Adolescents' Experiences of Online Sexual Solicitation

by

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Abstract

Adolescents' safety on the Internet is a prime concern in society. Sexual predators use the

online environment regularly to solicit adolescents for sexual purposes; however, we

know very little about the experiences of adolescents who become victimized in this way.

This research used a thematic analysis to examine the experiences of adolescents who had

been sexually solicited on the Internet. Eight participants, 18 – 25 years old, having

experienced online sexual solicitation between the ages of 12 – 16, were recruited via

advertising posters and announcements. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain

rich descriptions of their experience. A thematic analysis using the structure defined by

Braun and Clarke (2006) examined the transcripts of interviews to develop themes for

understanding the psycho-sociological and decision-making processes adolescents engage

in when encountering sexual solicitation online from young adults' perspectives. Two

major themes, Social Isolation and Exploring Sense of Self, along with five subthemes,

Belonging, Personal Insecurities, Internal Conflict, Sexuality, and A Significant

Experience developed from participants' accounts. Implications and discussions of these

themes are addressed.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Sylvia Peske. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethical approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Adolescents' Experience of Online Sexual Solicitation," No. Pro00016424, March 17, 2011.

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Problem

Sexual solicitation of youth online continues to be an important, yet complex, issue in today's society. The Criminal Code of Canada defines online luring as "someone using a computer system to communicate with someone they believe to be a child under the age of 18 years in order to facilitate committing an offence against that child" (https://www.cybertip.ca/app/en/projects#projects-research). One aspect involves predators luring unsuspecting youth online into sexual activities using a grooming process that slowly habituates youth to sexual content and can contain an element of coercion and/or threat. Another facet implicates youth as minors who willingly engage in online sexual activities with adults for their own intent and purpose. The latter raises difficult legal issues when attempting to define age of sexual consent (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). Under Canadian law, the age of sexual consent has recently been more clearly defined using "close in age" exemptions. Adolescents, 12 – 13 years of age are able to consent to non-exploitative sexual activity with other adolescents who are no more than two years older and adolescents 14 -15 years of age are able to consent with individuals no more than five years older (Miller, Cox, & Saewyc, 2010).

Nine percent of American youth between the ages of 10 and 17 are unwillingly sexually solicited online (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012). In 2011, a total of 67,000 online child sexual exploitation incidents had been reported to Canada's national tipline, Cybertip.ca, since its inception in September 2002. Of these cases, 1,000 (1.5%) were defined as luring (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2012). An examination of 264 of the specific luring cases reported between 2007-2011 found that 85.9% of victims were girls and the average age was 13 years. Thirty percent of victims sent sexually explicit

images of themselves to their perpetrator and 24% had been threatened, most often that their pictures would be distributed to social networking sites or their list of contacts (Canadian Centre for Child Protection). Although media publicize such occurrences frequently, it is estimated that fewer than 10% of online solicitation incidents are reported to authorities (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000).

Canadian governments recognize the growing importance of protecting youth from predators on the Internet and have responded by becoming involved in international, national, and provincial task forces specifically dedicated to the reporting, tracking, and capturing of online predators (http://ncecc.ca). At the beginning of the decade, representatives of the National Child Exploitation Coordination Center (NCECC) indicated that child sexual exploitation offences have been altered by the Internet, which has "destabilized the ability of Canada's criminal justice system to respond effectively to this type of criminal activity" (http://ncecc.ca/index_e.htm). Increases in task forces, training, technology, and investigative efforts since have led to a substantial increase in arrests of online perpetrators (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010) and to a decline of unwanted online sexual solicitation incidents in the United States (Jones et al., 2012). Prevention through research and education remains an important component for protecting Canadian youth and is recognized by NCECC as a necessary component for the success of their efforts.

Considering the ever-changing dynamics of technology, its use and research of youth on the Internet, remains in its infancy. Research on this topic to date largely focuses on understanding adolescents' Internet use and online behaviours. This focus offers insight into adolescents' online culture, risk-taking activities, and vulnerability for

sexual solicitation. However, there is a lack of research examining how adolescents experience, understand, perceive, or respond to sexual solicitation online. The paucity of research means that our understanding of the process adolescents go through when encountering online sexual solicitation is sketchy at best.

Significance

Understanding adolescents' experience of online sexual solicitation is important for law enforcements' investigative and prevention purposes (H. Kunce, personal communication, October 26, 2006; R. Sinclair, personal communication, May 28, 2007). Keeping up with the changing culture of adolescents and perpetrators online becomes key for investigative efforts, particularly with technology advancing so quickly and statistics showing 95% of adolescents are now connected to the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011). Media sources are adolescents' single most time consuming activity besides sleeping (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). The findings of this research have the potential to assist law officials efforts. It further will increase parents' and teachers' understanding and ability to better educate children and guide their online behaviour. Health service professionals will also be able to increase their ability for empathic understanding, ultimately aiding in the counselling process with youth who have been victimized in this way. Importantly, this research makes a significant contribution to the limited literature in the field.

Research Questions

The purpose of this investigation is to explore the following questions from the perspectives of young adults who have experienced online sexual solicitation during adolescence:

1) How do adolescents who experience online sexual solicitation understand, perceive, and respond to their encounters?

2) What are the psycho-sociological and decision-making processes adolescents engage in when encountering sexual solicitation online?

Overview of Research

This research has been organized into the following chapters:

Chapter Two, Literature Review, encompasses a review on key aspects of adolescent relationship development important for understanding their online presence. This includes background information on romantic relationship development in adolescence with consideration of biological, emotional, and cognitive components; identity development; attachment histories; and peer context. The presentation of literature continues on the risks involved in adolescents' romantic relationships and sexuality. This chapter concludes with a review of factors addressing adolescents' vulnerability for sexual solicitation and online predators.

