



## Social Media and Online Predators: Strategies Used to Target Vulnerable Children

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# Summary Brief

## Social Media and Online Predators: Strategies used to Target Vulnerable Children

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*Social media platforms are one of the most common sources for targeting vulnerable minors. Online predators use social media messaging to target children for sexual exploitation. Previous research has identified strategies predators use to target children, but this research has used either self-report data or focused on a limited number of strategies. This paper extends the research on online predators by using content analysis to analyze the messages used in a sting operation. During Stage 1, the research team read the messages sent by 125 potential predators to the sting profile operated by an undercover officer. Examples are presented that indicate the themes and strategies are appropriate for the content analysis using NVivo, which will be completed in Stage 2.*

### Introduction

The Internet offers ample opportunities for sexual predators to target underage victims since the younger population is especially vulnerable to these online advances (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019). Despite lengthy prison sentences and additional punishments such as registering as a sex offender, random searches of electronic communications and storage, and restricted contact with minors under 18 (Parker, 2022), online sexual misconduct continues to increase.

### Background

Concerns regarding the use of Internet communication platforms by individuals to engage in sexual conversations with minors continue to grow. One psychological theory used to assess different child grooming stages is the theory of luring communication (LCT) (Olson et al., 2007). This theory discusses the communicative process of entrapment by the offender to lure an adolescent into a sexual relationship (Kloess et al., 2017). According to LCT, a predator engages in three stages of grooming: 1) *deceptive trust development* (building trust by exchanging personal information such as age and likes), 2) *grooming stage* (triggering a victim's sexual curiosity by using sexual terms to entrap the victim), and 3) *physical approach* (requesting information about location, schedule, and parent schedule, etc.) (Cano Basave et al., 2014). During these stages, predators often apply communicative reframing to present sexuality as beneficial to the victim (Kloess et al., 2017).

A study by Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) identified five strategies utilized by predators during online grooming: 1) interest in the victim's environment, 2) use of deception, 3) sexualization of conversation, 4) gift giving, and 5) aggression. Another important study by Kloess et al. (2019) used thematic analysis to analyze transcripts of five convicted offenders in the United Kingdom who had communicated with children via various Internet platforms. Kloess et al. (2019) findings differed from the Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) study in that the predator did not necessarily use deception with the adolescent, instead, they encouraged the adolescent to maintain the secrecy of the relationship by using deception with their friends and family. The predators also used strategies to overcome the child's resistance that could be considered aggressive such as begging and pressuring the child.

This research aims to extend prior works such as Kloess et al. (2019) and Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021). Specifically, the current study evaluates messages sent by online predators to determine whether the five strategies identified through self-report data reflect the actual predatory online behavior of adults targeting adolescents. Furthermore, while Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) focus on potential victims for data collection, this research examines predatory behavior from the perpetrator's perspective. Consistent with Kloess et al. (2019) who reviewed transcripts of actual messages, the current study uses an even larger sample of potential predators as well as those who received convictions in a sting operation. This research will use themes suggested by both these studies to take a more holistic approach to analyze grooming strategies. The contributions of this research provide insights for public policy makers regarding regulations of social media platforms used by predators who groom victims to prevent this type of abuse on social media platforms.

## Key Findings

A Facebook account profile was created and used for a sting operation that targeted online predators in a community in northern California.

The researchers reviewed the 643 pages of messages provided to the investigator by Facebook and identified the five different strategies of Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021). Most strategies were found to be present as conceptualized in the online grooming scale except for the use of deception and aggression, which more closely aligns with the Kloess et al. (2017) findings.

Interestingly, predators did not express deception about themselves but instead requested the victim to display deception towards third-party individuals. In addition, aggressive behavior was displayed by using coercive communication. Predators relentlessly called the victim, demanding direct communication or threatened to spread rumors about the victim. One of the most commonly used strategies was to show interest in the victims' lives, problems, or environments by expressing sympathy.

This preliminary research serves to guide Stage 2. The results of Stage 1 indicate that the themes and strategies suggested by Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) and Kloess et al. (2019) are used by predators and serve as a good starting point for analysis using NVivo. The modified themes found in Stage 1 will also be included as well as tools in NVivo that can potentially identify additional themes.

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