who were victimised by both adults and peers reported scores reaching the clinical threshold for a PTSD diagnosis. It also found that those who were solely abused by peers had scores exceeding the clinical concern level. These results support previous studies reporting a high level of PTSD symptoms among young people (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017) and the increased risk of PTSD development following the experience of OCSA (Say et al., 2015). Therefore, the present finding demonstrates that the persistence of PTSD symptoms could continue into adulthood.

Self-esteem

Replicating the association between OCSA and lower self-esteem previously reported by young people who have experienced OCSA (Jonsson et al., 2019), the present study also found that adults who have experienced OCSA have lower self-esteem compared to those without this form of abuse, with scores meeting the threshold of low self-esteem. Research suggests that self-esteem increases during adolescence but increases more slowly during young adulthood (Erol & Orth, 2011; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Meanwhile, the positive relationship between self-concept and self-esteem has been consistently documented (Weber et al., 2023). In reference to the traumagenic dynamics model, sexual trauma is suggested to thwart one's sense of self (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). Thus, the experience of repeated

sexual trauma is likely to seriously distort the person's self-concept and self-esteem development and account for the lowest self-esteem reported by the OCSA by adults and peers group.

Poly-victimisation

The significant association found between OCSA and offline childhood adversity added to the growing evidence documenting a positive relationship between OCSA and offline poly-victimisation (Choi et al., 2023; Jonsson et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2011; Whittle et al., 2014a). While having a difficult family background or circumstances, including those that are transient, has been identified as a risk factor in qualitative studies (Joleby et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2014a), existing studies have not demonstrated which types of ACEs are associated with OCSA. This was clarified by the present study, which showed that verbal abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, domestic violence, having lived with someone who abused substances, or someone with mental health problems were all significantly associated with OCSA. These results provided an insight into the effect of specific forms of childhood trauma on increasing young people's vulnerability to OCSA.

Risk and impact of cumulative trauma

The finding of poly-victimisation across the online and offline environments makes noteworthy contributions to the study of OCSA and child abuse. First, the cumulative effect of childhood trauma on adults is strongly evident (Charak et al., 2020; Grusnick et al., 2020). The literature on OCSA also suggests that more experiences of offline childhood adversity are linked to greater negative impacts of OCSA (Finkelhor et al., 2023a; Whittle et al., 2013a). The available evidence thus provides an explanation for the poorest psychosocial well-being reported by participants who had experienced OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers across all the examined variables, as they had been the most poly-victimised (as indicated by their experience of OCSA by both adults and the experience of multiple ACEs) relative to the other

groups (i.e., OCSA by adults, OCSA by peers, and no OCSA). The most adverse well-being reported by the OCSA by adults and peers group in comparison to the OCSA by adults and the OCSA by peers group is also consistent with Finkelhor et al.'s (2007) traumatic stress theory, which asserts that multiple forms of victimisation pose a greater risk of poorer psychosocial well-being than the experience of a single trauma. The inter-related experience of online and offline poly-victimisation demonstrated in this study has two important implications. First, it underscores the accumulative effect of trauma. Second, it illustrates that the impact of OCSA cannot be fully understood without consideration of the experience and impact of other types of childhood trauma.

Second, the co-occurrence of online and offline poly-victimisation, including the link between sexual re-victimisation in both online and offline environments, demonstrates the role of childhood trauma in increasing the risk of further victimisation. Furthermore, existing studies suggest that OCSA is also linked to cyberbullying (Dahlqvist et al., 2022; de Santisteban & Gamez-Guadix, 2018b; Machimbarrena et al., 2018). The association between different forms of online and offline poly-victimisation highlights that the existence of any childhood trauma should be a warning sign of the possible simultaneous emergence of other adversities to inform prevention, as the young person could be more at risk of other forms of victimisation (if not already victimised). The present finding reinforces the importance of identifying at-risk individuals to prevent further victimisation, whether OCSA, offline childhood adversity, or both. Specifically, the available evidence underscores the need to comprehensively understand a young person's risk profiles across online and offline domains, as well as sexual and non-sexual victimisation.

Lastly, it has been reported that more offline childhood adversity before the age of 13 and non-contact offline childhood victimisation were associated with more negative emotional impacts of OCSA (Finkelhor et al., 2023a). Meanwhile, there is also evidence that pre-existing mental health difficulties are risk factors for OCSA (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018a). This

highlights the need to understand the directionality of the association between ACEs, OCSA, and psychosocial well-being, as each could independently, and interdependently increase the risk of another and have a cumulative effect on the abused person.

Impact of perpetrator age on OCSA

The lack of significant difference found between the OCSA by adults and the OCSA by peers group is consistent with Finkelhor et al. (2023a), who found the impact of OCSA was similar for both adult and peer perpetrators. These results, however, do not indicate that the experience of OCSA perpetrated by either adults or peers only has no impact on the abused person, as all three groups of OCSA reported more depression and anxiety symptoms, lower self-esteem, and experienced more ACEs compared to those without this form of abuse. Specifically, all of the three groups reported depression scores reaching the clinical threshold for diagnosis.

The finding that the experience of OCSA by adults and peers was the most impactful in adulthood supports Finkelhor et al.'s (2023a) findings, which showed the impact of OCSA was stronger as the number of perpetrators increased. While it cannot be ruled out that participants who were abused by adults or peers only could have been abused by multiple perpetrators, it is certain that participants in the OCSA by adults and peers group had been abused by more than one perpetrator. Since this group also experienced the most ACEs, the cumulative effect of sexual re-victimisation and poly-victimisation is likely to account for the most adverse effects reported by the OCSA by adults and peers group. Nevertheless, patterns emerged suggesting adult and peer perpetrated OCSA may have abuse specific effects. The findings revealed that participants who were abused by adults reported more depression symptoms and lower self-esteem than those who were abused by peers, whereas an opposite pattern was found for anxiety and PTSD between the two groups.

Relating to the effect of adult perpetrated OCSA, existing research suggests that the discovery of the true identity of the adult abuser and their deception can result in the victims feeling betrayed and blaming themselves for trusting the abuser (ECPAT International, 2022a). This is consistent with betrayal dynamics and the experience of depression as a result (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). On the contrary, deception is less likely to be used by peer perpetrators. Meanwhile, the strong relationship between low self-esteem and depression is also well documented (Bhattacharya et al., 2023; Sowislo & Orth, 2013), which would appear to explain the pattern of more depression symptoms and lower self-esteem reported by the OCSA by adults group.

With regard to the elevated level of anxiety and PTSD symptoms reported by the OCSA by peers group. Although the present study did not specify whether the peer perpetrator was someone the participant knew in person, prior research suggests that peer perpetrators are often offline acquaintances (Finkelhor et al., 2022; 2023a). Extrapolating from these results, it is thus likely that the peer perpetrators identified in this sample were someone the participants' knew in person. Thus, it is postulated that the proximity of the perpetrator, as opposed to only knowing the adult perpetrator online, may induce more anxiety in the abused person in several ways.

This suggestion is consistent with previous studies reporting that OCSA involving perpetrators from the victim's school can have more implications for reasons such as the school's preferential treatment of the perpetrator, as well as shame and blame from peers (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019). The fears of non-consensual sharing have also been found to result in higher distress and increased compliance with abuse (Hamilton Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2020). The potential and actual damage to social standing within the immediate social network can also exacerbate the anxiety level (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019; Hunehall Berndtsson, 2022; Johansen et al., 2019). Furthermore, offline contact with the perpetrator could further silence the victim and cause anxiety (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019; Hunehall Berndtsson, 2022; Hunehall

Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021). The present study further argues that the mere proximity of the perpetrator is in itself anxiety provoking and re-traumatising, regardless of whether the victim is threatened with more abuse or whether or not the abuse is ongoing or has ended. Thus, the potential encounter with the abuser is likely to exacerbate the sense of powerlessness induced by the sexual abuse (Finklehor & Browne, 1985). Consequently, the ongoing anxiety and fear may linger into adulthood as the abused person and the perpetrator, especially when the dyad may still share the same social network in the online space.

Moreover, since PTSD is a form of anxiety disorder, trauma-specific anxiety may perpetuate or exacerbate persistent and excessive anxiety about common occurrences and situations that are characterised by GAD, and vice versa. Thus explaining the co-occurrence of elevated PTSD and anxiety symptoms experienced by the OCSA by peers group.

Disclosure of OCSA

Since this was the first study to examine OCSA disclosure using an adult sample quantitatively and retrospectively, there is no available evidence with which to directly compare the present findings. Nevertheless, the finding that half of the sample (50.4%) had not disclosed their experience of OCSA at the time of study participation supports previous studies suggesting reluctance among young people to disclose this form of abuse (Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021). Importantly, the present result highlights that non-disclosure appears to persist into early adulthood, especially given that lifetime disclosure was examined. Referring to the literature on lifetime disclosure of offline CSA, while higher rates of up to 78% have been reported (Banyard et al., 2001), long delays in disclosure are also well documented, with studies reporting an average wait of up to 21 years before the adult tells someone about the abuse (Alaggia et al., 2019; Easton, 2019). Additionally, around a third of adults who have experienced CSA have never disclosed the abuse (Ruggiero et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2000). Since the average age of the current sample was 22 years old, participants are in early

adulthood compared to previous studies examining lifetime disclosure. Therefore, this may explain the lower prevalence found in this study, as the rate of disclosure is likely to increase with time. Nevertheless, further work is required to establish this.

Although the prevalence of disclosure found in the present study was slightly lower than that reported by young people who have experienced online grooming (Juusola et al., 2021), which contradicts the suggestion that CSA disclosure is expected to increase across the lifetime. The difference may be attributed to better education and awareness about OCSA over recent years (Patterson et al., 2022), as having the opportunity to tell and recognition of the problem can facilitate disclosure (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; IICSA, 2022; Morrison et al., 2018). The potential effect of the increased awareness of OCSA on disclosure may be further reflected by the positive experience of disclosure reported by Juusola et al. (2021) in comparison to those reported by previous studies. While both positive and negative reactions to disclosure are received and anticipated by victims, blaming and unsupportive reactions are typically more common (ECPAT International, 2020a; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2020). Yet over 70% of the respondents in Juusola et al.'s (2021) study reported a positive disclosure experience, with only two percent reporting feeling blamed by the disclosure recipient. Since Juusola et al.'s (2021) data was the most recently collected in comparison to the present and previous studies documenting more negative responses to disclosure, it is possible that the contrasting experiences of disclosure relate to the time period in which these studies were conducted and the sample source.

The literature on CSA disclosure indicates that the likelihood of disclosure within any population is affected by a range of inter-related factors, such as the victim's characteristics (e.g., gender and age at the time of abuse), abuse characteristics, including duration and severity of the abuse, and relationship with the abuser (McElvaney, 2015; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020; 2021). Specifically, repeated abuse has been associated with delayed disclosure (McElvaney, 2015). Since participants who had been abused by both

adults and peers made up the biggest proportion of the sample in the current study, it would seem plausible that they may delay disclosing the experience as a result of repeated victimisation. Thus, providing an explanation for why half of the sample had yet to disclose their experience. Moreover, interpersonal and socio-cultural factors have been cited as important in promoting or impeding disclosure (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Therefore, it is likely that all of the aforementioned characteristics could have influenced participants' decisions to disclose, and future studies will benefit from investigating how individual and abuse characteristics are related to disclosure.

A review of the existing literature on disclosure suggests that the methodological considerations pertaining to the examination of OCSA prevalence, such as the time period in which the experience was examined, the sample source, and how the experience was examined (Bryce et al., 2023), would also be relevant to the study of OCSA disclosure in terms of both its prevalence and the experience of disclosure. Importantly, since disclosure is neither a single nor a static event, and individuals will reinterpret their disclosure experience(s) over time (Manay et al., 2022), there are additional issues, as mentioned above, for researchers to consider when examining this multifaceted experience. Given that the literature on OCSA disclosure is currently underexamined, it is crucial to establish a baseline understanding of the methodological challenges on this topic to minimise the difficulty of comparing the results of research studies as noted in other areas of OCSA research (Bryce et al., 2023).

Impact of Disclosure

Concerning the relationship between disclosure and psychosocial well-being in adulthood, the results showed that disclosure was significantly associated with more depression symptoms, more experiences of OCSA, and higher historical distress towards the OCSA experience compared to participants who had not disclosed their experience of OCSA.

The well-developed literature on CSA disclosure suggests that abuse characteristics such as abuse frequency and severity can increase the likelihood of disclosure (Alggia et al., 2019; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Meanwhile, distress and a buildup of embroiling emotions of tension and internal conflict have been identified as prompting disclosure of CSA (Manay et al., 2022; McElvaney et al., 2020). Within the small body of literature on OCSA disclosure, young people who have disclosed their experiences of online grooming cited more intense feelings and the need for support as motivations for prompted disclosure (Juusola et al., 2021). Young people have also reported that they are most likely to tell someone when the abuse becomes unsustainable (Manrai et al., 2021). Thus, the associations between more victimisations of OCSA, higher levels of historical distress towards OCSA and disclosure found in the present study suggest that the precipitating factors for OCSA disclosure appear to be similar to offline sexual abuse.

Relating to the association between disclosure and depression. Although causal inferences cannot be established, the link between CSA, sexual re-victimisation, and depression is strongly established (Easton et al., 2019; Hailes et al., 2019; Maniglio, 2010). Since participants who had disclosed also experienced more OCSA than their undisclosed counterparts, it seems plausible that the elevated depression symptoms reported by the disclosed group would be related to repeated sexual victimisation. Importantly, none of the other psychosocial variables examined were found to be significantly different between the disclosed and undisclosed groups (though it should be noted that the disclosed group reported more anxiety and PTSD symptoms, more self-blame, and more ACEs). A catalyst for disclosure is prompts from others and open opportunities to talk (Lemaigre et al., 2017; Schaeffer et al., 2011). Therefore, the fact that the disclosed group also experienced more ACEs could suggest that their circumstances might have been noticed by others, such as the school or social services, which in turn provided more opportunity to disclose the abuse or led to the discovery of OCSA (Morrison et al., 2018).

Lastly, it is important to note that regardless of disclosure of OCSA, both groups reported depression and PTSD symptoms meeting clinical concerns, borderline moderate anxiety, and scores indicative of low self-esteem. These findings illustrated that the action of telling is inadequate to mitigate the long-term impact of the abuse. Therefore, despite the significant association found between depression and disclosure, the act of disclosure was not interpreted as more detrimental than not disclosing the abuse.

PTSD and Disclosed OCSA

The literature on CSA disclosure has consistently documented that the experience of disclosure, especially unsupportive and blaming societal reactions, is more impactful than the act of disclosure itself (Glover et al., 2010; McTavish et al., 2019; Swingle et al., 2016). Consistent with previous studies demonstrating negative reactions to disclosure are related to PTSD symptoms (Simon et al., 2016; Ullman et al., 2007; Ullman & Filipas, 2005a; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014; 2016), this study found that having received more negative reactions to disclosure and higher levels of self-blame about the abuse predicted higher PTSD symptom severity among participants who had disclosed.

Irrespective of the reasons for disclosure, disclosure is a help-seeking behaviour, whether practical help to stop the abuse or emotional support to be validated and listened to (IICSA, 2022; Manay et al., 2022). Existing evidence highlights that supportive and helpful responses to disclosure, particularly the first disclosure, can promote further disclosure and buffer against mental distress in adulthood (Easton, 2019; Manay et al., 2022). Therefore, the role of negative reactions to disclosure on PTSD symptom severity found in this study suggests that the experience of receiving negative and unsupportive reactions to disclosure could be experienced as a traumatic event itself. Finkelhor and Browne (1985) assert that the experience of being abused by a trusted person results in the abused person feeling betrayed and disappointed. Drawing on this, given that the decision to disclose weighs heavily on telling

someone perceived by the abused person to be trustworthy (Brattfjell & Flåm, 2019; IICSA, 2022), the experience of not receiving the expected help and protection, or worse, being blamed for the abuse, will provoke a sense of betrayal and disappointment (IICSA, 2022; Manay et al., 2022). Consequently, the additional trauma of receiving negative reactions is likely to intensify the internalised feelings related to the abuse (i.e., self-blame) and provide an explanation for the role of negative reactions received in predicting PTSD symptom severity among those who had disclosed the experience of OCSA.

The argument that negative reactions to disclosure may be experienced as additional trauma can be substantiated by the finding that anticipated negative reactions did not predict PTSD symptom severity in this study. It is speculated that despite participants who had not disclosed anticipated substantially more negative reactions to disclosure than those actually received by the disclosed group (see Appendix 23), they did not endure the actual experience(s) of being blamed or invalidated in comparison to those who had disclosed. Nevertheless, the high level of anticipated negative reactions reinforces anticipated stigma, which may act as a barrier to disclosure (Halvorsen et al., 2020). Furthermore, disclosure is not a single event, and individuals often disclose more than once (Alaggia et al., 2019; Manay et al., 2022). Therefore, the person will be re-traumatised each time they are confronted with blaming and stigmatising responses, leaving their needs further unmet and unrecognised. The accumulated invalidating and blaming experiences in turn exacerbate the sense of self-blame. Thus, explaining why having received more negative reactions to disclosure and higher levels of self-blame were found to be related to higher PTSD symptom severity.

PTSD and Undisclosed OCSA

PTSD symptom severity was found to be predicted by greater levels of self-blame and higher levels of historical distress towards OCSA in the present study. Although self-blame has been consistently cited as a barrier to (O)CSA disclosure, the evidence was largely derived from

qualitative research (ECPAT International, 2022a; Manrai, 2021). The present finding thus reiterates that self-blame can be a barrier to disclosure (Alaggia et al., 2019).

Existing literature recognises that individuals who have experienced CSA often predict how others will respond based on their appraisals of others' reactions (Alaggia et al., 2019; Halvorsen et al., 2020). This is also apparent from the anticipated negative reaction reported by the undisclosed group within this study. The internalised victim-blaming implies an underlying expectation that others would respond negatively should the person disclose the experience. Specifically, the undisclosed group was observed to report markedly higher TA reactions from others than the disclosed group (see Appendix 23). Since TA measures reactions related to being blamed, stigmatised, or infantilised, and has been associated with increased self-blame (Relyea & Ullman, 2015). This may be particularly pertinent to the nature of OCSA, as the young person often anticipates blame and shame for having had engaged in risky online (sexual) behaviours that led to the abuse (ECPAT International, 2022a; Manrai et al., 2021). The evidence therefore elucidates the significance of self-blame in predicting PTSD symptom severity among those who had not disclosed the abuse.

Dysfunctional cognitive processes such as rumination have also been found to relate to the development and maintenance of PTSD symptoms (LoSavio et al., 2017). Given that the PTSD symptoms examined in this study were specific to the experience of OCSA, the finding that a higher historical distress level towards OCSA may suggest that rumination on historical abuse can persist into adulthood, and the historical distress may be compounded by the recurrent perceived responsibility for the abuse, and vice versa. Furthermore, Collin-Vézina et al. (2015) highlighted that internalised victim-blaming and mechanisms to protect oneself are significant barriers to CSA disclosure. Taken together, these findings would explain the significance of self-blame and historical distress levels towards the historic OCSA in predicting PTSD symptoms among individuals who had yet to disclose OCSA, as the perceived

responsibility for the abuse is likely to have deterred the abused person from disclosing, especially when negative reactions were expected.

Positive Reactions to Disclosure

Neither anticipated nor received positive reactions were found to relate to PTSD symptom severity in this study. This finding was within expectations, as evidence on the link between positive reactions to disclosure and better mental health outcomes has been mixed (Bolen & Gergely, 2015; Ullman, 2003). Moreover, existing studies documenting associations between positive responses and mental health have generally identified family and social support following disclosure as important moderators between disclosure and trauma responses (Orchowski et al., 2013; Wallis & Woodworth, 2021). Within the small body of literature on OCSA, supportive reactions from family have also been linked to better psychosocial well-being following abuse, whereas unsupportive family has been suggested to compound the impact of OCSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Whittle et al., 2013a). As social support was not examined in this study, positive reactions to disclosure should not be regarded as unimportant to post-trauma responses. Rather, the current findings illustrate that positive reactions to disclosure are insufficient to mitigate the long-term harm of OCSA.

Summary

The examination of the experience of disclosure in this study reiterates the complex relationship between self-blame and negative reactions to disclosure (Ullman & Najdowski, 2011). Specifically, the results demonstrated a complex inter-relationship between self-blame (psychological) and negative reactions to disclosure (social factors) in influencing the experience of PTSD symptomology, regardless of the disclosure status. The current findings map onto the qualitative evidence on young people's experience with, and barriers to, disclosing OCSA, which suggests that young people are often met with or anticipate receiving unsupportive responses from others, and have high levels of self-blame, especially when they

perceive they had an active role in their abuse (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; ECPAT International, 2022a; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017; Joleby et al., 2020).

From a victim's perspective, the experience of disclosure is not always intended as a solution (Manay et al., 2022). Rather, it is often a relief from the burden of the secrecy of the abuse, especially when disclosure has been delayed (Easton & Parchment, 2021; IICSA, 2022). While it is imperative to offer the child immediate protection from further harm following disclosure, reactions to disclosure that are validating and reassuring the abused person that the culpability always lies with the abuser are also critical to how the victim processes the experience (Manay et al., 2022). Thus, the replication of the role of stigma and stigmatisation in shaping self-blame and anticipated stigma among CSA victims (Kennedy & Prock 2018) found in this study adds evidence that this process is broadly similar to how OCSA is perceived and constructed by society. The results also suggest that it has similar detrimental effects on the victims of OCSA, both in terms of their decision to disclose and their disclosure experience.

Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Impact of OCSA

The significant difference marked by the experience of OCSA on adults' depression, anxiety, PTSD symptom severity, self-esteem, and sexual re-victimisation during developmental years appears to map onto the negative consequences of sexual abuse explained by the four dynamics of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). The validity of this model in providing insights on the long-term impact of OCSA can be reinforced by the poorest psychosocial well-being reported by participants who had been victimised by both adults and peers. According to the model, repeated abuse would result in the person feeling more betrayed by the multiple abusers. This study further asserts that the negative reactions received and anticipated relating to the disclosure of OCSA may also result in the victims feeling disappointed by others. Both of which led to more adverse impacts of the abuse (as explained by the betrayal dynamic). These individuals would also feel more anxious in

response to the feeling of being powerless and the sense of not having control over their abuse (powerlessness dynamic). Meanwhile, repeated sexual abuse could lead to a more distorted sexual script and perpetuate the experience of sexual re-victimisation (traumatic sexualisation dynamic). Moreover, the negative connotation concerning the abuse, whether received or through inferences from others, would lead to lower self-esteem and a higher perceived level of self-blame (stigmatisation dynamic). The relevance of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) in understanding the impact of OCSA demonstrated in this study suggests that future research on the application of this model is recommended.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the present study provided important insights on the long-term impact of OCSA and the co-occurrence of OCSA and offline ACEs, the findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First and foremost, the correlational design means causal conclusions cannot be drawn. However, as post-OCSA responses are most likely to be moderated by individual and relational factors, establishing a causal relationship would require a prospective or longitudinal design. Another methodological limitation is that retrospective self-reports could be subject to recall bias due to the time lapse between childhood and adulthood. Nevertheless, since this present study examined the occurrence of childhood adversity without asking for specific details, it is argued that individuals are less likely to have forgotten about the occurrence of trauma due to their personal and significant nature (also see Section 2.6).

Another methodological consideration is that none of the psychiatric measures used in this study were diagnostic measures. Despite this, the use of standardised measures that are commonly used in both research and primary care is regarded as more appropriate for the non-clinical population used in this study. Importantly, the clinical threshold met by participants who had experienced OCSA highlighted that the lower threshold of these measures can offer more sensitivity in detecting emerging psychiatric disorders, which would otherwise be

undetected by diagnostic measures. The generalisability of the findings of this study is also limited by its sample size and would need to be replicated using a larger and more demographically balanced sample. Moreover, the lack of significant differences on psychosocial well-being found between OCSA perpetrated by adults or peers in comparison to those without the experience of OCSA could be attributed to the small sub-group sizes. Therefore, it is cautioned that the findings do not indicate that victimisation by adults or peers is harmless.

Furthermore, steps were taken to minimise any potential confounding effects of the other childhood trauma. For instance, participants were asked to answer the PTSD measure specifically in relation to the experience of OCSA to minimise post-trauma responses related to ACEs. The measure of other childhood adversity was also lowered to the age of 16 instead of 18, as stated in the original scale, to correspond to the OCSA experience measured. Other childhood adversity was also controlled for by being entered as a first block in the regression model. Importantly, the scant knowledge of the aftermath of OCSA justified the cross-sectional design used in this study to fill the gap in understanding the long-term impact of OCSA. Nonetheless, future studies will benefit from longitudinal research to examine the trajectory of psychosocial adjustment following OCSA and to identify protective and risk factors, to inform prevention and early intervention.

Disclosure of OCSA is a seriously unresearched area. The fact that half of the adult victims of OCSA had not sought or received support, and for those who had disclosed, their PTSD symptom severity was related to negative reactions received to disclosure, illustrates the societal role in shaping and processing the experience of OCSA. Research has found preferential responses to blame attributions towards CSA victim and perpetrator, depending on the victim characteristics (e.g., age and gender) and perpetrator characteristics (e.g., gender and relationship with the victim) (de Roos & Curtis, 2021), as well as gender differences in responses to disclosure (Okur et al., 2020). Given that negative reactions were

both anticipated and received by victims of OCSA in this study, it is important for future studies to examine whether reactions to OCSA disclosure differ according to the type of abuse and context in which it was experienced. This can be used to inform campaigns to address misperceptions that one experience of OCSA may be less serious than another.

Building on the relationship between negative reactions to disclosure and PTSD symptom severity found in the present study, future studies need to investigate the impact of the nuances of negative reactions to disclosure, as previous studies suggested that TA and UA are associated with different adaptive and maladaptive coping responses (Relyea & Ullman, 2015). Relating to self-blame, this study observed that the attribution of behavioural self-blame was higher for both the disclosed and undisclosed groups in comparison to characterological self-blame. Behavioural self-blame involves the belief that one's inappropriate behaviour can be modified, whereas characterological self-blame has been suggested to be more treatment-resistant because character flaws are believed by the person to be relatively stable, global, and unchangeable (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). Given that cognitive process therapy targeting trauma-related negative cognitions such as self-blame has been shown to improve PTSD symptoms (LoSavio et al., 2017; Stayton et al., 2018), the difference observed in this study thus tentatively points towards the potential benefit of addressing behavioural self-blame in intervention to develop a realistic appraisal of the perpetrator's responsibility to improve post-abuse coping. Therefore, the suggested research directions relating to negative reactions and self-blame warrant further investigation.

On a final note, the study data was collected during the height of the coronavirus pandemic (May to September 2020), and the global event could have negatively impacted participants' well-being and inflated their responses. Nevertheless, the significant difference found between participants who had experienced OCSA and those who had not experienced this form of abuse argues that the impact of COVID-19 on the findings was likely to be minimal.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the long-term impact of OCSA and the role of disclosure on long-term psychosocial well-being. This study provided the first evidence on the long-term impact of OCSA on adults' psychosocial well-being. The replication of the well-established relationship between CSA and adverse psychosocial functioning among adults indicates that OCSA is as serious as those experienced offline. Within this sample, there were more participants who had experienced OCSA than those who had not. It also revealed that victimisation by both adults and peers was the most common and represented the largest proportion of the sample. Compared to those who had not experienced OCSA, this group experienced significantly more offline childhood adversity, was more at risk of sexual re-victimisation (online and offline) and exhibited the poorest psychosocial health in adulthood. These findings of poly-victimisation across online and offline environments highlight the importance of identifying at-risk young people who have experienced any form of trauma (offline ACEs or OCSA) to prevent further victimisation, which may in turn alleviate the long-term impact of trauma.

The results also identified the important influence of self-blame on the experience of PTSD symptoms, regardless of disclosure. More negative reactions to disclosure were also related to more PTSD symptom severity for those who had disclosed the abuse. Together, these results illustrate the significance of societal stigma in shaping individuals' attributions of self-blame about abuse and how they are negatively responded to. Internalisation of stigma by CSA victims could not occur without prior exposure to victim-blaming messages from broader society. Implicitly and explicitly blaming the victim for their experience of abuse is never acceptable, and this study demonstrated that the impact of negative reactions to disclosure and anticipated stigma on self-blame can be detrimental to the experience of PTSD in adulthood. This underscores an urgent need to address and challenge victim-blaming surrounding the experience of OCSA.

CHAPTER 6 GENERAL DISCUSSION

This programme of research used a mixed methods approach to examine the factors that can increase young people's vulnerability to OCSA and the long-term impact of OCSA using a non-clinical young adult sample.

6.1 Development of this Programme of Research

This research set out to examine the experience of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances following online grooming. Therefore, Study 1 used two focus groups (one male and one female) to retrospectively examine young adults' online encounters with unknown acquaintances before the age of 16. This aimed to identify similarities and differences between the formation of developmentally normative and exploitative online relationships. However, narratives from Study 1 highlighted that whilst OSS from unknown adults was frequently encountered by young people online, particularly by females (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018b; Ortega-Baron et al., 2022), online adult acquaintances were not the only source of potential online sexual harm to young people. Rather, the findings revealed that young people were also at risk from OCSA perpetrated by peers. The different forms of OCSA in terms of behaviours, victim-perpetrator dynamics, and the crossover between online and in-person abuse were considered novel findings when Study 1 was conducted in 2014. This is because these findings contested the focus on sexual risks posed by unknown adults online and underscored that young people were also being victimised by peers (Villacampa & Gómez, 2017). The different types of peer perpetrated OCSA recounted by participants in Study 1 (e.g., receiving unwanted sexually explicit materials, non-consensual sharing victimisation) made it clear that the examination of OCSA could not be limited to those perpetrated by adults. A finding that was consistent with subsequent research (Finkelhor et al., 2023a; Hollis & Belton, 2017; Patchin & Hinjuda, 2020; Wolak et al., 2018).

The literature on OCSA was fragmented at the time (and remains so), as the different forms of victimisation were typically separately examined, often without specification of the context or age of the perpetrator (Bryce et al., 2023; Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023). Therefore, a primary aim of Study 2 was to investigate the extent to which young people were being sexually victimised online by quantitatively examining the experience of different forms of OCSA before the age of 16. Furthermore, although participants in Study 1 did not report experiencing sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, their accounts suggested different grooming tactics were encountered. Therefore, the prevalence of the different types of online grooming tactics encountered by participants was also examined in Study 2 to address the lack of quantitative evidence on the online grooming process resulting in sexual abuse.

The influence of gender norms found in Study 1 suggests that young people's online sexual behaviours and experiences are influenced by social context. Meanwhile, social norms have been identified as an important factor in predicting young people's engagement in risky sexual behaviour (Bhushan et al., 2021; Buhi & Goodson, 2007; Ciranka & van de Bos, 2021). Specifically, peer norms (i.e., the perception of peers' engagement in and approval of a behaviour) have also been found to influence online risky sexual behaviour among adolescents (Baumgartner et al., 2011; 2015; Bhushan et al., 2021; Doornwaard et al., 2015). Drawing on the evidence of the influence of gender sexual norms on young people's online sexual behaviour from Study 1, Study 2 examined the role of peer norms as another set of norms that are embedded within social contexts. Therefore, Study 2 quantified the online grooming process by concurrently examining the different forms of OCSA, the experience of online grooming tactics, and the role of peer norms in predicting sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances using an online questionnaire.

To address the absence of knowledge of the long-term impact of OCSA and the lack of distinction between the age of the perpetrator, Study 3 examined the long-term impact of OCSA by comparing the psychosocial well-being between participants who have and have

not experienced this form of abuse using an online questionnaire. It also investigated whether the impact differed between OCSA perpetrated by adults, peers, or victimisation by both adults and peers. To develop an understanding of the relationship between online and offline poly-victimisation, Study 3 also examined the co-occurrence of offline childhood adversity. Another objective of Study 3 was to address the undeveloped quantitative knowledge of OCSA disclosure and its impact, and this was achieved by examining the prevalence of OCSA disclosure, reactions to disclosure, and its influence on psychosocial well-being in adulthood.

6.2 Social Influences on the Experience of OCSA

This programme of research has developed new knowledge that contributes to understanding the experience and impact of OCSA in a number of different areas (see individual study chapters for more detail). An important implication is the influence of social factors and contexts on the experience and outcome of OCSA noted across the three studies.

Normalisation and Gender Norms

Study 1 revealed that the normalisation of online harmful sexual encounters appears to increase young people's risk of OCSA. Although resigned acceptance of online harmful sexual experiences was also observed in relation to OSS by adults, none of the participants responded to the overtly sexualised behaviours displayed by online adult acquaintances and instead claimed they were able to assertively decline these sexual requests. Yet, narratives of OCSA perpetrated by peers showed that participants were less able to decline unwanted online sexual requests made by acquainted peers, despite having the skills to do so. Importantly, the findings suggested that sexual re-victimisation was consequential to the perception that peers' sexually abusive behaviours did not warrant action. This resulted in the young person putting themselves in the same situation over time, especially when the

perpetrator was a male peer. These findings are consistent with the subsequently well-developed knowledge of the role of gender norms in guiding young people's online sexual behaviour, where it is deemed acceptable for males to make sexual advances and females to be passive recipients (Ringrose et al., 2021a; 2021c).

Sexual double standard and victim-blaming attitudes were also evident. For example, within the context of image-based abuse, participants' accounts revealed that despite acknowledging that it was the perpetrators' fault for sharing or threatening to share the sexually explicit material without consent, the victims (especially females) were still being blamed and shamed for sending the material in the first place. The gendered dynamics and sexual double standard surrounding non-consensual sharing among young people are consistent with subsequent studies revealing that they are often met with punitive responses from peers when their online sexual behaviours turn into victimisation (Endendijk et al., 2020; Hunehall Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2021c). The results of Study 1 and the literature therefore highlight how gender norms are important in determining judgements of young people's online sexual behaviours. Importantly, these attitudes extend to the experience of sexual victimisation, where females receive more blame than their male counterparts. Collectively, the results of Study 1 underscored that young people's online sexual behaviour is deeply embedded in social norms regarding gender and sexuality.

Utility of the Social Exchange Framework

As online grooming is an interactive process involving exchanges between the victim and the abuser, it is imperative to understand how these manipulative relationships are formed from the perspective of the young person. Therefore, another contribution from Study 1 is the application of the Social Exchange Theory (SET) to understand relationship formation and maintenance in relation to adult and peer perpetrated OCSA. The framework was chosen as

its premise rests on the material or symbolic exchange of resources between individuals that are weighed against costs, rewards, reciprocity, and equality (Ahmad et al., 2023). Accordingly, individuals remain in relationships only as long as the perceived rewards exceed the perceived costs of continuing them.

The results of Study 1 demonstrated that the use of SET, which is based on the premise of self-interest and rewards (Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and the theory of relational cohesion (Lawler & Yoon, 1996), which is anchored in SET but centred on positive emotions and affection in the maintenance of social exchange, are complementary to each other in providing a theoretical framework to understand the initiation and maintenance of exchange between the victim and the abuser across different OCSA contexts.

Concerning the formation of online exploitative relationships with online adult acquaintances, the results from Study 1 revealed that while participants were able to ignore, assertively decline, or even aggressively challenge OSS or flattering comments made by unknown adults online, those whose needs were not sufficiently met offline became highly susceptible to non-sexual grooming tactics. There was evidence that they valued online interactions with online adult acquaintances, and that these interactions mostly had a positive impact on how they felt about themselves (e.g., that someone showed an interest). Since interpersonal interactions are assumed by the social exchange framework to be driven by the maximisation of benefits, the companionship and attention offered by online acquaintances could appear to offer rewards and positive emotions at a low cost. These perceived rewards appeared to encourage participants to continue with these online interactions, and they would return the 'cost' by offering emotional support and engaging in further online risky behaviour, despite being aware of the potential harm posed by online adult acquaintances.

Despite none of the participants in Study 1 reported being sexually abused following interactions with online adult acquaintances, the effects of online grooming tactics echoed

those reported by victims of OCSA in other studies (e.g., Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014a). It was evident that participants' receptiveness to non-sexual grooming tactics was related to their emotional vulnerability at the time, in which feelings such as loneliness and wanting to be wanted or listened to were identified as reasons why they responded positively to online approaches made by adults. These findings are consistent with the accounts of online grooming victims, where they described the deceptively trusting and caring interactions with the abuser often gave them a self-esteem boost and care that they yearned for, which prompted them to maintain contact with the abuser (Joleby et al., 2020; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014a).

Since the social exchange framework is based on perceived costs and emotions, it can also account for individual differences, in which each young person will be motivated by different perceived rewards (e.g., connection to others, sexual curiosity, excitement), and will experience varying intensities of the emotions based on their personal circumstances. For example, as demonstrated in Study 1 and previous studies, young people with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as social isolation may be more receptive to the deceptively genuine and caring approaches made by online groomers (Joleby et al., 2020; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014a).

The framework also asserts that the likelihood of a person investing in a relationship is contingent on whether the interactions are viewed as valuable and whether alternatives are available. This may explain the positive responses displayed by participants with pre-existing vulnerabilities and their disappointment when these online interactions ended following discovery by others. It is possible, therefore, that participants who lacked a supportive network offline had few alternatives and thus highly valued their interactions with online adult acquaintances. Meanwhile, the framework suggests that the more often individuals receive a reward, the more likely they are to engage in future actions under similar conditions. Thus, it is speculated that frequent communication would have intensified any positive emotions

derived from these online interactions and encouraged young people to stay in contact to continue receiving the rewards. A finding that was confirmed in Study 1. Paradoxically, emotional attachment, which is a cost according to the framework, can also increase young people's vulnerability to OCSA if these interactions are exploitative.

Since it is the rewards and benefits that underpin an individual's motivation to engage in social interaction and the perceived rewards are to outweigh the costs, the social exchange framework can also contribute to understanding why some young people would knowingly engage in sexual activity with an adult, as these activities can provide pleasure and excitement (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Quayle et al., 2012b; Whittle et al., 2014b). Furthermore, decisions to engage in further online sexual activity can also be reinforced by positive feedback and encouragement from the abuser (Kloess et al., 2017a). Although it would seem apparent that the power imbalance between the young person and the adult would not meet the equality assumption of the framework, it should be noted that victims of OCSA often perceive themselves to be in control of the relationship and are able to decline unwanted sexual activities until the situation becomes untenable, such as when the abuser employs threats to demand sexual compliance (Chiu & Quayle, 2022). Similarly, in the case where a young person engages in online sexual activity with peers, they may also be motivated by the attention and compliments received as a result of these actions, which may result in them overlooking the potential associated risks (Döring, 2014; Quayle, 2022).

This framework can also provide insight into compliance with abuse, whether it results from threats to withdraw attention from victims, threats of non-consensual sharing, or threats of the abuser harming themselves. Under these circumstances, the perceived costs of non-compliance are likely to place a large burden on victims, leading them to comply with the sexual demands to avoid threats being carried out or as an effort to restore the 'relationship' with the abuser (Joleby et al., 2020; Kloess et al., 2017a; Whittle et al., 2014b). This may be especially relevant as young people often feel responsible for having sent the sexually explicit

material in the first place and are also blamed by others for doing so (ECAPT International, 2022a; Joleby et al., 2020). This provides a potential explanation for why some young people would comply and endure victimisation.

Although the framework appears to be versatile in explaining why young people engage in online sexual behaviour, the experience of OCSA is complex, and victims of online grooming and image-based sexual abuse often report ambivalent emotions about the experience (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Joley et al., 2020; Quayle et al., 2021b; Whittle et al., 2014b). Thus, the reduction of emotions and behaviours to their basic level (i.e., positive vs negative, rewards vs costs) can only provide a partial understanding of such a complex experience. This highlights the need to combine this framework with other theoretical perspectives to develop more detailed knowledge about OCSA.

Role of Peer Norms

The relationship between social influences and the experience of online grooming activities and OCSA can be further illustrated by the role of descriptive norms in predicting both the experiences of being asked by online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances, as found in Study 2. Extending findings from previous studies documenting the role of descriptive norms in influencing young people's offline and online risky sexual behaviours (Baumgartner et al., 2010; 2011; Doornwaard et al., 2015; Maheux et al., 2020; van de Bongardt et al., 2015; van Ouytsel et al., 2017), Study 2 provided additional evidence and revealed a nuanced relationship between the subjective prevalence of peers' online sexual behaviours and the experience of online grooming activities.

Peer norms are subjective perceptions that are based on social observations of the prevalence of a behaviour (descriptive norms) and the approval or disapproval of a behaviour (injunctive norms) (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Therefore, based on the effectiveness of interventions

addressing social norms related to a range of problematic behaviours among young people (Banyard et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2018), the current findings have implications for the prevention of OCSA through addressing perceived norms for online sexual behaviours. The social norms approach posits that overestimation of peer engagement in problematic behaviour leads to an increase in a young person's own problematic behaviour. Consistent with this, Study 2 found that the perception that online risky sexual behaviour was prevalent among peers was related to being asked by online adult acquaintances to meet in person. Conversely, the perception that online sexual victimisation was less common was one of the predictors of sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. These findings highlight the importance of challenging the perceptions that online risky sexual behaviour is common, and that online sexual victimisation is not, as these perceptions can concurrently increase a young person's risk of online grooming.

The perception that online sexual victimisation was uncommon was related to OCSA by adults may reflect a lack of awareness and understanding in recognising OCSA (Manrai et al., 2021), which may stem from the lack of opportunities for young people to openly talk about their experiences of online sexual victimisation (Manrai et al., 2021). Indeed, young people, including victims of OCSA, have identified social stigmatisation in relation to OCSA and blame from others as barriers to disclosing experiences of abuse (ECPAT International & WeProtect Global Alliance, 2022; Manrai et al., 2021). The victim-blaming attitudes noted in Study 1 and other studies would also suggest that young people are likely to face repercussions from peers if they share their experiences of abuse. Thus, the perception found in this study may be an extension of the underlying societal stigma and shame associated with OCSA and CSA in general (Halvorsen et al., 2020; IICSA, 2022), which is a key finding from Study 3.