Chapter Three, Methodology, includes a description of the methodological procedure of thematic analysis under a pragmatic and symbolic interactionist perspective. Elements of procedure discussion include rationale, sampling, data collection and analysis, rigor, and ethical considerations.

 Chapter Four, Participants, provides a summary of each participant's experience of online sexual solicitation.

Chapter Five, Results, offers a detailed thematic description of the findings, including interview excerpts, arising from data analysis.

Chapter Six, Discussion, presents a discussion of the results, including counselling implications and future research considerations.

Literature Review

Adolescents' vulnerability to online sexual solicitation is complex, dynamic, and can involve many factors. Some of these factors include the behaviours and activities adolescents engage in while online, while others involve developmental issues and personality characteristics. In a qualitative study inquiring about adolescents' general online experiences, Maczewski (2002) identified themes that were descriptive of adolescents' vulnerability. Themes arising from interviews suggest that adolescents enjoy feeling a sense of excitement, freedom, power, and connectedness using the Internet, along with having opportunity to expand their identity and sense of self (Maczewski). Further, the "instantaneous, private Internet connection is seductive, responding to instinctual and self-sustaining wishes for sexual prowess, self-worth, and narcissistic grandiosity" (Steinberger, 2009, p. 134).The nature of these themes can be powerful for developing adolescents, luring them into risky online activities without the necessary cognitive capabilities to handle situations if they arise, especially if they are struggling with personal and/or mental health issues.

The fundamental nature of adolescents' romantic relationship development contributes to their online vulnerability for it has important implications for adolescents' interpersonal actions on the Internet. Sexual predators target online adolescents who desire relationships and who chat about issues of sexuality (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2008). As such, the first objective of this review is to discuss romantic relationship development in adolescence and the risks involved in this normative aspect of development. The second objective is to outline specific characteristics of how the Internet assists adolescents in romantic relationship development, of how adolescents

become victims of online sexual solicitation, and of how sexual predators use the Internet for criminal purposes. The third and concluding objective discusses the purpose of this proposed research.

Romantic Relationship Development in Adolescence

Until recently, there has been a dearth of research on adolescents' romantic relationship development because of prevailing yet false assumptions. Adolescents' relationships were often viewed as trivial and transitory, impacting primarily problems of behaviour and adjustment and offering little information beyond parent-child and peer influences (Collins, 2003). Researchers now believe that romantic relationships are central to adolescent development (Brown, 1999; Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006; Kan & Carlson, 2006) and have significant influence on developmental trajectories (Collins; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Joyner & Campa, 2006).

Although there are inherent aspects of romantic relationships that are the same for both adolescents and adults, the fundamental nature of development is what differentiates adolescents' romantic relationships. Cotterell (1996) describes development as the result of "continuous change over time in a way that the person perceives and interacts with the environment" with the growth of development "towards greater complexity, greater differentiation, and greater organization of cognitive, affective, social, and conative processes" (p. 14). Because adolescents are in an earlier phase of development, understanding adolescents' romantic relationships is best when considering the developmental nature of their experiences (Kan & Carlson, 2006).

Themes have emerged from recent research on adolescents' romantic relationship development. One theme reveals that romantic interest is common; most adolescents become progressively more fixated on the particular goal of finding a romantic partner (Florsheim, 2003) as their need to relate to others increases (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Approximately 25% of 12-year-olds, 50% of 15-year-olds, and 70% of 18-year-olds report experience in a romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Increasing emphasis on relationships during adolescence fosters both independence (behavioural and emotional autonomy from parents) and interdependence (mutual influence and support through connections with others) (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Romantic relationships offer adolescents support, companionship, and intimacy over and beyond same or other sex friendships (Furman, Ho, & Low, 2007) and challenge them to express emerging feelings of love, passion, and sexuality (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). They create the foundation for subsequent romantic relationships, for peer social competence, for economy and status, and for identity, including sexual orientation, sexual identity, and romantic self-concept. Psycho-sociologically, romantic relationships serve as the primary context for the development of sexuality (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Furman et al., 2007).

Another theme highlights that adolescent romance does not exist in a developmental vacuum; history and context are key factors impacting romantic relationship development (Florsheim, 2003). As such, there is a psycho-sociological component in adolescents' romantic relationship development that includes both micro and macro systems (Cavanagh, 2007; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Coontz, 2006; Kan & Carlson, 2006). Microsystems suggest that the romantic relationships in adolescence

must be understood in conjunction with their other relationships. Macro systems refer to

the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape individual attitudes and

expectations which ultimately affect adolescents' romantic-related behaviours. Therefore,

a component of romantic relationship development in adolescence is socially constructed

while at the same time offers important socialization functions (Davila, Stroud, Miller, &

Steinberg, 2007).

A third theme reveals that romantic relations in adolescence can be

transformative; they can serve to either heighten or diminish adolescents' risk factors

(Florsheim, 2003). For example, adolescents who connect with risk-taking romantic

partners may engage in similar risk-taking activities. Alternatively, risk-taking

adolescents who connect with more emotionally stable and cautious partners may in fact

settle down. Developmentally, relationships offer adolescents new reference points for

interpersonal interactions which can moderate the influences of early attachment

relationships on their interpersonal-developmental trajectory (Florsheim, 2003).

