DRAGON-SHIELD

STRONG
AT THE
BROKEN PLACES
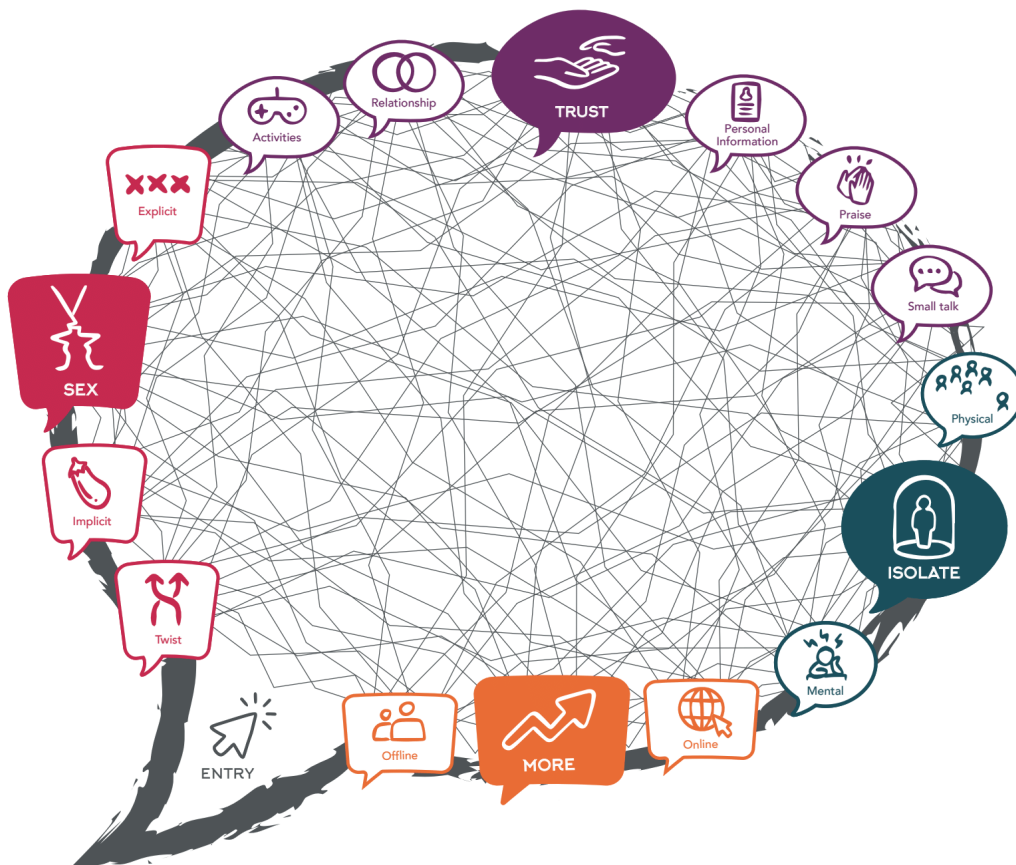
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THE DRAGON-S PROJECT

PROJECT DRAGON-S is a research project headquartered at Swansea University. It pioneers the applied integration of linguistic and Artificial Intelligence research in order to generate two technology solutions to help counter online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE).

The first of these solutions is DRAGON-Shield, a training portal to help upskill and support safeguarding practitioners in their work with children.

The second is DRAGON-Spotter, an online detection system for use by law enforcement agencies.

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is dedicated to Paul Finney, Tim Hotham and Rhiannon-Faye McDonald for their time, expertise, wisdom, humour, unequivocal commitment and the sharing of their lived experiences in order to better safeguard children from the harms caused by online grooming.

Also, sincere thanks go to Lee Horne who joined the LEEG group late on in the project and wrote the inspiring score for the music in the animation Strong at the Broken Places.