Utility of the Social Norms Approach (SNA)

One of the strengths of the SNA is its potential universality in understanding engagement in risky behaviours and intervening to prevent harm across a range of settings (Dempsey et al., 2018). Supporting this, Study 2 found that descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour were related to receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person and sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. This suggests that the SNA may also offer insight into understanding how peer norms can influence the experience of online sexual victimisation. In parallel, although injunctive norms were not found to relate to OCSA in this research, the SNA appears to provide insight into the relationship between peer norms and the perpetration of OCSA. Injunctive norms measure approval and disapproval of problematic behaviours that are associated with rewards for popularity and social hierarchy (Ciranka & van den Bos, 2021; Guimond et al., 2018). Within the context of peer-on-peer image-based abuse, existing studies suggest that the possession of sexually explicit materials of peers can gain value and reputation rewards, especially for young males (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2021c). Therefore, the (mis)perceptions that online HSB, such as asking for sexually explicit materials, is valued by peers may prompt the young person to engage in these harmful sexual behaviours themselves.

This suggests that the focus of SNA on promoting behaviours in a positive manner through information-based interventions can be applied to peer perpetrated OCSA. The focus of social norms-based interventions on challenging commonly held normative misperceptions of related behaviour can potentially contribute to the prevention of online risky sexual behaviour without disregarding or denying young people's rights to sexual autonomy (Setty, 2019; Quayle, 2022).

One limitation of this framework is the broad theoretical assumption it makes about the role of normative misperceptions. Although there are numerous references to 'Social Norms Theory',

there is no one unified theoretical model that is universally applied to all SNA research (Dempsey et al., 2018). Furthermore, whilst this approach operates on the premise that misperceptions of peers' behaviour and attitudes underlie engagement in negative health behaviours and a reduction in positive behaviours, the process that implicates the development of these misperceptions remains unclear. Another limitation of SNA is its lack of consideration of individual and environmental factors. As outlined in Chapter 1, risk factors that increase a young person's vulnerability to OCSA are interrelated. Similarly, the findings of this research and previous studies indicate that emotional vulnerability and other childhood adversities can significantly increase a young person's risk of OCSA. Therefore, while descriptive norms were found to relate to OCSA, the perceptions relating to the norms are likely to be influenced by other ecologically related factors. Nevertheless, the role of peer norms found in Study 2 expands current knowledge of social variables as risk factors for OCSA and demonstrates that peer norms can also increase a young person's vulnerability to OCSA.

Social Stigma

Furthering the evidence of the role of social influence on young people's online sexual experience and victimisation, the results of Study 3 demonstrated that societal stigma of OCSA disclosure can have long-term adverse effects on victims in two ways: both in terms of the decision to disclose the abuse and the severity of PTSD symptoms. Within the literature on CSA disclosure, the link between negative social reactions to disclosure and PTSD is well documented (McTavish et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2016; Ullman et al., 2007; Ullman & Filipas, 2005a). Aligning with these findings, this research confirmed that having received more negative reactions to OCSA disclosure and higher levels of self-blame about the abuse predicted PTSD symptom severity for individuals who had disclosed their experience of OCSA. The result also strengthened the victim-blaming attitudes noted in Study 1 and confirms existing qualitative findings that victims of OCSA usually receive more unsupportive than positive responses relating to OCSA disclosure (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Joleby

et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Quayle et al., 2012). It also provided evidence on the adverse impact of the societal stigma on the decision to disclose OCSA and the impact of the abuse.

Notably, the significance of self-blame in predicting PTSD symptoms, regardless of disclosure, demonstrated that stigma and anticipatory stigma about OCSA can be internalised and persist into early adulthood. The findings also underscored the detrimental effect of self-blame on recovery and how self-blame can impede disclosure for individuals who have yet to disclose the abuse. As explained in Chapter 5, anticipated stigma cannot occur without prior exposure to societal messages (Kennedy & Prock, 2018). Therefore, the significance of self-blame in predicting PTSD for undisclosed individuals implies that anticipated stigma is nevertheless present. This finding extended previous qualitative findings that self-blame and victim-blaming are barriers for young people to seek help and report online abuse (Gill et al., 2022; Manrai et al., 2021) by underscoring that self-blame can continue into adulthood and deters the person from seeking help even as an adult.

Relating to individuals who have disclosed CSA, previous studies reported that negative disclosure experience can be as traumatising as the abuse itself (Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). Furthermore, it should be noted that disclosure is rarely a single event, and that individuals are likely to disclose on more than one occasion (Alaggia et al., 2019; Manay et al., 2022). Thus, the person may be re-traumatised each time they are confronted with blaming and stigmatising responses, leaving their needs further unmet and unrecognised. This can, in turn, compound the attribution of self-blame. The accumulated unsupportive and negative reactions may therefore perpetuate the sense of self-blame about the abuse and contribute to the experience of PTSD symptoms in adulthood, a relationship that was found in this research.

The negative and unsupportive responses to OCSA and anticipated stigma underlining the wider societal issues identified in this research echo those of CSA (IICSA, 2022). The act of disclosure is a help-seeking behaviour, and previous studies found that when victims are met

with validation and emotionally supportive responses, it helps to re-establish trust with others, promotes self-efficacy, and directs them to appropriate resources (Brattfjell & Flåm, 2019; Easton, 2019; McElvaney, 2015). Minimising the impact of abuse requires a collective effort of supportive mechanisms in both personal and interpersonal contexts. The detrimental effect of self-blame on PTSD found in Study 3 emphasises the need for greater public awareness to dispel stigma relating to OCSA to improve responses to disclosure. Thus, campaigns need to focus on assigning culpability to the perpetrator to challenge the misperception that victims of OCSA are 'active' participants in abuse (ECPAT International, 2022a; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021; Police Foundation, 2022).

There is also a need to reframe the typical online safety message, as the role assigned to the young person to keep themselves safe online may compound the sense of self-blame and victim-blaming (Rudolph et al., 2022). Concurrently, there is a need to address the victim-offender-bystander continuum in normalising peer perpetrated OCSA (Boer et al., 2021). The sexual violence literature has identified that peer perceptions are important in influencing bystander behaviour to intervene (Mainwaring et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2020). Therefore, given the importance and influence of peer norms found in this research, intervention programmes are likely to benefit from targeting peer group norms to encourage young people to speak out about peer perpetrated OCSA.

A permeating theme across the three studies conducted in this research is the societal influence of OCSA. This research demonstrates that social stigma can be equally impactful as the experience of OCSA on individuals' long-term well-being. This highlights the importance to improve knowledge in recognising this form of abuse and to address the issue of victim-blaming resulting from the abused person and those responding to the abuse. This can, in turn, promote a safe environment to facilitate disclosure and improve responses and support in assisting the person to recover from the trauma.

Utility of the Traumagenic Dynamics Model

Study 3 examined the long-term impact of OCSA and the impact of disclosure through the lenses of the traumagenic dynamics model (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). While this model appears to account for the different effects of OCSA, research will benefit from empirically testing the model by simultaneously examining its four dynamics to understand the complex relationship between the dynamics and psychosocial adjustment in both the short and long term. However, in light of the evidence on the social impact of disclosure and poly-victimisation found in Study 3, the model would seem inadequate to account for the cumulative effect of trauma and the role of disclosure, as these experiences can have adverse effects on psychosocial well-being. Importantly, this model does not consider the importance of protective factors in attenuating the impact of trauma. Nevertheless, this model can contribute an ecological approach to understanding OCSA, and a detailed discussion of the application of this model can be found in Chapter 5.

Utility of an Ecological Approach to Understanding OCSA

This research demonstrates that different theoretical perspectives can offer important insights into different aspects of OCSA. For example, while the social exchange framework can be used to understand why young people engage in online sexual (exploitative) behaviour and abuse maintenance, the SNA highlights the role of peer norms in increasing a young person's engagement in online risky behaviour resulting in sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Meanwhile, the traumagenic dynamics model can provide a framework for understanding the impact of abuse.

However, it is important to note that not every young person experiencing the same risks will be harmed, and each will be impacted differently following victimisation. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach highlighted that risk and protective factors occurring at the

individual, family, community, and society levels are intertwined. Similarly, the literature on CSA disclosure indicates that disclosure is determined by a complex interplay of factors relating to the abused person, family environment, community influences, and cultural and societal attitudes (Alaggia, 2010; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015). The relevance of the ecological framework to understand the long-term impact of OCSA and disclosure relating to the abused person (self-blame), others (offline ACEs), and the social world (stigma, blame and negative reactions to disclosure) was also demonstrated by the findings of Study 3. Supporting this, the ecological orientation for OCSA interventions has been suggested by Patterson et al. (2022), who recommend that strategies aimed at protecting young people from online sexual harm require a 'whole systems' approach. This should target behaviours, attitudes, knowledge, and skills at multiple levels, including young people and adults. At the environmental level, this also relates to schools and local communities, healthcare and criminal justice services, as well as cultural and social contexts and norms (Patterson et al., 2022).

Together, the evidence from this research points to the importance of using an integrative approach whereby different aspects of a set of theories are integrated (Kalmar & Sternberg, 1988) to provide a greater understanding of the different facets of OCSA. This emphasises that a broad ecological framework is required to understand the factors that can increase an individual's vulnerability to OCSA and the impact of abuse, as well as protective factors in attenuating risk and the impact of OCSA.

6.3 What Makes OCSA More Impactful?

The adverse effects of CSA on adults cannot be overstated (Hailes et al., 2019). Yet, research examining the long-term effects of OCSA remains underdeveloped, and there is currently no known study that has specifically examined the impact of OCSA among adults.

Therefore, the knowledge gained from Study 3's examination of the impact of OCSA on adults' psychosocial well-being and the role of OCSA disclosure are important contributions to the literature. First, the study presents the first evidence on the adverse effects of OCSA on depression, anxiety, and self-esteem among adults who have been victims of OCSA. These findings reiterate that this form of abuse is no less serious than offline CSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017), and suggest that the negative impacts reported by young people can potentially persist into adulthood (ECPAT International, 2022a; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Joleby et al., 2020). Crucially, the results revealed that young adults who had been sexually abused by both adults and peers exhibited the poorest psychosocial functioning, with PTSD symptom severity meeting a probable clinical diagnosis. Previously, Finkelhor et al. (2023a) reported that having more than one OCSA perpetrator was more impactful than having one perpetrator at the time of the abuse. Thus, the present finding demonstrates that the effect of repeated victimisation may also persist into adulthood.

Meanwhile, the co-occurrence of online and offline childhood adversity and sexual re-victimisation across the online and offline domains found in this research extends the knowledge of the short- and long-term and intergenerational impact of ACEs, especially among those who are poly-victimised (Copeland et al., 2018; Finkelhor et al., 2007; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Specifically, the experience of poly-victimisation has been found to be more highly related to trauma symptoms than experiencing repeated victimisation of a single type across lifespans (Casey & Nurius, 2005; Turner et al., 2010). The present findings therefore emphasise that the accumulated effect of adversity cannot be overlooked when examining the impact of OCSA.

Moreover, Study 3 demonstrates that accumulated negative and unsupportive disclosure experiences and a high level of attribution of self-blame can have a detrimental effect on the experience of PTSD symptoms in adulthood. This finding underscores that post-abuse social experiences can also significantly compound the impact of abuse. Taken together, the

evidence of the impact of poly-victimisation and sexual re-victimisation, and negative social reactions to disclosure highlighted that the impact of OCSA cannot be examined without consideration of other factors.

Although it was beyond the scope of this research to comprehensively investigate the different factors that influence the impact of OCSA, a review of the literature indicates that abuse characteristics, such as victim-perpetrator dynamics and types of OCSA, and demographic characteristics, should be considered as they also influence the impact of OCSA to varying extents, and will be discussed below.

Victim-perpetrator dynamics

Considering the role of gender, Guerra et al. (2022) reported that males and females responded differently to some, but not all, psychopathologies following the experience of OCSA. An interactive effect has also been found when the gender of the victim-perpetrator dyads was considered, where males victimised by males were found to be less impacted compared to females with a male perpetrator (Finkelhor et al., 2023a). Furthermore, Guerra et al. (202) found that a more complex relationship emerged when the gender and age of the perpetrator and the gender of the victim were concurrently examined.

Relationship with perpetrator

Relating to the implication of the relationship with the perpetrator, Finkelhor et al. (2023a) found no difference between online acquainted, offline acquainted, and unknown perpetrators on the impact of OCSA. While the relationship with perpetrator was not examined in this research, previous studies showed that known and unknown offenders sexually abuse young people using similar tactics (Thomas et al., 2023). As such, the technological aspects of how OCSA can be experienced may outweigh whether the offender was online or offline acquainted. In the same vein, when the young person is a victim of, or being threatened with, non-consensual sharing, the permanence of the sexual abuse content and the uncertainty of

not knowing when or who can access it (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Walsh & Tener, 2022; Wolak et al., 2018) would seem likely to outweigh whether the offender was online and offline acquainted or unidentified.

Type of OCSA

Concerning the impact of the different types of OCSA, although image-based victimisation has been found to be the most impactful at the time of victimisation (Finkelhor et al., 2023a), the outcome of image-based abuse has also been found to differ by the type of image-based abuse as well as the age of the perpetrator (Finkelhor et al., 2023b). Meanwhile, the duration of the abuse should also be considered, as existing studies suggest some forms of OCSA, such as online grooming resulting in sexual abuse and threats of non-consensual sharing, could last up to years (Joleby et al., 2020; Walsh & Tener, 2022; Wolak et al., 2018). Although the duration of abuse was not examined in this research, the finding that participants who have experienced OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers reported the poorest psychosocial well-being demonstrates the adverse impact of sexual re-victimisation. Based on this finding, this research posits that duration of abuse is likely to be a more important variable in influencing the impact of OCSA, as ongoing abuse is an indication that the victim has been subjected to repeated victimisation over time.

Together, the presented findings suggest that examination of the different forms of OCSA alone, without taking into account the victim and perpetrator characteristics and duration of the abuse, would be insufficient to comprehensively understand the impact of OCSA, especially since OCSA is rarely an isolated incident and that young people are usually likely to experience multiple forms of abuse.

Demographic Characteristics

Another important factor to consider when investigating the impact of OCSA is the role of demographic characteristics, which is currently underexamined in the literature.

Although ethnicity was not examined in this research, the role of the social environment and responses from others in increasing a young person's risk of OCSA and mediating the impact of OCSA found in this research may provide some insight on why individuals from ethnic minority groups have been found to have the lowest rate of disclosure of CSA in the UK (IICSA, 2022). This research and previous studies demonstrate that societal contexts are intricately linked to how individuals process childhood sexual trauma. Accordingly, when CSA is a prominent sociocultural taboo within a community, social stigma implies that individuals are unlikely to receive support should they decide to disclose. The literature also suggests that these individuals are likely to be heavily stigmatised following disclosure. Both of which are likely to compound the impact of the abuse in comparison to individuals who live in societies or communities where family reputation and shame are not considered as important (Ali et al., 2021; ECPAT International & WeProtect Global Alliance, 2022).

However, this research wishes to draw attention to the use of the term *ethnic minority*, as this description may unintentionally imply that individuals from a less represented group in any society are inherently more at risk of OCSA. Furthermore, minorities in one country (e.g., Black, Asian, and minority ethnic in a predominately White society) will not be considered minorities in Asian, African, or Caribbean countries. Research suggests that vulnerability to OCSA and the impact of OCSA are influenced by both internal and external cultural factors. These include internal factors such as a lack of understanding and awareness of CSA resulting from a lack of sex education, pressure within families and communities to maintain honour and prevent shame, and external factors such as poverty and cultural insensitivity by agencies and services (Ali et al., 2021). Considering none of the aforementioned factors are intrinsically ethnically related, the term 'cultural' may be more suitable, as culturally related practices and thinking are likely to permeate individuals' families or communities to varying extents, regardless of the country of residence.

A review of the impact of OCSA and the wider literature on CSA underscores that the impact of sexual abuse transcends abuse characteristics and demographic, cultural, and social factors. Based on the available evidence and the findings of this research, this research is in the view that individuals who have experienced poly-victimisation across both online and offline environments with low perceived and/or actual support from others will be most adversely affected by the experience of OCSA. Meanwhile, reviewing the literature also makes it clear that knowledge of the impact of OCSA remains underdeveloped and fragmented. Therefore, research is urgently needed to determine how the type of OCSA, onset, duration, victim-perpetrator dynamics, sexual re-victimisation, and online and/or offline adversity influence the impact of OCSA. Similarly, the ecological orientation of disclosure, relating to the nature of disclosure (voluntary vs involuntary), the extent to which victims disclose and when the disclosure was made, reactions to disclosure received, and reasons for not disclosing the abuse, also require investigation to establish how each of the different factors can influence the long-term effects of OCSA. The available evidence emphasises that an ecological approach to understand the interactions between demographic, psychological, and environmental factors that increase the likelihood of online sexual harm is also required to understand the impact of OCSA.

6.4 Practical Implications and Future Research Directions

Poly-Victimisation

Detection of childhood adversity can act as a preventative measure for future victimisation, whereas early intervention can mitigate the impact of serious health conditions (Colizzi et al., 2020). Therefore, the co-occurrence of OCSA and other childhood trauma found in Study 3 illustrates that child abuse experienced online and/or offline should not be treated in isolation. Furthermore, the online and offline poly-victimisation and sexual re-victimisation experienced

in both online and offline environments found in Study 3 provide additional evidence that vulnerabilities across different contexts are inter-related. Importantly, whilst a link between OCSA and offline ACEs has been reported in previous studies (Choi et al., 2023; Jonsson et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2023), the association between specific ACEs and OCSA remains unclear. Thus, this research contributes to existing knowledge by presenting evidence that both direct (e.g., verbal abuse, sexual abuse) and indirect (e.g., having witnessed domestic violence, living with someone who has abused substances) offline ACEs were associated with the experience of OCSA.

The crossover of online and offline CSA, online sexual re-victimisation, as indicated by the fact that participants who have experienced OCSA perpetrated by adults and peers represented the biggest proportion of the sample in Study 3, and the co-occurrence of different forms of abuse found in this research highlight that young people with any known trauma history should be identified as at-risk of further abuse. The experience of poly-victimisation highlights the need to screen or ask if young people with a known abuse history have also experienced OCSA or vice versa. These recommendations also highlight the current gaps in children's and healthcare services' responses to identifying and responding to OCSA. The emerging literature suggests that while OCSA is recognised as a form of abuse, it is not routinely screened by child protection services and/or child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), despite the referral is often an indication that the young person is already experiencing difficulties (Quayle et al., 2023). El-Asam et al. (2021) also highlighted that professionals need to be better trained to identify online and offline risks when assessing a young person's needs to provide them with skills and protection to safely navigate the online landscape.

Furthermore, there is currently no clear treatment approach for OCSA in the UK (Schmidt et al., 2023), and there is only one intervention that has been tested for its feasibility as an evidence-based treatment approach offered to young people who have experienced OCSA

(Bucci et al., 2023). Research has also identified a lack of referral pathways and inconsistent staff training in relation to OCSA across services (El-Asam et al., 2021; Quayle et al., 2023). Thus, the adverse long-term impact of OCSA on adults found in this research further reiterates the need to develop better treatment responses to this form of child abuse.

The online and offline poly-victimisation and sexual re-victimisation found in this research indicate that reducing exposure to childhood adversity and victimisation may also mitigate the long-term impact of accumulated trauma, especially since the present research found that individuals who are most poly-victimised exhibited the poorest psychosocial well-being. Since being asked in a non-judgmental manner encourages disclosure (Lemaigre et al., 2017; Solberg et al., 2017), it is particularly important that young people identified as at-risk are routinely offered opportunities to talk about their online experiences. This emphasises the need to address the generational gap identified by young people as a barrier to disclosing the abuse to adults (Juusola et al., 2021; Manrai et al., 2021). Indeed, parental awareness of OCSA appears to be low, as a recent survey conducted by Microsoft (2023) indicated that most parents underestimated all types of online risks their child might have been exposed to. The survey also found that young people are least likely to talk to their parents about their experiences of online sexual victimisation compared to non-sexual harms experienced online. Other studies also reported that a lack of understanding of young people's online behaviour and the complex dynamics involved in OCSA can result in practitioners viewing the young person as an active participant in their victimisation (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Quayle et al., 2023).

This is especially important as the current findings indicate that negative reactions to disclosure can be detrimental to the experience of PTSD symptoms and that anticipated stigma deters disclosure. These findings highlight that the consequential effect stemming from a lack of understanding of the risks encountered by young people online may add to the lack of understanding of the harm of OCSA (Manrai et al., 2021). Both of which contribute to the

poor and harmful responses to OCSA. This places an emphasis on the importance of improving practitioners' skills in identifying and responding to OCSA (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022), especially since the first disclosure experience can be instrumental in preventing the person from disclosing again or seeking help in the future (Brattfjell & Flâm, 2019; Manay et al., 2022).

Moreover, the long-term effects of OCSA and accumulative trauma advocate for a trauma-informed approach, which seeks to resist re-traumatisation by providing appropriate assessment and intervention to address mental health difficulties and enhance recovery (Grossman et al., 2021). Although trauma-informed practice is intended for adults, findings from this research suggest that young people are also likely to benefit from building resilience and developing positive coping strategies to negotiate the impact of trauma. Thereby reducing the need for reactive care and minimising the long-term effects identified in this research. Furthermore, cognitive process therapy targeting trauma-related negative cognitions such as self-blame has been shown to improve PTSD symptoms (LoSavio et al., 2017; Stayton et al., 2018). Thus, the deleterious effect of self-blame in predicting PTSD symptom severity found in this research suggests that OCSA intervention can address self-blame by developing a realistic appraisal of the perpetrator's responsibility to improve post-abuse coping.

Peer Perpetrated OCSA

In line with previous research (Hollis & Belton, 2017; Thomas et al., 2023), the findings of this research relating to the different forms of peer perpetrated OCSA demonstrated that young people are engaging in varying degrees of implicit and explicit coercion to pursue sexual advances across the online and in-person contexts. This highlights the need for researchers to examine beyond image-based abuse (Barroso et al., 2023; Economist Impact, 2023a; Lewis, 2018) to comprehensively understand the different forms of sexual harm posed by young people.

Although the literature on young people's motives for engaging in OCSA is still in its infancy (Lewis, 2018), the use of persistence and the unwanted nature of OCSA perpetrated by peers in this research indicate that these incidents are not unintentional, although the intent may not be to cause harm to the recipient. There is some evidence to suggest that young people are more likely to engage in online and/or offline sexually abusive behaviours following their own sexually abusive experiences (Hollis & Belton, 2017; Lateef & Jenney, 2021). Within the small body of literature on OCSA, a reciprocal relationship between perpetration and victimisation through OSS (Ybarra et al., 2007), non-consensual sharing (Walker et al., 2021), and threats of non-consensual sharing (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020) have also been documented. Furthermore, Vaswani and colleagues (2022) found that 44% of the young people who receive support for engaging in online sexually abusive behaviours have been victims of OCSA themselves. The evidence therefore suggests a link between online sexual victimisation and perpetration, and the direction of this relationship warrants further investigation by future research.

The experience of CSA as a predisposing factor for the transition from victim to child sexual offending behaviour in adulthood has been extensively researched, and the evidence generally suggests that a proportion of adult child sex offenders, especially men, have been victims of CSA themselves (Glasser et al., 2001; Plummer & Cossins, 2018). Despite offence supportive cognitions developed from the experience of CSA have been found to contribute to online child sexual offending in adulthood (Chopin et al., 2022), the distinct impact of OCSA on increasing the risk of committing CSA in adulthood has virtually been unexamined. However, it is worth noting that 70% of adults who took part in the ReDirection project, an online survey of CSAM users, reported they were first exposed to CSAM before the age of 18, and early 40% were 13 or under at the time of first exposure (Insoll et al., 2021). Since exposure to CSAM is a form of CSA, these findings suggest that, consistent with the cycle of abuse identified in the CSA literature, the experience of OCSA appears to also increase the risk of OCSA offending in adulthood. Notably, some of these CSAM offenders reported that

they searched for and viewed CSAM as an attempt to find materials depicting their own abuse (Insoll et al., 2021). Since the ReDirection project was anonymously self-reported, this finding provides a valuable insight that for some offenders, the offending behaviour may be a response to trauma and underlines the detrimental consequences of OCSA if the abuse is left unaddressed.

The presented evidence on the experience of CSA as a risk factor for the development and continuance of sexually abusive behaviours highlights the importance of early intervention to prevent further offending behaviour in adulthood. These findings suggest that assessment and treatment of young people displaying online sexually abusive behaviours should consider the broader concerns within the young person's family lives (Hackett et al., 2019; Miccio-Fonseca, 2023) as the display of problematic sexual behaviour may be an indication of sexual trauma and potentially, experience of other forms of abuse. The prevalence and diversity of OCSA perpetrated by young people found in this research suggest that practitioners working with young people who engage in OCSA should recognise these behaviours as markers of OCSA and explore whether the young person has had any inappropriate sexual experiences online and/or offline. Nevertheless, this needs to be delicately balanced to avoid prioritising the needs of the abuser over victims, especially since peer perpetrated OCSA is already trivialised by both adults and young people (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019; Quayle et al., 2023). Therefore, a rehabilitative and strengths-based approach is needed to protect young people from perpetrating further OCSA and prevent these harmful sexual behaviours from continuing into adulthood.

Verbal Sexual Coercion Tactics

Although verbal sexual coercion tactics ranging from subtle pressuring to threats have been identified in the literature on OCSA (Black et al., 2015; Joleby et al., 2021b; Kloess et al., 2017b), these tactics have not been quantitatively examined. Therefore, the examination of

the different verbal sexual coercion tactics young people experienced as part of OCSA is considered another noteworthy contribution of this research.

Study 1 found that most narratives of peer perpetrated OCSA featured the use of coercion. When the type of verbal coercion tactics was further examined in Study 2, the results revealed that the majority of participants had engaged in unwanted online sexual activities as a result of verbal coercion tactics. Yet, the experience of verbal coercion was not found to predict sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances. Since the identity of the perpetrator was not specified in Study 2, it would seem plausible that the unwanted online sexual activities were engaged in with peers under pressure. This thus provides an explanation for the finding that the experience of verbal sexual coercion tactics was unrelated to OCSA perpetrated by adults.

Within the literature on online grooming, some researchers have identified the use of overt persuasion and threats as important in abuse maintenance and escalation (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). However, the majority of participants in Study 2 reported experiencing subtle coercion, such as psychological pressure and persistence, as opposed to the use of threats. The qualitative literature also suggests that the use of subtle coercion is more often used to gradually sexually de-sensitise the victim (Joleby et al., 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016). These findings appear to suggest that implicit and explicit coercion may be distinct constructs. This warrants further research to examine whether implicit, explicit, or the experience of both types of coercion tactics have different implications for the psychopathology and impact on the abused person.

Educational Implications

This research also has practical implication relating to the prevention of adult as well as peer perpetrated OCSA.

Prevention of adult perpetrated OCSA

Relating to OCSA perpetrated by adults, Study 1's finding that the experience of non-sexual online grooming tactics did not lead to sexual abuse is prominent, as this implies that there are likely to be young people who have been groomed by adults online without realisation. Narratives from Study 1 also revealed that the use of deception and bribery appeared to be particularly effective in obscuring young people's ability to recognise potentially exploitative situations, and instead prompted them into engaging in further online risky behaviours with online adult acquaintances, with or without overt persuasion. This finding is important as the experience of deception and bribery has been previously found to increase the likelihood of sexually abusive interactions with online adult acquaintances (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018a). Significantly, the fact that online grooming tactics were found to predict sexual abuse by online adult acquaintances in Study 2 underscores the importance for young people to recognise online grooming behaviours and to take actions promptly to protect themselves from further (sexual) harm.

Although grooming behaviours leading to sexual abuse, especially those that are non-sexual, can be difficult to identify (Winters & Jeglic, 2017), this research presents findings that deception by online acquaintances should be recognised as a warning sign of online grooming. Supporting this, the examination of the prevalence of online grooming tactics in Study 2 illustrated that identity deception in different forms was the most commonly encountered online grooming tactic used by adults. Therefore, education on OCSA should emphasise that discovery of lies is a sign of exploitation, and young people should be educated on how to take appropriate actions, such as terminating the online contact and reporting the person to the online platform provider, to prevent further engagement that may lead to sexual abuse.

While verifying the age of online acquaintances can be complicated by the use of age deception by adults, literature suggests that some offenders disclose their true identity at some

point during the online interactions (Katz, 2013; Whittle et al., 2014b), a finding also confirmed in Study 2. Meanwhile, previous research indicates that victims of OCSA can also be suspicious about the identity and intentions of the abusers (Juusola et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). Yet, narratives from Study 1 revealed that these doubts did not always inhibit the young person from terminating these interactions. Rather, they engaged in further online risky behaviours, such as progressing the mode of communication as a means to verify the person's authenticity. Thus, without undermining the benefit and positive experiences for young people to socialise and meet people online (Juusola et al., 2021; Smahel et al., 2020), young people should also be encouraged to question and critically evaluate information provided by online acquaintances, especially when they feel suspicious about the person's identity or intention, to protect themselves from further harm.

Although resistance strategies, such as ignoring, blocking, and directly questioning the online acquaintance and/or abuser, were found in Study 1 and other studies to protect the young person from potential or further sexual harm (Gill et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2023; Whittle et al., 2014b), these proactive strategies used by young people may not always be sufficient to offer protection as they can be overcome by the offenders re-adding the young person online through other online social media platforms or under other disguises (Gill et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2023). This reiterates the importance of creating a safe environment for young people to talk about their online experiences to minimise the likelihood of young people complying with abusive requests as a result of feeling overpowered by the offenders.

Prevention of peer perpetrated OCSA

Relating to prevention measures targeting peer perpetrated OCSA, Agnew and McAlinden (2021) pointed out that the social and cultural dimensions of young people's online HSB are blurring the boundaries between these harmful sexual practices and those that are developmentally appropriate. Thereby masking the exploitative nature of abusive sexual behaviours. This was also apparent in this research through the normalisation of peer

perpetrated OCSA described by participants in Study 1, as well as the perceived prevalence and approval of these harmful sexual behaviours reported by participants in Study 2. The use of coercion by young people to obtain sexual activities is particularly concerning, as the evidence on the cycle of abuse suggests that these harmful sexual practices may continue into adulthood if they are left unaddressed.

In the US, prevention education programmes focusing on affirmative consent have been found to be effective in reducing sexual violence on campus (Borges et al., 2008; Jozkowski et al., 2014). Relating to OCSA, young people have reported that a lack of clarity and knowledge about OCSA can hinder recognition of abuse and subsequent disclosure (Manrai et al., 2021). This highlights the benefit of young people being educated on the boundaries between developmentally appropriate online sexual behaviour and unwanted and/or coerced online sexual behaviour. Furthermore, Study 1 and Study 2 found that verbal coercion tactics in the form of psychological pressure, such as being questioned about sexuality or attractiveness and persistence, were commonly encountered tactics that resulted in the engagement in unwanted online sexual activities. Therefore, education on the inappropriateness of using subtle coercion in pursuing sexual advances may be useful in preventing OCSA victimisation and perpetration, especially since these behaviours may be harder for young people to recognise as harmful in comparison to overt coercion such as threats or the use of force.

6.5 Methodological Reflections

The essence of using a mixed methods approach is drawing from the strengths and limitations of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and this ethos was evident throughout the development and interpretation of the data collected for each study. Qualitative designs are, for the most part, observational in nature, and data are collected in situ, usually as events happen. Padgett (2008) suggests that the emergent design is based on the principle that circumstances often dictate changes in focus or means of data collection. Therefore, the

researcher should be prepared to accommodate those changes rather than adhere to a plan to use potentially inappropriate or inadequate methods. This was aptly reflected by Study 1, which highlighted that pursuing an understanding of participants' historical online sexual experiences and the dynamics influencing the experience was more pertinent than the original research question, which was to identify the similarities and differences in typical and exploitative online relationship development. Building on the insight gained on the prevalence of OCSA perpetrated by both adults and peers, the normalisation of these behaviours, and the impact of OCSA, these topic areas were subsequently examined quantitatively in Study 2 and Study 3. Collectively, these findings underpinned and informed the direction of this programme of research. Data interpretation was also integrated by combining, comparing, and synthesising the findings from the different methods used in each study. The contribution of this research therefore strengthens the advantage of using a mixed methods approach in the study of OCSA.

The study of OCSA has many methodological challenges, with the reference period for measurement of experiences being one of the difficulties as this will influence prevalence figures (Bryce et al., 2023). However, the fact that a cohort difference was not found by Turner et al. (2023) in their retrospective examination of OCSA suggests that despite some of the retrospective accounts being 10 years old, the present findings would still be relevant in contributing to the literature on young people's experience of online sexual harm.

With regard to the examination of OCSA disclosure, while qualitative literature examining barriers to disclosure provides valuable insight on the subject, participation in these studies is a form of disclosure and implies help-seeking behaviour. The sense of being in control of the disclosure process in personal recovery and research contexts has been identified by CSA victims as important in influencing the decision to disclose the experience (Easton et al., 2014; Sharrock et al., 2022). Therefore, the online questionnaire used in Study 2 and Study 3

provided an opportunity for participants to share their OCSA experiences with full autonomy, as they could decide not to answer certain questions or withdraw from the study.

Adults who have experienced CSA often highlight that being asked if sexual abuse has occurred encourages disclosure over time, especially if the person who demonstrated interest did so persistently (Brattfjell & Flåm, 2019). Although this study was unable to do the latter, the non-judgmental approach to the subject, i.e., asking if OCSA has ever happened, what happened (in Study 2 and Study 3), and whether the abuse had been disclosed (in Study 3) with the option to withdraw or not to answer, might have facilitated disclosure for those who have yet to disclose and promoted further disclosure and help-seeking behaviours. This is particularly important as disclosure of CSA is often delayed (IICSA, 2022; McElvaney, 2015). Importantly, since recognition of abuse is a significant barrier to OCSA disclosure (Manrai et al., 2021), the phrasing and description of OCSA without using emotive terminologies such as abuse or trauma might have prompted participants to reflect on historical online sexual experiences that were not previously acknowledged as abusive, and recognition of the abuse can facilitate the first step in trauma recovery. Furthermore, the questions on the experience of PTSD relating to the OCSA in Study 3 might have also prompted participants to reflect on the current impact of the abuse and to seek support in addressing the experience of OCSA and mental health difficulties.

6.6 Conclusion

Every young person should have the right to use and safely explore the online space, just as they are protected offline. This programme of research makes three important contributions to the current literature on OCSA. First, it presented evidence that the experience of OCSA can have an adverse long-term impact on depression, anxiety, PTSD symptom severity, and self-esteem in adulthood. This reiterates that OCSA is no less serious or less abusive than offline CSA. Second, it demonstrated that the experience of OCSA is influenced by the broader

societal contexts. This research shows that the perception of, and the engagement in online risky sexual behaviours can be influenced by their normalisation and related social norms. In parallel, the recognition, processing, and disclosure of abuse are interrelated and dependent on the characteristics of the social environment. Specifically, this research demonstrated that social stigmatisation, negative and unsupportive responses to disclosure, and self-blame about the abuse are detrimental to PTSD symptom severity in adulthood. This research also helps to understand that individuals who have been affected by OCSA are also at risk of both online and offline sexual re-victimisation and experience poly-victimisation across a variety of childhood adversities. These findings highlight that offline childhood adversity can be a risk factor for OCSA, and it is important to identify at-risk youths to prevent further victimisation, which may in turn mitigate the adverse impact of accumulative trauma.

The impact of OCSA demonstrated in this research underscores that it is imperative to prevent this form of child abuse from happening. However, society also has a duty and responsibility to recognise that abuse is never the child's fault, regardless of how contact was initiated or who the abuser is. The influence of social dynamics on OCSA through social norms, offline childhood adversities, and societal stigma and responses to OCSA found in this research highlights the importance of examining and addressing these aspects of OCSA in abuse prevention and mitigation of its impacts. This is because social factors, unlike demographic characteristics, are dynamic, changeable, and can be addressed at different levels. Ultimately, the factors that influence disclosure are those that are apparent in society and will influence the responses of people to whom young people may disclose to. Therefore, another implication of this research is by presenting evidence that the burden on the prevention and intervention of OCSA is also on the larger community to mitigate factors that can increase a young person's vulnerability to OCSA. This research underscores the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment to effectively facilitate disclosure to ensure that the experience is beneficial rather than harmful. The present findings can inform researchers and

policymakers to address social inequality and social attitudes in preventing exposure to OCSA and to facilitate a safe climate to mitigate the impact of this form of childhood abuse.

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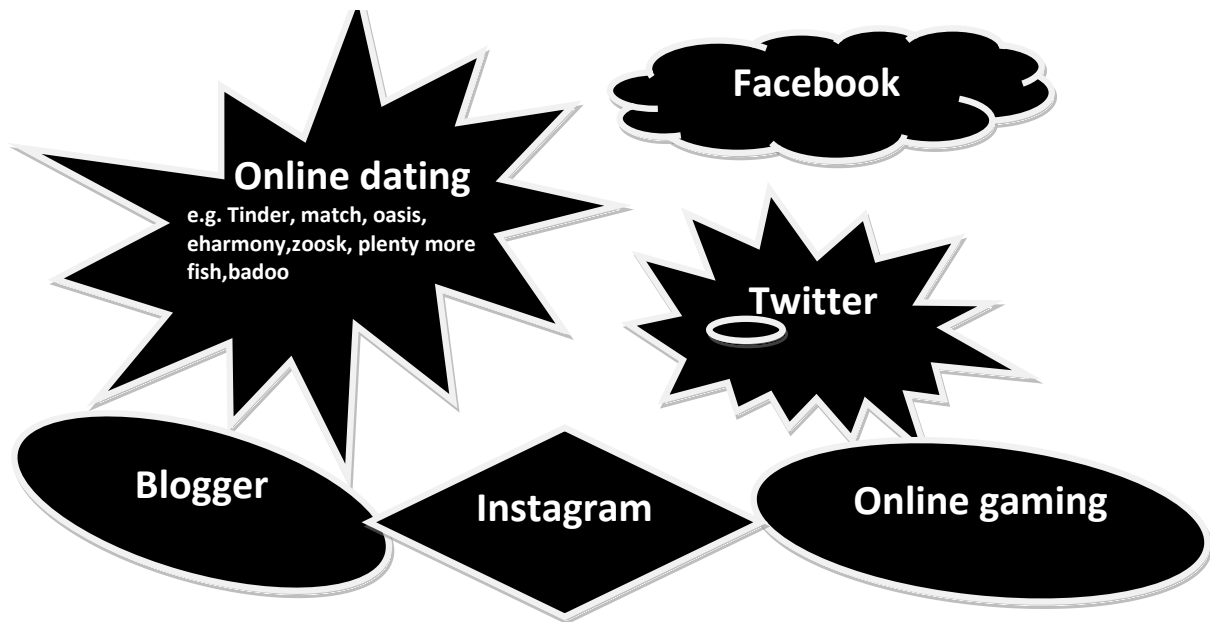
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559599004001001>

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559599004001001>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Study 1 Advert



Do you and your friends use social media to communicate? If so, have you or your friends had any experience of meeting people online?

Yes? Why not join a focus group discussion about online relationships?

I am a PhD student in the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire. For my research, I am interested in young adult online experiences, particularly the process of establishing relationships.

I am looking for people aged 16-25 to take part in a recorded focus group discussion. Each group will consist of approx. 4-6 participants of the same gender and similar age. Groups of 4 or more friends are able to participate as a single focus group if preferred.

The aim of the session is to examine the development of online romantic relationships, and will cover issues which are potentially sensitive and confidential. All data generated during the session will be kept confidential by the researcher, although full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the group nature of the discussion and the involvement of multiple participants. *As a result, participants will be asked to please respect the privacy and confidentiality of others within the group.*

If you're interested and would like to find out more about taking part, please contact me on cymchan@uclan.ac.uk or tear off my details below.

Please note: individuals must be aged over 16 and fluent in English to participate.

Appendix 2 Study 1 Participant Information Sheet

Exploration of Online Romantic Experiences Study: Information Sheet

Thank you for expressing an interest in taking part in a focus group discussion as outlined in the advertisement. Before agreeing to participate in the research, please read this information sheet carefully.

I am a PhD student in the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire. I am conducting research into young adults' online romantic experiences under the supervision of Dr Jo Bryce. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to discuss your perceptions and experiences of online interactions and relationships in a focus group setting. Each group will consist of student participants of the same gender and of approximately the same age (you will be asked to provide this information by the researcher to allow appropriate matching of participants). Groups of 4 or more friends are also able to participate in a private group discussion. Please inform the researcher if you would like to arrange this type of session.

Some of the issues addressed in the groups are of a potentially sensitive nature (e.g., online sexual interactions). Please do not to take part if you think this would be a problem. You do not have to provide information about your own personal experiences unless you feel comfortable doing so. If you do agree to participate and this causes any distress or raises any issues, you will be provided with details of relevant agencies providing further help and support (e.g., Victim Support, Samaritans, UCLan Counselling Service).

The researcher would also like to ask that participants do not discuss any information relating to criminal or illegal activity in the group. Anything of this nature or that relates to a risk of harm to others may have to be disclosed to relevant agencies as deemed appropriate by the researcher. This will be the police if there is suspicion of a criminal offence having taken place, as well as referral to the UCLan counselling service, victim support and / or the Samaritans as appropriate.

The focus group will take place on the University Campus and will last for 1-1.5 hours. It will be voice recorded, and this recording will be transcribed and analysed. Only myself, my supervisors and those with a legitimate academic need (e.g., internal and external PhD examiners) will have access to the data. All data will be stored securely in accordance with UCLan data storage policies. The analysed data will be used in the writing of my thesis, journal articles and conference presentations.