A fourth theme identifies that romance and sex in adolescence has the potential to

lead to negative consequences (Florsheim, 2003). Adolescents can face issues of

jealousy, limited time for friends, and humiliation within romantic relationships (Kan &

Carlson, 2006). More serious risks include teen pregnancy, STDs, sexual victimization,

dating violence, and aggression (Furman et al., 2007). The ending of relationships can

also carry negative consequences. Breakups are a normal part of relationship

development and can be adaptive for adolescents (Barber, 2006; Davila et al., 2007);

however, adolescents may experience painful symptoms of withdrawal (Fisher, 2006)

along with other short-term and long-term consequences including, depression, loss of

social status, substance use, and social isolation (Barber; Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003).

Although adolescents' romantic relationships maintain a normative and adaptive

function, there are several risks that can challenge and influence adolescents'

development. They are still in a process of learning how to be in a romantic relationship,

and because of the rapid changes they experience in response to new developmental

challenges, adolescents are "more likely than adults to experience transient psychological

difficulties" (Seefeldt, Florsheim, & Benjamin, 2003, p. 172).

The question left to ask is what makes some adolescents more vulnerable to the

negative consequences of romantic relationships? The answer is not straightforward.

There are theories available that provide insight on individual differences for adolescents.

Each one on its own is insufficient to account for all the factors that may be involved;

however, together they begin to provide some understanding about the unique aspects of

romantic relationship development in adolescence. Various theories include biological,

emotional, and cognitive components, as well as identity development, attachment

histories, and peer contexts. Discussions of these theories follow.

Biological, emotional, and cognitive components. Puberty-specific maturational

changes, particularly hormonal changes, lead to the development of romantic interest,

sexual motivation, emotional intensity, risk for affective disorders in females, increase in

risk taking, novelty seeking, and sensation (reward) seeking (Dahl, 2004) and accentuate

individual differences in social competence (Monahan & Steinberg, 2011). The

significance of biological maturation is that it brings changes in arousal and motivation

before the development of competent emotional regulation (Steinberg, 2005). The new

drives, motivations, and intensity of feelings that come with pubertal and sexual

maturation have important influences on the affective systems in the brain which perform outside of conscious awareness (Steinberg).

Another biological explanation for romantic relationship development in adolescence contends that dopamine and other brain chemicals increase in adolescence and create a biological drive for love (Fisher, 2006). Viewed as a drive, romantic love directs behaviour to achieve particular biological needs based on a reward system that is exceedingly difficult to control. Complex romantic love, therefore, has a biological link to lust so that when adolescents fall in love, they can "become biologically motivated to seek sexual activity with their beloved" (Fisher, p. 10). However, "dopamine is not destiny" (Schwartz, 2006, p. 45) and biological variance across adolescents interacts with their contextual factors to produce different romantic experiences (Halpern, 2003; Schwartz). Further, the bidirectional nature of such interaction indicates that emotionally cognitive processes can also directly alter adolescents' biological processes (Halpern).

In terms of direct cognitive changes, the brain undergoes its third major growth spurt in early adolescence (Stien & Kendall, 2004) in which improvements are made in the existing capabilities of the brain (Luna & Sweeney, 2004; Steinberg, 2005). Although adolescence marks the beginning of greater cognitive control, higher-level cognitive processes are not yet fully mature (Luna & Sweeney). The lack of efficiency in an integrated and synchronous brain system suggests that adolescents are vulnerable to heightened risk taking as they are more often driven by external (Luna & Sweeney) and socioemotional stimuli without the voluntary control of behaviour (Albert & Steinberg, 2011; Pharo, Sim, Graham, Gross, & Hayne, 2011; Steinberg, 2007, 2008, 2010b; Steinberg, et al., 2008).

The growth and development of the adolescent brain, which includes hormonal and other chemical changes, has implications on adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural capacities in regards to their romantic involvement and risk-taking activities. It takes a certain amount of "emotional intelligence" to assist individuals in directing forms of adaptive and functional behaviour (Goleman, 1995). The word intelligence suggests individuals maintain some level of ability to be emotionally smart. Goleman defines such abilities as "being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope" (p. 34). The basic tenet of emotional intelligence is the understanding that emotions are signals that offer messages to guide individuals in certain directions and toward certain behaviours (Goleman; Greenberg, 2002). Emotional signals are indispensable to rational thinking; they help to eliminate and highlight options for courses of action (Damasio, 1994). The challenge for adolescents is that an influx of biological and physiological changes begins in early adolescence while the ability to access higher-level cognitive self-regulatory processes used in decision-making do not occur until mid-late adolescence. These processes of development create a context where young adolescents often act and react based on their emotions. Without the necessary impulse control, young adolescents are more at risk for making poor decisions when it comes to love and romantic relationships (Fisher, 2006). However, it is important to note that the process of brain maturation "unfolds within an environmental context that…moderates its expression in emotion, behaviour, and cognition" (Steinberg, 2010a, p.160).

Identity development. Identity development involves two distinctive tasks. One encompasses a thorough exploration of identity through considerations of alternatives for who one might become and the other represents a commitment to identity through the process of greater definitive decisions about who one is (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Individuals actively engage in the process (Salmela-Aro & Schoon, 2009) whether they are fully aware of it or not. The development of a personal identity is neither static nor limited to the developmental period of adolescence. What makes identity development prominent in adolescence is what Marcia (2002) describes as the first time that "all of the necessary ingredients exist for its construction" (p. 202). The necessary components on an individual / psychological level include growth in adolescents' physical, sexual, cognitive and moral reasoning development. On a social level, adolescents face the responsibility to meet social expectations for the future adult roles they will fulfill, such as being a spouse, parent, worker, and citizen (Marcia). As such, the development of a personal identity occurs within a social context and encompasses interacting dynamics.