Their contribution to the development of the core aspects of the Developing Resistance Against Grooming Online: Spotter and Shield (DRAGON-S) project ensured that the real impacts on child victims of online grooming for sexual abuse are reflected throughout the DRAGON-Shield training portal. Their input has been pivotal to the production of concepts and content for a training portal that will influence safeguarding professionals in their responses to the needs of children – responses that, through better attunement to research on how communication works in an online grooming context, are informed, compassionate and healing for the child recipients.

The title 'Strong at the Broken Places' is inspired by a book of the same name[1] and was a reference made by one of the group members during the creative process. It was inspired by the centuries-old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery, kintsugi[2], or Kintsukuroi, translated as 'golden joinery'. Rather than a camouflaged adhesive, kitsugi uses sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold to re-join ceramic pieces. Once completed, beautiful seams of gold glint in the cracks and breaks of the ceramics, giving a one-of-a-kind appearance to each 'repaired' piece. This literally makes them shine at the broken places. It is a technique that emphasises and acknowledges fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. This concept and philosophy flow through the animation the LEEG has created.

It is no easy task to call upon your own childhood victimisation to help others. There is a cost, and that cost is different for each individual. This truism was borne out during the consultations with the LEEG members who made reference and tribute to those victims for whom recovery seems impossible or are no longer with us due to the impacts of trauma on their psychological well-being. Such costs are, hopefully, ameliorated by the knowledge that, by working in partnership with project developers, the LEEG has been able to impact on a final product that will truly meet the needs of children.

Speaking truth to power is one of the many roles that Lived Experience Experts play in ensuring that children who are currently being abused receive the best possible responses to the situations in which they find themselves. It is hoped that, through the guidance given by the LEEG, DRAGON-Shield proves to be an effective training programme for the protection of children.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of work carried out by the DRAGON-Shield team, Tink Palmer MBE (external consultant) and Ruth Mullineux-Morgan (DRAGON-Shield Deputy Lead) and the LEEG (Paul Finney, Rhiannon-Faye McDonald and Tim Hotham) during 2021 and 2022. It outlines the rationale for consulting with those with lived experience of being victimised for sexual purposes and the methodology that was used.

This work took place during the Covid 19 lockdown period and in its aftermath. Consequently, the work sessions all took place virtually with the exception of one in person meeting at Swansea University. The end results achieved are to the credit of all involved.

2 | RATIONALE FOR ESTABLISHING A LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERTS' GROUP

Over the past 10 years survivors of child sexual abuse have begun to have their voices heard in a way that has not occurred before. There has been a growing recognition amongst safeguarding practitioners, policy makers, researchers and legislatures that those with lived experience of sexual abuse should not only be supported and protected but they should be heard - they have much to teach us.

The members of the LEEG enabled the DRAGON-Shield team to bridge lived experience of survivors with the research findings about the language of online grooming. We have a fairly comprehensive understanding of groomers' communicative (language-based) tactics (see section 4b). However, what is less understood, due to less research in this area, is children's communication during grooming and the impact groomers' communicative tactics have on the children they target[3]. LEEG members were able to add to this important layer of understanding.

Survivors alone know how words can be used to trick them into believing that they are communicating with a friend only to discover when it is too late that this is not the case. They alone know what it feels like to be scared, frightened, humiliated and trapped by those intent on sexually harming them. They know the fear of realising that they have been duped and not knowing where to go for help and who to talk to.

Words can be powerful agents for both good and bad. Online groomers of children for sexual purposes use language in a manipulative way to control their targets and to silence them. The words used and the tone in which the abusers deliver their messages stay long after the abuse has ceased. From practice experience we know that many victims of online grooming report that the greatest long-standing harm and barrier to their recovery is the impact of groomers' manipulative use of language on how they think and feel about themselves. The power of words in such scenarios should never be underestimated.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Following a full ethical review in October 2021 by Swansea University, the appointment of an external consultant and identification and allocation of budget, the Lived Experience project initiated in November 2021 and a schedule of work agreed (see Figure 1). Initially five sessions, each lasting two hours, were set between November 2021 and March 2022. These took place via the online platform Zoom[4]. A further two meetings were arranged for the end of April and the beginning of June 2022 – the former being an offline meeting held at Swansea University. This was possible due to the easing of Covid 19 restrictions in the UK from January 2022.