All data gathered will be confidential and your responses will also be made anonymous to ensure that you will not be able to be identified in any subsequent publications providing quotes from the groups. However, full confidentiality cannot be assured given the group nature of the discussion and the involvement of multiple participants. ***As a result, please respect the privacy and confidentiality of others within the group.***

It is important to note that participation in the group is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research at any point without having to give any reason. However, it will not be possible to withdraw your contribution once voice recorded as specific individuals cannot be identified from the session recording data.

If you would like to participate in the study, please reply to the researcher stating your interest, and further arrangements will be made by email. Please include details about your age, gender and whether you would like to take part in a focus group restricted to named friends. Please feel free to contact us if you would like further information about the study.

Thank you

Researcher: Cindy Chan (cymchan@uclan.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Jo Bryce (JBryce@uclan.ac.uk)

School of Psychology,
University of Central Lancashire,
Preston, Lancashire, PR1 2HE
Tel: 01772 893420

Debriefing sheet

PLEASE KEEP THIS PAGE

Thank you very much for participating in this study. **Please remember that your contribution will remain anonymous** and only the researcher, supervisory team and those with a legitimate academic need (e.g., internal and external PhD examiners) will have access to the study data.

The focus groups are an exploratory study examining young peoples' experiences of online interactions, social and romantic relationships. The study aims to identify the extent to which persuasion, coercion and controlling behaviours are used and resisted in these contexts. It will also establish a basic understanding of the normative processes of development and maintenance of online romantic relationships, and enable the development of age appropriate materials and research questions for use in another study addressing these issues with adolescents.

If you require any further information about the research, please do not hesitate to contact myself, Cindy Chan (cymchan@uclan.ac.uk) or my supervisor, Dr Jo Bryce (jbryce@uclan.ac.uk).

If you feel distressed or affected by any of the issues discussed in the focus group, you may wish to speak to a professional body. The following services provide free and confidential support:

- **VICTIM SUPPORT** – Victim Support helps people cope with the effects of crime.
Helpline: 08453030900
E-mail: contact@victimsupport.org.uk
Web: www.victimsupport.org.uk
- **SAMARITANS** – Samaritans provides a confidential 24-hour telephone helpline to anyone in emotional distress.
Helpline: 08457909090
E-mail: jo@samaritans.org
Web: www.samaritans.org
- **UCLAN COUNSELLING SERVICE** - Free counselling service to all UCLan students
Helpline: 01772892572
E-mail: CoRecep@uclan.ac.uk

Information and advice on how to stay safe online

- **UK Safer Internet Centre**
<http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>
- **Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre (CEOP) Think U Know**
<http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

Appendix 4 Study 1 Focus Group Agenda

1. *Expectations when approached by, or meeting new people online*

- What expectations do people have when meeting others online? (e.g., friendship, romance?)
- Are these expectations different when meeting people offline? Why would this be?
- How might this vary / influenced by the online acquaintance making contact and their intentions (e.g., romantic, friendship)
- Would these expectations influence (participants') behaviour? (e.g., try to make themselves more likeable?)
- How might they do this? (e.g., emphasis on common interest, shared knowledge, use of humour?)

2. *How would online acquaintance behave to convey their intentions?*

- What sort of things do they talk about?
- Would the language use differ depending on their intention?
- Does it differ online compared to face-to-face?
- Would people disclose more personal information? (e.g., send/ post more pictures online)
- What else might they do?

3. *How would people determine if their expectations are correct and reciprocated?*

- What are the signs or indicators? (e.g., emoticons, picture exchange, flattery, frequency and duration of communication etc.)
- How could someone tell if the expectation isn't reciprocal? (e.g., longer replying time, less flattery, 'likes', comments etc.)
- What would the person do if this is the case? (e.g., 'unfriend'/ 'unfollow' the other person)

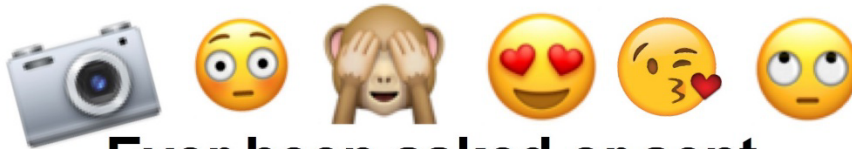
- How might people find out they were being lied to and what would they do? (e.g., person 'slips up', comes clean).

4. *At what point would people trust the person they are interacting with?*

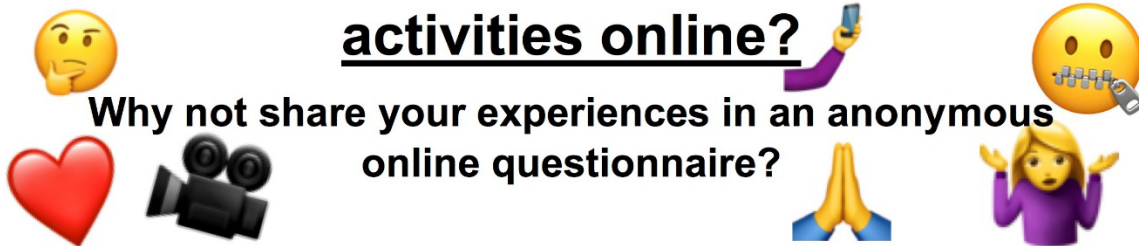
- Do most people trust other people online?
- What is important in informing such judgments?
- Are there specific things to look for? (e.g., numerous pictures of the other person, use of video chat)
- How would the relationship progress/ evolve?

5. *Do people feel under pressure to disclose more personal information?*

- What sort of situations can occur online in which people might feel coerced into specific behaviour? (e.g., asked to send/exchange explicit pictures of self, engage in sexual activity)
- How might they be persuaded to do something even if they don't want to? (e.g., sweet talk, exchange of pictures)
- What about more coercive ways? (e.g., emotional blackmail / threats to post private sexual materials)
- Why would people comply with this?
- How might they resist pressure to do this?
- Would they tell someone else about it? (e.g., friends, adults, service providers, police) or keep it to themselves? If so, why? (e.g., worried about threats, ashamed about the behaviour)
- Is it difficult to end an online relationship? If so, why?



**Ever been asked or sent
naked pics online, received
sexual requests or engaged in sexual
activities online?**



**Why not share your experiences in an anonymous
online questionnaire?**

I'm Cindy, a PhD student at the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire. For my research, I am interested in examining people's digital sexual experiences before they turned 16 and as an adult now, as well as what they think about them.

Anyone aged 18–30; can read and understand English is welcome to take part. The questionnaire will take approx.15 minutes to complete.

If you are interested, follow the link to find out more about taking part.

<https://goo.gl/TXbGN9>

Or visit these social media sites to find out more. Thanks!



@onlinebehaviour

@onlinebehaviour

Don't hesitate to get in touch with either myself@ cymchan@uclan.ac.uk
or my supervisor Dr Jo Bryce @ jbryce@uclan.ac.uk

A study of digital sexual activities among young people:

Information Sheet – paper version

Hi, my name is Cindy Chan and I am a PhD student at the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, UK. Thank you for considering taking part in this research. Please read the information included here carefully so you can decide whether to participate.

What is the purpose of the project?

This project is part of my PhD research, under the supervision of Dr Jo Bryce. The research is interested in people's views and experiences of sexual activities and behaviours in the digital environment¹ that occurred before they turned age 16 and as an adult, and as well as how these are influenced by personality traits.

Am I eligible for the study?

Individuals aged 18 to 30 are welcome to take part. Participants must also be able to understand and read English.

What will I have to do if I agree to take part?

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire that focuses on you and your friends' digital sexual activities that occurred before you turned 16, as well as your recent experiences.

There are two ways to take part:

1. If you are reading this on paper, there will be a questionnaire in this pack. The questionnaire can be returned to the researcher in the envelope provided to ensure anonymity.
2. If you wish to complete the questionnaire online, simply go to the link provided or please use the QR code, or IG or twitter account where the link to questionnaire is also provided.

How much time will it take?

The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Is taking part confidential?

Yes. All information and data collected will be anonymous and confidential. Data will be stored in a secure, password protected file on the researcher's computer / university network, and retained for five years. Only myself, my supervisors and those with a legitimate academic need will have access to the data. It is possible that your responses may be shared with others doing similar research, but only if their request to access it is approved by the University. You will not be able to be identified should this happen as all answers are anonymous.

As the questionnaire collects sensitive information, please complete it on your own in a private area.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

Some of the questions are potentially sensitive (e.g., asking about online sexual approaches, sexual pressure, unwanted sexual requests) and may cause distress. Please do not take part if you think this will be a problem. If you do experience any distress as a result of participating in the study, sources of help and support are provided on the debrief page.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

¹Any apps or communication channels that do not require face to face physical contact (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, text messages etc.).

What if I change my mind about taking part?

Withdrawal is free at any point until the questionnaire is returned to the researcher.

Alternatively, if you are completing this online. You can withdraw from this study until the point of submitting the completed questionnaire by closing the browser window or not clicking 'submit', and your data will not be used. However, once you have submitted your responses, you will not be able to withdraw as all data is anonymous and individual responses cannot be identified. If you decide to withdraw whilst completing the questionnaire, clicking on the 'withdrawal' link at the bottom page will direct you to the debrief sheet.

How will the data be used?

The data will be used for my project write up, as well as potentially for journal articles and teaching purposes.

What happens now?

If you would like to take part, you can either fill in the questionnaire provided in the pack or do it online using the links provided below. By completing the questionnaire and submitting your responses, you are giving consent to take part in this study. Please contact myself or my supervisor if you have any questions or need more information.

Thank you

Researcher contact details:

Cindy Chan
School of Psychology
University of Central Lancashire
Preston
PR1 2HE
cymchan@uclan.ac.uk

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Jo Bryce
School of Psychology
University of Central Lancashire
Preston
PR1 2HE
JBryce@uclan.ac.uk / 01772 893437

If you have concerns about the research and you wish to raise them with somebody who is independent of the research team, please contact the University Officer for Ethics (OfficerForEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

<https://goo.gl/TXbGN9>



@onlinebehaviour



@onlinebehaviour

Thank you for having decided to take part in this survey. Please answer all questions as truthfully as possible. If you do not wish to answer a question, please leave it blank.

The following demographic questions are asked to allow the researcher to establish if certain characteristics influence our behaviours.

Would you consider yourself as	Male / Female / Neither / Prefer to self-describe
Please state your age	
What is your sexual orientation	

Answer the following questionnaire thinking of your behaviours in an online environment only.

An online environment includes:

- social media (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc.),
- messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Kik, WeChat, Facebook messenger, any DM (direct messages) etc.),
- text messages / iMessages
- webcam, video chat, live chat,
- blogs, vlogs;
- or communication / activities that **DO NOT** involve face to face communication with others who are physically present.

Section 1. Thinking about when you were aged 16 and under, how often did **you** experience the following:

	Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always	This happened but I did not feel pressured
Someone pressured me repeatedly to talk about sex.						
I was pressured to 'do things to myself' (e.g. remove my clothing, touching myself sexually) via webcam/video chat.						
I felt pressured to tell someone about my sexual history or sexual life.						
I sent semi-nudes/ nude selfies because I felt under pressure.						

Please also answer the following statement.

	Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always
Videos or photos of a sexual nature were sent to me without me asking for them.					
I was made uncomfortable by innuendos of a sexual nature but carried on continuing the conversation.					
Someone continued sending me sexual or obscene materials such as pictures, jokes, memes or videos after I had asked them to stop.					
I saw someone engaging in sexual activities without me agreeing to it (e.g. seeing it on webcam, live chat, or videos).					
I was asked to talk about my sexual fantasy even when I didn't want to.					
I had sexual images of myself shared with others without my permission.					

Section 2. Again, thinking about when you were under 16, how much do **you** agree that you were more likely to engage in the sexual behaviours and activities described in section 1 because...

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I was questioned about my sexuality or attractiveness.					
Someone became displeased, annoyed or 'cold' at me.					
Someone told me he/she was disappointed when I didn't.					
He/she kept nagging me.					
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I felt bad/guilty if I didn't.					
The person said he/she would stop talking to me.					
He/she said my sexual images/videos would be sent to others or post online if I didn't.					
Someone threatened or threatened to blackmail me with non-sexual related matters.					
Someone used sexual images or videos of me to threaten or blackmail for more sexual activities.					
I was too intoxicated by drugs or alcohol when being asked to refuse.					

Section 3. How often did **your friends** experience the following when aged under 16...

	Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always
Sent photos or videos of parts of their bodies because they felt pressured.					
Asked others to send semi-nude/nude photos or videos.					
Talked to people that they had only met online about sex.					
Showed others or shared sexual images/videos that they had received, without the sender knowing.					
Were recorded engaging in sexual acts without them knowing.					
Teasing comments of a sexual nature were made about their bodies or appearance online.					

Shared sexual images or videos of others without the consent of those involved.					
Continued making comments or talking in a sexual way despite others saying they felt uncomfortable.					
Being threatened or blackmailed about their own sexual images or videos.					
Sexually explicit photos or videos between your friend and the other person were circulated.					
Said no to sexual requests online despite feeling pressured.					
Sent sexy selfies or videos to another person who had also sent them nudes to 'return a favour'.					

Section 4. Again, thinking back when you were under 16. How likely were **your friends** to agree with these statements...

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
It's common to exchange sexual images/videos between two people.					
Most people know someone who has been threatened or blackmailed for sexual requests.					
Most people would carry on talking about sex even when he/she has been asked to stop.					
People usually asked for sexual images first, before suggesting sexual activities via video, webcam.					
Just because someone has agreed to engage in sexual activities in the past doesn't mean he/she has to do it again in the future.					
Sexually explicit materials shared between two people are not to be shared with others.					
Females faced more pressure than males to send sexual photos/videos.					
It's the sender's fault for sending sexual images or videos.					
People would think badly about a male if his sexual photos/videos were posted online.					
My friends have shown others or shared sexual images or videos that they have received, without the sender knowing.					

People would think badly about a female if her sexual photos/videos were posted online.					
People would usually give in after he/she was asked a few times to send sexual selfies or videos.					

Section 5. Thinking about when you were 16 and younger, how much did **you** agree with the following statements...

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
It was easier to ignore sexual requests made by people I had only met online.					
I was more likely to agree to sexual requests if the person was someone who I knew offline (e.g. a friend, someone I knew from school, community, etc.)					
I felt comfortable saying no regardless of how I met the person (i.e. online or offline).					
People I knew offline were just as likely to make sexual requests online.					
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
If I didn't want to do it, it didn't matter if the person was someone I only met online or someone I knew offline.					
There were more negative consequences related to ignoring sexual requests from people I knew in person.					
I felt more comfortable engaging in digital sexual activities if the person was similar to my age.					
Regardless of the age of the person I was talking to, I was more likely to engage in sexual activities online if the person made me feel special.					
Talking to someone who was in their twenties was less creepy than talking to an older man/woman.					
It was common to be approached by someone over 18 online.					
I preferred to talk to someone my age range.					
The way adult(s) talked to me sometimes made me feel special.					

I didn't mind engaging in a sexual relationship with an older person (18 and above) as long as he/she cared about me.					
Adults used a lot of flattery (e.g. telling me I'm attractive, my photos are nice etc.)					
I didn't mind opening up to someone who was older than me if he/she listens and gives me a lot of attention and time.					

Section 6. How often did the following things occur before you turned 16?

	Never	Occasionally (at least once)	About half the time	Most of the time	Always
I was asked by someone who was 18 and above to meet in person.					
Someone lied to me about their gender.					
People pretended to be younger but later revealed their true age.					
Someone lied to me about their identity.					
I was offered money, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or things I wanted in exchange for sexual explicit photos or videos of me.					
I agreed to engage in a physical sexual relationship with someone who was 18 and above.					
I agreed to meet someone I met online in person, despite knowing s/he was 18 or above.					
I accepted money, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or things I wanted in exchange of sexual favours that I wouldn't otherwise engage.					
Someone pretended to be my age despite being an adult.					
I engaged in online sexual activities with someone who was 18 and above.					

Appendix 7 Study 2 Debriefing Sheet

Debrief sheet

Thank you very much for taking part in this research study and completing the questionnaire. Please remember that your contribution will remain anonymous.

The study examines young people's sexual activities and sexual coercive experiences by asking them about their current experiences and those that occurred before the age of 16. Factors such as personality traits, peer norms, age of the person whom you were interacting with, and the of the relationship between you and the other person are also examined. The study asks these questions to determine if they have any influence on individuals' online sexual behaviours and experiences.

By researching this area, it is hoped that knowledge will be developed which could contribute to developing further understanding of young people's online sexual behaviour and experiences, including those which are coercive in nature.

Please remember that once you have submitted your answers, you will be unable to withdraw your data from the study.

If you feel distressed or have been affected by the content in the questionnaire, you may wish to speak to someone to receive help and advice. The following services provide free and confidential support:

- NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in Childhood) – Support to adult survivors of all types of childhood abuse.
Website: www.napac.org.uk / Helpline: 08088010331
- Victim Support – Helps people cope with the effects of crime.
Website: www.victimsupport.org.uk / Helpline: 08453030900/ email: contact@victimsupport.org.uk
- Childline – Free, confidential advice and support for anyone under 19 with any issues they are going through.
Website: www.childline.org.uk / Helpline: 08001111
- Kooth – Free, safe and anonymous online support for young people
Website: www.kooth.com
- Samaritans – Free 24/7 confidential service
Website: <https://www.samaritans.org/> Helpline: 116123
- Get Safe Online – UK's leading source on online safety.
Website: <https://www.getsafeonline.org/>

If you would like more information regarding this study, please contact me using the contact details below.

Researcher contact details:

Cindy Chan
School of Psychology
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PR1 2HE
cymchan@uclan.ac.uk

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Jo Bryce
School of Psychology
University of Central Lancashire
Preston
PR1 2HE
JBryce@uclan.ac.uk / 01772 893437

If you have concerns about the research and you wish to raise them with somebody who is independent of the research team, please contact the University Officer for Ethics (OfficerForEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

Appendix 8 Missing Values SPSS Output for Study 2

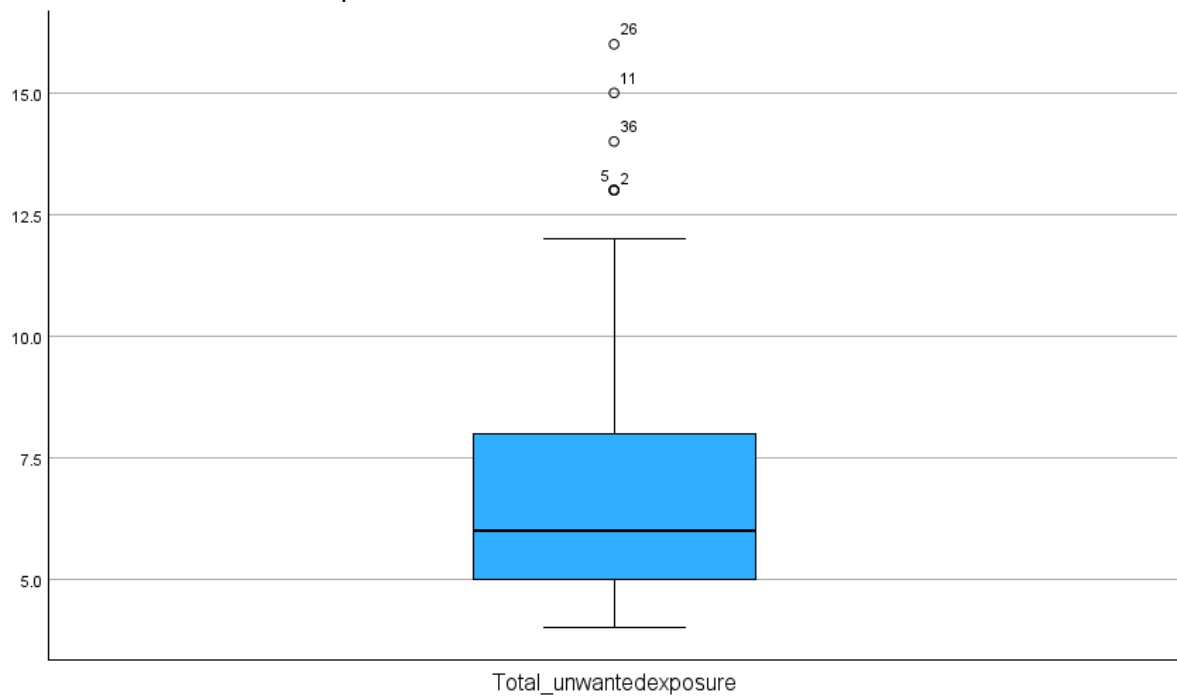
Univariate Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Missing		No. of Extremes ^a	
				Count	Percent	Low	High
Total_unwantedexposure	171	6.73	2.591	2	1.2	0	7
Total_SexualPressure	138	7.99	2.927	35	20.2	0	3
TotalSexualCoercion	167	22.1377	9.70462	6	3.5	0	0
V_NonconsensualSharing	171	1.15	.420	2	1.2	.	.
Total_Descriptive_Risky16	171	4.47	1.880	2	1.2	0	0
Total_Descriptive_V16	172	8.55	3.101	1	.6	0	3
Total_Descriptive_P16	169	7.44	3.068	4	2.3	0	6
PeerNorm_injuctiveR1	172	3.49	1.126	1	.6	11	0
PeerNorm_injuctiveV1	173	3.10	1.288	0	.0	0	0
revisedINJUCTIONperpetration	172	13.1860	3.27497	1	.6	0	0
approached	173	6.6069	2.58492	0	.0	0	6
groomed	173	2.8497	1.45892	0	.0	0	21
Total_GroomingTactics	172	14.40	4.527	1	.6	0	4
Age_adult	172	9.38	3.179	1	.6	0	0
Age_peer	173	7.65	1.791	0	.0	12	0
Relationship_online	171	4.13	1.104	2	1.2	18	0
Relationship_offline	172	9.30	2.623	1	.6	3	0
assertivness_under16	172	7.65	2.173	1	.6	0	0

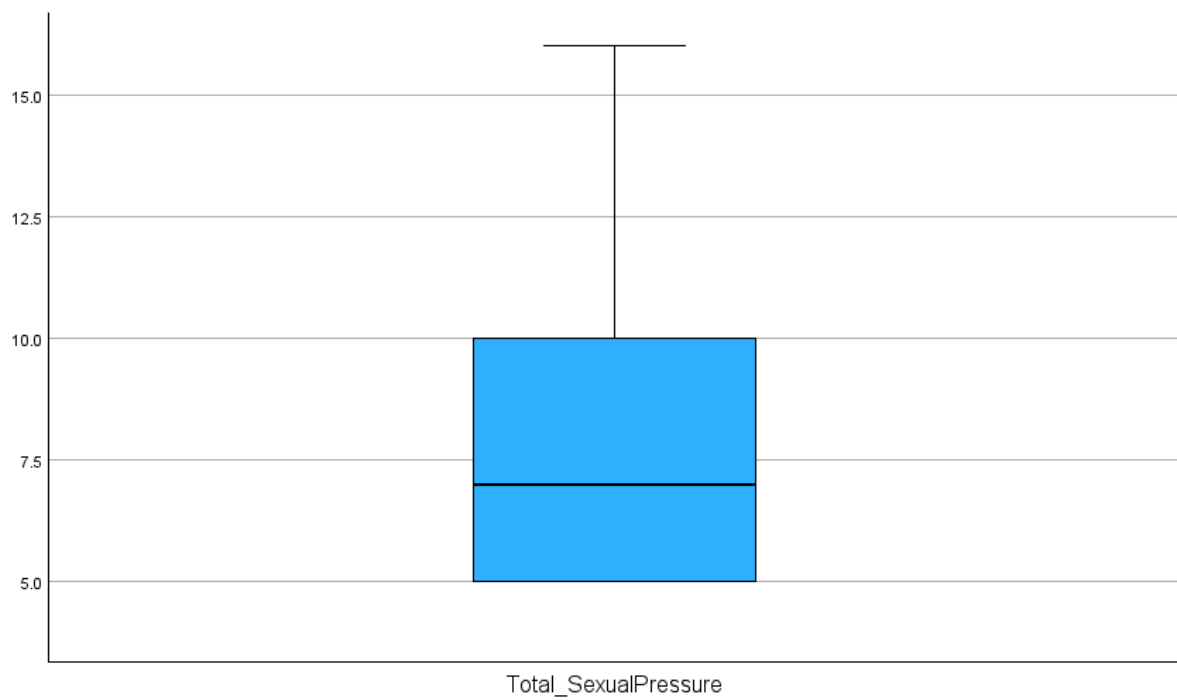
a. Number of cases outside the range (Q1 - 1.5*IQR, Q3 + 1.5*IQR).

Appendix 9 Boxplots for Study 2 Variables

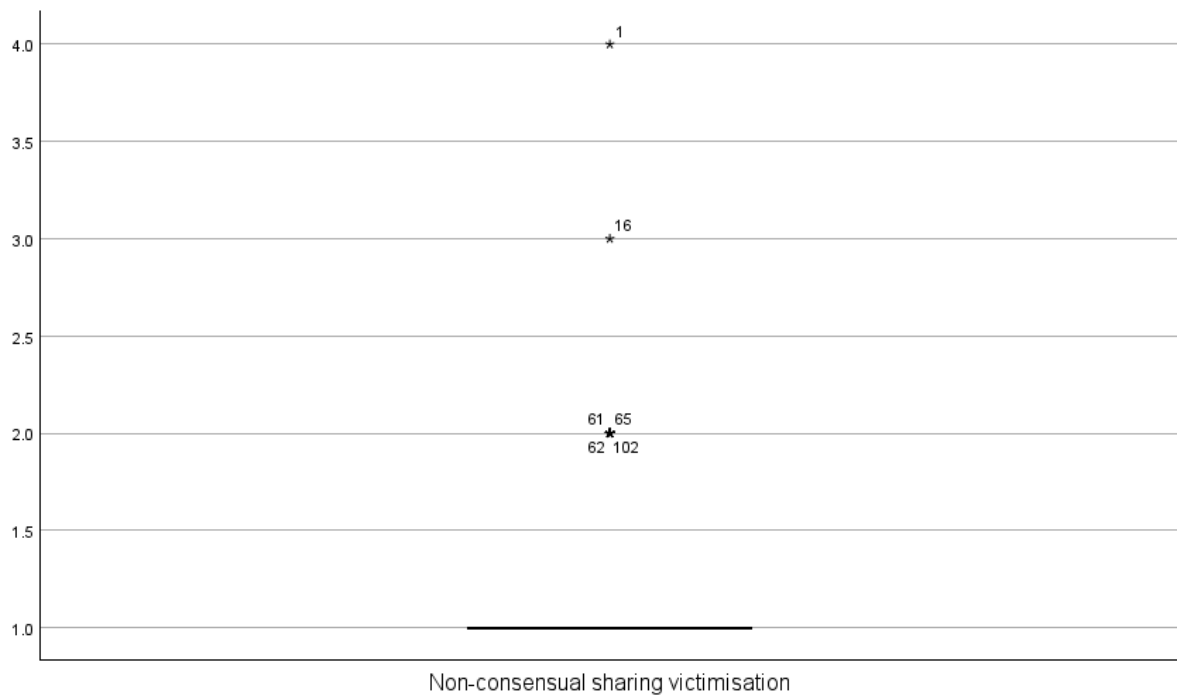
Unwanted online sexual exposure



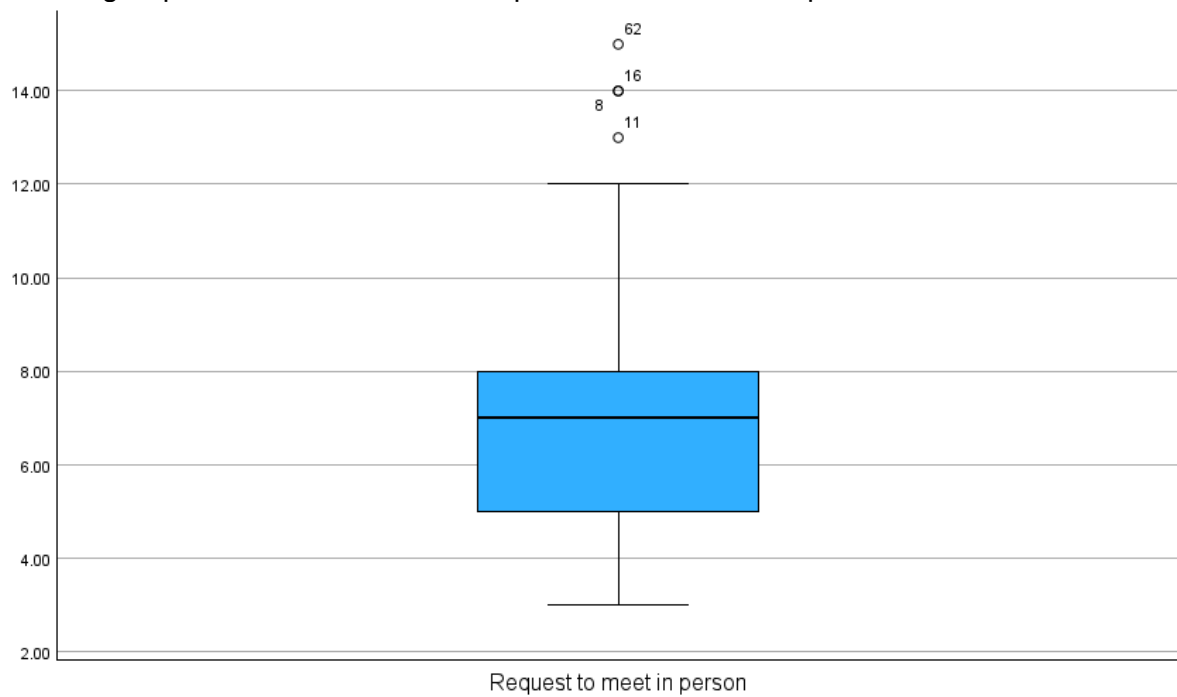
Pressured online sexual activities



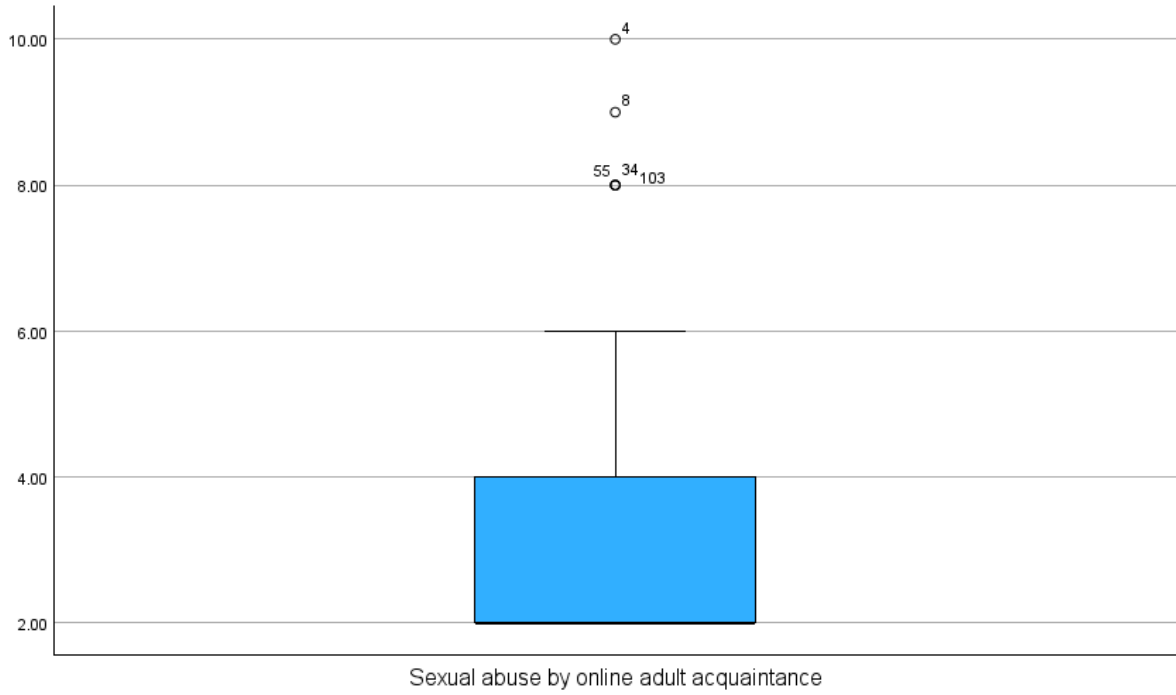
Non-consensual sharing victimisation



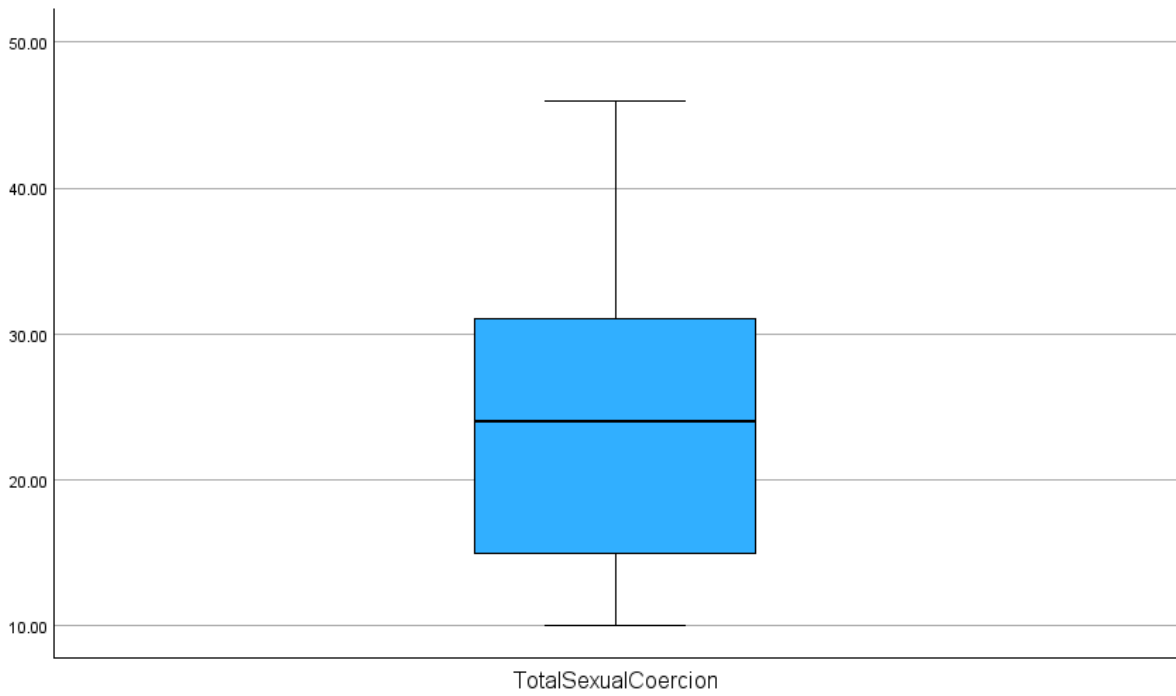
Receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person



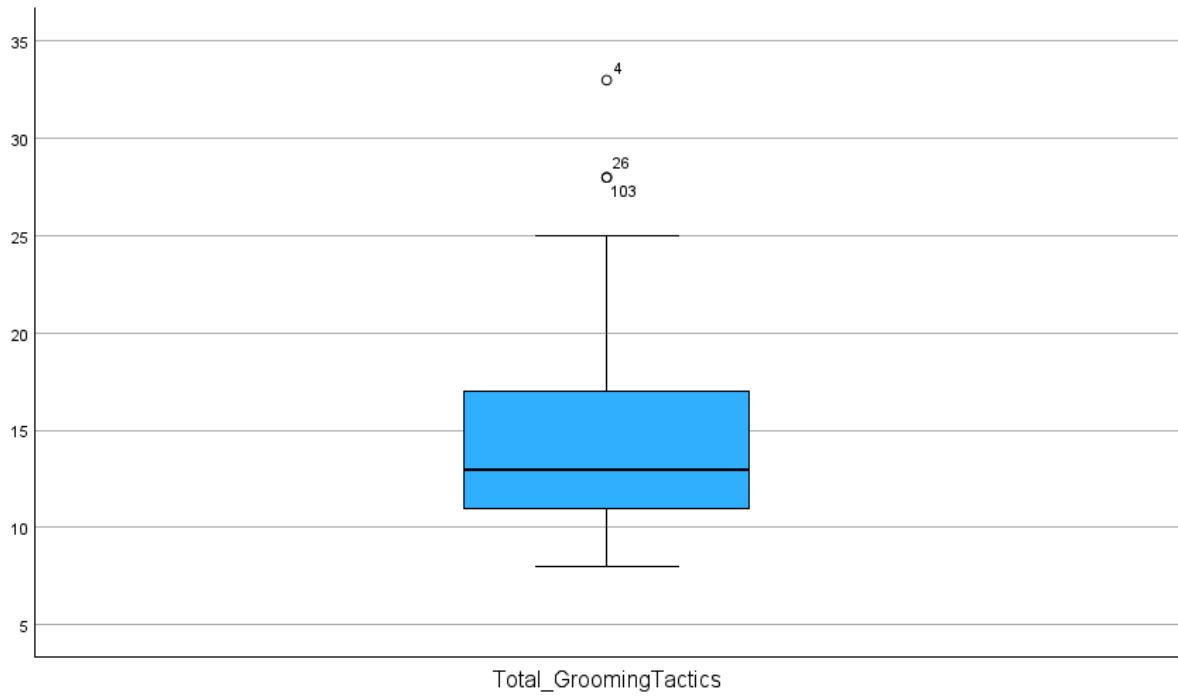
Sexual abuse by online adult acquaintance