Adolescents create their identity when they obtain clear self-definitions and integrate their personal values and moral beliefs into their chosen roles and relationships (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). There may be no experience more important than the development of close relationships for adolescents to develop their identity (Tabares & Gottman, 2003), a mutually influencing process of development (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, and Vaugh, 2011). Adolescents develop distinct perceptions of themselves through romantic experiences; they learn about what's important to them, what types of relationships they are comfortable with, what types of

emotional interactions they prefer in partnerships, what they want in a partner and whether they are valued, accepted, and desired by others (Bouchey, 2007; Davila et al., 2007; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Sippola, Buchanan, & Kehoe, 2007; Tabares & Gottman; Vogensen, 2003) separate from their family of origin (Kerpelman, et al., 2012). Partners also offer encouragement, direction, inspiration, mirroring, and a role model which assists identity formation (Vogensen). In attempts to obtain clear self-definitions, adolescents experiment with alternate selves in different relationships to help them explore alternatives (Furman & Shaffer; Marcia, 2002).

Adolescents' identity further develops in the struggle to find a balance between autonomy and connectedness as they negotiate the needs of two people (Davila et al., 2007; Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Competent adolescents are more likely to display their genuine selves to others (Davila et al.); however, because the process of developing a more complex identity begins in adolescence and continues throughout the lifespan, there may be few who are competent, particularly younger teens. In fact, even by late adolescence, few teens and young adults have been found to achieve a stable identity (Vogensen, 2003). Therefore, adolescents may have more difficulty articulating their feelings clearly and coherently, engaging in complex communications (Seefeld et al., 2003) and presenting false selves to others. Sippola et al. (2007) describe the false self as adolescents' subjective sense that the self they present to others is separate from their true, inner self. Boys are particularly prone to present a false self in romantic relationships compared to girls (Sippola et al.).

There is also another important aspect to identity formation that adolescents learn about and experiment with in romantic relationships. This is the development of their

sexuality. Romantic relationships serve as the primary context for adolescents to learn about most of the features of sexuality – not only the "*how* of sexual behaviour but also for the *what* and *when*" (Furman & Shaffer, 2003, p. 12). This opportunity allows adolescents to discover what is sexually attractive and arousing, what they like in their partners and what their partners like, and how to reconcile their sexual desires with their moral values and their partners' desires (Furman & Shaffer). However, competency in discussing and negotiating sexual issues becomes important as well. Because adolescents may be less competent based on their phase of identity development, teens may give in to sexual advances while not necessarily wanting to have sex in order to obtain greater intimacy (Shulman, 2003). This is especially true for females (Shulman).

Attachment histories. There is consensus among researchers that attachments made in infancy influence the nature of future interpersonal relationships. Early prominent relationship experiences help children to create expectations regarding themselves in the environment which then guide their interpretations of their experiences and their interpersonal interactions (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). For example, feeling secure with parents in the family environment can create a foundation for children to be successful with their peers, and strong friendships are generally associated with a sense of increased comfort and success in romantic relationships (Collins & Sroufe). Attachment has been described as a motivational system in which the need to belong and experience intimacies and security impels individuals to readily form new relationships with reluctance to end such relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Adolescence marks the beginning of a search for others who can offer a similar sense of security to that of primary caregivers (Marvin & Britner, 1999). Although

adolescents maintain their relationship with their primary attachment figures, research indicates that teens shift away from parents and more readily turn to peers for emotional support and comfort (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). However, the strength of attachments made in infancy and childhood can affect adolescents' new attachment relationships. Early attachment experiences create mental models or representations that consolidate with other relationship experiences to provide a structure on which adolescents base their expectations of emotional quality for romantic relationships (Brown, 2006; Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Steinberg, Davilla, & Fincham, 2006). Different experiences, expectations, and representations lead to different ways adolescents interact with others and form romantic relationships. Further, attachment representations can shift as adolescents gain experience in romantic relationships (Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010; Meier & Allen, 2009).

Furman and Simon (2006) propose that there are two levels of perspective in attachment. Romantic styles are self perceptions of how individuals approach romantic relationships and what they expect from those relationships. Romantic working models are internalized states of mind/representations of romantic relationships. Their research found that adolescents' patterns of interaction were associated with their perspectives of romantic relationships, particularly internalized representations and especially for girls (Furman & Simon).

Attachment can not only influence patterns of interaction but also dynamics of romantic and sexual relationships. One way is through effects of partner choice based on expectations of attaining acceptance and avoiding rejection (Downey, Bonica, & Rincon,

1999), which can directly impact motivations for sex (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004). Entering relationships and engaging in sex can act as strategies for eliciting desired and needed attachment care in those who are insecurely attached (Ammaniti, Giampaolo, & Speranza, 2007). For example, adolescents with attachment experiences based on rejection more often anxiously or angrily expect, perceive, and react to rejection. Downey et al. coined the term "rejection sensitive" to describe such individuals. Overly concerned with approval from others, Tracy, Shaver, Albino, and Cooper (2003) found anxious adolescents with fears of rejection and abandonment to "fall in love" often simply because partners showed a positive interest in them. Further, they had sex more frequently at younger ages and were prone to use alcohol and drugs to reduce relationship anxiety in general and in relation to sexual interactions. Steinberg et al.'s (2006) research further supports these findings with insecure, anxious adolescents reporting more negative and risky romantic experiences. This was particularly evident among anxious adolescent girls (Steinberg, et al.; Tracy et al.).