Fig. 1 | Table showing LEEG session dates and focus

| SESSION NUMBER	SESSION DATE	SESSION FOCUS
1	November 2021	**Introduction to Lived Experience Project.** Defining roles and agreeing scope of project. Introducing the concept of OG as communication. Review of DRAGON-Shield Outputs – feedback exercise. Discussion of creative outputs of project - developing a digital animation.
2	December 2021	**Introducing research into online grooming communication.** Review of DRAGON-Shield outputs – feedback exercise. Plan creative sessions. Storyboard development for the digital animation.
3	January 2022	**Creative Session 1:** Creative methods - idea generation. Review of DRAGON-Shield outputs – Heart illustration.
4	February 2022	**Creative Session 2:** Creative methods -scripting and concept agreement.
5	March 2022	**Creative Session 3:** Review and feedback on first cut animation. Planning of Launch event for digital animation.
6	April 2022 (in person)	**Creative Session 4:** Digital animation work: Storyboard review, audio recording etc. Discussion around DRAGON-Shield outputs ('What's in a Word?' digital animation)
7	June 2022	**Creative Session 5:** Digital animation work: Storyboard v.2 agreement. Report recommendations review.
8	June 2022	**Project Conclusion:** Digital animation screening. Draft report and recommendations launch during Project DRAGON-S' 2nd Outreach Event.

4 | PROJECT IMPACTS

The aims for the Lived Experience project were set out in the initial brief received by the LEEG. These were to provide lived experience and subject matter expertise to co-develop, review and feedback on core concepts and outputs of DRAGON-Shield. Three key outputs can be highlighted:

a | 'What's in a word?' Animation

During the early project sessions, there was a process of upskilling the LEEG in the findings of the research underpinning Project DRAGON-S about the role that language and communication play in the manipulation of children by groomers. These early discussions were aided by showing an original animation developed by the DRAGON-Shield team ('What's in a word?'). The LEEG provided detailed, constructive feedback on a first cut of the animation. This included, for example, that the depiction of the groomer and child were difficult to tell apart, and arguing that the groomer depiction needed to 'glitch more' to show groomers' manipulative intent. Valuable feedback was also provided about the voice over and script. The DRAGON-S team acted on this feedback - see e.g. the change in the design of the groomer depiction in Figure 2.

Fig. 2 | Before and after LEEG Input – 'What's in a Word?' Animation

Before
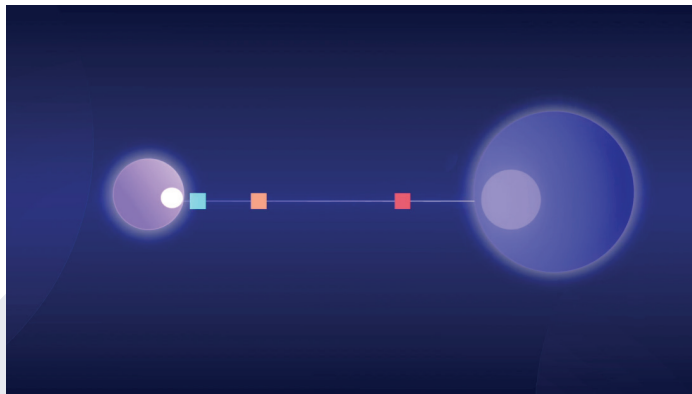
After
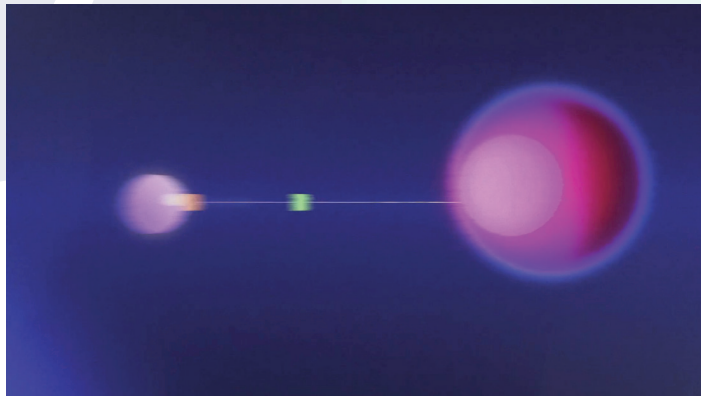
b | Illustrating the Online Grooming Discourse Model