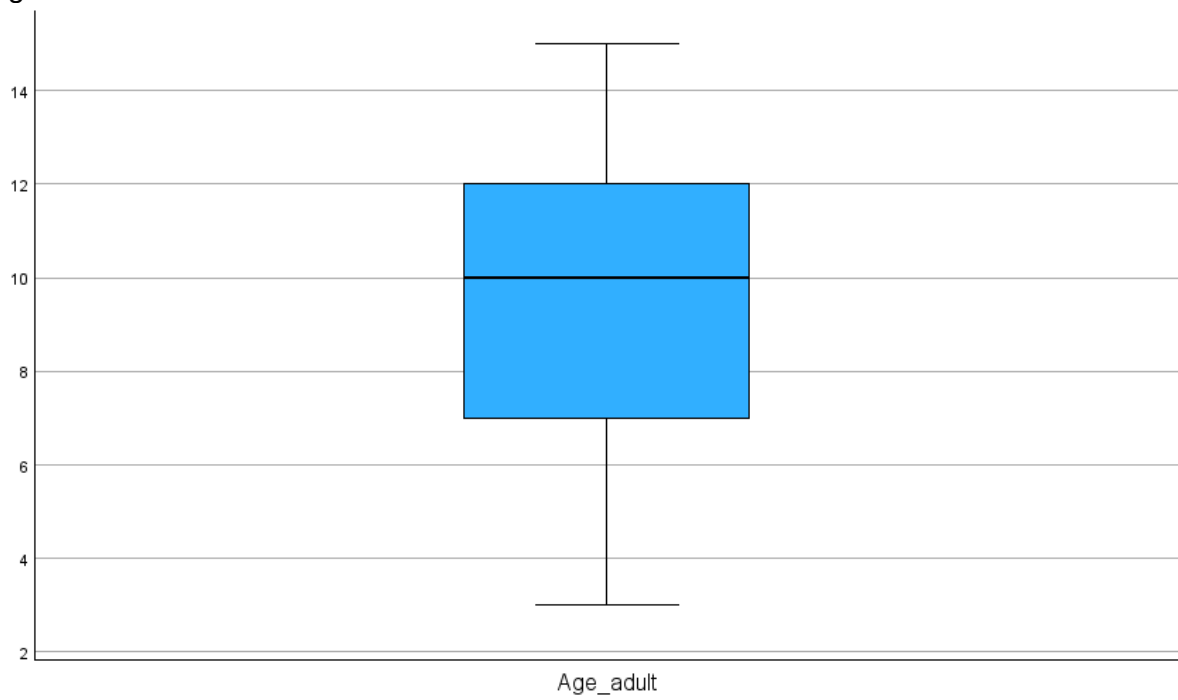
Verbal sexual coercion tactics



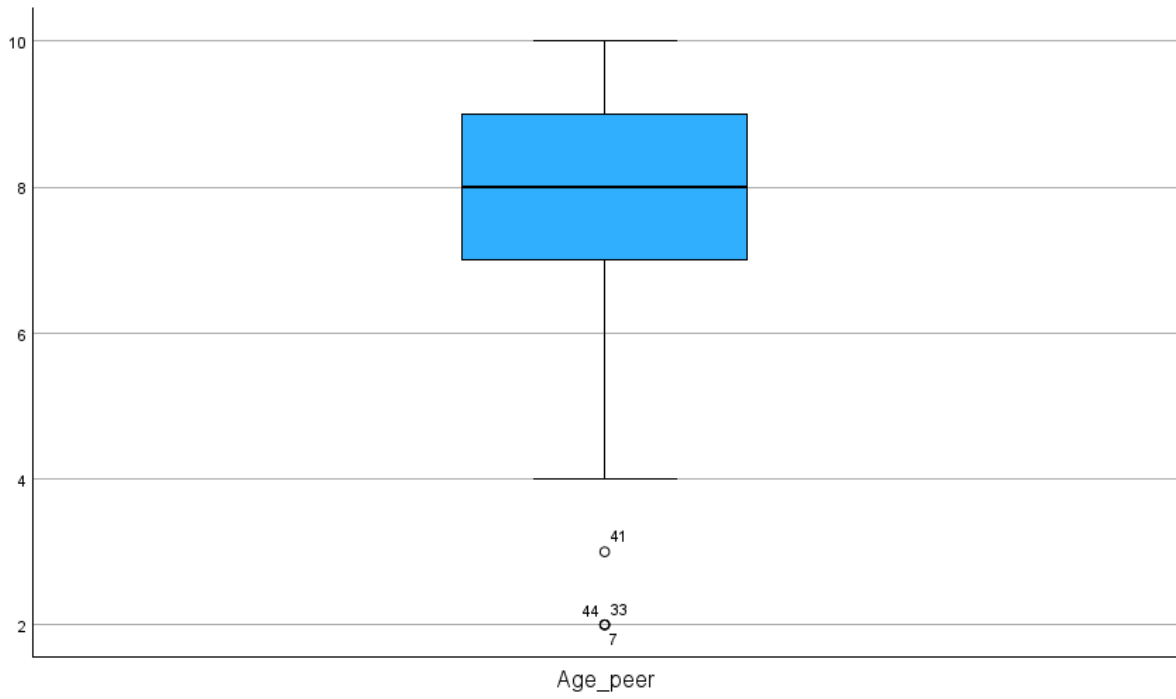
Online grooming tactics



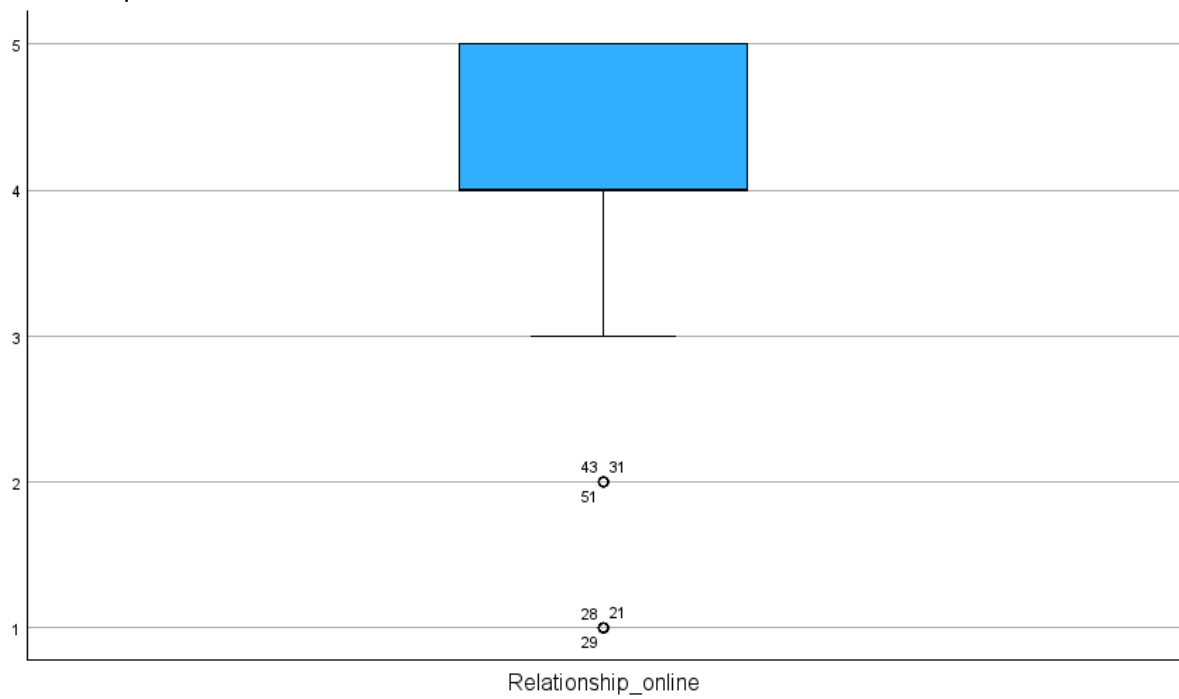
Age of advancer – adult



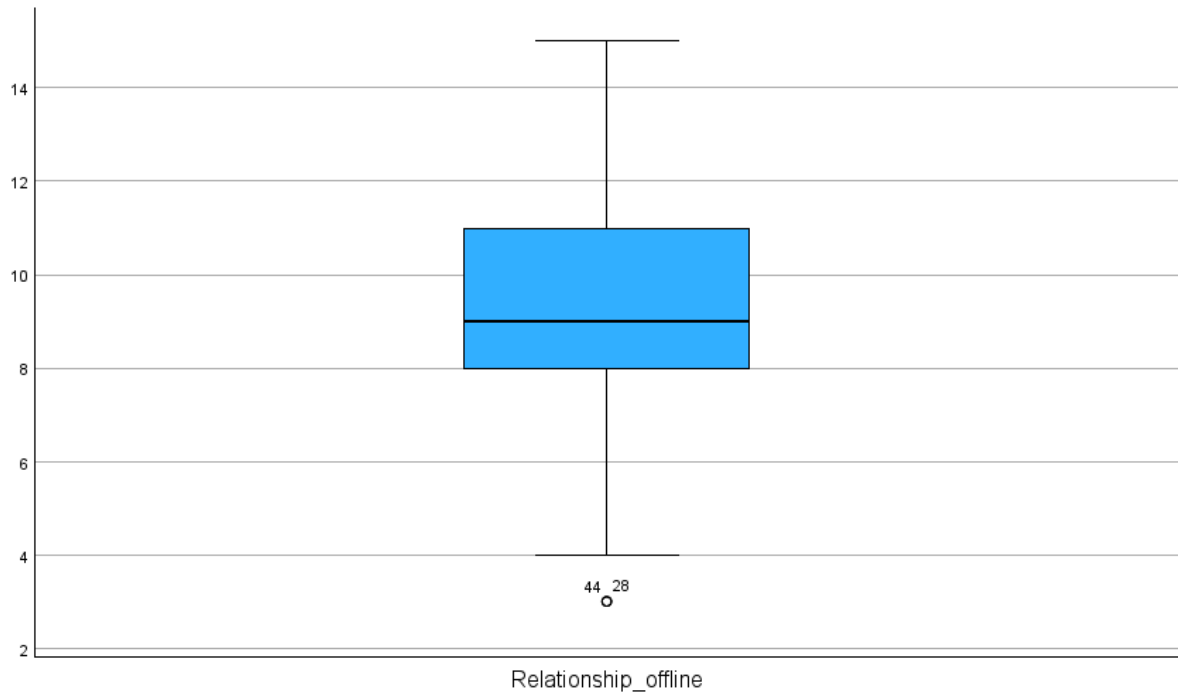
Age of advancer – peer



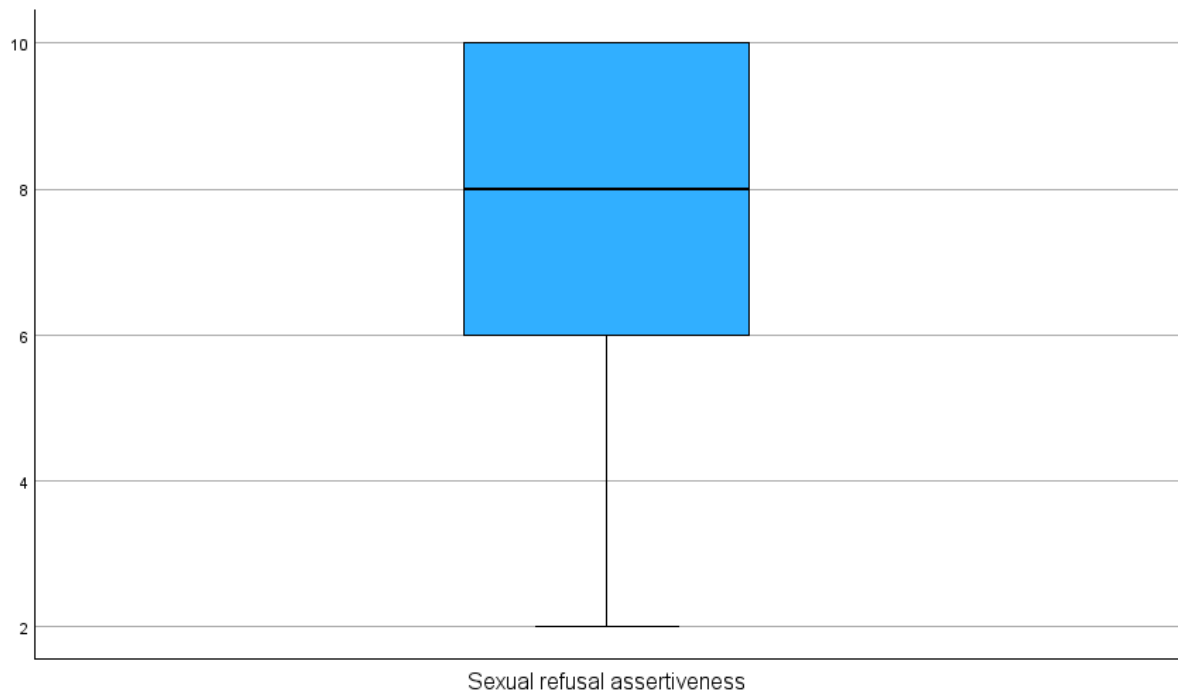
Online acquaintance



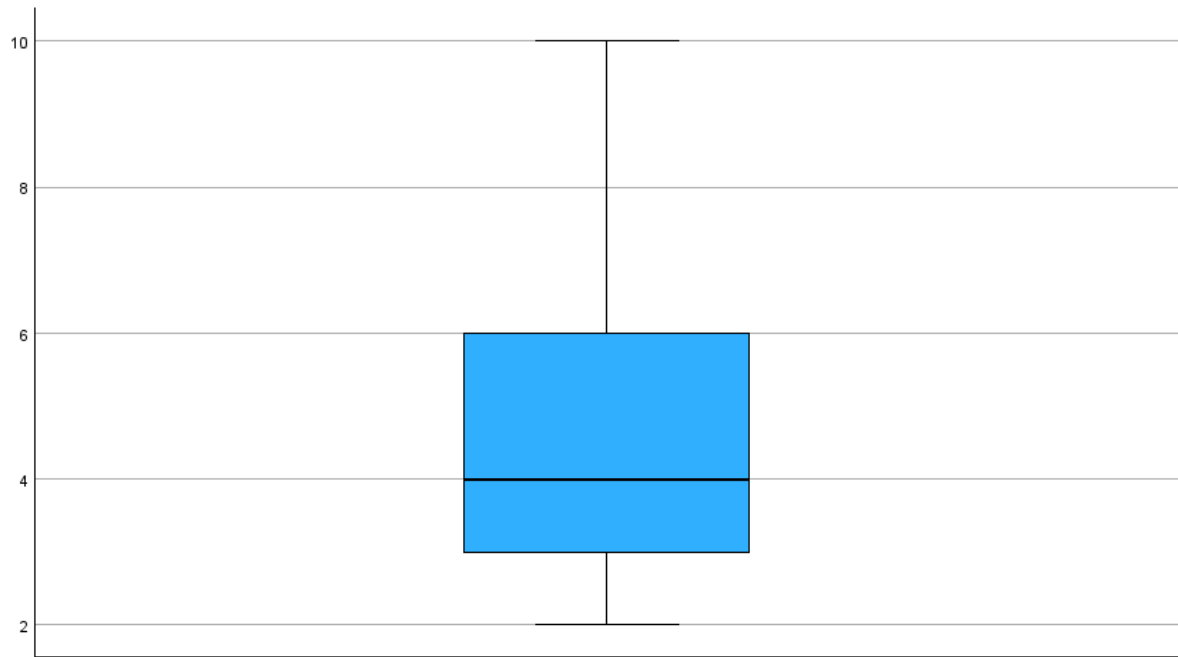
Offline acquaintance



Sexual refusal assertiveness

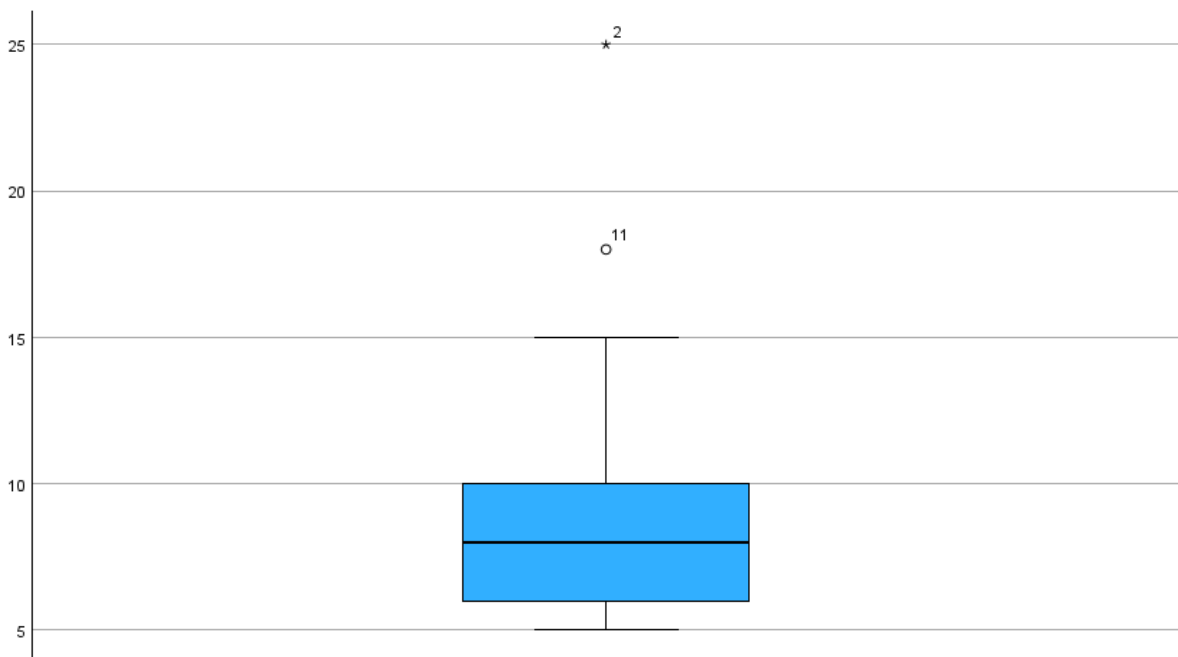


Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour



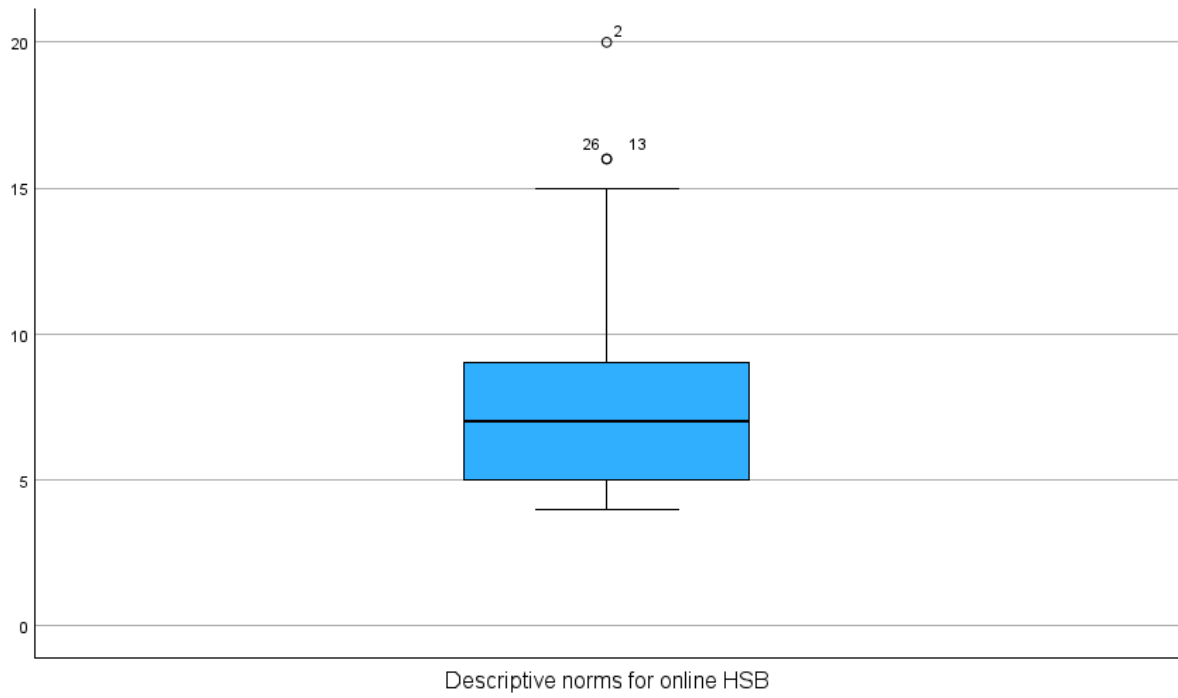
Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour

Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation

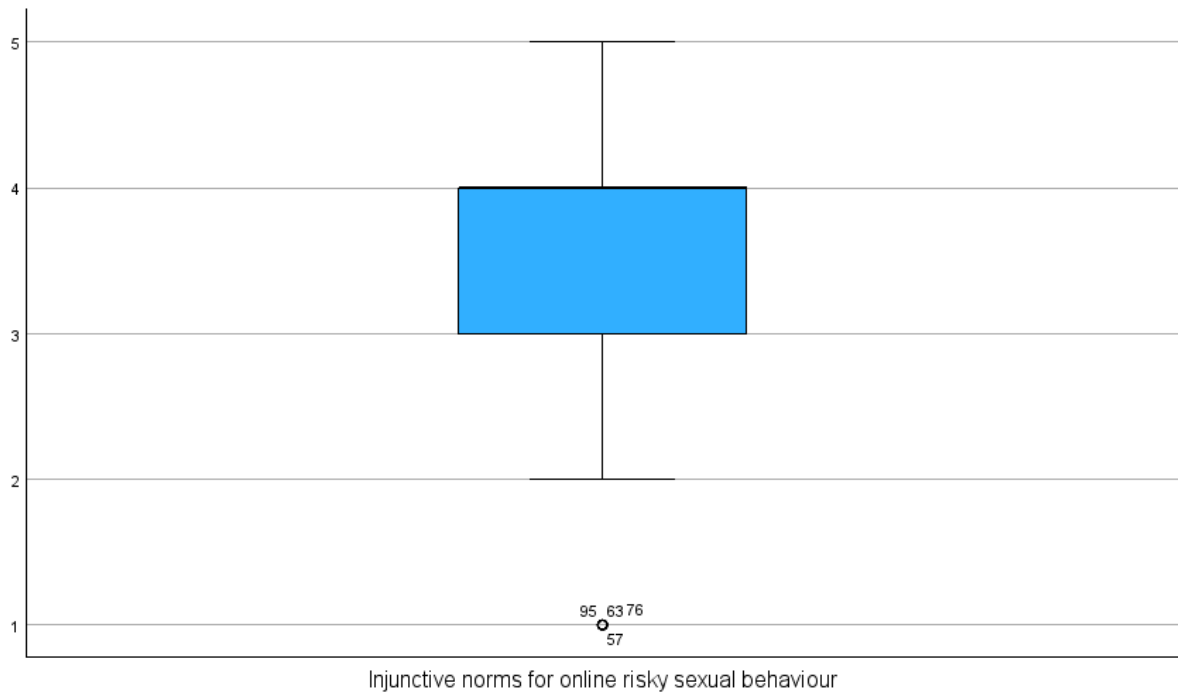


Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation

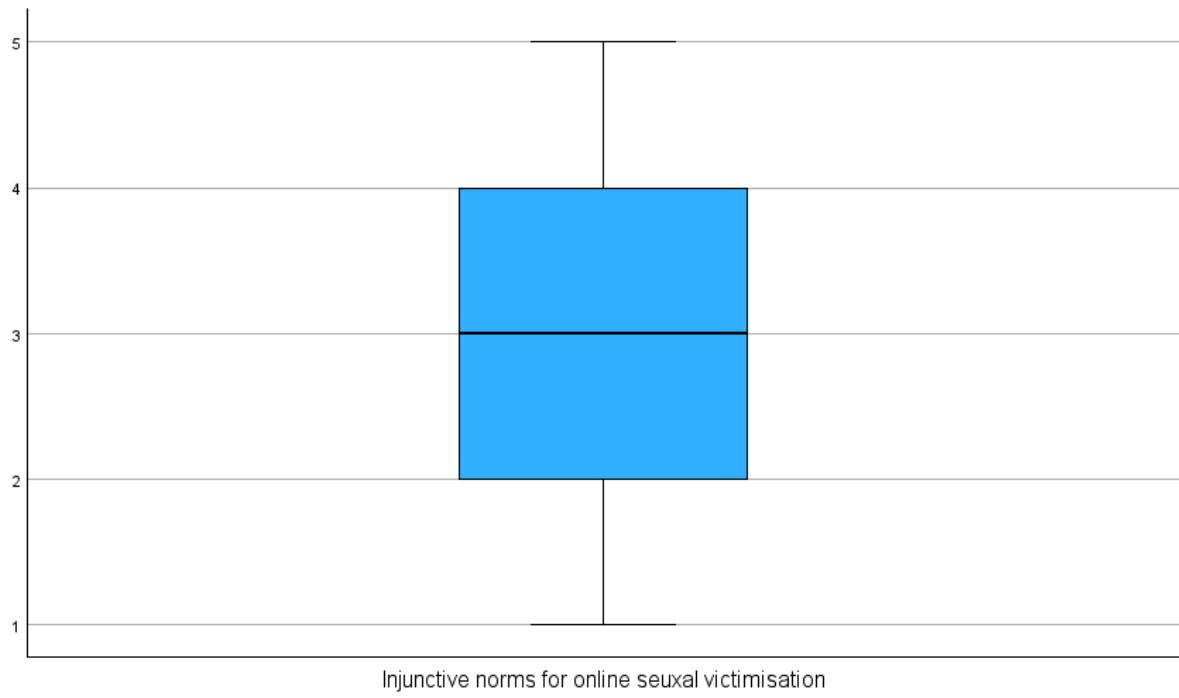
Descriptive norms for online harmful sexual behaviour perpetration



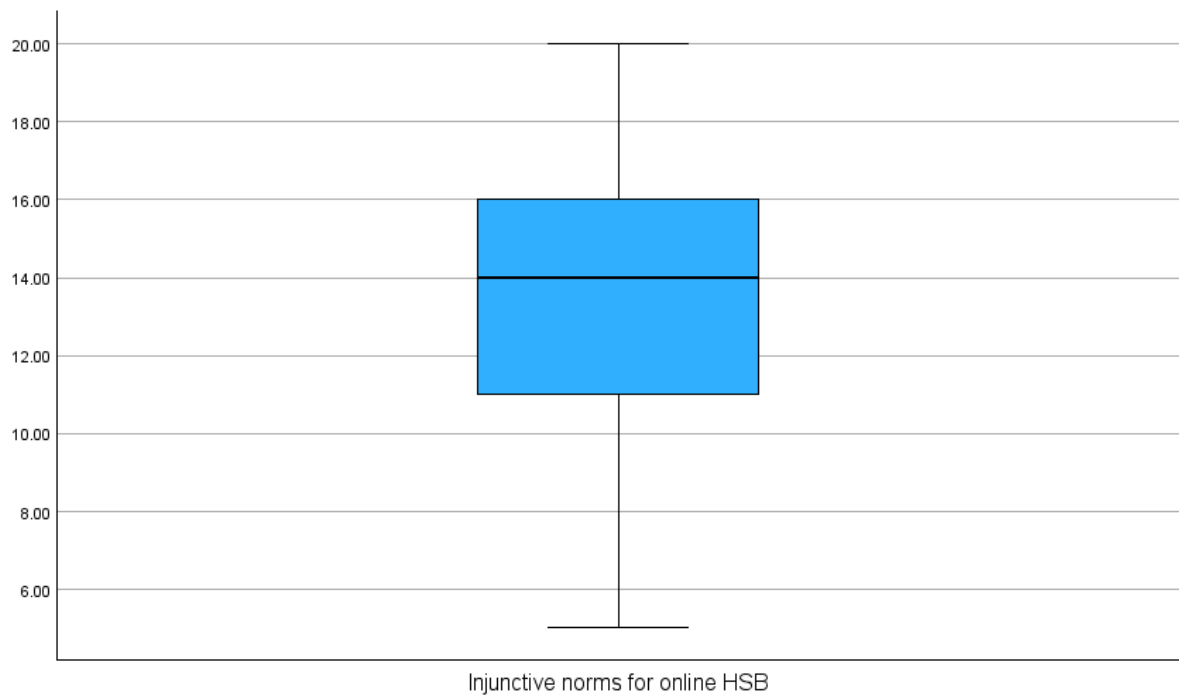
Injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour



Injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation

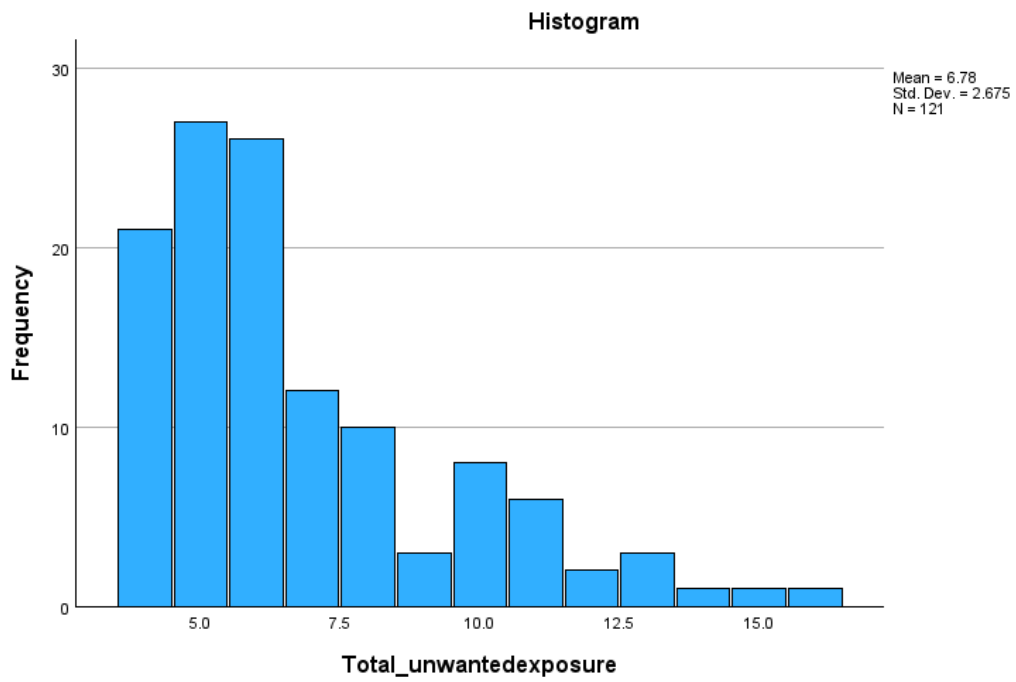
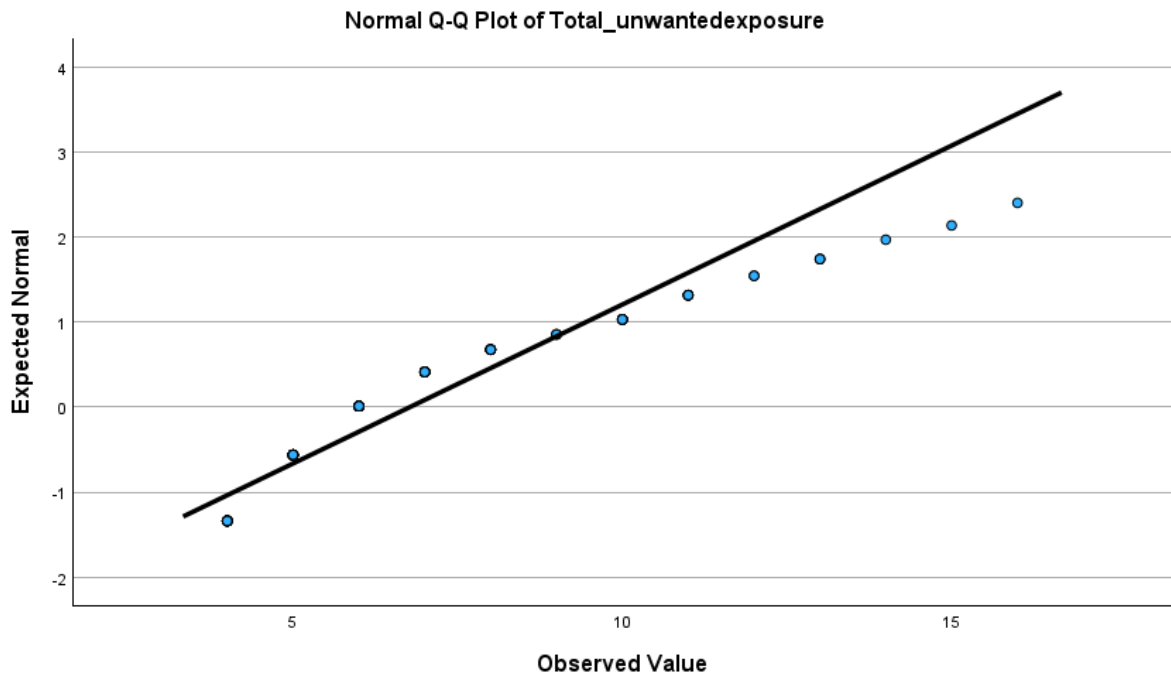


Injunctive norms for online harmful sexual behaviour perpetration

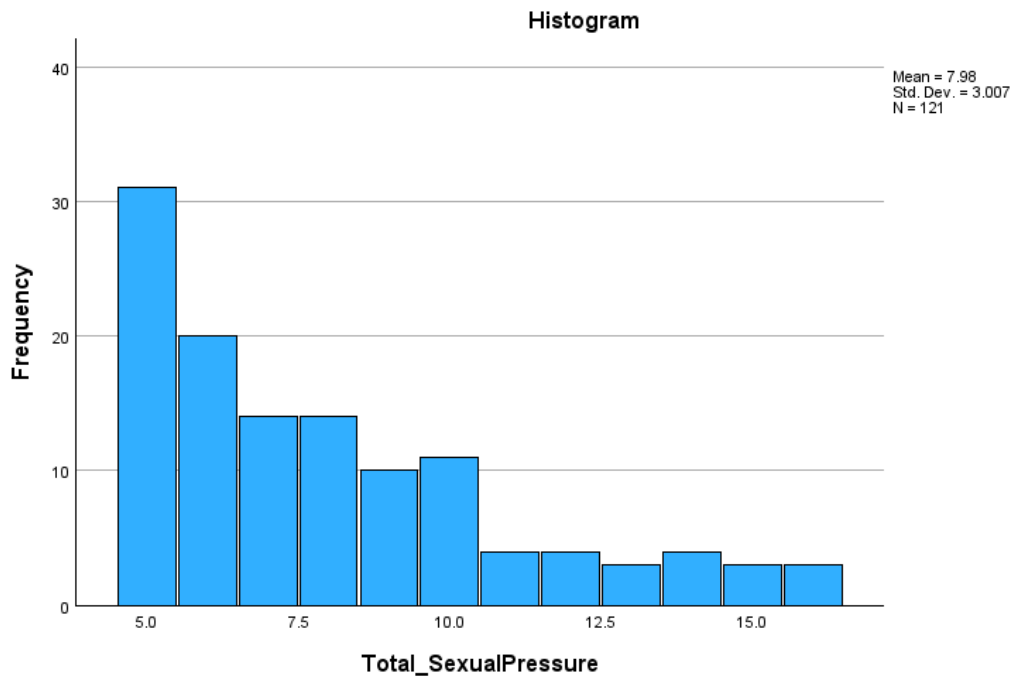
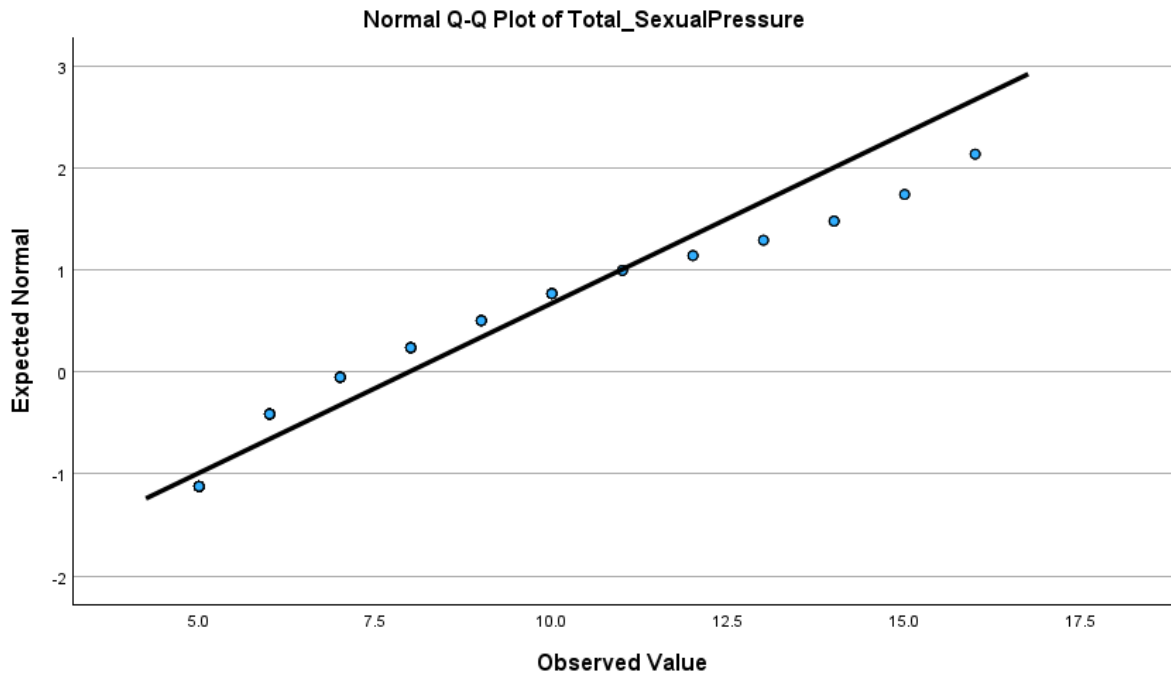


Appendix 10 Normal Q-Q plots and Histograms for Study 2 Variables

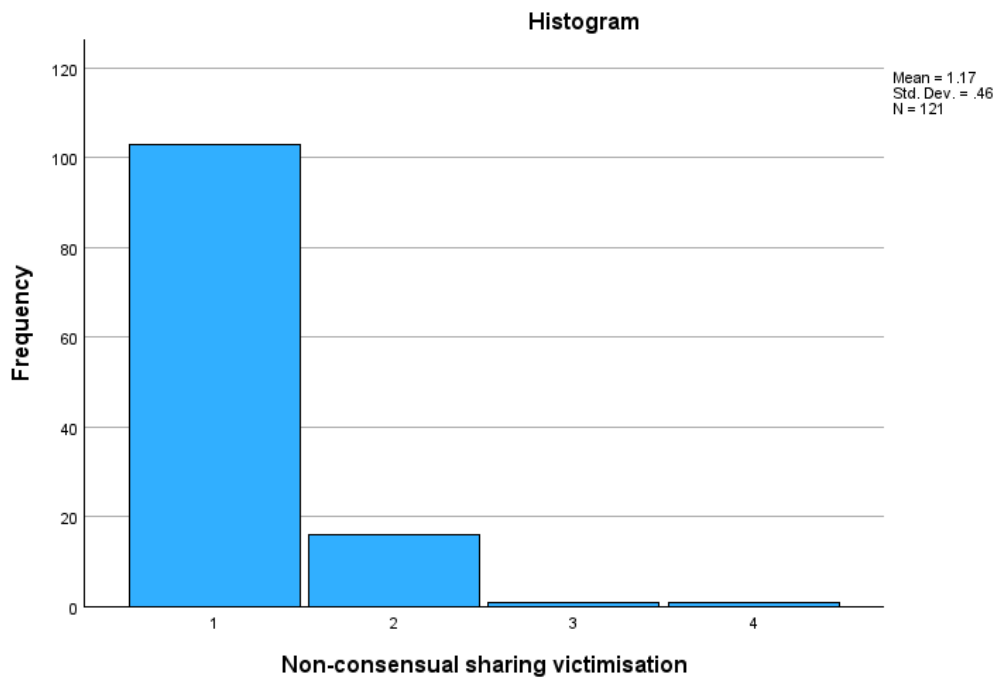
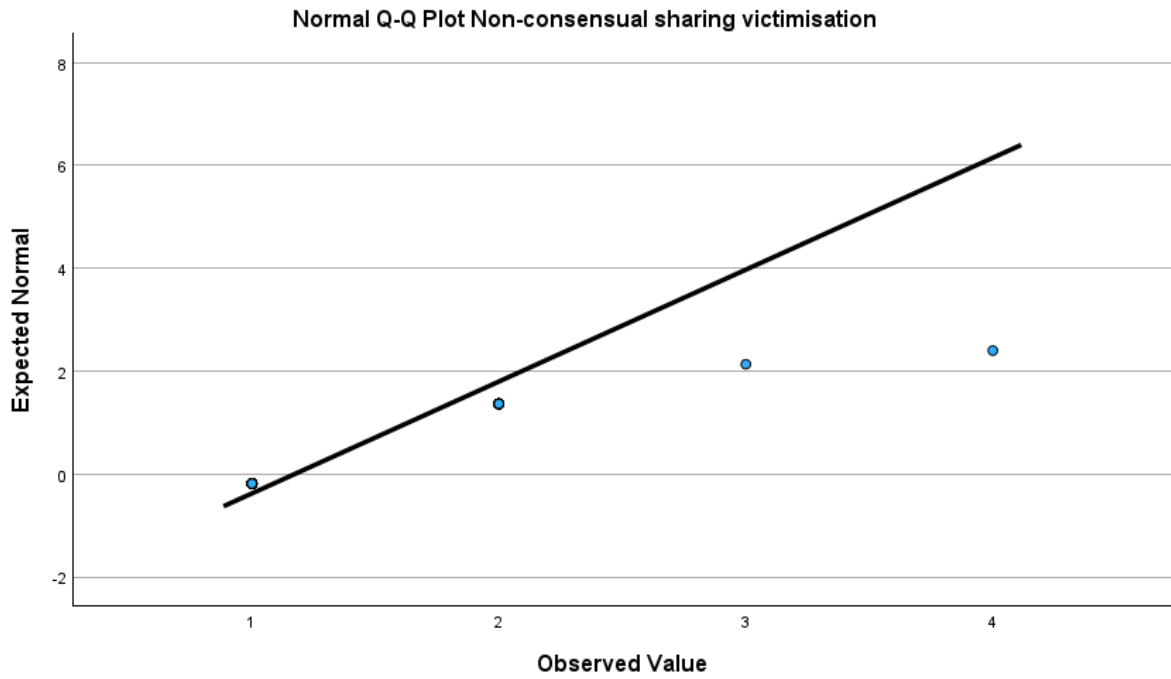
Unwanted online sexual pressure



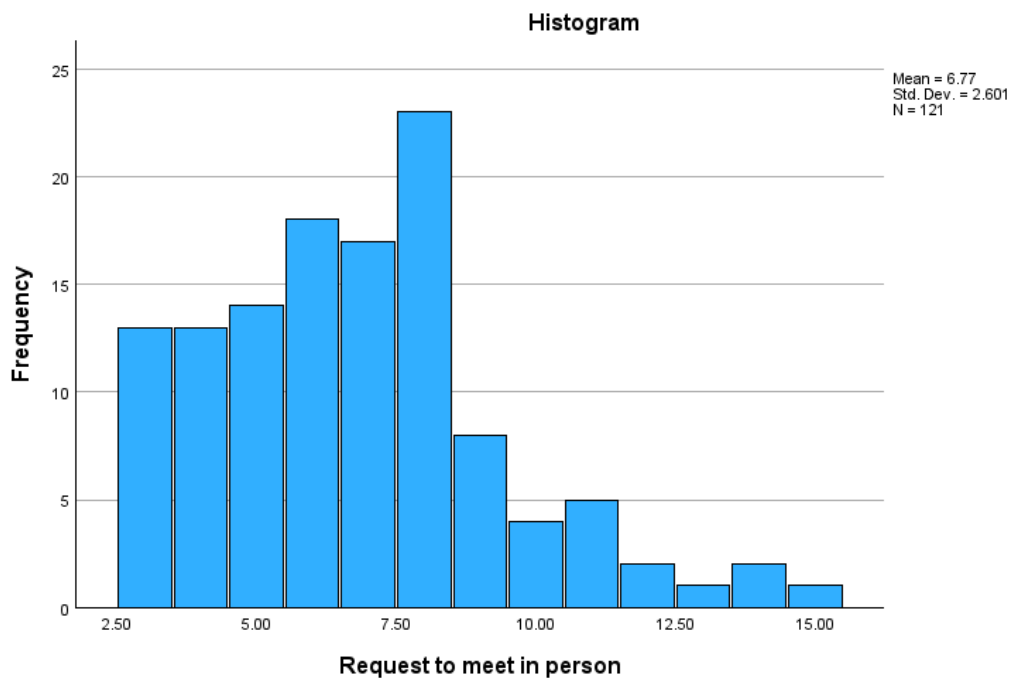
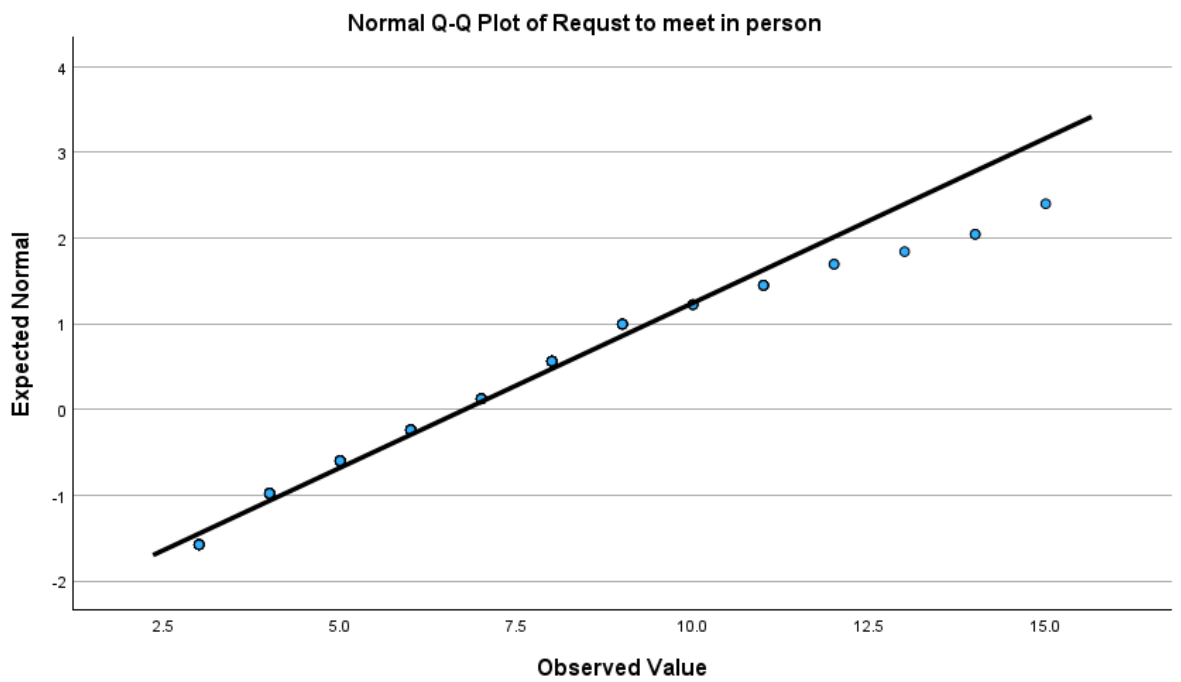
Pressured online sexual activities