Tracy et al.'s (2003) research also offers a profile of adolescents who are avoidant and insecure. The sexual and dating profile for avoidant adolescents reflects their discomfort with intimacy and unwillingness or inability to form close bonds with others. These adolescents displayed a relatively low perceived sex drive and were less sexually active and less confident of their sexual competence compared to their anxious or secure peers. They were more often motivated to have intercourse based on a desire to lose their virginity and were most likely to use alcohol or drugs to combat their sexual fears. Alternatively, with a positive view of self and positive views of partners, the sexual and

dating experiences of secure adolescents reflect their comfort with interpersonal intimacy. Secure adolescence were

more love-oriented, more likely to be involved in a relationship, less likely to display sexual aggression or become the victims of sexual aggression, less likely to use drugs or alcohol in sexual situations, and likely to experience more positive and fewer negative emotions during sex. (Tracy et al., p. 154)

Research continues to explore the impact of attachment styles on relationship and sexual development (Ammaniti et al., 2007; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; Davis et al., 2004; Day, 2006; Doyle, Lawford, & Markiewicz, 2009; Evans, 2011; Kerpelman et al., 2012; Markiewicz et al., 2006; Mayseless, Sharabany, & Sagi, 2007; Miga, Hare, Allen, & Manning, 2010; Rodrigues & Kitzmann, 2007; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006).

It is important to note that context is important when considering the influence of attachments on romantic relationships. Although research finds patterns of interpersonal interactions and sexual and dating profiles based on differing attachment experiences, non-romantic relationships and experiences particularly from peer groups have their own influence on the development of adolescents' romantic relationships (Kan & Carlson, 2006). As we will see in later discussions, different peer groups with varying norms and expectations can differentially manifest the influence of attachment history on romantic experiences (Ammaniti et al., 2007; Kan & Carlson).

Peer context. Adolescents' peer context provides the social milieu for the development of interpersonal relationships. Friendships, whether of the same or opposite sex, provide the opportunity for adolescents to negotiate all aspects of relationship

dynamics (Diamond, 2003), which ultimately assists them in developing interpersonal skills and competence (Brown, 2006). Competent interpersonal skills often progress to romantic interactions eventually leading to romantic relationships (Brown). This is not to say that romantic relationships cannot influence peer relationships as both utilize the same skills that likely have a reciprocal effect on each other (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Regardless, the overall progression of romantic relationship development parallels the transformation of peer groups throughout adolescence. In early adolescence, peer groups consist mainly of same gendered members before becoming composed of mixed gendered members that set the stage for dating opportunities and romantic relationships (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004).

However, the gender composition of adolescents' peer network may further influence their readiness for dating. Young adolescents' move more quickly into romantic relationships when situated among peer networks with many opposite-gendered peers compared to networks of fewer opposite-gendered members (Cavanagh, 2007; Feiring, 1999). This is also true for adolescent girls. Females who have the most friends overall, including opposite-gendered friends, are those who usually date (Kuttler & La Greca, 2004). Further, adolescents who have more friends with romantic partners are those who date more seriously (Kuttler & La Greca).

Peer contexts are important for the development of social norms and behaviours; they set the rules and standards. Peers generally facilitate idealized romantic and sexual conceptions of romantic and non-romantic relationships and these ideals translate into behaviour (Cavanagh, 2007; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005). Should peer

groups promote romantic relationships and sexual intercourse, then members of those groups often maintain relationships and engage more freely in sex (Cavanagh). Further, should peer groups accept sex outside of romantic relationships as a norm, then adolescents engage in more non-romantic sexual activity (Manning et al.). Outside of defining norms, peers can influence other group members' behaviour in two ways. First, friends can model behaviour, and secondly, friends can introduce new behaviour to the uninitiated (Fortenberry, 2003). This influence is important particularly when it comes to risk behaviours. Research finds that adolescents engage in risk taking and risky decision making more often when in peer groups (Chein, Albert, O'Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; O'Brien, Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2011; Steinberg, 2008).

Adolescent males and females are further socialized differently within their peer groups which differentially prepares them for participation in romantic relationships (Giordano et al., 2006). Characterized by affection, intimacy, and self-disclosure, girls' peer relationships offer them an advantage in romantic relationships through greater exposure to and experience with intimate relationship building skills. On the other hand, boys' experiences of competition and having to be better than the other in their peer relationships may account for their increased levels of awkwardness and anxiety in romantic relationships (Giordano et al.). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that boys have more dominance in peer groups whereas girls maintain more dominance in romantic relationships, making girls more dependent on establishing a relationship while boys more dependent on maintaining a particular relationship (Coontz, 2006). Differential socialization might also add to gender differences in the way girls and boys conceptualize

romantic relationships. Boys do place greater emphasis on the sexual components within ideal relationships compared to girls (Cavanagh, 2007).

Risks Involved in Adolescents' Romantic Relationships

Although romantic relationships maintain developmental importance in adolescence, there are risks that can impact trajectories. Laursen and Mooney (2007) propose three models to describe the contributions of romantic relationships on adolescent adjustment. The first model, romantic relationship status, suggests that adolescent adjustment occurs simply from their participation in romantic relationships. One main benefit of romantic relationship experience is the opportunity for adolescents to master new forms of socially desirable behaviour; however, the relationship also provides the opportunity to master new forms of risk-taking behaviour. The second model, romantic relationship quality, places importance on adolescent perceptions of relationship characteristics. Beneficial outcomes result from positive relationships while detrimental outcomes result from negative relationships all based on how adolescents perceive their relationship. The third model, relationship network quality, encompasses different types of close relationships in adolescents' lives beyond that of their romantic relationship. Therefore, adolescent adjustment is a function of the quality of their extended relationships in which beneficial outcomes increase as the number of positive relationships increase. Alternatively, detrimental outcomes increase as the number of negative relationships in adolescents' lives increase. The foundation of this model rests on the fact that if adolescents have access to resources, they are better prepared to overcome adversity (Laursen & Mooney). Thus, romantic relationships can be healthy and beneficial for adolescents when they are paced with adolescents' competencies and

"embedded in a social context that both support and regulate appropriate involvement" (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009, p. 144-145).