The Online Grooming Discourse Model (OGDM)[5] depicts the complex communicative processes involved in grooming children online. It identifies the language tactics and sub-tactics that groomers use and reflects the fact that such tactics are not linear and that they overlap. The DRAGON-Shield team wanted to produce an illustration of the model that would reflect the complexity in the use of language by groomers together with the impact this has on the child victims. The authenticity of the illustration needed to be such that it would be remembered by practitioners completing the DRAGON-Shield training.

The initial choice was a heart shape, encompassing all the online grooming tactics and sub-tactics identified in the model, and a web of interconnected lines between them. The choice of a heart shape was to convey that grooming was relationship based, a matter of the heart. The initial concept was shared with the Project DRAGON-S Advisory Network, who questioned the romantic connotations and interpretation of an illustration based on a heart shape, and suggested to make the heart darker and fractured to depict the hurt and damage caused by grooming. Several iterations of this development were trialled by the DRAGON-Shield team, working alongside the project's digital designer.

The concept of the heart illustration in all its iterations was taken to the LEEG for their views and comments. None of the members were comfortable with the heart, though some understood what the project team was trying to convey. Also, the LEEG agreed, the heart concept required so much 'setting up' that it just would not work. There was a discussion around the inter-connection of the impact of grooming on the heart and the brain, and LEEG members felt an illustration incorporating a brain may be more appropriate and effective.

This input fundamentally shaped the final choice of illustration (a speech bubble), which was presented to and approved by the LEEG.