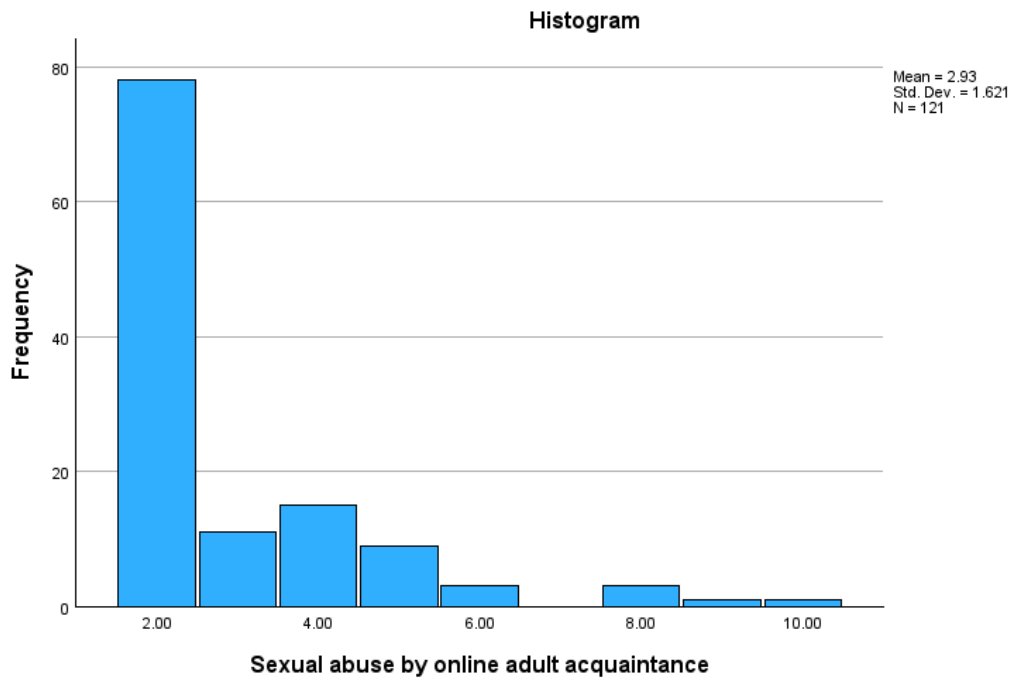
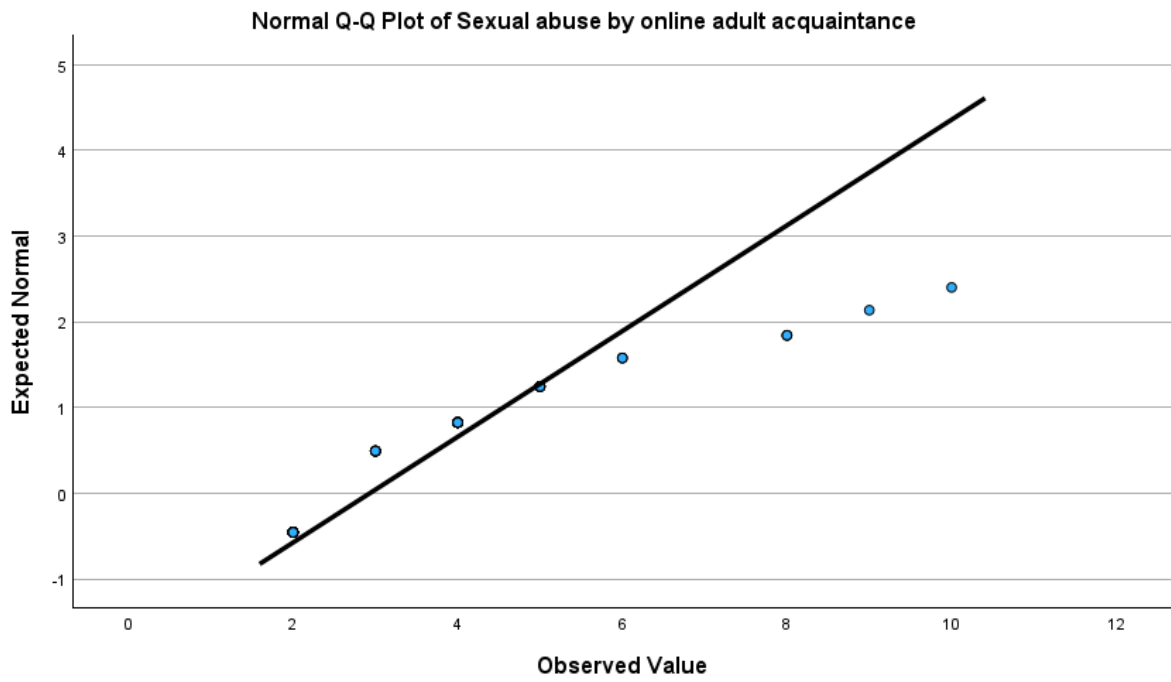
Non-consensual sharing victimisation



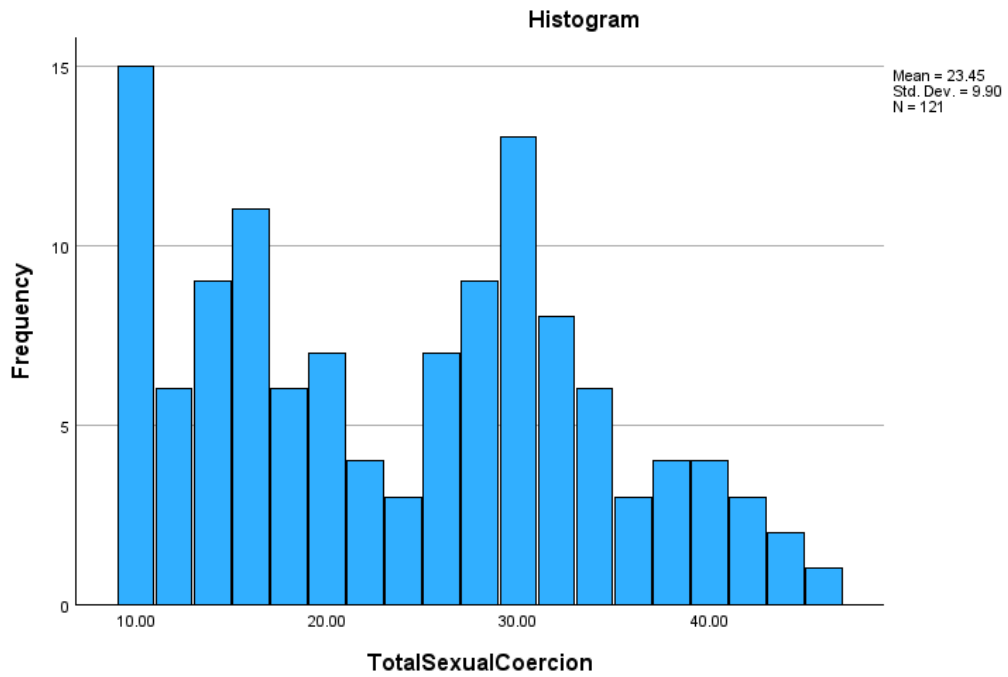
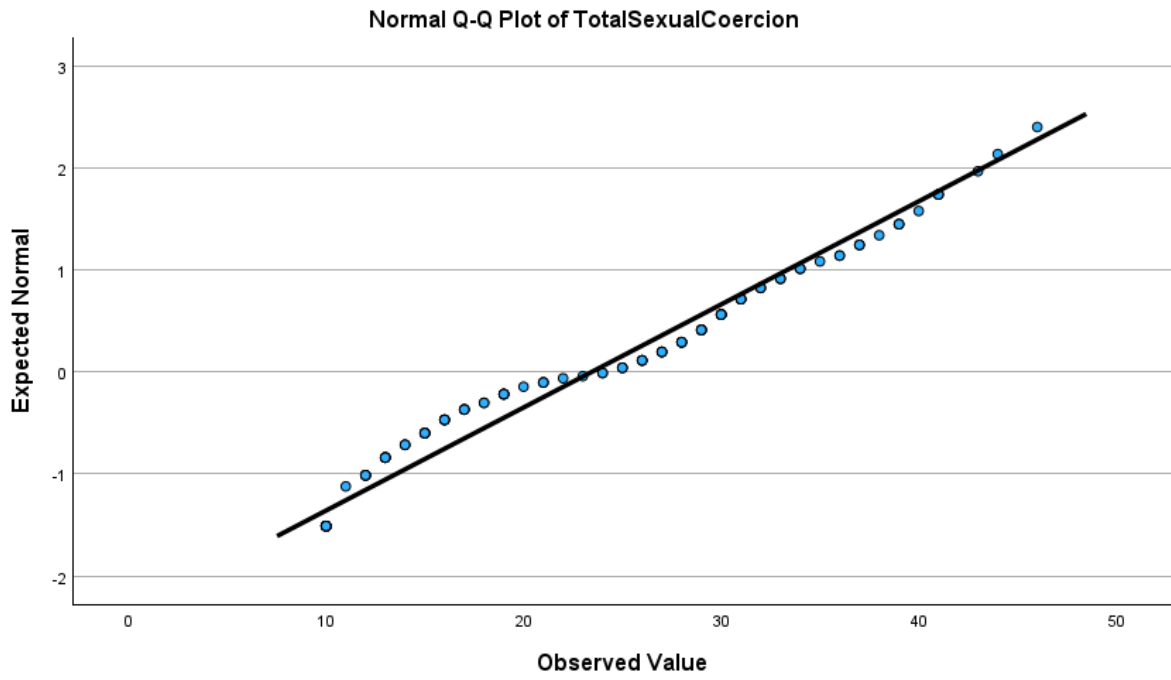
Receiving requests from online adult acquaintances to meet in person



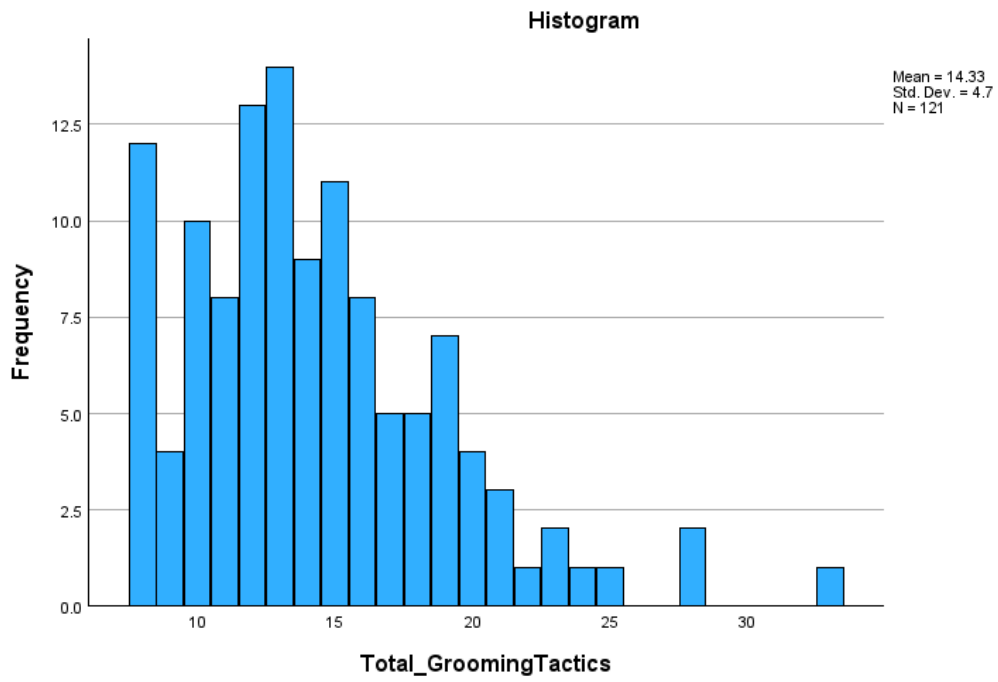
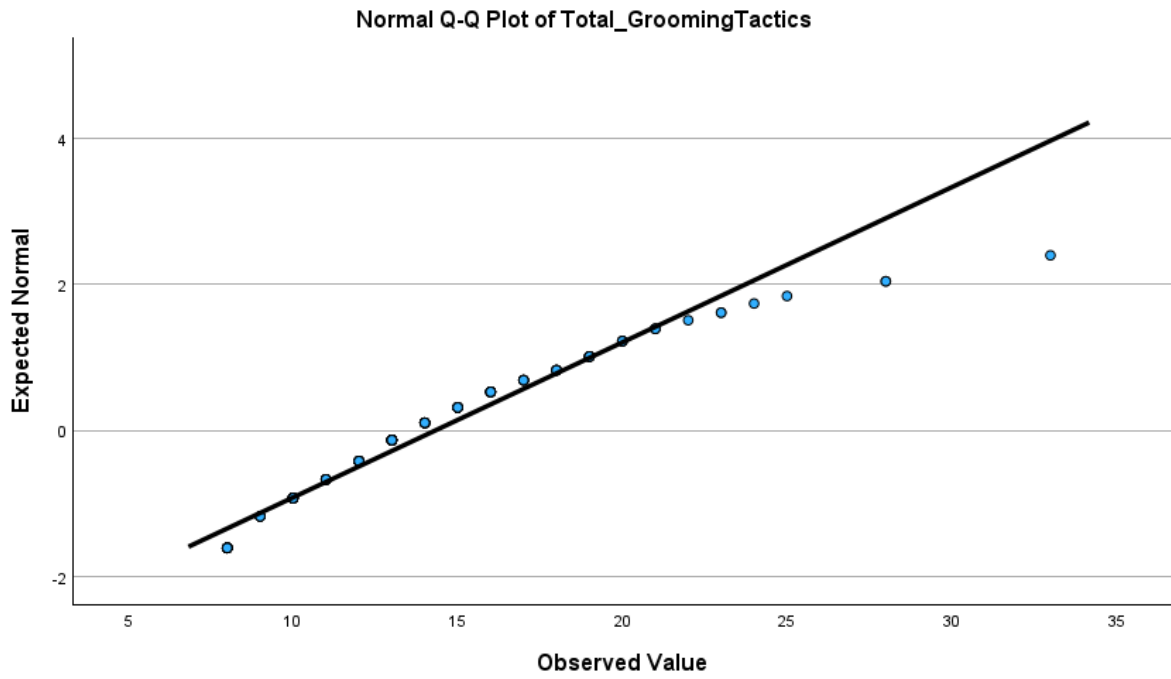
Sexual abuse by online adult acquaintance



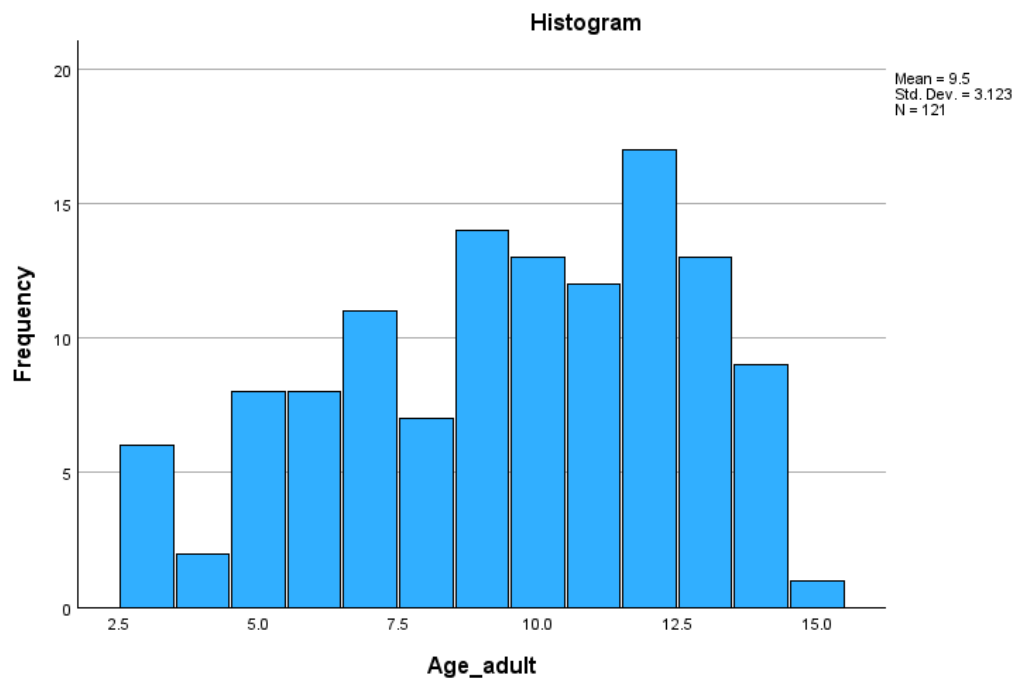
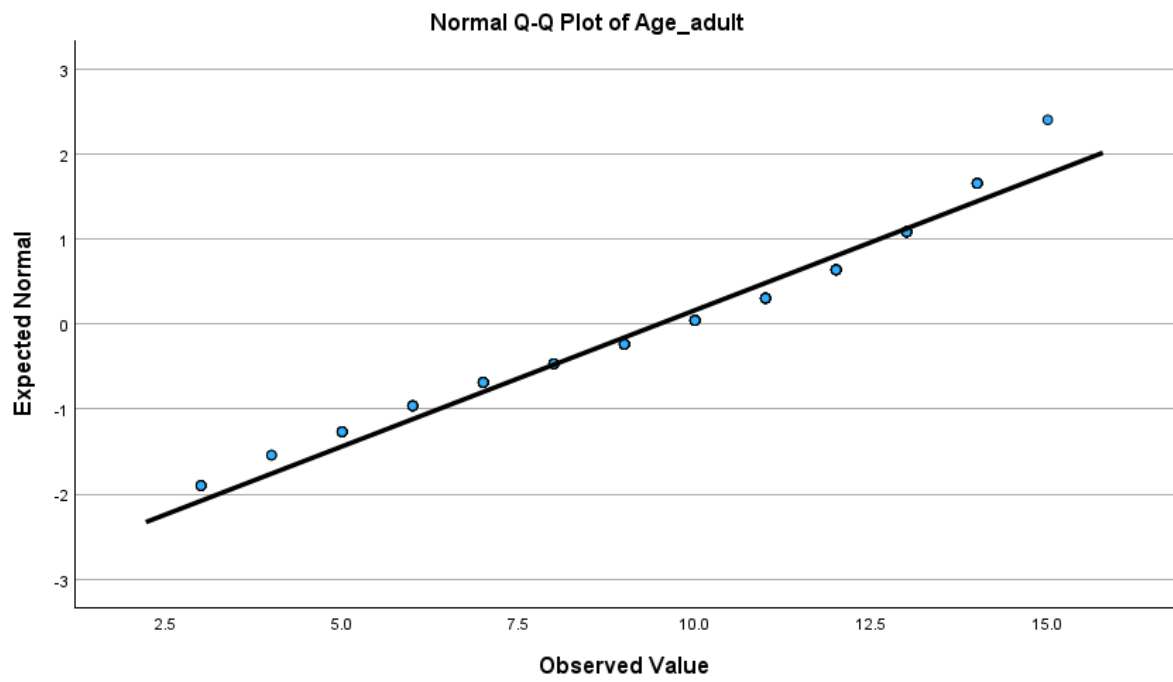
Verbal sexual coercion tactics



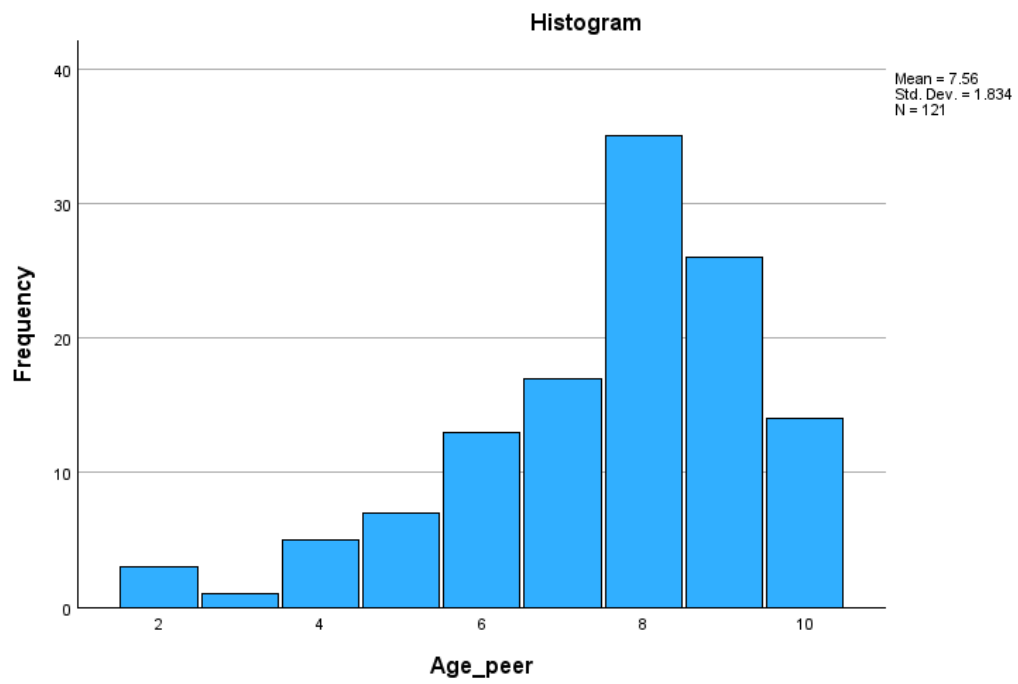
Online grooming tactics



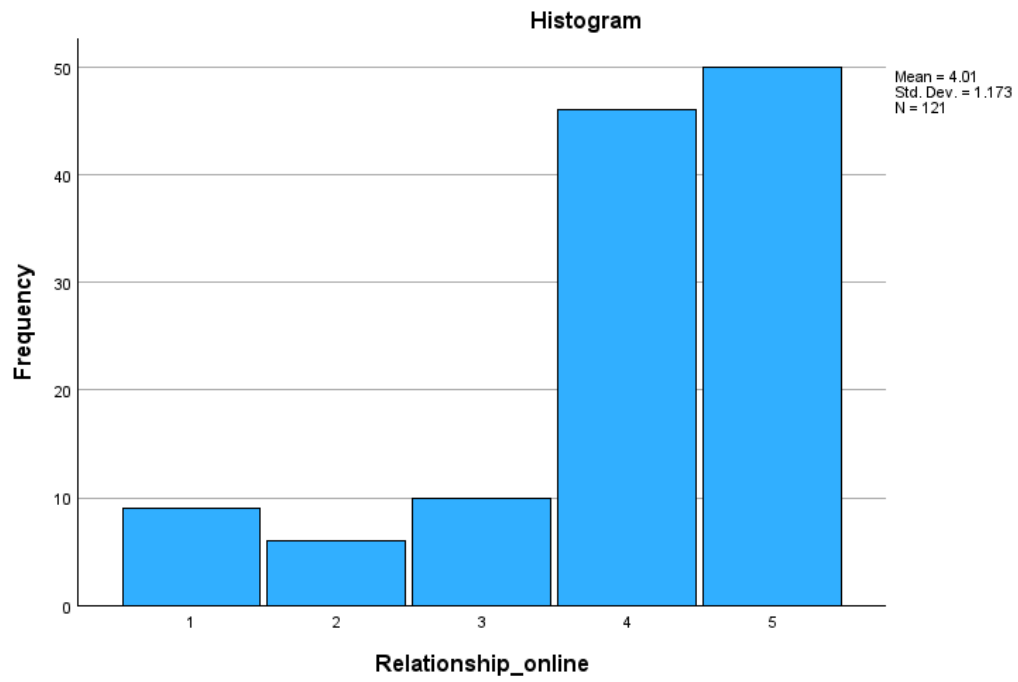
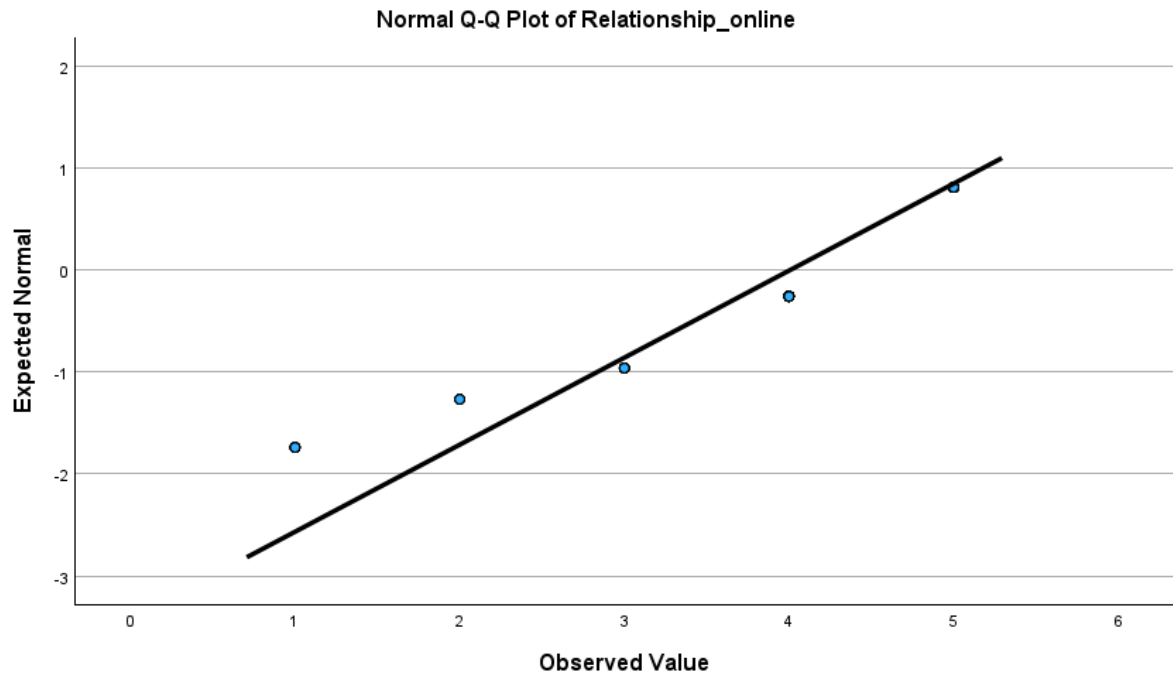
Age of advancer – adult



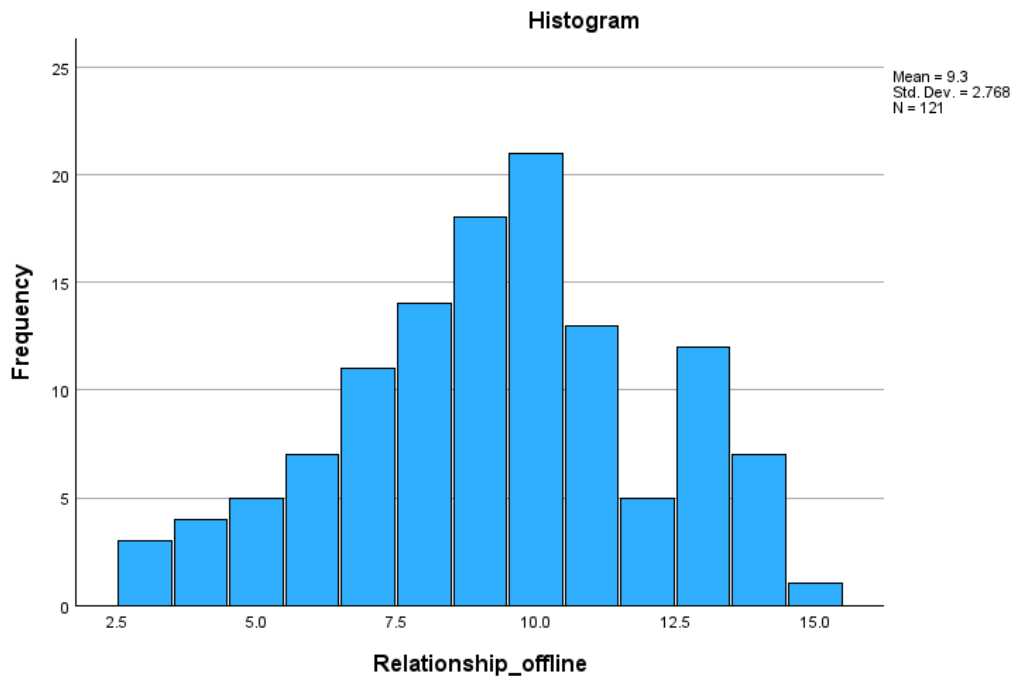
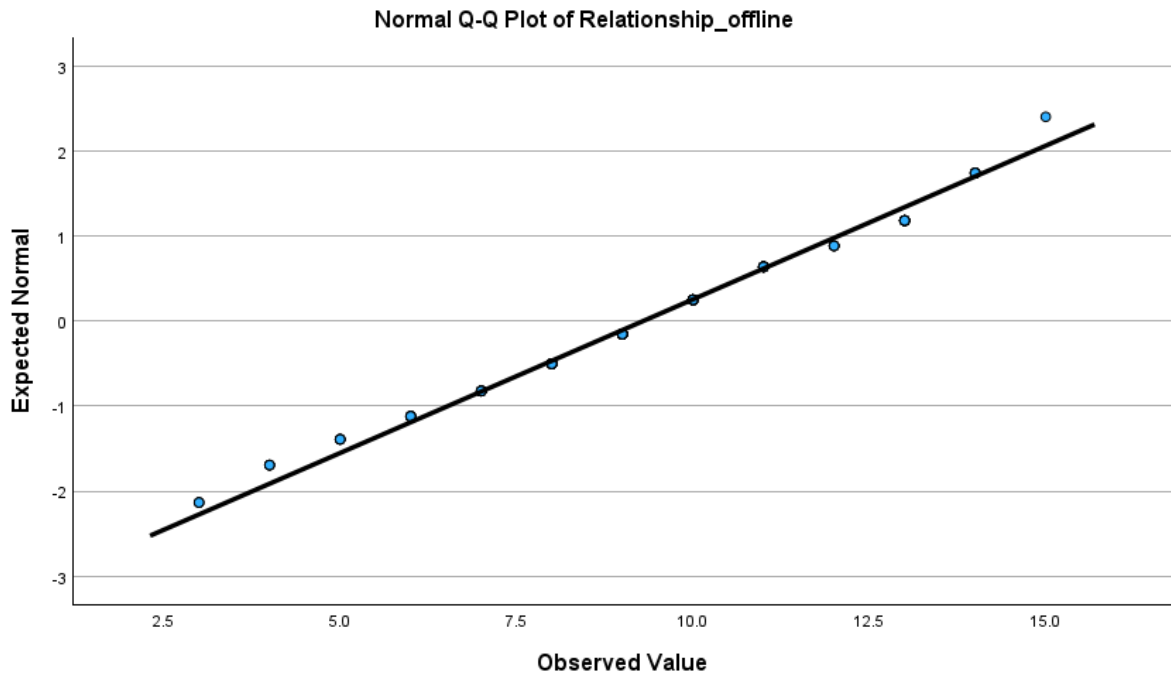
Age of advancer – peer



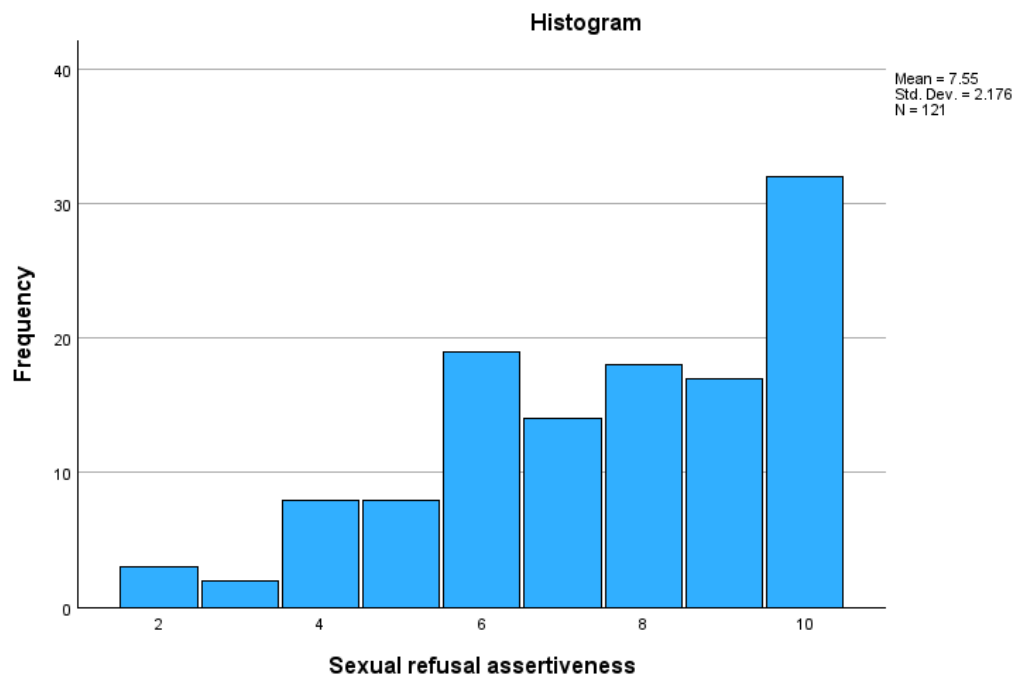
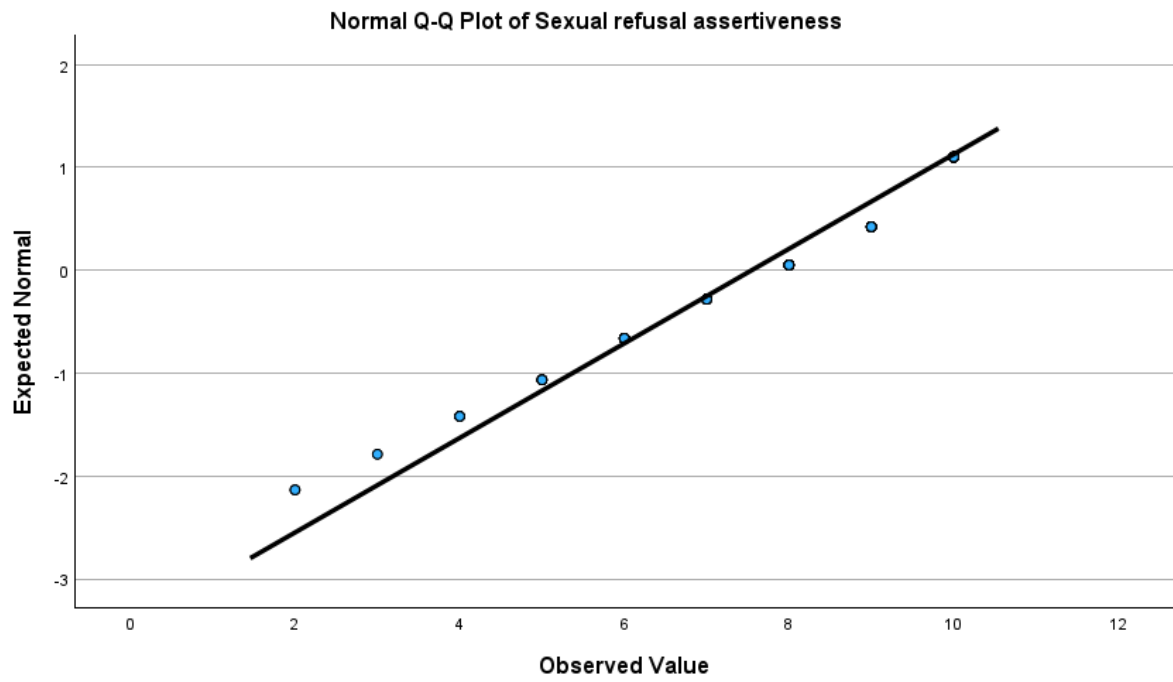
Online acquaintance



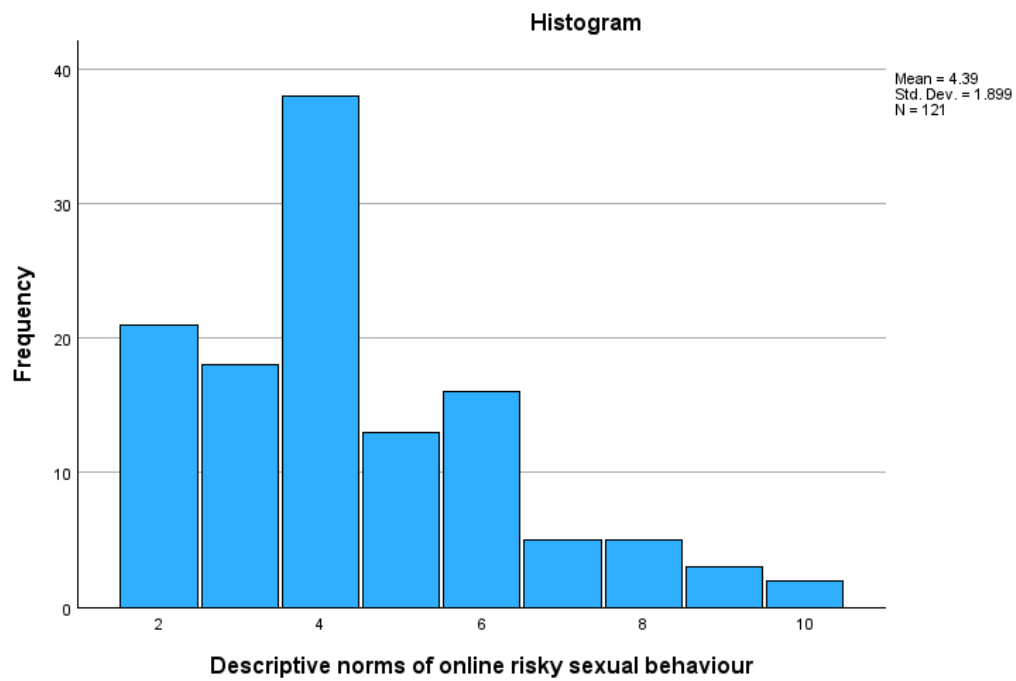
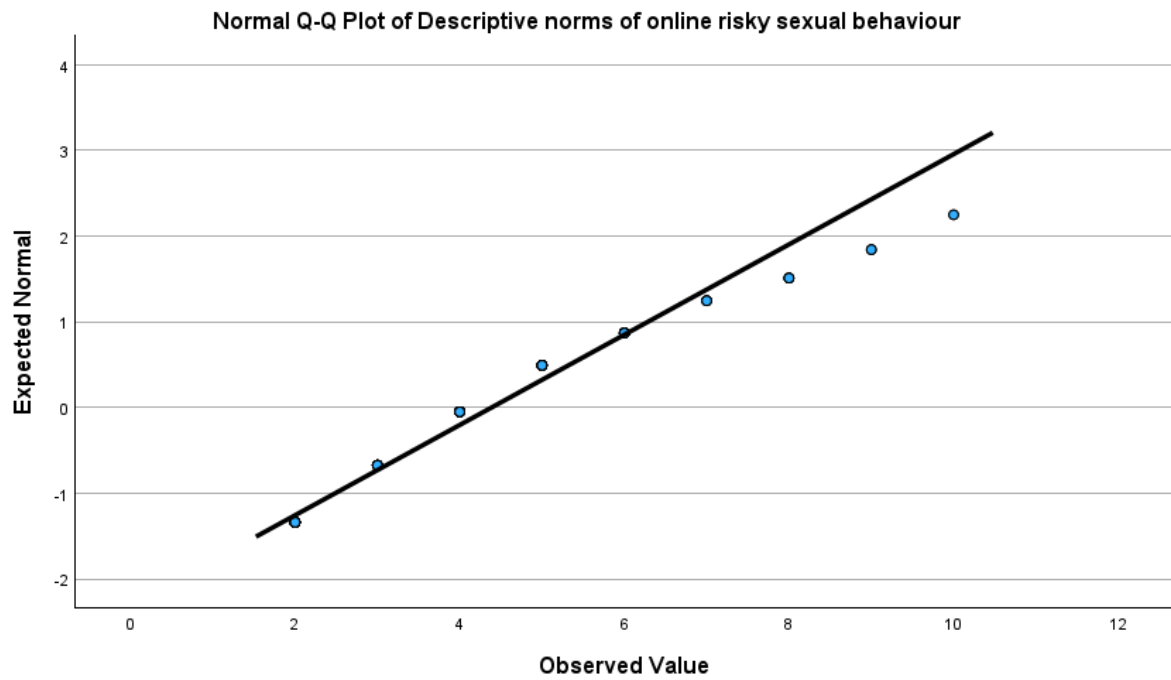
Offline acquaintance