Although these models help to look at different ways to characterize and explain adjustment outcomes, the challenge in determining whether adolescents' romantic relationships are healthy or dysfunctional is difficult for a variety of reasons (Florsheim, 2003). One issue to consider is that there is a historical influence on adolescents' social norms and values surrounding romantic relationships. Increases in current divorce rates and out-of-wedlock childbirth have influence on adolescents' sets of standards for evaluating the quality of their romantic relationships in ways that are not yet well understood by researchers. Another challenge involves the nature of romantic relationships and how developmentally individuals learn over time and through experiences. Individuals learn to distinguish positive and negative elements within both healthy and dysfunctional relationships over the course of time. Further, some adolescents are better prepared to engage in this developmental process than others. An additional difficulty contains the social and cultural expectations that highly constrain current views of adolescents' romantic relationships and the distinction between those that are healthy and dysfunctional. Adolescents in western industrialized nations face contradictory messages in popular media that strongly influence their perspectives of romance. These influences include:

(a) having a boyfriend or girlfriend is socially desirable; (b) premarital sex is probably wrong but expected and normative; (c) a healthy romantic relationship is based in love; (d) it is good to date around and not get too serious with any one partner; (e) men and women occupy very distinctive roles and romantic relations

but ought to be treated as equal; and (f) beauty is closely associated with mate

value. (Florsheim, p. 373-374)

There are also difficulties surrounding research issues, such as the methodological gaps

in understanding adolescents' romantic relationships, including dyad characteristics in the

reinforcement of behaviours, and the political sensitivity of adolescent sexuality for

obtaining data from normative populations (Florsheim).

Nevertheless, context does play an important role for the risks associated with

adolescents' romantic experiences. The majority of the risks found in the literature

surround the nature of adolescents' sexual experiences and activities as a natural

component of romantic relationships. Kan and Carlson (2006) propose four levels of

contextual effects to help better understand these risks – relational, social, historical, and

developmental. The relational context is important because the range of normative

sexual behaviour changes as adolescents increase their involvement in sexual

relationships (Miller & Benson, 1999). Adolescents also make varying choices about sex

and contraception in different relationships (Manlove, Franzetta, Ryan, & Moore, 2006;

Upchurch & Kusunoki, 2006) which are complicated by the influence of partner

characteristics (Kan & Carlson). The social context considers cultural and

socioeconomic factors and findings that suggest sexual relationships and behaviour vary

as a function of culture (Manlove et al.) and socioeconomic status (Coontz, 2006). What

might be adaptive for adolescents of certain cultures and/or socioeconomic statuses to

engage in risky sexual behaviour may be maladaptive for others. The historical context

focuses on definitions of risk and on the historical changes in sexual behaviour (Kan &

Carlson). A recent historical notion suggests that childbearing out of wedlock is risky for

adolescents because it interferes with their ability to obtain individual achievement (Coontz). In addition, the fact that adolescents today are extending their education and postponing their marriages leads to an increase in sexual relations prior to marriage (Graber, Britto, & BrooksGunn, 1999; Miller & Benson, 1999) and an increase in their requirements to exercise caution for longer periods of time (Schwartz, 2006). The developmental context is what may be the most important area for consideration when considering adolescents' risks when engaging in sexual behaviour. The fact is, adolescents have fewer resources to handle the consequences of risky sexual behaviour (Kan & Carlson), and the earlier they engage in sexual activities, the greater their risk for more negative consequences (Browning & Laumann, 1997; Fortenberry, 2003; Graber et al.; Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000).

The factors that influence the risks associated with adolescents' sexual relationships interactively influence each other, adding to the complexity in understanding the nature of consequences (Kan & Carlson, 2006). There are "differences in the types and meanings of relational contexts in different cultures, over historical time, and across development" (Kan & Carlson, p. 252). To aid in our understanding, we can focus on research findings in regards to adolescents' sexual behaviour and consequences.

Adolescent Sexuality

Similar to any developmental period, adolescents' relationships vary. They may engage in traditional and/or committed dating relationships, which may or may not involve sexual activities, to those that are highly promiscuous where sexual activities occur outside of any relationship (Furman & Hand, 2006). However, most sexual experiences occur within romantic relationships, and for those that do not, partners

typically know each other for some time before engaging in sex (Abma, Martinez, & Copen, 2010; Giordano et al., 2006; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Snyder, 2006). Generally, there is a developmental progression of intimate contact that leads to sexual activities. Adolescents regularly hold hands within a group context before proceeding to touching each other without clothing, and these intimate events occur more often than physical sexual activities (O'Sullivan, Mantsun, Harris, & BrooksGunn, 2007).