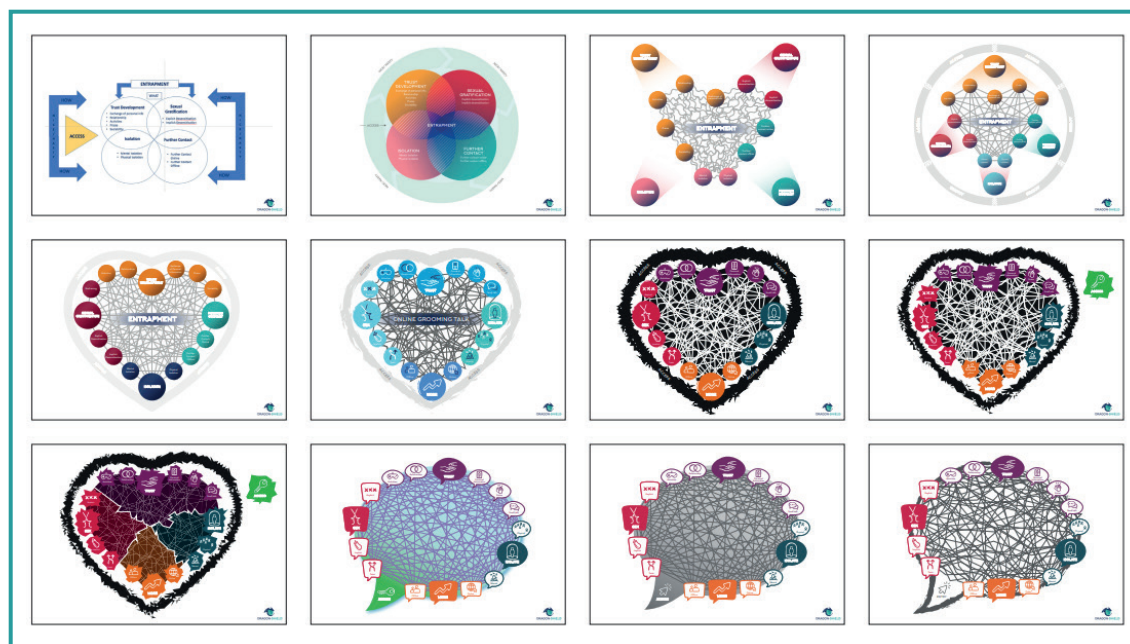**Fig. 3 | Speech Bubble Illustration of the OGDM and Creative Journey Shaped by LEEG Input**
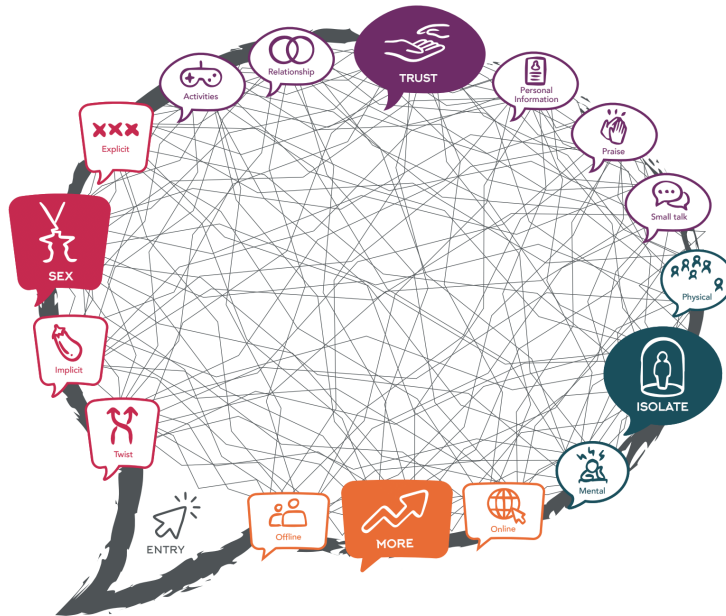
Fig. 4 | Final Speech Bubble Approved by LEEG June 2022

c | 'Strong At the Broken Places' Animation

The LEEG worked over 8 sessions to storyboard, script, voice over and create an original score for a 90 second animation. The aim was to use a creative approach to capture and communicate the survivor and lived experience voice. The intent of this animation was that it would remain in the mindset of all who viewed it, capturing the impact of understanding online grooming as manipulation through communication. It was designed to capture how children who experience it think, feel and act in the aftermath. Due to the constraints of online engagement, this activity involved work both during and after sessions, where LEEG members were asked to work on a number of creative exercises including word association, developing vision boards, newspaper blackout poetry[6] and animation inspiration sessions (Fig 5).

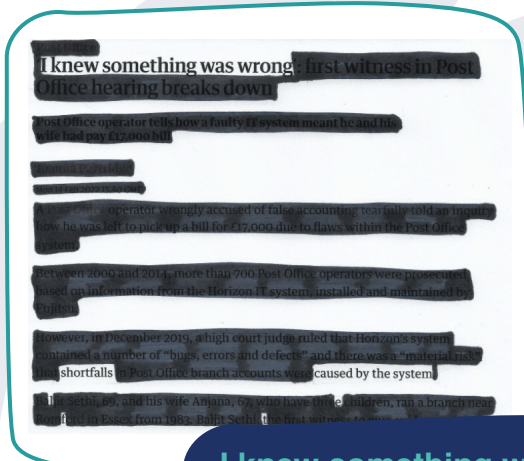**Fig.5 | Example of Newspaper Blackout Poetry Developed by LEEG Member**