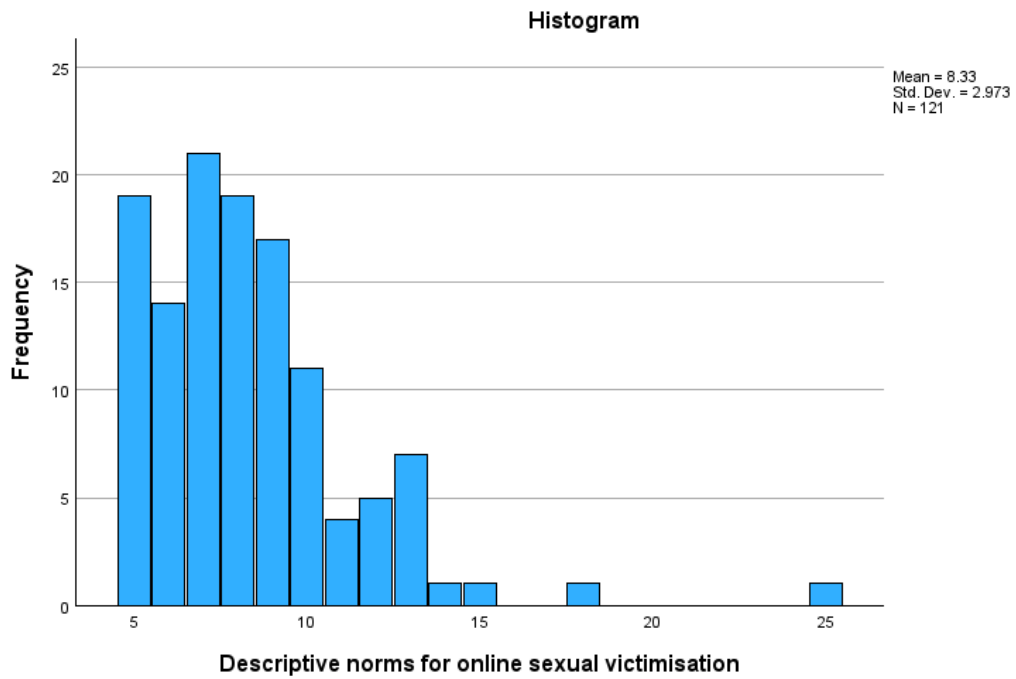
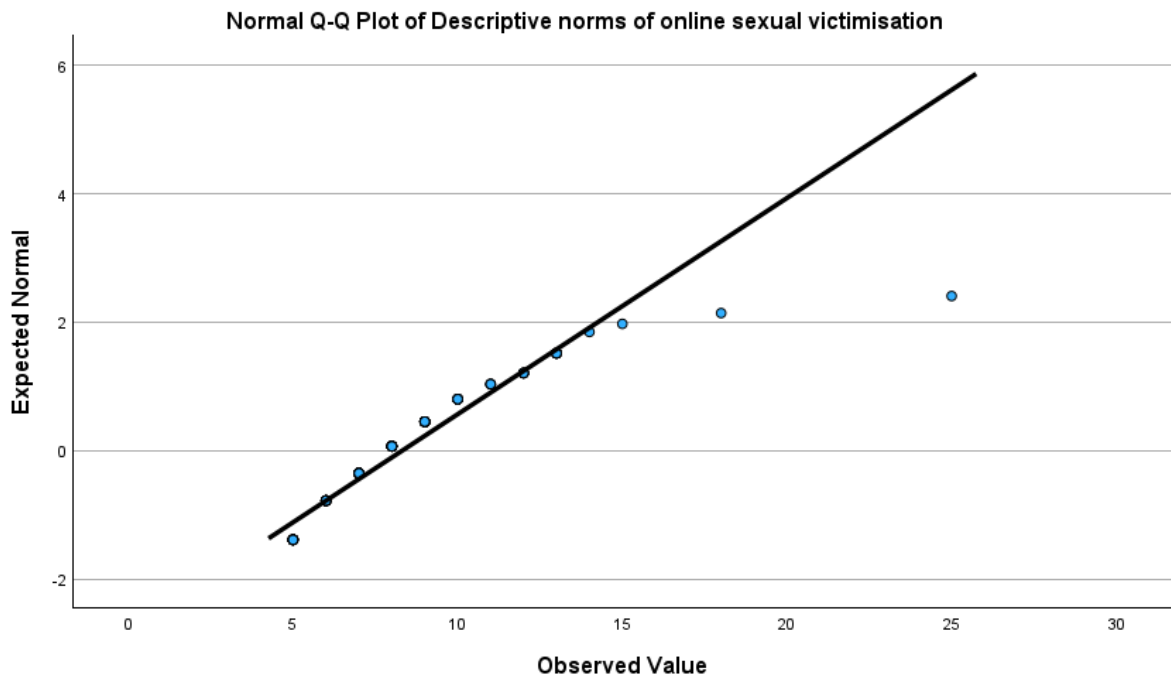
Sexual refusal assertiveness



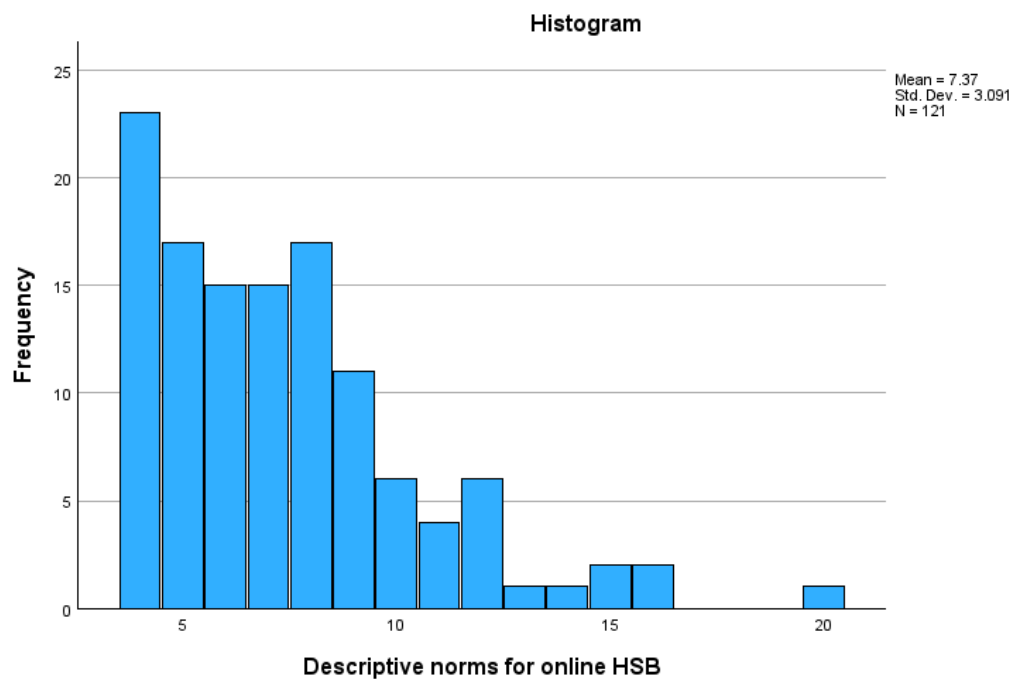
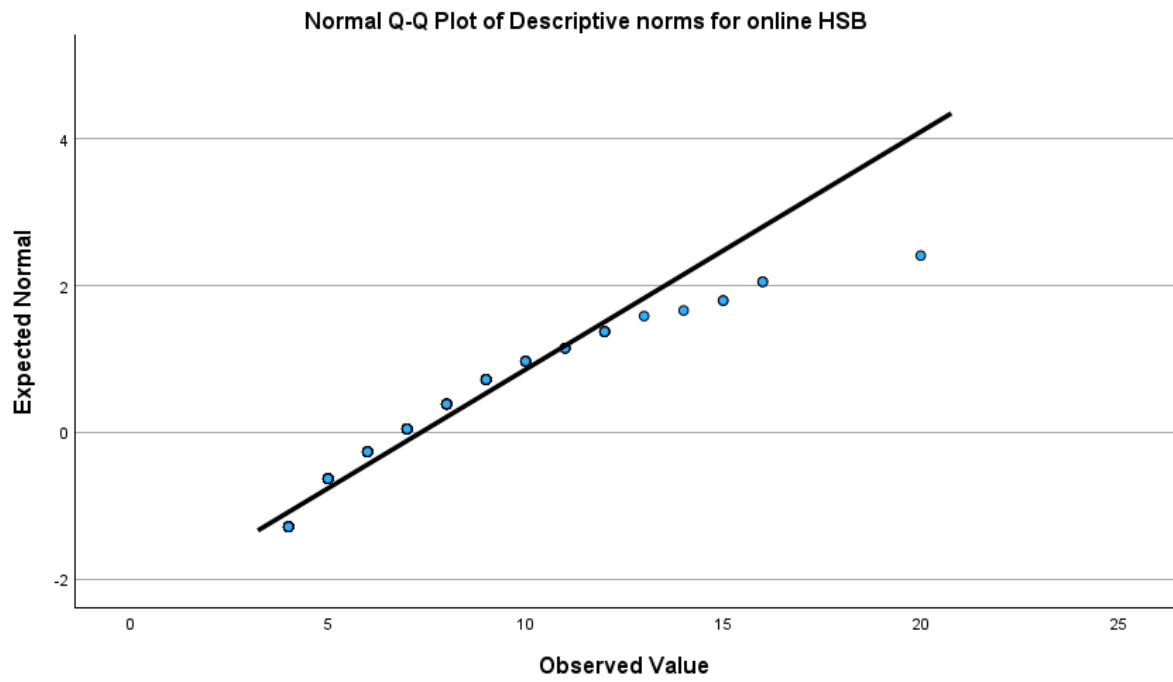
Descriptive norms for online risky sexual behaviour



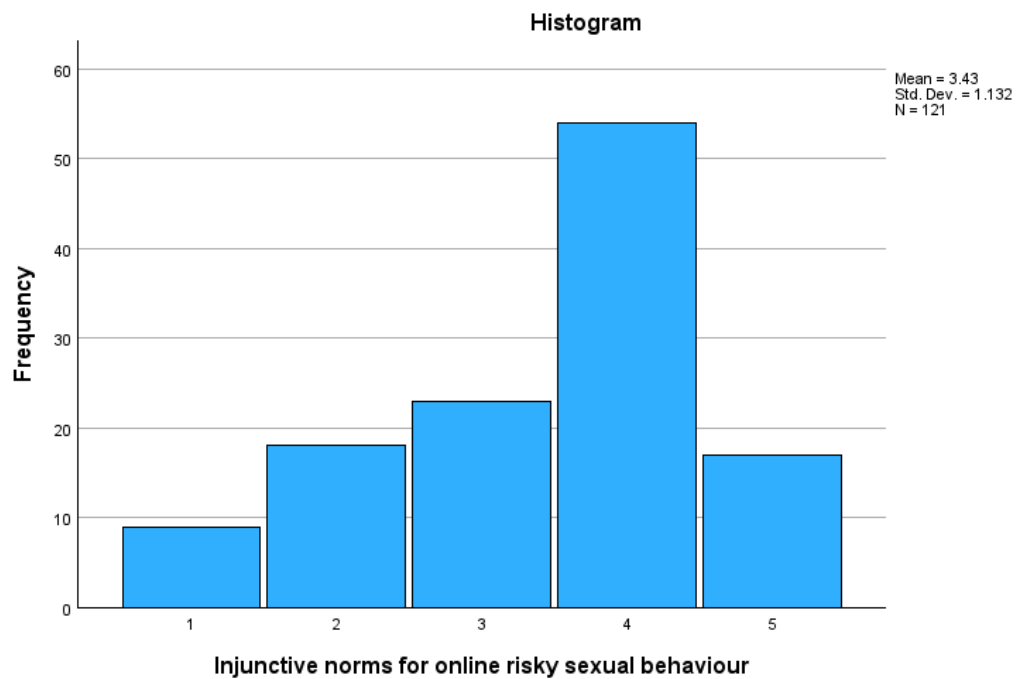
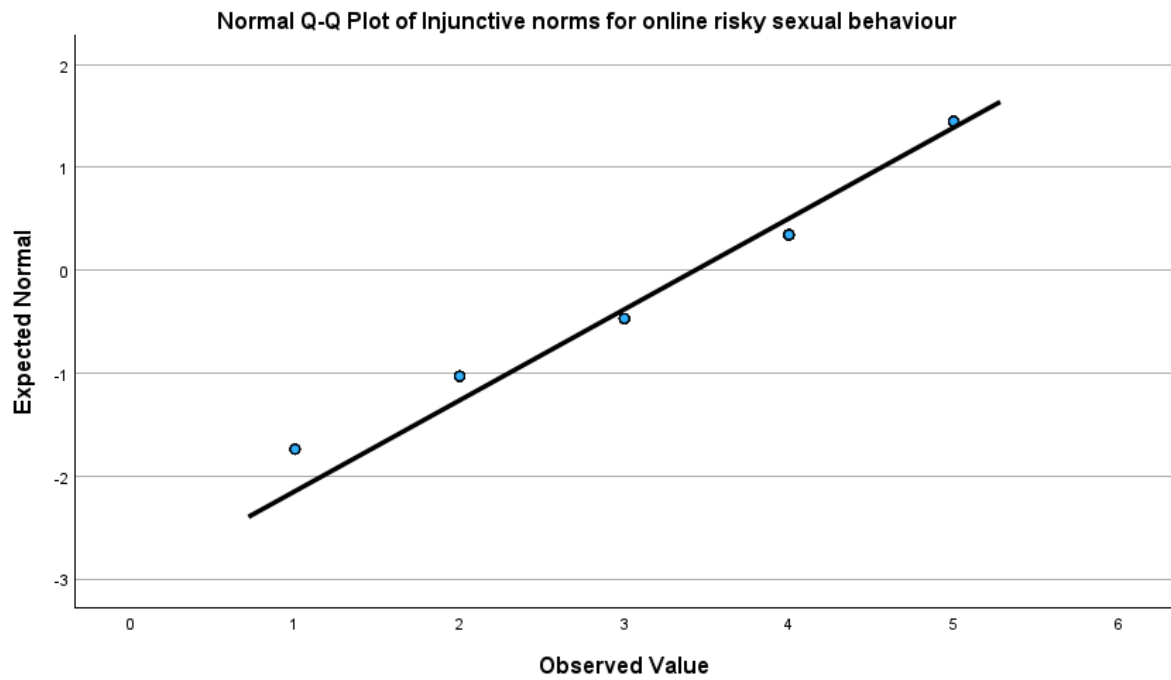
Descriptive norms for online sexual victimisation



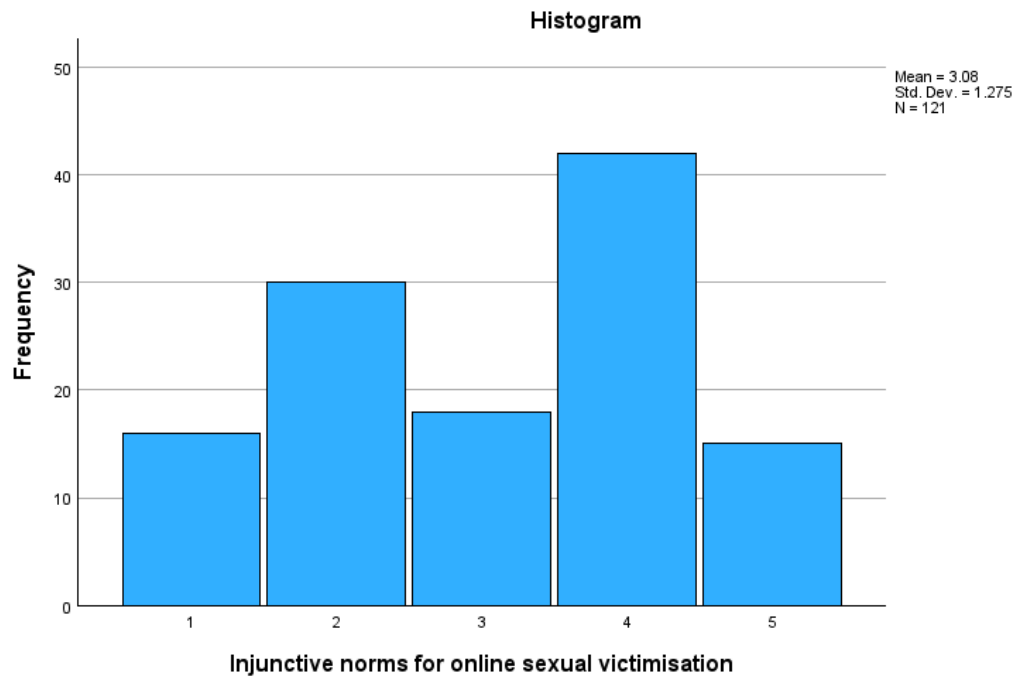
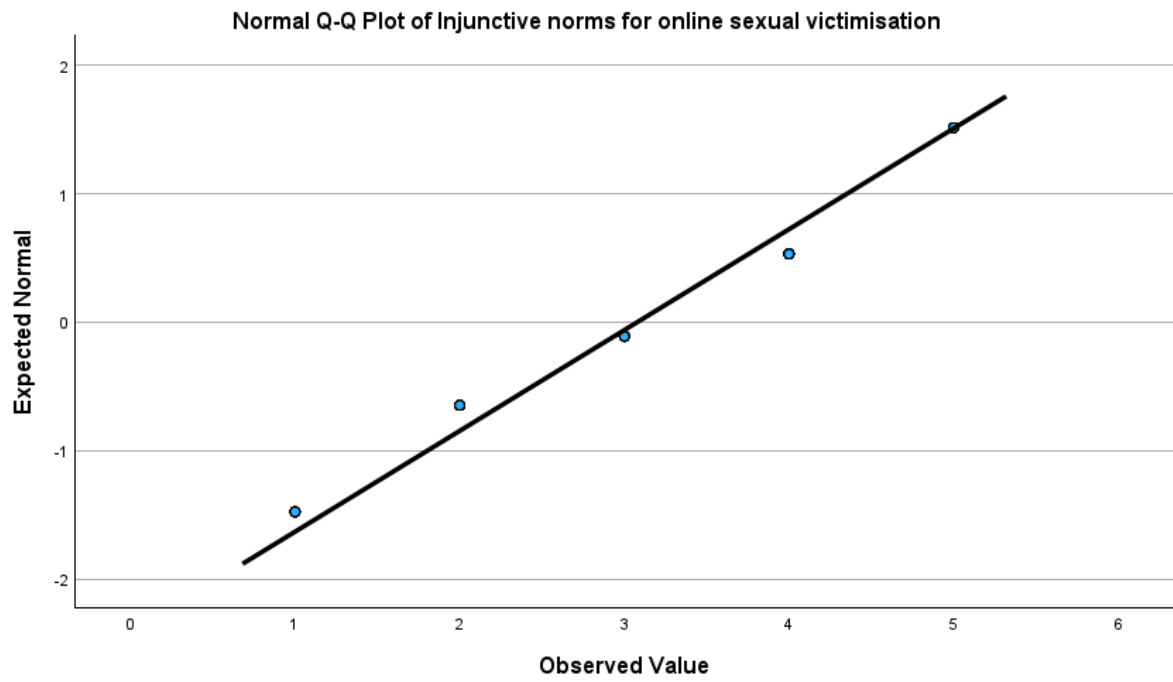
Descriptive norms for online harmful sexual behaviour perpetration



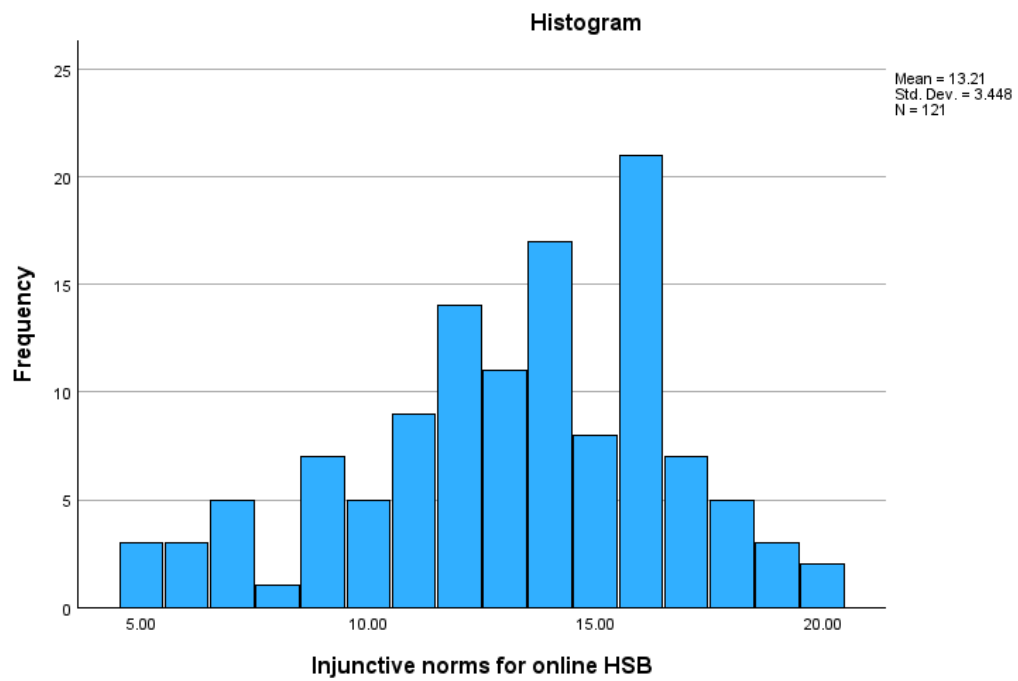
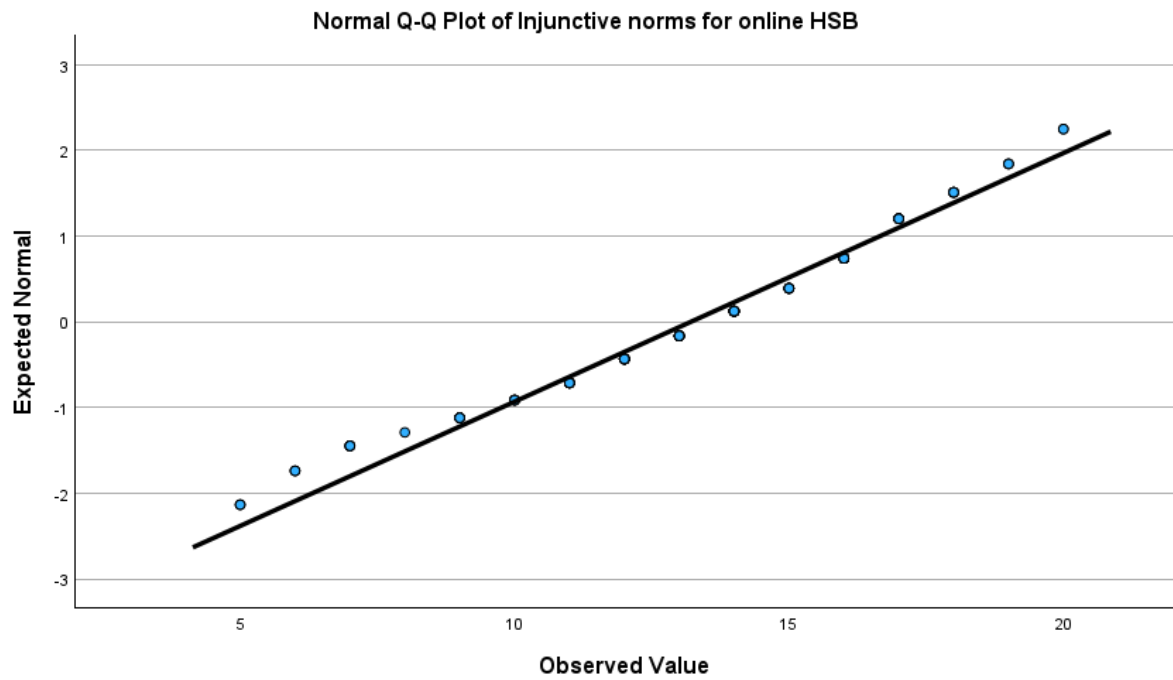
Injunctive norms for online risky sexual behaviour



Injunctive norms for online sexual victimisation



Injunctive norms for online harmful sexual behaviour perpetration



Appendix 11 Skewness and Kurtosis Values for Study 2 Variables

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis
Unwanted online sexual exposure	1.28	1.18
Pressured online sexual activities	1.04	.27
Non-consensual sharing victimisation	3.24	13.11
Verbal sexual coercion tactics	.23	-1.07
Online grooming tactics	1.09	1.77
Request to meet in person	.69	.54
Sexual abuse by online adult acquaintance	2.16	4.95
Descriptive norms online risky sexual behaviour	.87	.48
Descriptive norms online sexual victimisation	1.99	7.72
Descriptive online HSB	1.28	2.07
Injunctive norms online risky sexual behaviour	-.63	-.41
Injunctive norms online sexual victimisation	-.18	-1.17
Injunctive online HSB	-.48	-.23
Adult	-.39	-.80
Peer	-.99	.87
Online acquaintance	-1.34	1.06
Offline acquaintance	-.19	-.41
Sexual refusal assertiveness	-.60	-.48

Appendix 12 Study 2 Correlations Table

	Correlations of model variables for Study 2																			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
1 Online approaches by adult																				
2 Sexual activities with adults	.572**																			
Unwanted online sexual exposure	.554**	.501**																		
3 Pressured online sexual activities	.548**	.503**	.663**																	
4 Victimization of non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit materials	.335**	.200**	.224**	.314**																
5 Online sexual coercion	.415**	.367**	.404**	.548**	.193*															
6 Grooming Tactics	.606**	.540**	.557**	.494**	.208**	.392**														
7 Descriptive peer norms - online risky sexual behaviour	.627**	.411**	.570**	.567**	.276**	.382**	.472**													
8 Descriptive peer norms - online sexual victimisation	.502**	.232**	.472**	.423**	.209**	.367**	.372**	.679**												
9 Descriptive peer norms - online HSB	.466**	.289**	.473**	.351**	.204**	.291**	.438**	.684**	.784**											
10 Injunctive peer norms - online risky sexual behaviour	.304**	.195*	.310**	.384**	.162*	.288**	.202**	.396**	.337**	.351**										
11 Injunctive peer norms - online sexual victimisation	.316**	0.144	.212**	.308**	0.072	.286**	.173*	.371**	.410**	.252**	.280**									
12 Injunctive peer norms - online HSB	.487**	.370**	.452**	.485**	.230**	.461**	.376**	.465**	.499**	.504**	.506**	.305**								
13 Sexual refusal assertiveness	-.254**	-.263**	-0.098	-.309**	-.169*	-.403**	-.203**	-.196*	-.156*	-.165*	-.162*	-0.141	-0.142							
14 Relationship with advancer - offline acquaintances	.173*	0.079	.187*	.289**	.215**	.304**	0.135	.263**	.251**	.228**	.267**	0.023	.307**	-0.085						
15 Relationship with advancer - online acquaintances	-.156*	-.261**	-0.021	-0.065	-.192*	-.179*	-.155*	-0.051	0.065	0.005	0.087	-0.025	0.058	.545**	.200**					
16 Willingness to interact with adults online	.398**	.343**	.296**	.328**	0.059	.416**	.487**	.281**	.263**	.302**	.258**	0.099	.432**	-.214**	.218**	-0.105				
17 Willingness to interact with peers online	-0.107	-0.101	0.092	0.058	0.023	0.134	0.044	0.115	-0.014	0.040	.200**	-0.038	.157*	0.120	.324**	.216**	.173*			
18																				
19																				

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).



**Ever been asked or sent
naked pics online, received
sexual requests or engaged in sexual
activities online?**

**Why not share your experiences in an anonymous
online questionnaire?**

I'm Cindy, a PhD student at the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire. For my research, I am interested in examining the association between early online sexual experiences and psychological well-being in adulthood*.

Who can take part?

- People who are now aged 18 and above, and can read and understand English

Follow the link to find out more so you can decide whether or not to take part



@onlinebehaviour



@onlinebehaviour

* Please note there are questions about childhood stressful events that some may find sensitive
Don't hesitate to get in touch with either myself@ cymchan@uclan.ac.uk
or my supervisor Dr Jo Bryce @ jbryce@uclan.ac.uk

Appendix 14 Study 3 Participant Information Sheet and Questionnaire

Welcome to the research study!

My name is Cindy Chan, and I am a PhD student at the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, UK. Thank you for considering taking part in this research. Please read the information included here carefully so you can decide whether to participate.

I am interested in examining the association between online sexual activities which took place before the age of 16 and psychological well-being in adulthood. **You will be asked about your online sexual experiences with adults and/or peers before the age of 16, your experience of sharing these encounters with others and your recent mental wellbeing. There are also questions about childhood stressful events (emotional, physical, sexual) that you might have experienced, however, specific details about past difficult events WILL NOT be asked. The questions can be sensitive and being asked about past stressful events may be distressing, re-traumatising or triggering.**

Your welfare is of priority. Please bear this in mind when making your decision about whether to take part. Please do not take part if you think doing so would harm you.

If you decide to withdraw whilst completing the questionnaire, click on the 'I wish to withdraw' link at the bottom of the page, and you will be taken to the debrief page.

There are also sources of help and support provided on the debrief page if you experience any distress as a result of participation.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study until you submit your data by closing the browser window and your responses will not be used. After this point it will not be possible to withdraw as all responses are anonymous and individual data cannot be identified.

All data is anonymous and confidential. It will be stored in a secure, password protected file on the researcher's computer / university network and retained for five years. Only myself, my supervisors and those with a legitimate academic need will have access to the data. It is possible that your non-identifiable responses may be shared with others doing similar research, but only if their request to access is approved by the University. The data will be used for my PhD thesis, to write articles and for teaching purposes.

As the questionnaire collects sensitive information, please complete it on your own in a private area. To protect your privacy, please also refresh the website page and delete your history (through internet options) after you have submitted the questionnaire. If you are not sure how to find the internet options tab, please search 'history' on your computer.

The length of the questionnaire varies in length depending on your experience. The study should take between 10-20 minutes to complete. It is possible to change your answers by clicking the backwards button on the bottom on each page.

A debriefing sheet is provided regardless if the questionnaire is completed, which further explains the study and provides details of relevant organisation that offer free support.

If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please get in touch with

Welcome to the research study!

My name is Cindy Chan, and I am a PhD student at the School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, UK. Thank you for considering taking part in this research. Please read the information included here carefully so you can decide whether to participate.

I am interested in examining the association between online sexual activities which took place before the age of 16 and psychological well-being in adulthood. **You will be asked about your online sexual experiences with adults and/or peers before the age of 16, your experience of sharing these encounters with others and your recent mental wellbeing. There are also questions about childhood stressful events (emotional, physical, sexual) that you might have experienced, however, specific details about past difficult events WILL NOT be asked. The questions can be sensitive and being asked about past stressful events may be distressing, re-traumatising or triggering.**

Your welfare is of priority. Please bear this in mind when making your decision, and do not take part if you think doing so would harm you.

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As the questionnaire collects sensitive information, please complete it on your own in a private area. To protect your privacy, please also refresh the website page and delete your history (through internet options) after you have submitted the questionnaire. If you are not sure how to find the internet options tab, please search 'history' on your computer.

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A debriefing sheet is provided regardless if the questionnaire is completed, which further explains the study and provides details of relevant organisation that offer free support.

If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please get in touch with

Researcher Contact Details:

Cindy Chan
School of Psychology
University of Central Lancashire
Preston
PR1 2HE
cymchan@uclan.ac.uk

Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Jo Bryce
School of Psychology
University of Central Lancashire
Preston
PR1 2HE
JBryce@uclan.ac.uk

If you have concerns about the research and you wish to raise them with somebody who is independent of the research team, please contact the University Officer for Ethics (OfficerForEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, that you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study by using the withdrawal link or closing your browser window until you submit your data.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

(then Qualtrics display two options to choose from)

- I consent, begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Thank you for having decided to take part in this survey. If you do not wish to answer a question, please leave it blank.

Would you consider yourself as	Male / Female / Prefer to self-describe (free text)
Please state your age in numbers (e.g. 18, 25)	
Please describe your sexual orientation	(free text)

Depression

For each statement, please indicate how often you have felt this way in the past two weeks by selecting the option you most agree with					
	During the two weeks				
	Not at all Or Less than 1 day	1-2 days	3-4 days	5-7 days	Nearly every day for 2 weeks
My appetite was poor	0	1	2	3	4
I could not shake off the blues					
I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing					
I felt depressed					
My sleep was restless					
I felt sad					
I could not get going					
Nothing made me happy					
I felt like a bad person					
I lost interest in my usual activities					
I slept much more than usual					
I felt like I was moving too slowly					
I felt fidgety					
I wished I were dead					
I wanted to hurt myself					
I was tired all the time					
I did not like myself					
I lost a lot of weight without trying to					
I had a lot of trouble getting to sleep					
I could not focus on the important things					

Anxiety

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	0	1	2	3
Not being able to stop or control worrying				
Worrying too much about different things				
Trouble relaxing				
Being so restless that it is hard to sit still				
Becoming easily annoyed or irritable				
Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen				

(Screening questions)

Answer the following questionnaire thinking of your behaviours in the online environment **BEFORE YOU TURNED 16 YEARS OLD.**

This includes communication or interactions via mobile phones, tablets, and/or laptops/computers. This can involve DMs (direct message), messenger, pictures, videos, live chat, or gaming.

The following questions ask about your *unwanted sexual experiences* online.

People engage in *unwanted sexual activities* for a variety of reasons. For example, they feel pressured, forced, manipulated, or controlled etc. Unwanted sexual experiences might have made/make you feel uncomfortable. Even if you think you enjoyed the experience or didn't mind at the time, it's okay if you look back now and no longer believe it was what you wanted. Please bear this in mind when answering the following questions.

OCSA perpetrated by adults

Before you turned 16, how frequently did you engage in the following activities with adults who you knew or suspected were aged 18 and older?

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Sent semi-nude or nude pictures/videos to an adult	0	1	2	3
Talked about sex / sexual fantasy with an adult				
Engaged in online sexual activities such as masturbation over video chat/or whilst talking to or texting an adult				
Received sexual photos/ videos from the adult who you were talking to				
Met with an adult in person for sexual activities after meeting online				

(Only shown to those who did not answer "Never" to all questions)

Reflecting on your interactions with adult(s), how distressing did you find these sexual experiences as a whole?

Not distressing at all	A bit distressing	Neutral	Somewhat distressing	Very distressing
------------------------	-------------------	---------	----------------------	------------------

OCSA perpetrated by peers

Before you turned 16, how frequently did you engage in unwanted online sexual interactions with someone who was under age 18? This does not include people you were in a romantic relationship with.

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Sent semi-nude or nude pictures/videos under pressure	0	1	2	3
Talked about sex / sexual fantasy under pressure				
Engaged in online sexual activities such as masturbation over video chat/or whilst talking or texting, under pressure				
Received sexual images/videos despite asking the sender to stop				
Engaged in physical sexual activities under pressure following online communication				

(Only shown to those who did not answer "Never" to all questions)

Reflecting on your interactions with others who were under age 18, how distressing did you find these sexual experiences as a whole?

Not distressing at all	A bit distressing	Neutral	Somewhat distressing	Very distressing
------------------------	-------------------	---------	----------------------	------------------

Self-esteem

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement **at the moment**.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
0	1	2	3

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself
2. At times, I think I am no good at all*
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of*
6. I certainly feel useless at times*
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on equal plane with others
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself*
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure*
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself

Other trauma experienced before age 16

During the first 16 years of your life:

	Yes	No
Did a parent or other adult in the household often ... Swear at you, insult you, put you down or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?	1	0
Did a parent or other adult in the household often ... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?		
Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever ... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Try to or actually have oral, anal, vaginal sex with you?		
Did you often feel that... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?		
Did you often feel that... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?		
Were your parents ever separated or divorced?		
Was your parent or carer: Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at him/her? or Sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?		
Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?		
Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?		
Did a household member go to prison?		

This is the end of the questionnaire, thank you for your time. *(for individuals who did not report online sexual experiences)*
Qualtrics will display debrief sheet.

For respondents who reported online sexual experiences, the following will be displayed

PTSD symptoms

Below is a list of difficulties people sometimes have after stressful life events. Please read each item, and then indicate how distressing each has been for you during the past month with respect to the **online sexual experiences you encountered before the age of 16**. Even if you think you enjoyed the sexual interactions or didn't mind then, it's okay to look back and no longer believe that was what you wanted.

You can think about one particular online sexual encounter that caused you the most distress, or your experience with one person in particular. You can also think about all the negative online sexual encounters you experienced before age 16.

Since it is not uncommon to meet face-to-face with people who we first met online, sexual activities that took place in person also count.

How much have you been distressed or bothered by these difficulties in the past month?	Not at all	A little bit	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
1. Any reminder brought back feelings about it	0	1	2	3	4
2. I had trouble staying asleep					
3. Other things kept making me think about it					
4. I felt irritable and angry					
5. I avoided letting myself get upset when I thought about it or was reminded about it					
6. I thought about it when I didn't mean to					
7. I felt as if it hadn't happened or wasn't real					
8. I stayed away from reminders about it					
9. Pictures about it popped into my mind					
10. I was jumpy and easily startled					
11. I tried not to think about it					
12. I was aware that I still had a lot of feelings about it, but I didn't deal with them					
13. My feelings about it were kind of numb					
14. I found myself acting or feeling like I was back at that time					
15. I had trouble falling asleep					
16. I had waves of strong feelings about it					
17. I tried to remove it from my memory					
18. I had trouble concentrating					
19. Reminders of it caused me to have physical reactions, such as sweating,					

trouble breathing, nausea, or a pounding heart					
20. I had dreams about it					
21. I felt watchful and on guard					
22. I tried not to talk about it					

Social reactions

Have you ever disclosed or shared your negative online sexual experiences with others?

- Yes
- No

(depending on the answer, Qualtrics will display different items. For those who answer 'Yes', Qualtrics display items in normal text; for those who answer 'No', Qualtrics displays items in italics below)The following is a list of reactions that other people sometimes have when responding to a person with negative sexual experiences.

Please indicate how often you experienced each of the listed responses from other people / *Please indicate how often you anticipate each of the listed responses from other people when you consider sharing your experience.*

0	1	2	3	4
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always

1. Told you that you were irresponsible or not cautious enough / *Tell you that you were irresponsible or not cautious enough*
2. Reassured you that you are a good person / *Reassure you that you are a good person*
3. Treated you differently in some way than before you told them that made you uncomfortable / *Treat you differently in some way than before you told them that will make you uncomfortable*
4. Told you to go on with your life / *Tell you to go on with your life*
5. Comforted you by telling you it would be all right or by holding you / *Comfort you by telling you it will be all right or by holding you*
6. Tried to take control of what you did/ decisions you made/ *Try to take control of what you do / decisions you made*
7. Has been so upset that they needed reassurance from you / *Will be so upset that they may need reassurance from you*
8. Made decisions or did things for you / *Make decisions or do things for you*
9. Told you that you could have done more to prevent this experience from occurring / *Tell you that you could have done more to prevent this experience from occurring*

10. Provided information and discussed options / *Provide information and discuss options*
11. Told you to stop thinking about it / *Tell you to stop thinking about it*
12. Expressed so much anger at the perpetrator that you had to calm them down / *Express so much anger at the perpetrator that you have to calm them down*
13. Avoided talking to you or spending time with you / *Avoid talking to you or spending time with you*
14. Treated you as if you were a child or somehow incompetent / *Treat you as if you were a child or somewhat incompetent*
15. Helped you get information of any kind about coping with the experience / *Help you get information of any kind about coping with the experience*
16. Made you feel like you didn't know how to take care of yourself / *Make you feel like you don't know how to take care of yourself*

Attribution of blame

Below are statements describing thoughts people often have about why negative sexual experiences occurred. Please indicate how often you have had each of the following thoughts in the **past 12 months**.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

How often have you thought: my negative online sexual experience was because...

- 1) I used poor judgment
- 2) I should have resisted more
- 3) I just put myself in a vulnerable situation
- 4) I should have been more cautious
- 5) I didn't do enough to protect myself.
- 6) I am unlucky
- 7) I am a careless person
- 8) I am just the victim type
- 9) Things like this happen to people like me
- 10) I am too trusting

Thank you for your time, this is the end of the questionnaire.

Appendix 15 Study 3 Debriefing Sheet

Debrief sheet

Thank you very much for taking part in this research and completing the questionnaire. Your contribution will remain anonymous.

The aim of the study is to explore the long-term impact of negative online sexual experiences occurred before the age of 16. Psychological functioning such as self-esteem and self-blame were examined, along with mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms experienced in adulthood. In particular, the study explores whether reactions or anticipated reactions of others to the disclosure of negative online sexual experience will mediate one's psychological wellbeing in adulthood.

Some participants were asked above to reflect on statements about the possible causes of their negative online experiences. Please remember that statements such as 'I'm too trusting' or 'I didn't do enough to protect myself' are neither factual nor reflective of why the events had happened. Inappropriate behaviour is always the fault of the person who carries it out, and not of the person who receives it.