Yet adolescence is the developmental period in which most teens have their first sexual experience (Finer, 2007; Maticka-Tyndale, 2008; Santelli, Lindberg, Finer, & Singh, 2007). Therefore, most adolescents have had sex, and those who engage in sexual activities regularly, maintain some sexual experience outside of their romantic relationships (Manning et al., 2005) and engage in some form of risky sexual behaviour (Snyder, 2006), particularly when they perceive benefits in doing so under a cost-benefit model for decision making (Maslowsky, Buvinger, Keating, Steinberg, & Cauffman, 2011; Parsons, Siegel, & Cousins, 1997; Siegel et al., 1994). This does not assume that adolescents are unaware of the potential consequences in their sexual behaviour. Research suggests that adolescents who engage in risky sexual behaviour perceive the consequences as less significant than those who do not engage, although it is important to note that the influence of risk perceptions on actual behaviour is reciprocal rather than determinable (Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002). Adolescents tend to take greater sexual risks in committed relationships compared to casual ones; however, there are some adolescents who feel compelled to engage in sex regardless of their level of commitment based on their low perceived ability to say no to sex (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996).

Offering greater insight into the development of adolescents' sexuality, Diamond and Savin-Williams (2009) review the literature and examine adolescents' motivations for engaging in sex. Adolescents appear to engage in sexual activities motivated by pleasure; by curiosity and experimentation; by the achievement of social status; by romantic relationships with the inherent motivating aspects of love, intimacy and desire to please; and by emotional regulation issues. Adolescents challenged by emotional regulation issues can use sex as a means to cope with negative emotions (Diamond & Savin-Williams). These teens tend to have a higher number of sexual partners and casual sex relationships, and are more likely to engage in greater sexual risk-taking (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998).

Trends in research help to illuminate the potential negative consequences involved in adolescents' sexual development and experience. Focusing only on the physical act of sex, adolescents in romantic relationships and/or who have older partners typically transition earlier into sexual activities compared to those not in romantic relationships (Halpern, Kaestle, & Hallfors, 2007). Of course, adolescents may use relationships solely for the purpose of sexual fulfillment and achievement of sexual status (Diamond & Savin-Williams; Miller & Benson, 1999). Teens with partners outside of their normal friendship networks and those they do not know very well maintain an increase in potential for problems (Ford, Sohn, & Lepkowski, 2001). Research links psychological adjustment challenges in teens with casual relationships (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Grello, Welsh, Harper & Dickson, 2003; Monahan & Lee, 2008). In addition, the potential for negative consequences increase for adolescents who experience regular

emotional difficulties (Harmon, 2006; Howard & Wang, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Wekerle & Avgoustis, 2003).

Gender differences further appear in research trends. Typically, female adolescents maintain a greater potentiality for the negative consequences of sexual participation in part because they often have older partners (Gowen, Feldman, Diaz, & Yisrael, 2004; Kaestle, Morisky, & Wiley, 2002), which decreases their contraception use (Ford et al., 2001; Glei, 1999; Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2003). Females further engage more frequently in sexual activities they dislike which suggests that they passively engage in their partner's desires rather than actively choose their level of participation (Kaestle, 2009). Additionally, females who maintain greater sexual activity often engage in risky dating behaviours, such as being secretive of their encounters (Levy, 2005). Lastly, sexual abuse, whether in the form of harassment, unwanted sexual comments, or coerced sex, is higher among females and increases throughout adolescence (Saewyc, Magee & Pettingell, 2004; Saewyc, Taylor, Homma & Ogilvie, 2008).

There are additional, more severe, consequences for adolescents' sexual participation. For example, sex typically precedes adolescents' experience of relational violence (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005) regardless of the many risks factors that contribute to violent and abusive romantic relationships (Harmon, 2006; Howard & Wang, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Wekerle & Avgoustis, 2003). Adolescents are more likely to experience violence in romantic relationships when they engage in sex with two or more partners and/or do not use condoms (Howard & Wang, 2003a, 2003b). In addition, unprotected sex can result in sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unplanned pregnancies. These

are important consequences of adolescents' sexual activity as they can lead to adolescent morbidity through suicidal actions (Fortenberry, 2003).

Research on adolescents' sexual practices in Canada based on age of consent laws aids our understanding of age factors implicated in the potential for negative consequences. It is important to note that the patterns of teenage sexuality in Canada have been relatively stable since 1970 (Maticka-Tyndale, 2008). On average, the age of first sexual intercourse occurs between 16 – 18 years of age with less than one-quarter of adolescents losing their virginity under the age of 16. This rate is lower than in earlier years (Maticka-Tyndale). However, concern is evident for those who have their first sexual experience at a younger age. Although 14 – 15 year olds most often have first intercourse within the "close in age" exemption laws, they are more likely than older teens to report forced sex and three or more partners (Miller, Cox, & Saewyc, 2010). Twenty-five to fifty percent of 12 – 13 year olds who have first intercourse are with others who are not within "close in age" law exemptions and almost 40% of teens under the age of 12 report first intercourse experiences with someone 20 years of age or older (Miller et al.). Younger teens with older partners experience higher rates of nonvoluntary and forced sex (Abma et al., 2010; Manlove, Moore, Liechty, Ikramullah, & Cottingham, 2005).

Regardless of age of consent laws, it is difficult to determine if adolescents are actually engaging in consensual, sexual relationships. Coontz (2006) identifies their general state of dependence in relationships. This dependence leads adolescent females who are struggling with a lack of confidence unlikely to risk "derailing a desired relationship with an older, more powerful man who might offer an escape from a bad

family situation or the hope of a more stable life" (Coontz, p. 89). Males are also not excluded from relationship pressures. Both female and male adolescents experience situations of forced sex (Howard & Wang, 2003b; Saewyc et al., 2004, 2008). The consequences from these situations can lead adolescents to further place themselves in harm's way (Howard & Wang).