Fig. 6 | Finished Blackout Poetry Used to Inspire 'Strong at the Broken Places' Script

I knew something was wrong

Shortfalls caused by the
system left me in a hole
A problem
Broken
Something wrong
but no one wanted to know
I'm over IT
Take the blame
The ordeal away
Hear me give up valuable time
And relive distressing memories

Throughout the process the LEEG provided insight, comment and creative ideas to produce every stage of the animation – from the initial concept, to the creative brief, to the scripting, storyboard development, voiceovers and original score. An example can be seen at Fig.7, where the group commented that the first version of the story boards was too literal, that the humans depicted were too gendered and the whole concept needed to be more abstract. This was summed up with comments about a section of the script that recalls a childhood memory of a motorbike ride. The first iteration showed an actual motorbike (see Fig.7), whereas the second iteration (see storyboard v.2 – Fig. 8) used imagery of butterflies to depict the memory in a more symbolic way.

Fig. 7 | 'Strong At the Broken Places' - Storyboard V.1.
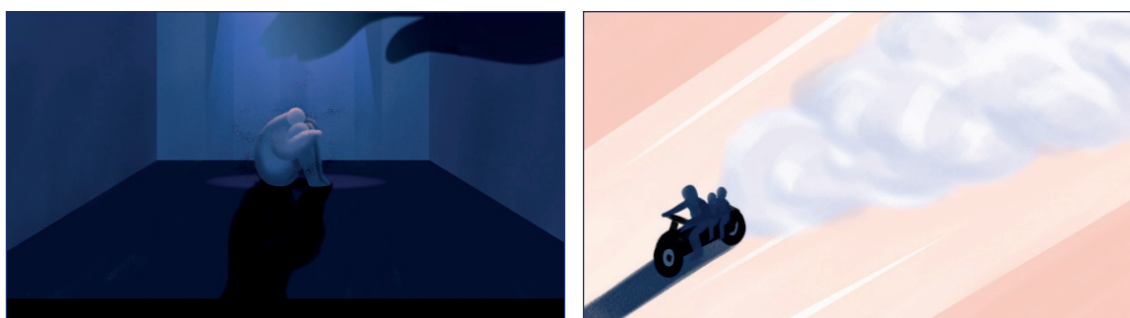

Fig. 8 | 'Strong at the Broken Places' - Storyboard V. 2

The final animation was launched in September 2022 at an event hosted by the Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cross Party Group on Preventing Child Sexual Abuse. Sign up to the DRAGON-S newsletter for updates on all aspects of the Shield Training by emailing **project.dragons@swansea.ac.uk.**

5 | REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

As evidenced throughout this report, the LEEG have played a central role and made a crucial contribution in co-developing the DRAGON-Shield training portal, and to Project DRAGON-S as a whole. Their input has been crucial to ensure that the correct messages are relayed regarding the impacts of online grooming (and all other forms of OCSAE) to the receiving audience.

Throughout the Lived Experience project, positive and encouraging feedback was provided to the LEEG members regarding the role they played and the support the DRAGON-Shield team were able and willing to provide. However, as with any endeavour of this kind, there are learning points along the way. Our recommendations stem from reflective discussion by all involved in the LEEG project and are aimed at decision-makers, funders, and future project leads, indeed anyone developing ideas or projects that would involve working with LEEGs. We hope our proposed recommendations will start a conversation towards a more systematic understanding of what it takes to safely and successfully embed the voice of lived experience at heart of future CSAE research and development work.

PROJECT DRAGON-S LEEG
PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lived Experience Experts' Group's overarching call:

We must work towards the establishment and support of LEEGs becoming routine when working on projects, products or developing policy relating to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE).

Funders and Decision-makers

All applications for funding relating to research and resource development on CSAE must be required to evidence how they have considered the involvement of lived experience expertise. This consideration should be a condition for approval.