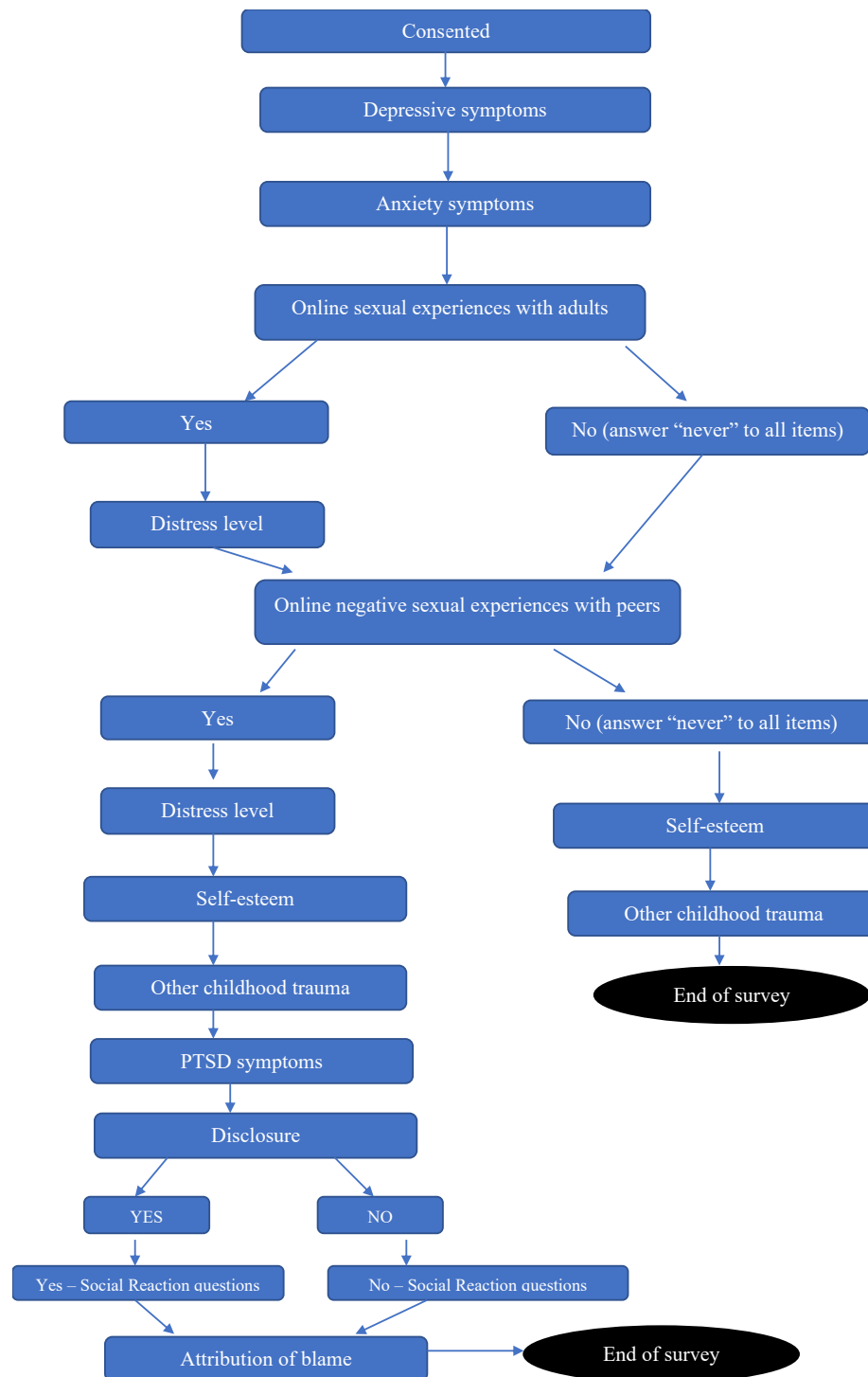
It is hoped that knowledge gained through the study can contribute to developing further understanding of the impact of early online sexual behaviour and experience.

Please remember that once you have submitted your answers, you will be unable to withdraw your data from the study. To protect your privacy, you may wish to delete the browser history. To do so, open your browser and press Ctrl+H, which works on most browsers. Alternatively, go to the top right corner of the browser and find 'history' to delete your browsing history.

If you feel distressed or have been affected by the content in the questionnaire, you may wish to speak to someone to receive help and advice. The following services provide free and confidential support:

- NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in Childhood) – Support to adult survivors of all types of childhood abuse.
Website: www.napac.org.uk / Helpline: 08088010331
- Victim Support – Helps people cope with the effects of crime.
Website: www.victimsupport.org.uk / Helpline: 08453030900 / email: contact@victimsupport.org.uk
- Childline – Free, confidential advice and support for anyone under 19 with any issues they are going through.
Website: www.childline.org.uk / Helpline: 0800 1111

Appendix 16 Study 3 Questionnaire Flowchart



Appendix 17 Missing Values SPSS Output for Study 3

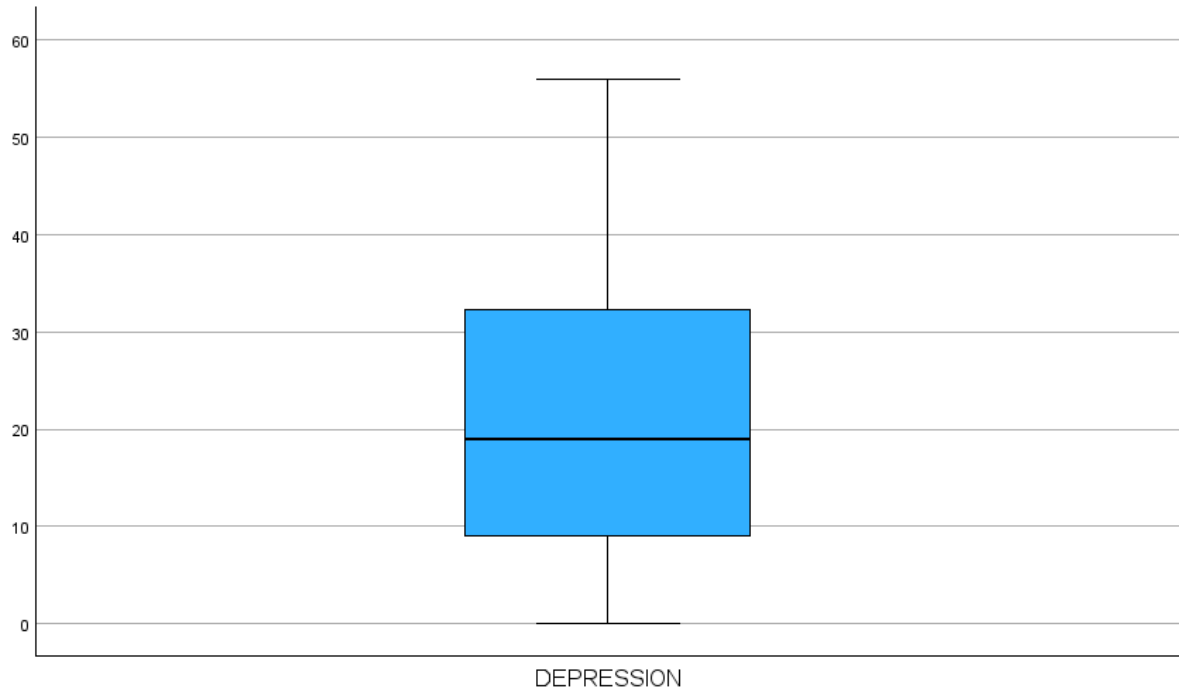
Univariate Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Missing		No. of Extremes ^a	
				Count	Percent	Low	High
DEPRESSION_TOTAL	188	21.08	15.159	9	4.6	0	0
ANXIETY_TOTAL	193	7.41	5.514	4	2.0	0	0
GROOMING_ADULT_TOTAL	197	2.20	2.901	0	.0	0	5
GROOMING_PEERS_TOTAL	194	2.01	2.576	3	1.5	0	3
SelfEsteem_Total_Recode	194	16.14	5.979	3	1.5	0	0
ACE_TOTAL	196	2.64	2.521	1	.5	0	6

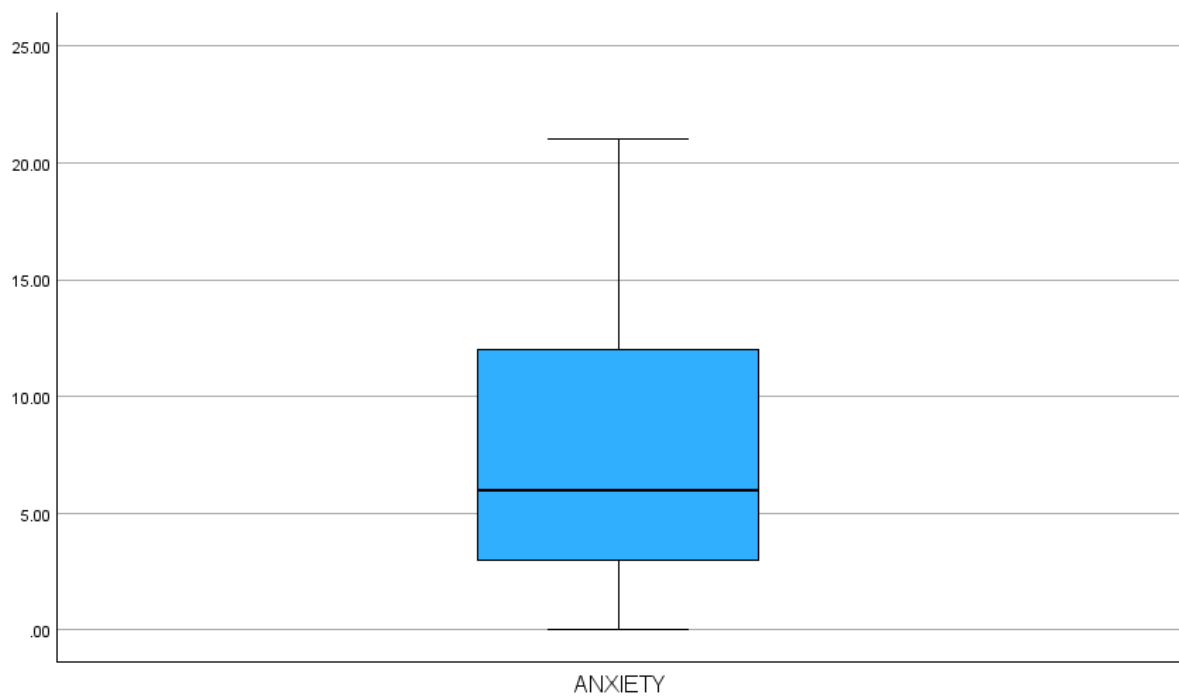
a. Number of cases outside the range (Q1 - 1.5*IQR, Q3 + 1.5*IQR).

Appendix 18 Boxplots for Study 3 Variables

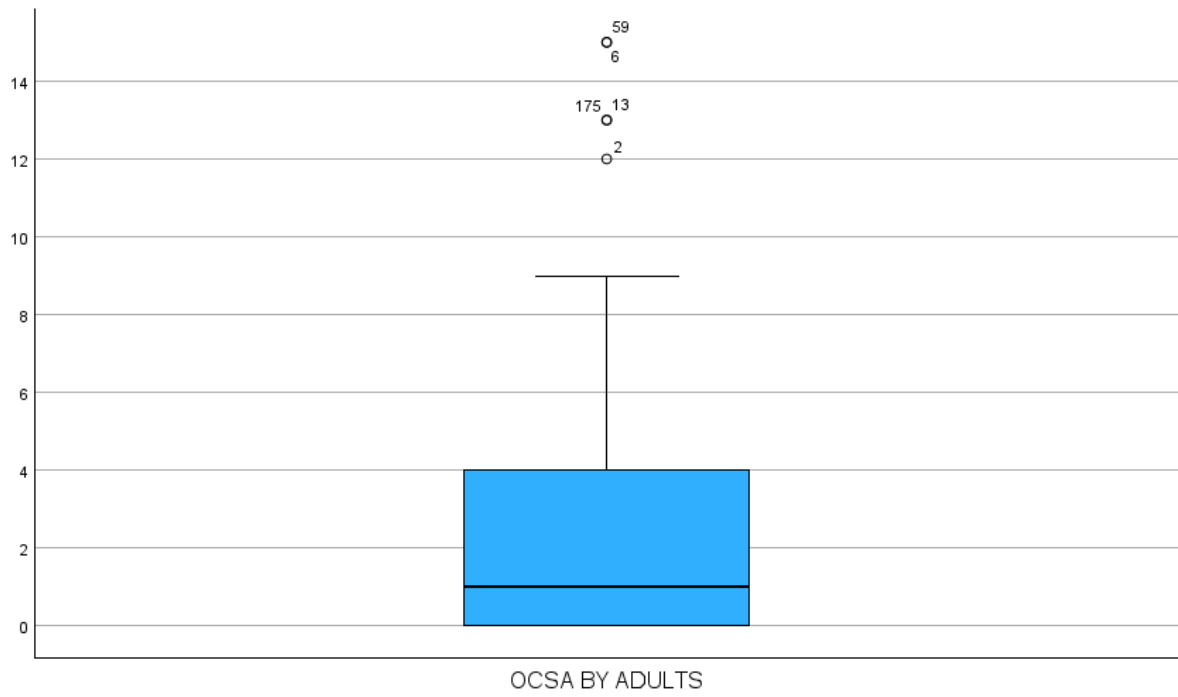
Depression



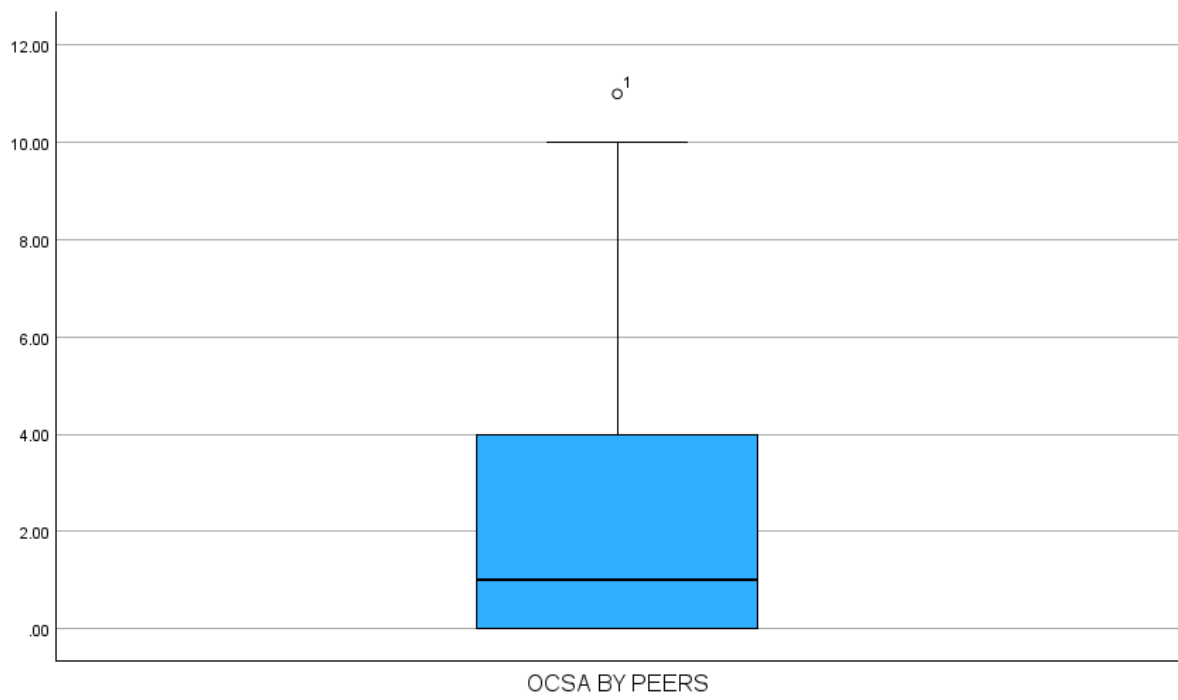
Anxiety



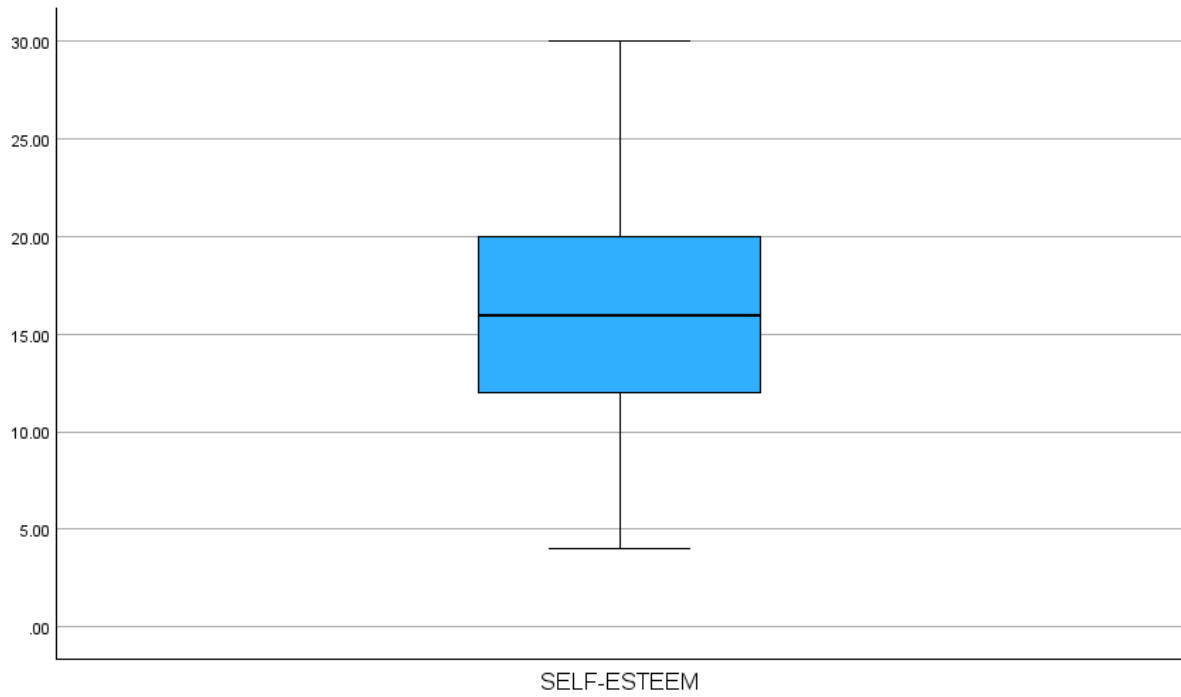
OCSA perpetrated by adults



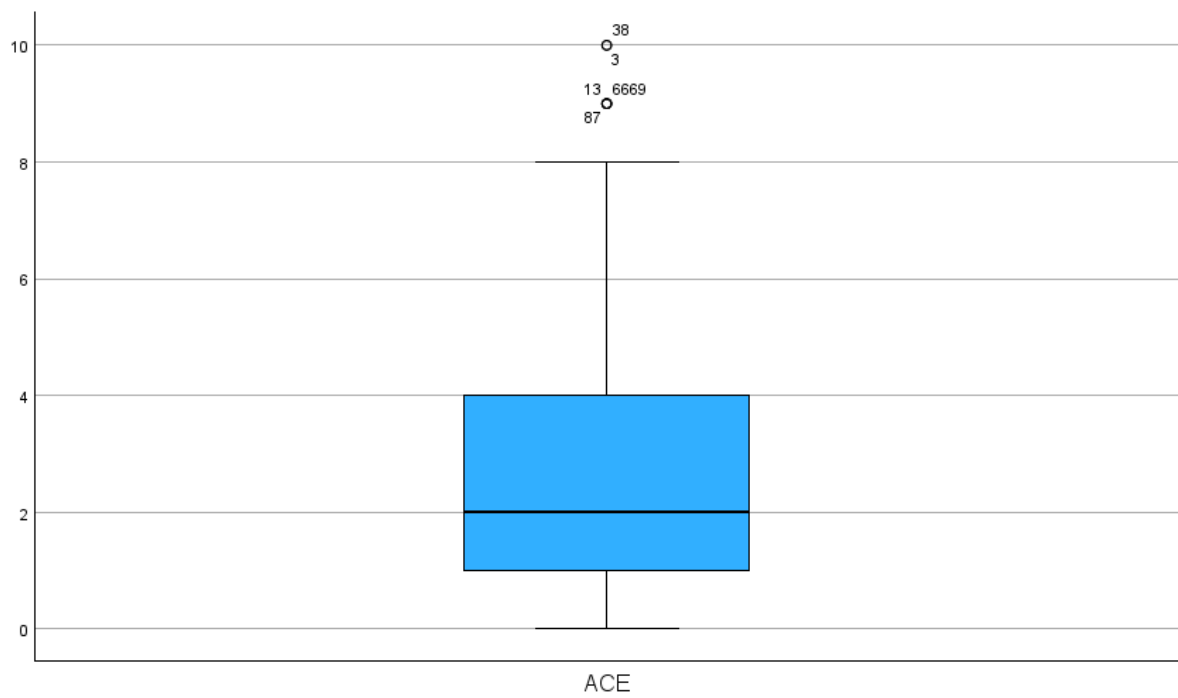
OCSA perpetrated by peers



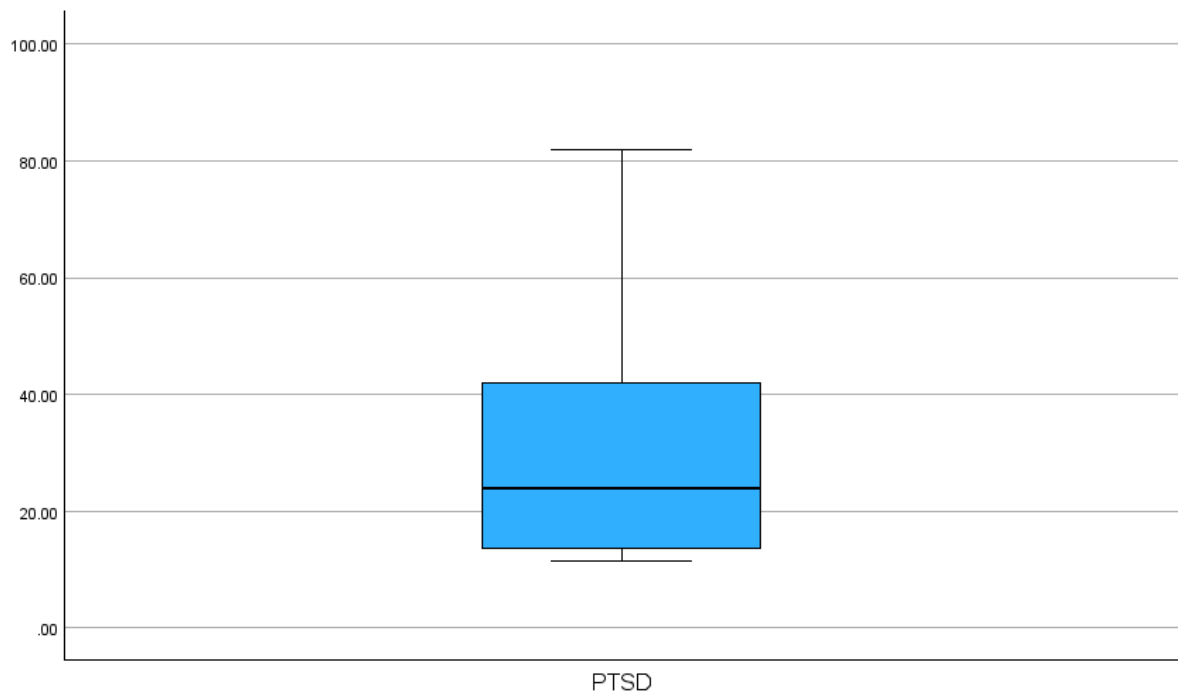
Self-esteem



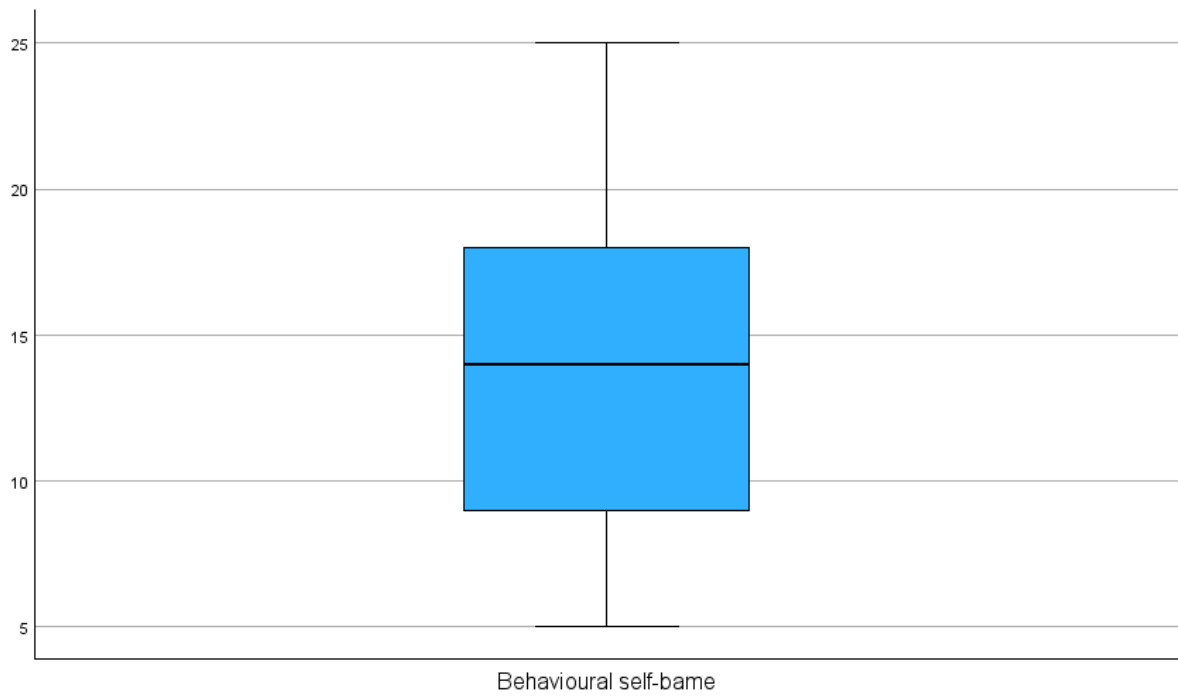
ACEs



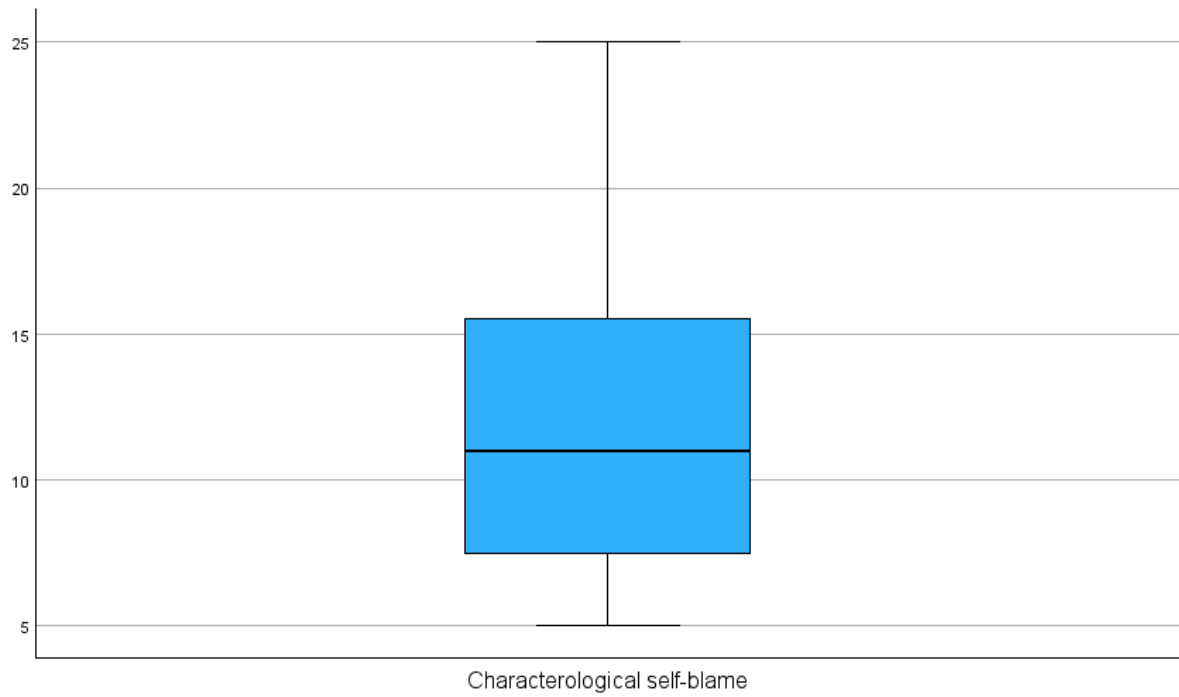
PTSD



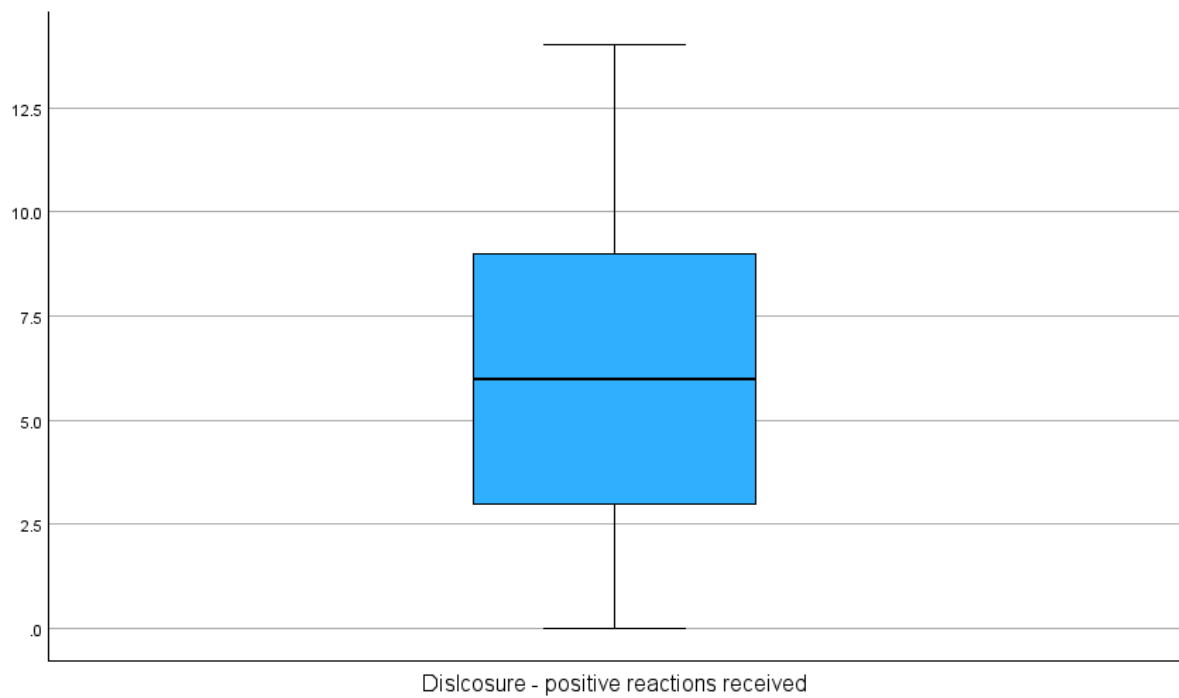
Behavioural self-blame



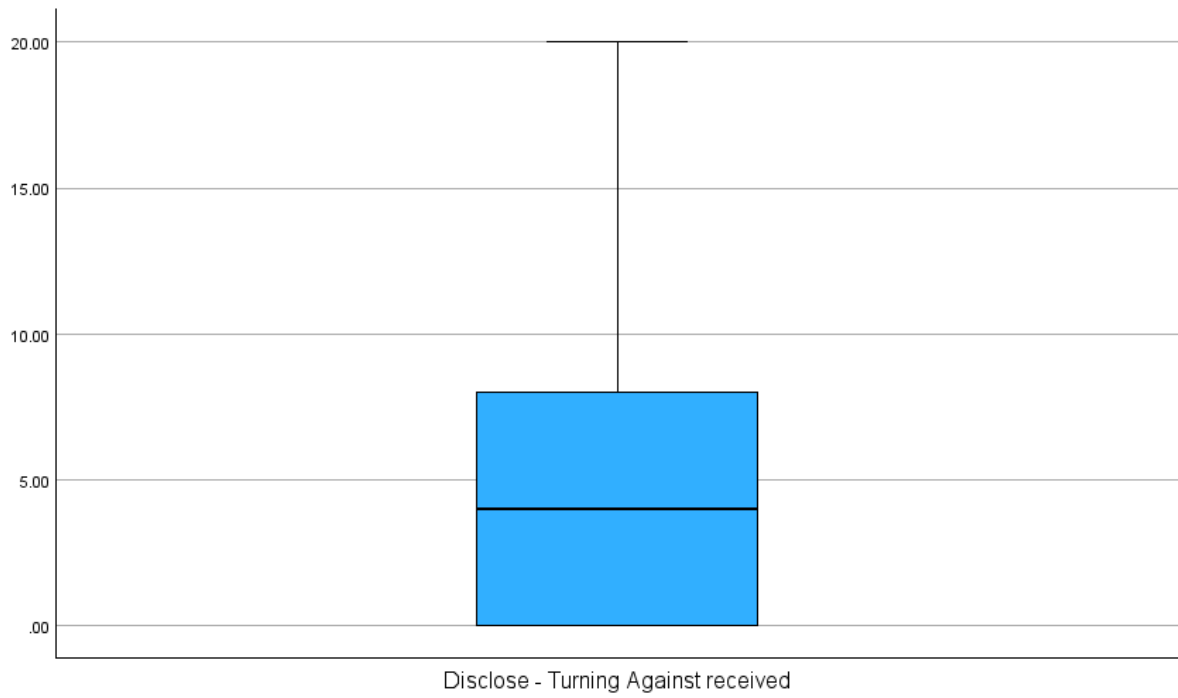
Characterological self-blame



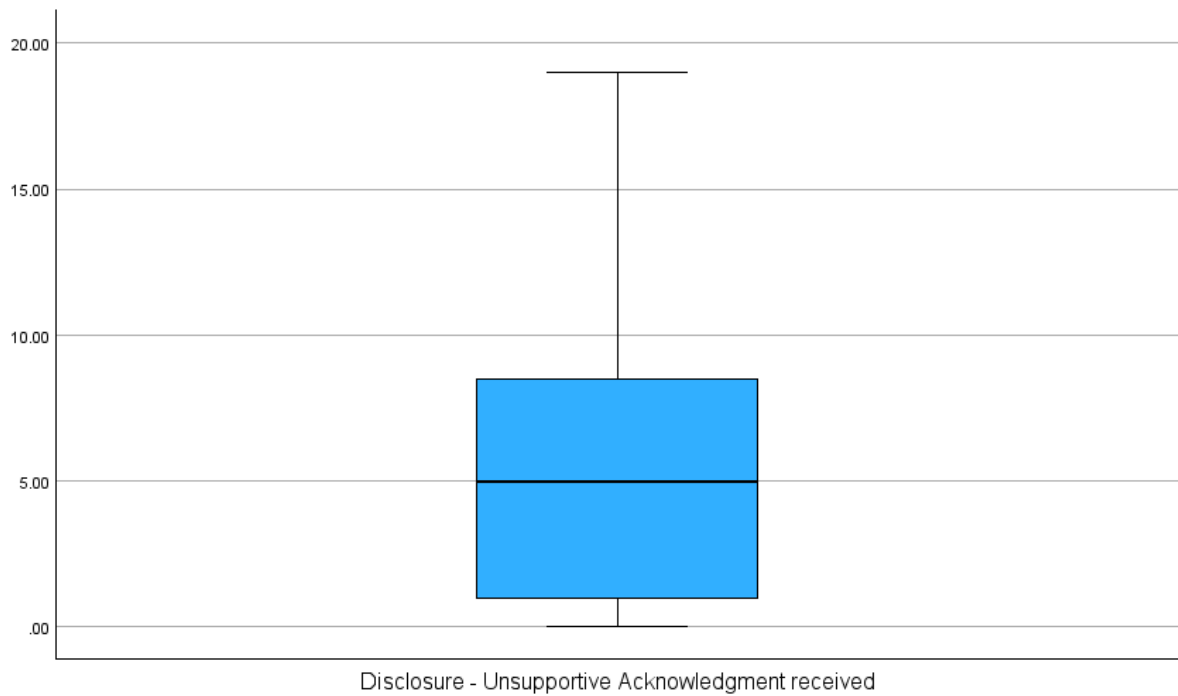
Disclosure – received positive reactions



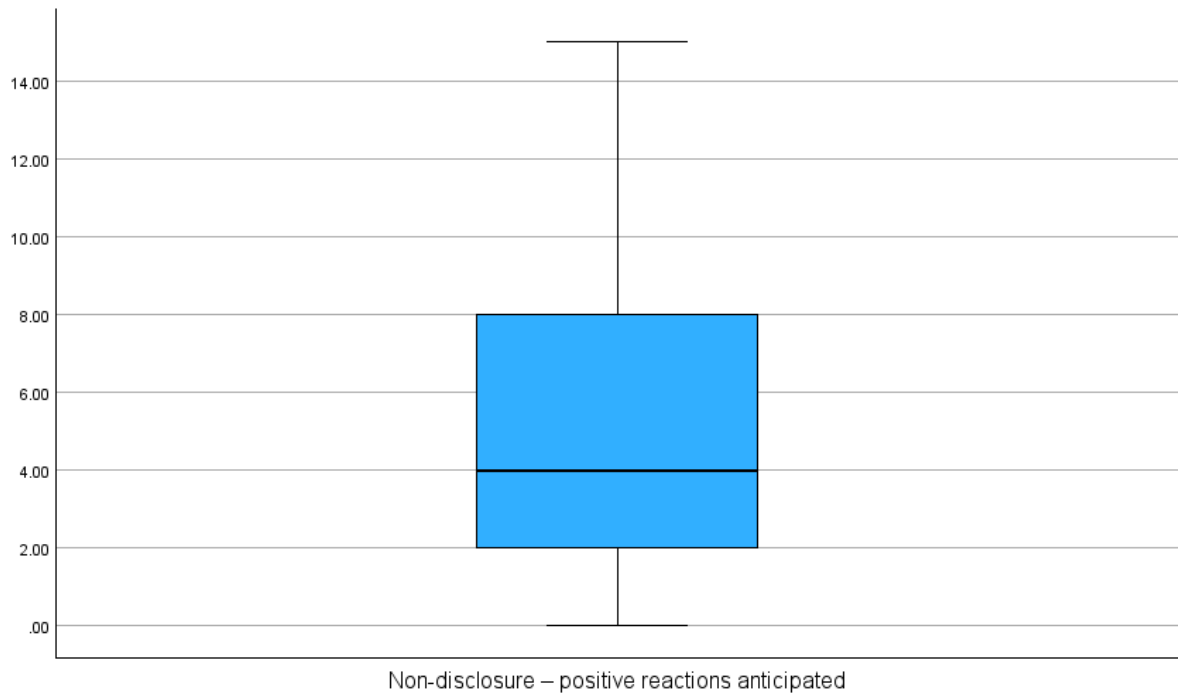
Disclosure – negative reactions, received turning against (TA)



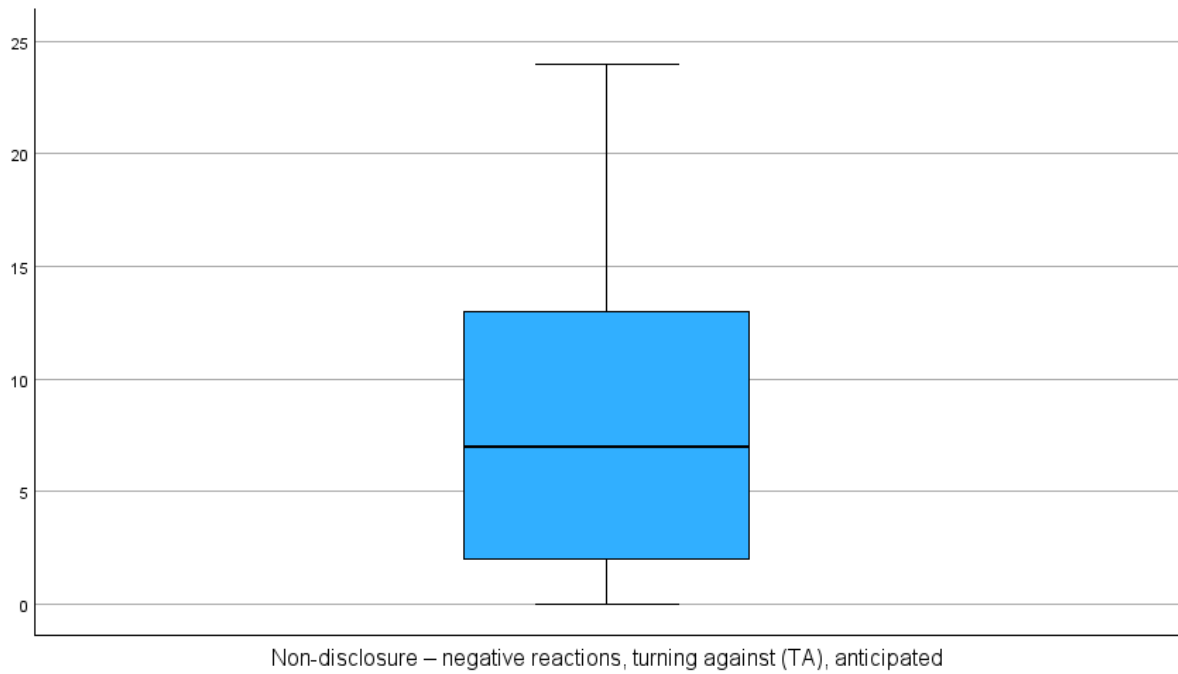
Disclosure – negative reactions, received unsupportive acknowledgment (UA)



