Chapter 19
Young People, Sexual Content and Solicitation Online

Kareena McAloney
Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland

Joanne E. Wilson
Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Young people can potentially be exposed to sexual material from a variety of sources, both accidentally and purposefully. One such source, the internet, plays host to a vast array of information and imagery, among which sexually explicit material and pornography are in high concentration. Indeed within this virtual catalogue of material it is possible to find both adult and child pornography, particularly if one is aware of the correct methods of accessing such content. This chapter provides an in-depth overview of current knowledge regarding young people’s exposure to and experiences of sexual material and sexual predators online, including those particular aspects of young people’s online interactions that make them vulnerable to receive unwanted sexual material and solicitation. The authors then discuss the use of the Internet for the sexual exploitation of children and young people both in the nature of sexual material to which they are exposed to online including the transmission of images of child pornography and molestation, the processes by which young people access sexual material online, the solicitation of children by sexual predators in targeting young people and how young people in turn come to interact with sexual predators online. Finally they address current mechanisms designed to protect children and young people as they engage in online activities.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet can be viewed as the cornerstone of the modern world. When we talk about the “Internet” we are referring not only to the World Wide Web but also methods of electronic communication such as e-mails, chat-rooms and instant messaging. Undoubtedly the Internet is a valuable resource that puts people in connection with vast amounts of information (and in some cases, misinformation). The Internet is also a source of communication and support to many people and can facilitate...
cognitive, social and physical development (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). Yet, it also opens the door to the transmission of harm and exploitation across communities and cultures, in no small part due to the lack of geographical restraints implicit in the World Wide Web. Despite the widespread acceptance and use of the internet within society, it is also shrouded in mystery and fear, particularly in relation to sex. This situation in not eased by a general lack of research and investigation in this area with much of the existing literature drawing from early research, which may be particularly problematic in an area with such a rapid developmental trajectory as that of the internet. Another particular difficulty which hampers the contemporary research and investigation of sex on the internet, and in particular on child pornography is the highly sensitive, and often illegal, nature of the information under study which restricts the ability of researchers to conduct a full investigation, and enforces a reliance on secondary sources of information.

**Sex on the Internet**

The growth of the Internet has allowed the rapid exchange of information over geographically diverse populations. The majority of children in the United Kingdom (UK) have access to the Internet either at home (75%) or at school (92%; Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Although most children spend less time on the Internet compared to watching television – less than one hour (Livingstone & Bober, 2005), the little time that they do spend *surfing* instills fear in many adults as there is the possibility that they may be exposed to unwanted sexually explicit material and solicitation from deviant individuals. There are several reasons as to why such concerns may be justified. First children are digital consumers – they have the skills and knowledge base to rapidly and extensively *surf the net* (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). They are also capable and rather skilled at avoiding detection. For example, qualitative research by Cameron et al. (2005) found evidence that children can evade their parents’ efforts at control: “…indirect monitoring (e.g. checking history files) was easily thwarted by adolescents” (p.537). While for many children their first exposure to adult sexually explicit material occurs during adolescence offline via television or magazines, even the lyrics in songs subconsciously expose children to sexual innuendos, the lack of control and responsibility bestowed on the Internet means that children are likely to encounter sexual material online irrespective of whether they intended to or not. Children are also at risk of exploitation through the transmission and viewing of child victimization in child pornography; and its use by predators to attract and engage children and young people as potential victims for both sexual pleasure and financial gain (Esposito, 1998). The Internet can be used to facilitate this abuse in a number of ways and four key areas have been identified by which child molestors/sexual predators use the Internet: to disseminate sexualized images of children; to establish online networks with individuals with similar interests in children; to engage with children in an inappropriate and sexual manner; and to locate potential child victims for their sexual overtures and attentions (Durkin, 1997).

**Exposure to Adult Sexual Material Online**

The Internet is a vast source of sexual material including sexually explicit pictures, sexually explicit movies/clips and erotic sites (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Given the widespread availability of and accessibility to sexually explicit material online, it is not surprising that the Internet has been described as a “sexual medium” (p.178) with mounting concerns regarding children’s exposure to such material (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Such fears are not entirely unfounded. In a study of 2,880 children aged 10-16 years of age, Flander, Cosic & Profaca (2009) found that 27% had been exposed to human nudity and sexual activity online. Peter
17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product’s webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/young-people-sexual-content-solicitation/50708?camid=4v1


Related Content

Data Quality and Work Alignment: Do IT Professionals Think Differently?
www.igi-global.com/chapter/data-quality-work-alignment/24740?camid=4v1a

Economic Rationality and Rational Credence
www.igi-global.com/article/economic-rationality-and-rational-credence/223980?camid=4v1a

The Role of Information Quality of a Website: Examining Consumer Information Search through the IS Success Model
www.igi-global.com/article/the-role-of-information-quality-of-a-website/114592?camid=4v1a

The Role of the Organizational Context in the Use of a Workflow System: Lessons from a Case Study
www.igi-global.com/chapter/role-organizational-context-use-workflow/6938?camid=4v1a