1 Funders must scope and fully cost the financial commitment required to adequately remunerate lived experience expertise contributions. This needs to be built into, assessed and scrutinised as part of award decisions from the outset.

2 Fair renumeration and reimbursement of expenses incurred for lived experience experts must be core to any proposal and a condition of successful applications.

3 To define appropriate levels of renumeration and achieve consistency, clear guidance should be provided to grant applicants at the outset of the process and proposals should be assessed on the basis of adherence to this guidance. This needs to cover a realistic view of all parts of the project process.

4 Funding needs to be flexible to respond to the real-life, personal contributions that are being made and extra or replacement sessions that may be needed. Contingency funding must be accessible to support this. The financial resources and capacity required should be ringfenced in applications.

PROJECT DRAGON-S LEEG PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Project Leads and Teams

5 Projects must carefully assess and evidence their consideration of the role of lived experience experts in their project developments.

6 Group selection and assessment must be led by specialists in the field of CSAE who engage in trauma informed practice.

7 Constant feedback on Project developments need to occur and touching base with participants in between sessions is essential. Such engagement takes time and needs to be properly catered for in any financial bid.

8 Sessions must be flexible, inclusive and adaptable to respond to the different needs, skills and abilities within a group. This will ensure and facilitate full engagement and participation. Staff need to be supported to offer this reflexive and responsive approach.

9 Project leads should be trauma informed and alert to the potential impacts on Project staff and participants of the subject matter they are working with.

1

Sandford, L (1991). Strong at the Broken Places: Overcoming the Trauma of Childhood Abuse. London: Virago; Reprint edition.

2

Kintsugi, a Centuries-Old Japanese Method of Repairing Pottery with Gold (mymodernmet.com)

3

Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Hanson, E., Whittle, H., Alves-Costa, F., & Beech, A. (2020). Technology assisted child sexual abuse in the UK: Young people's views on the impact of online sexual abuse. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 119. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105451.

Kloess, J. A., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. E., & Beech, A. R. (2017). A descriptive account of victims' behaviour and responses in sexually exploitative interactions with offenders. *Psychology, Crime and Law,* 23(7), 621–632. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2017.1293052.

Whittle, H., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., & Beech, A. (2014). "Under His Spell": Victims' Perspectives of Being Groomed Online. *Social Sciences,* 3(3), 404–426. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci3030404.

Whittle, H., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Beech, A., & Collings, G. (2013). A review of young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18(1), 135–146. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.11.008.

4

This was due to the Covid 19 stay at home guidance, which was in place for the majority of the duration of the project.

5

Lorenzo-Dus, N., Izura, C. & Perez-Tattam, R. (2016). *Understanding grooming discourse in computer mediated environments. Discourse, Context & Media*, 12, 40-50. DOI: doi:10.1016/j.dcm.2016.02.004.

Lorenzo-Dus, N. & Izura, C. (2017). 'cause ur special': Understanding trust and complimenting behaviour in online grooming discourse'. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 112, 68-82 DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2017.01.004.

Lorenzo-Dus, N. & Kinzel, A. (2019). 'So is your mom as cute as you?': Examining patterns of language use by online sexual groomers, *Journal of Corpora and Discourse Studies*, 2, 15-39. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/jcads.31.

Lorenzo-Dus, N. Kinzel, A. and Di Cristofaro (2020). The communicative modus operandi on online child sexual groomers – recurring patterns in their language use, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 155, 15-27. DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2019.09.010.

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Lorenzo-Dus, N. (2022) Digital Grooming: Discourses of Manipulation in Cyber-crime. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lorenzo-Dus, N., Evans, C., and Mullineux-Morgan, R. (2022/23). Digital Sexual Grooming Discourse: Offender and Child Perspectives. Cambridge Elements Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6

Kleon, Austin (2010). Newspaper Blackout. HarpPeren; 1st edition See also How To Make A Newspaper Blackout Poem

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