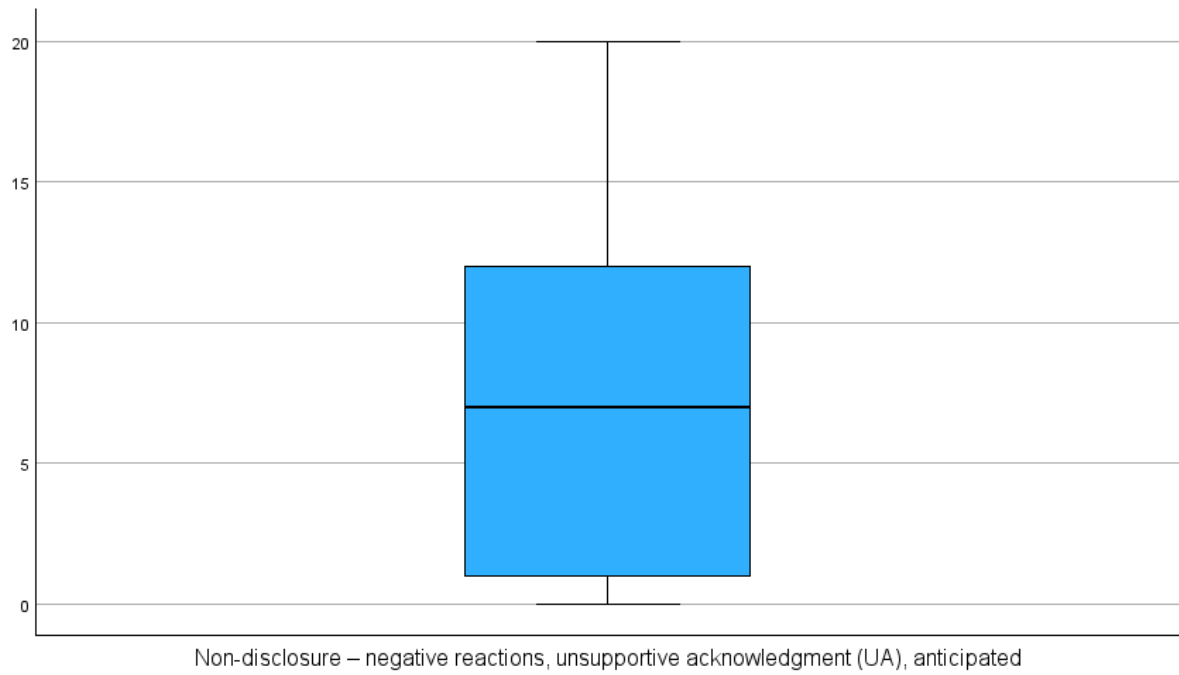
Non-disclosure – anticipated positive reactions



Non-disclosure – negative reactions, anticipated turning against (TA)

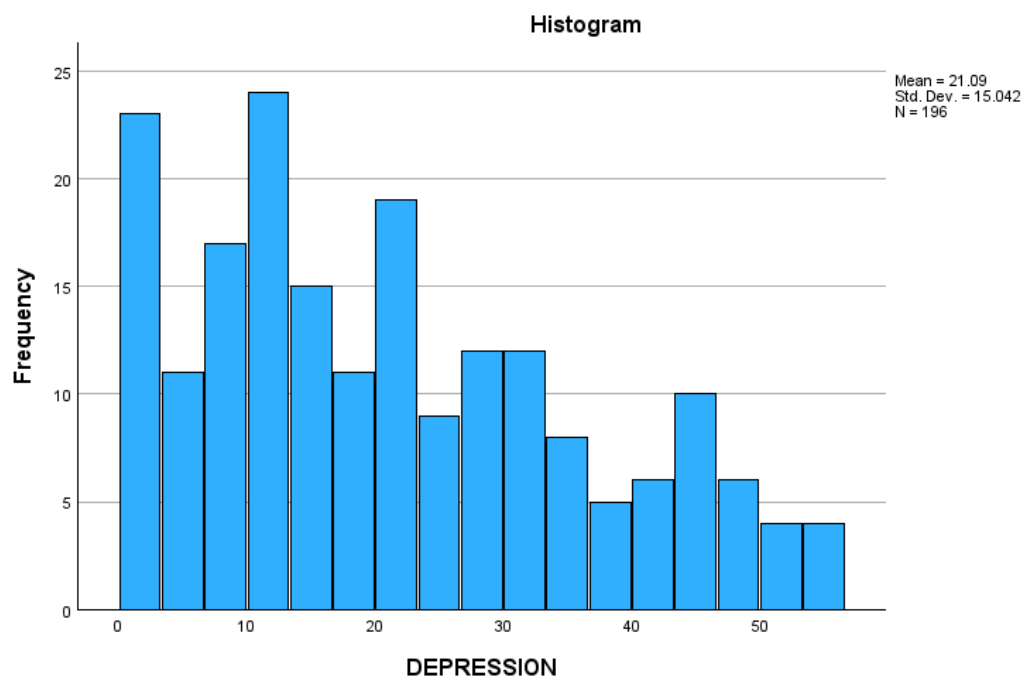
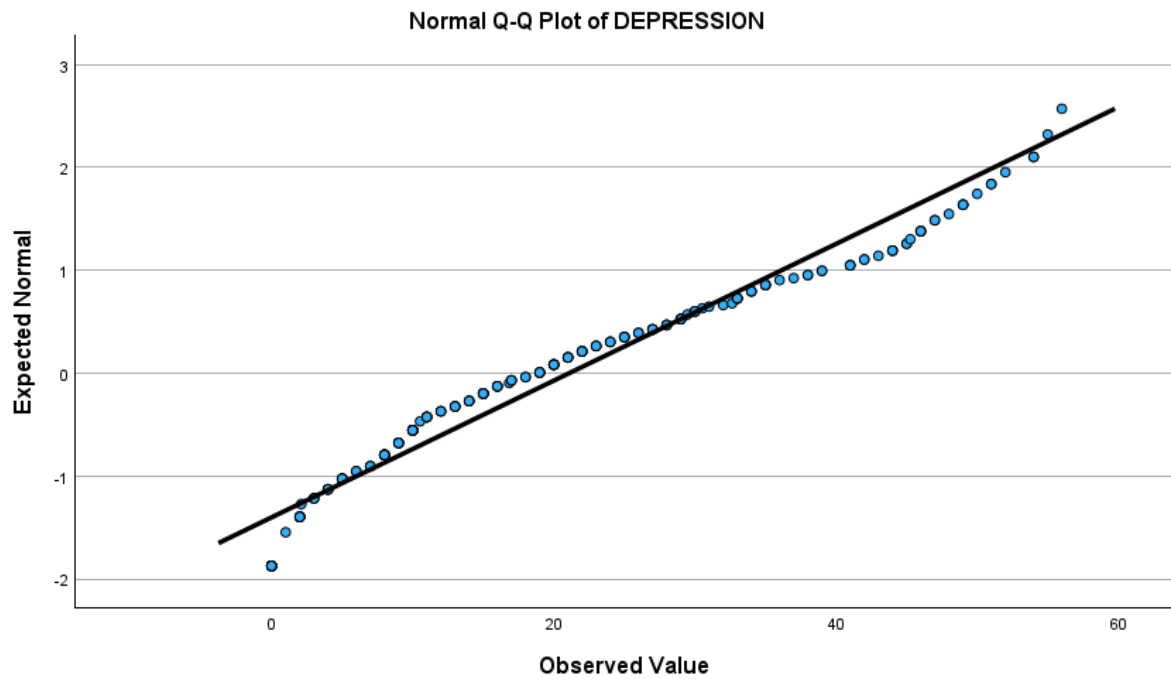


Non-disclosure – negative reactions, anticipated unsupportive acknowledgment (UA)

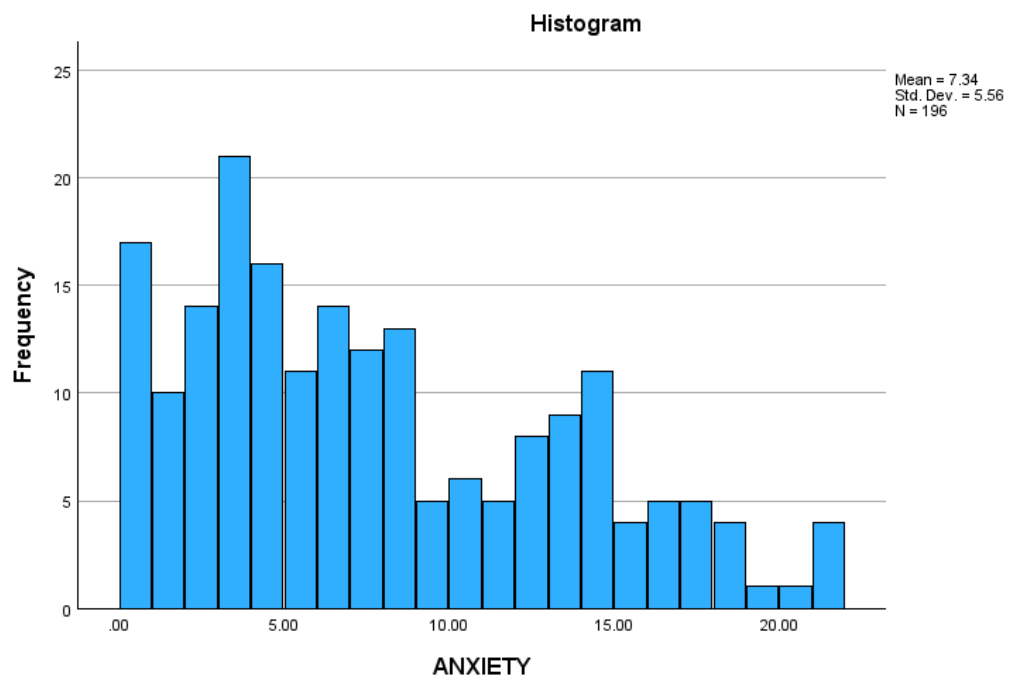
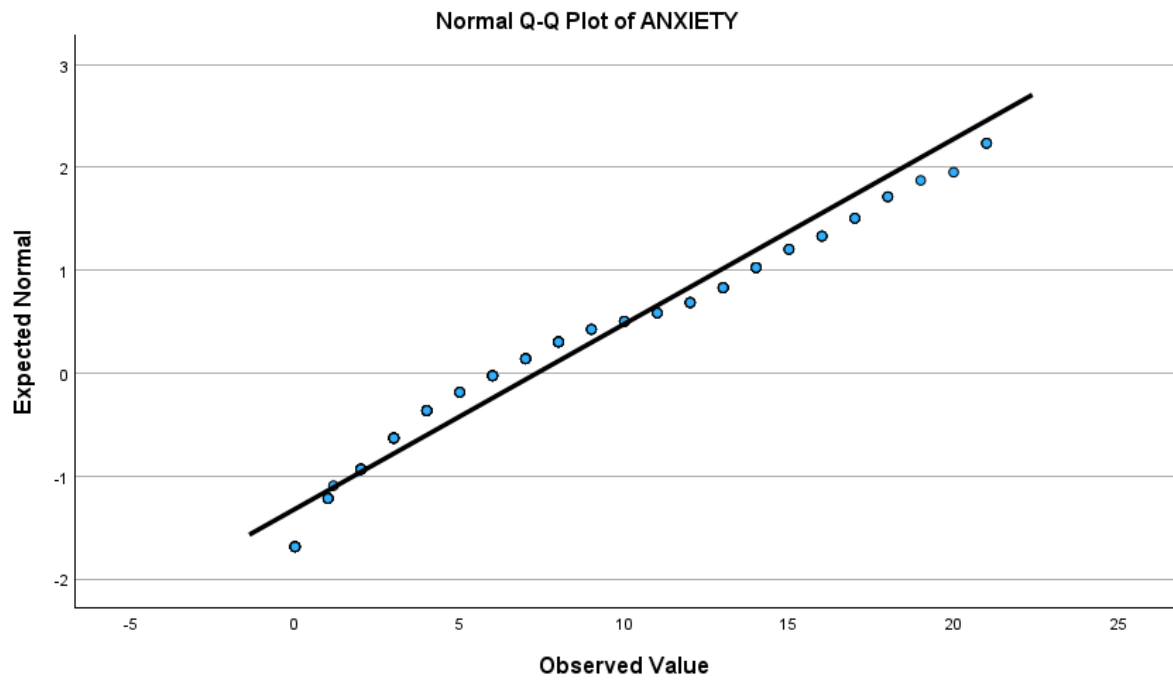


Appendix 19 Normal Q-Q plots and Histograms for Study 3 Variables

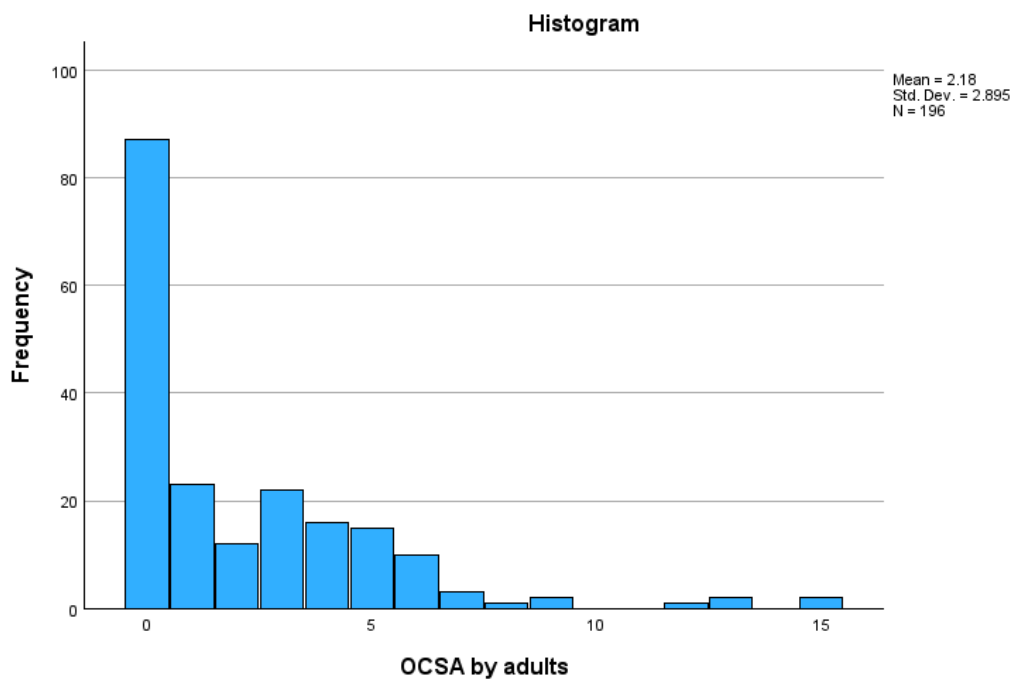
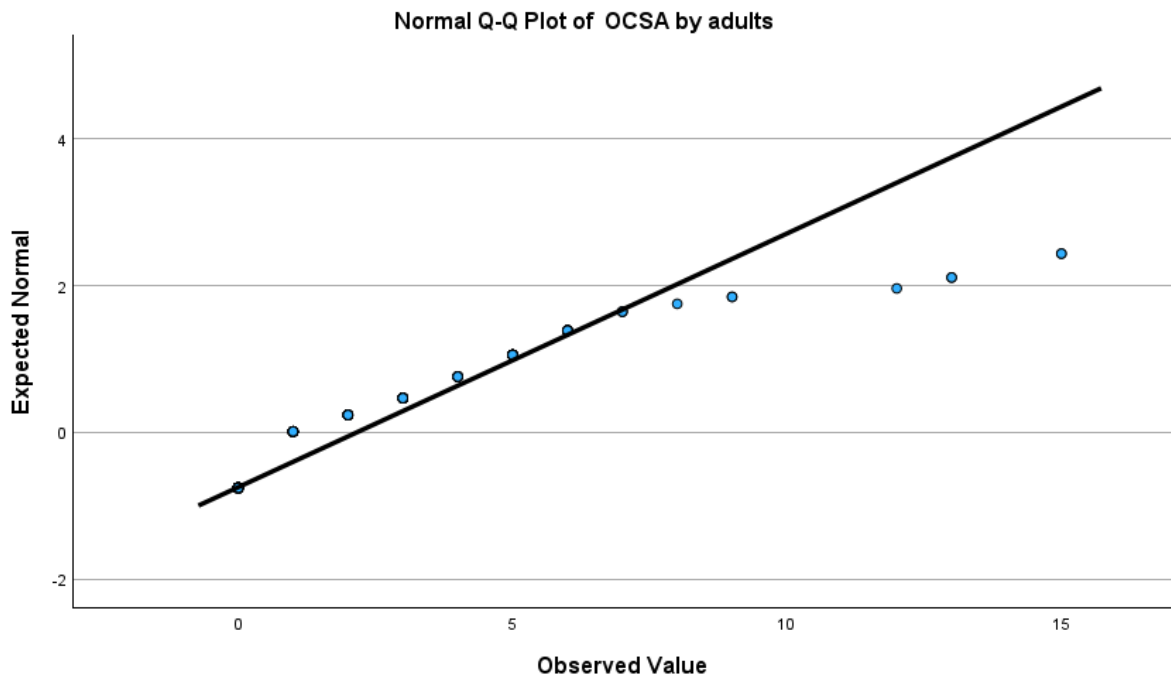
Depression



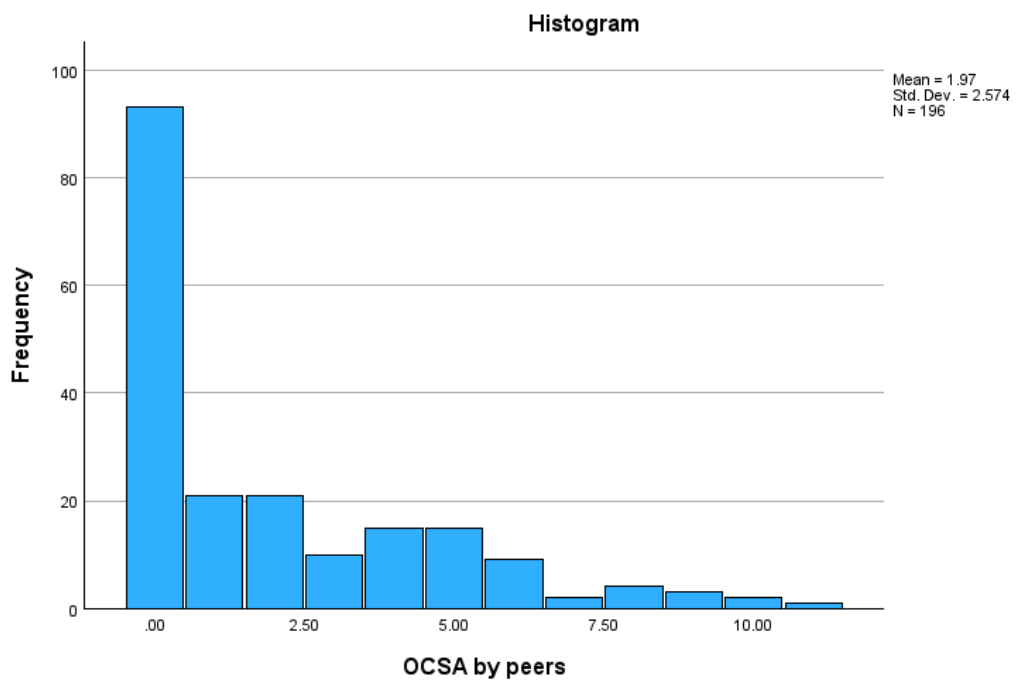
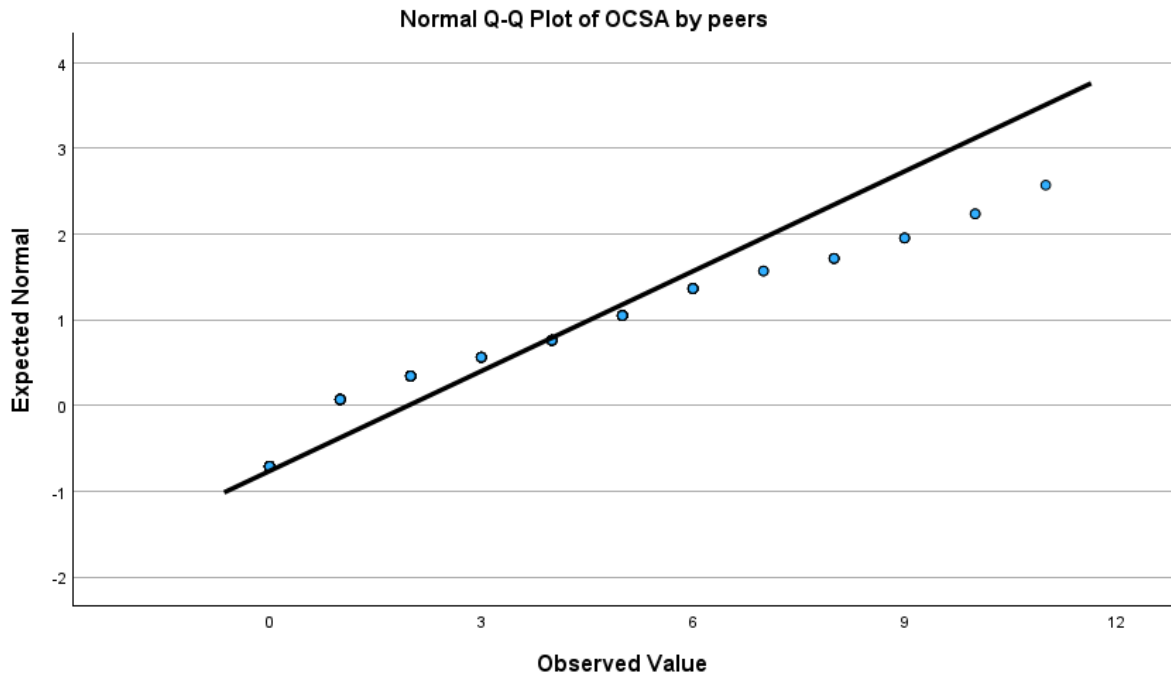
Anxiety



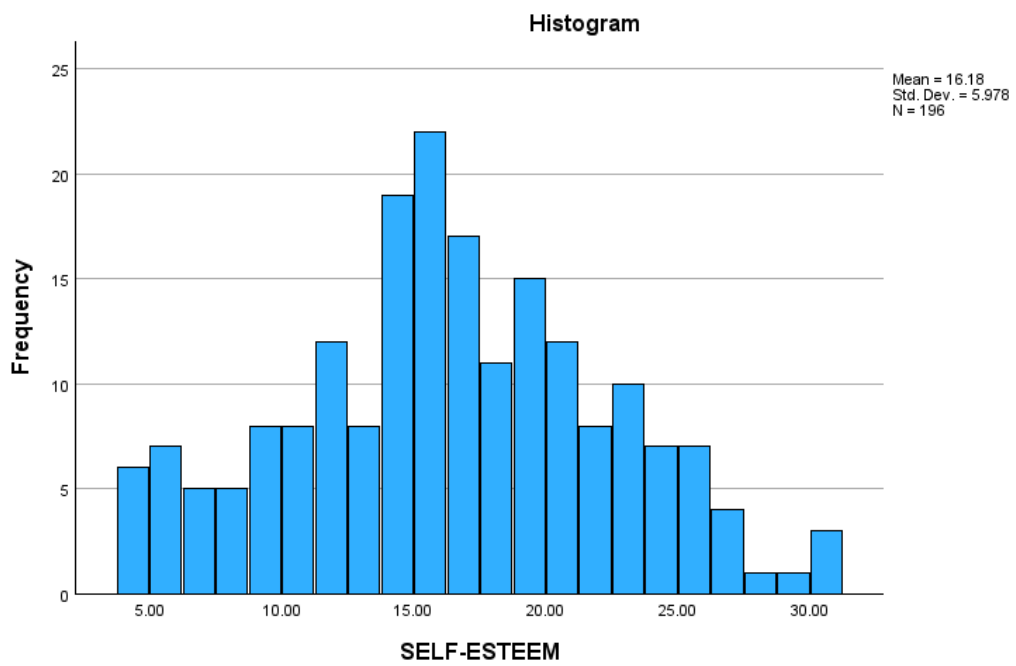
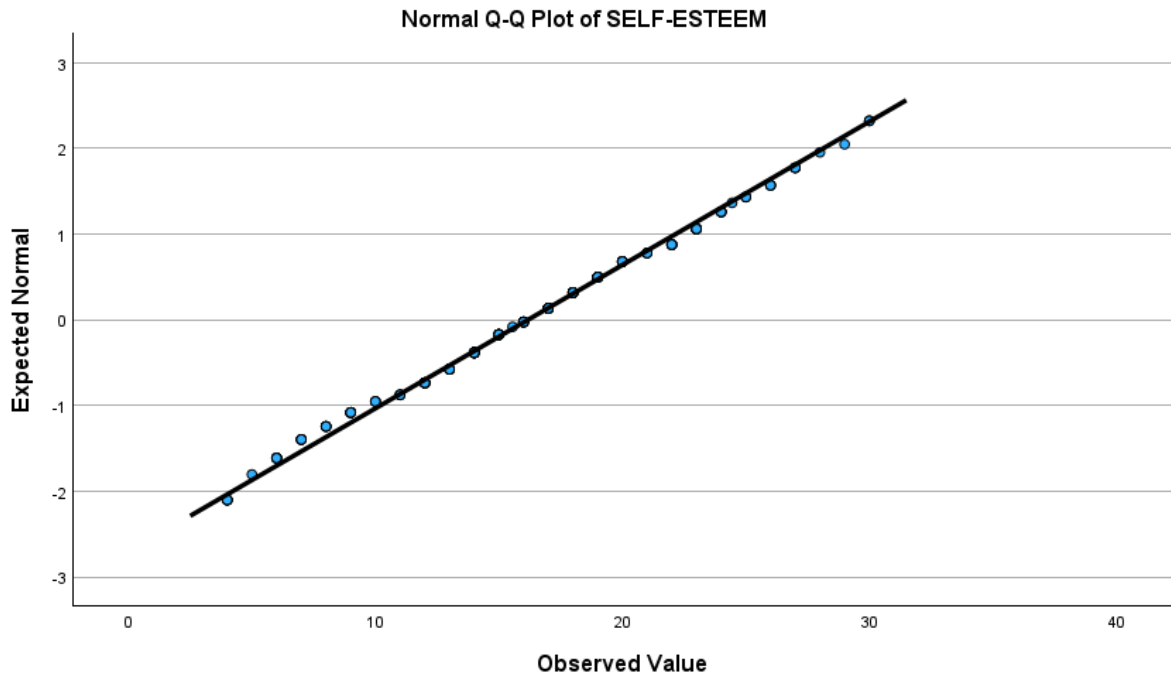
OCSA by adults



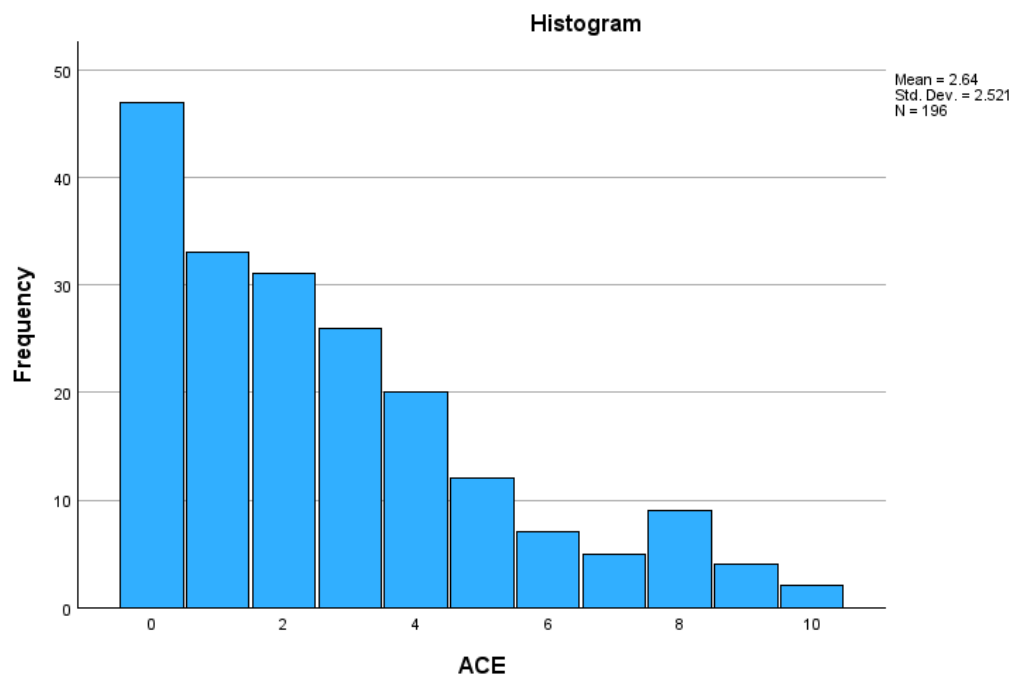
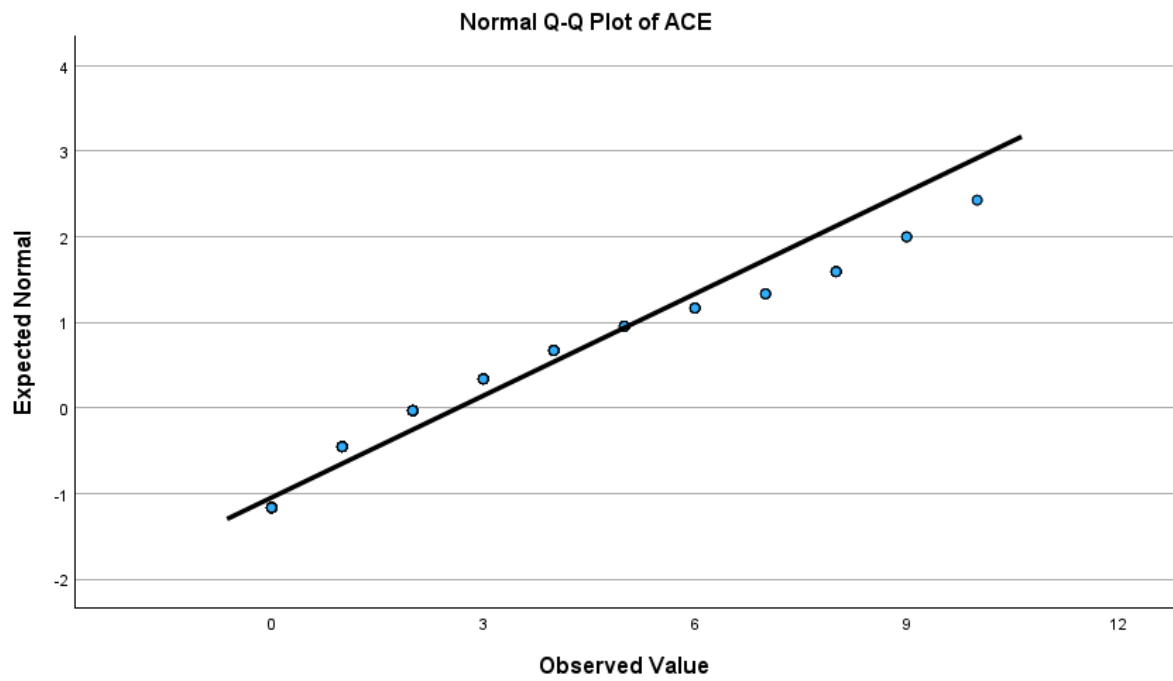
OCSA by peers



Self-esteem



ACEs

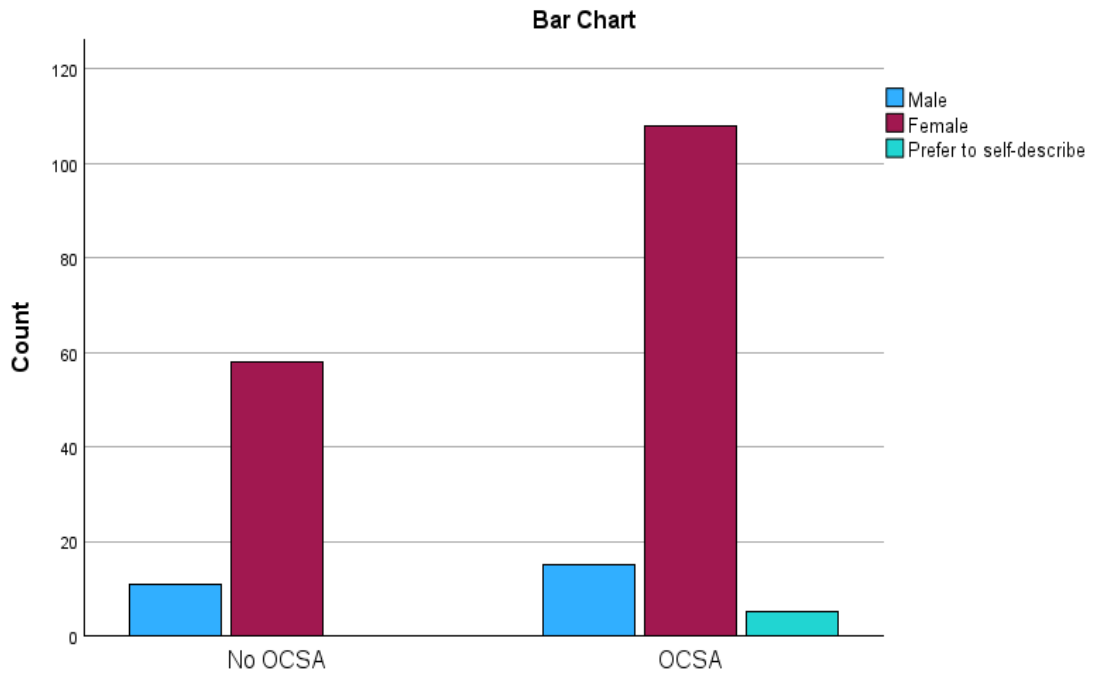


Appendix 20 Skewness and Kurtosis Values for Study 3 Variables

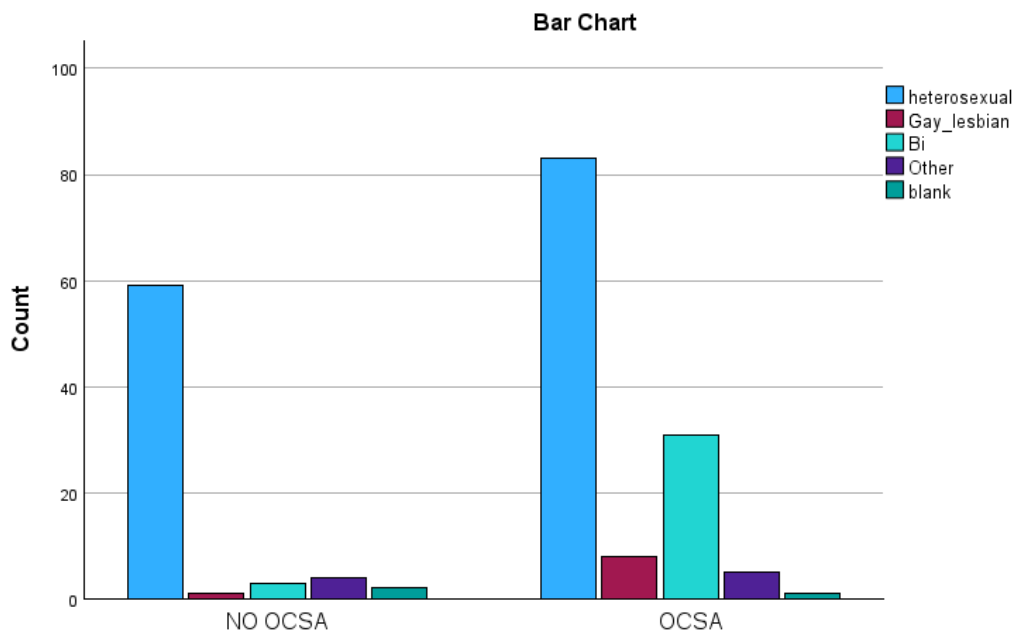
Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis
Depression	.51	-.75
Anxiety	.61	-.59
OCSA by adults	1.9	4.7
OCSA by peers	1.3	1.1
Self-esteem	.02	-.42
ACEs	.99	.29

Appendix 21 Demographics Differences by the Experience of OCSA

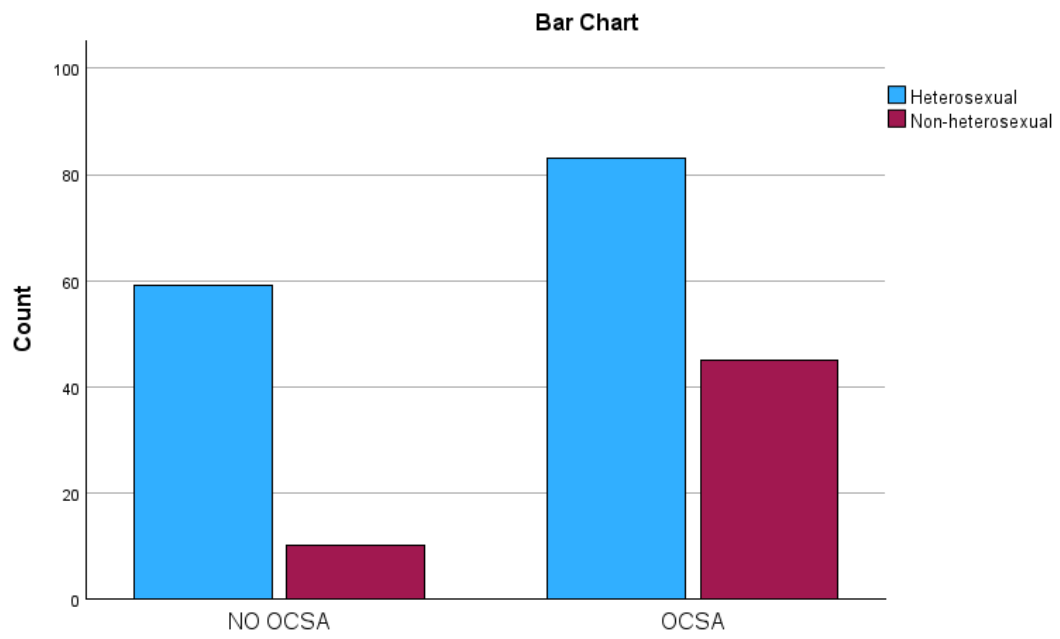
Graph 1. Gender by the experience of OCSA



Graph 2. Sexuality by the experience of OCSA



Graph 3. Sexuality (binary) by the experience of OCSA



Appendix 22 Study 3 Correlations Table

Variable	<i>n</i>	M	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. PTSD	128	29.42	19.08	-														
2. OCSA total	197	4.17	4.75	.42***	-													
3. Distress	131	1.91	1.47	.39***	.47***	-												
4. Other childhood trauma	196	2.64	2.52	.43***	.35***	.07	-											
5. Behavioural self-blame	124	13.69	6.02	.66***	.51***	.39***	.36***	-										
6. Characterological self-blame	124	11.48	5.08	.57***	.37***	.36***	.34***	.74***	-									
7. Self-blame total	124	25.17	10.35	.66***	.48***	.41***	.37***	.94***	.92***	-								
8. Disclosure – Positive reactions received ¹	63	6.02	3.46	.20	.70	.11	.05	.37**	.24	.34**	-							
9. Disclosure – Negative reactions received ¹	63	10.37	9.68	.65***	.50***	.18	.42***	.59***	.47***	.58***	.17	-						
10. Disclosure – Turning Against received ²	63	4.94	5.39	.59***	.57***	.15	.44***	.58***	.46***	.57***	.003	.93***	-					
11. Disclosure – Unsupportive Acknowledgment received ²	63	5.43	5.08	.61***	.35**	.19	.35**	.52***	.42***	.52***	.31*	.92***	.71***	-				
12. Non-disclosure – Positive reactions anticipated ³	64	5.14	4.00	.01	-.01	.11	-.26*	-.05	-.06	-.60	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-			
13. Non-disclosure – Negative reactions anticipated ³	64	15.11	12.08	.51***	.21	.24	.25*	.66***	.57***	.66***	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	.16	-		
14. Non-disclosure – Turning Against anticipated ⁴	64	7.75	6.82	.45***	.19	.19	.31*	.65***	.53***	.63***	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-.01	.96***	-	
15. Non-disclosure – Unsupportive Acknowledgment anticipated ⁴	62	7.34	5.98	.53***	.20	.28*	.17	.62***	.57***	.64***	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	.35**	.95***	.81***	-

¹Disclosed group was not asked about anticipated reactions ²Sub-scales of negative reactions ³Non-disclosed group was not asked about reactions received ⁴Sub-scales of anticipated negative reactions

p*<.05 *p*<.01 ****p*<.001

Appendix 23 Received and Anticipated Reactions to Disclosure

Reactions to disclosure	Disclosed (<i>n</i> =64)		Not Disclosed (<i>n</i> =65)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Positive reactions	6.02	3.46	5.14	4.01
Negative reactions	10.36	9.68	15.11	12.08
Turning against	4.94	5.39	7.75	6.82
Unsupportive Acknowledgment	5.42	5.08	7.34	5.96

Note. Comparisons between groups were not possible as different measures of reactions to disclosure was administered to the disclosed (reactions received) and not disclosed (anticipated reactions) groups.