Although there are many potential negative consequences of adolescents' sexual development and most research to date highlights these pathological and problematic aspects, there is a movement toward understanding and promoting sexual development in adolescence as "positive" (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). In fact, the term "sexuality development" is emerging to replace the older term of "sexual development" to encompass new theoretical and empirical understandings (Tolman & McClelland). Important aspects to understanding sexual development in adolescence under this perspective is the consideration that adolescence covers only a portion of development over one's life span yet represents an important time period in light of the normative initiation of one's emerging sexuality. This "positive" perspective creates a need to better understand how adolescents' conceptualize sex, how they negotiate between conflicting motivations, how they experience and understand their own sexual thoughts and fantasies, and how their culture and social-cognitive-biological maturation shape their subjective and symbolic meaning of sexuality (Diamond & Savin-Williams). To foster a broader conceptual understanding of the normative aspects of this developmental period, Tolman and McClelland conducted a thorough review of literature from 2000-2009 and identified three newer perspectives on adolescents' sexual behaviours, sexual selfhood, and sexual socialization.

The dimension of adolescents' sexual behaviours includes physical sex acts and a growing need for empirical research to more clearly define such acts as well as to include the choice for abstinence; adolescents do not consider these as opposing constructs (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). The shifting perspective arising from research on sexual behaviours is a "growing interest in documenting the psychological and developmental dimensions of sexual behaviors rather than assuming that adolescent sexual behaviour is a route to psychological and physical damage" (Tolman & McClelland, p. 244-245). Sexual selfhood encompasses the internal development of adolescents' sexual self-concept and identity. Researchers are beginning to investigate relationships between sexual identity formation, sexual decision-making, and sexual behaviours and outcomes. Arising from this perspective is a shift in the consideration of sexual orientation development – how adolescents identify themselves and how this identification relates to their same and opposite sex behaviours, which has become quite liberal for today's adolescents. This shift greatly impacts the perspective of sexual minority youth. We are seeing a change in the focus of investigations from minorities' sexual and psychological risk to how adolescents become gendered and develop sexual identities. This speaks to the emerging awareness of how adolescents are actively making decisions in the development of their sexuality. Lastly, the dimension of sexual socialization highlights greater awareness of the existing and changing social contexts through which adolescents come to develop their sexual knowledge and experience. Recent investigations of the relationship between, and influence of, adolescents' contexts and the development of their sexuality, including peers, casual sexual relationships/"hooking up," romantic relationships, and media (particularly the

Internet) are beginning to examine and highlight the positive contributions of these contexts rather than simply focusing on the negative (Tolman & McClelland).

Online Context

The online environment can be an extension of adolescents' social context, offering them a venue for addressing their developmental tasks. Many researchers highlight the opportunities offered by, and successful uses of, the Internet to create, maintain, and negotiate social relationships (Donchi & Moore, 2004; Freeman-Longo, 2000; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Robbins, 2001; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004; Tynes, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). This can be particularly valuable for marginalized youth whose offline social circles might otherwise limit their potential for meeting others (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Holloway & Valentine, 2003). The Internet further offers adolescents a social context for the development of identity (Barak & Fisher, 2002; Calvert, 2002; Gray, 2009; Gross, 2004; Huffaker, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Maczewski, 2002; Mazur, & Kozarian, 2010; Robbins, 2001; Spears, Seydegart, & Zulinov, 2001; Steinberger, 2009; Subrahmanyam et al., 2004, 2006; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). It is not surprising then that adolescents use the Internet mainly for personal and social reasons (Wolfradt & Doll, 2001) in a way that is seamless with their offline world (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Wolak, Ybarra, & Turner, 2011; Osgerby, 2004). Thus, adolescents spend more time in communication domains such as email, instant messaging, blogs, and chat rooms. Social websites such as Facebook have been developed specifically for adolescents and include all of these communication abilities.

As a communication tool, the Internet can increase adolescents' connectivity with peers and others, particularly if they are introverted and/or lacking in social skills (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005), which can serve important emotional needs. Online social support can increase adolescents' sense of self (Maczewski, 2002), psychological well-being, and social involvement (Kraut et al., 2002; Valkenberg & Peter, 2007b). In addition, adolescents can discuss sensitive interpersonal topics online in ways that may not be available offline (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Longo, Brown, & Orcutt, 2002).

However, because online communication offers adolescents an alternate way to socialize, for some, the Internet is also another means to be socially rejected and bullied. The benefits of Internet communication activities can diminish when adolescents spend most of their free time online. High usage can lead to decreased social integration (Boies, Knudson, & Young, 2004; Donchi, Moore, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010) and Internet-related addictions (Boies et al.; Freeman-Longo, 2000; Griffiths & Wood, 2000; Johansson & Gotestam, 2004; Maczewski, 2002). Further, negative interactions can decrease adolescents' self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), particularly if they do not maintain some network of close friendships (Valkenberg & Peter, 2007a).

The anonymity available online supports adolescents' exploration of sexuality. Without having to identify themselves, teens can learn about sexual activities in discrete ways. In fact, some researchers suggest that the Internet may be adolescents' primary resource for issues of sexuality (Bay-Cheng, 2005; Levine, 2003) in light of the fact that less information on sexuality is coming from schools (Pascoe, 2011). As such, there are developmental benefits for exploring sexuality online (Barak & Fisher, 2002). However,

the availability of online sexual content, particularly explicit material, can influence adolescents' sexual attitudes, moral values, and sexual activity (Greenfield, 2004b; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008a). Adolescents' exposure to online sexually explicit material has been found to lead to greater sexual uncertainty (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010), more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration with casual partners, friends, and one-night stands (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2008b), and engagement in active and passive sexual violence (Bonino, Ciairano, Rabaglietti & Cattelino, 2006). Such material has implications for the internalized messages adolescents develop particularly when sexual material often degrades women and focuses on physical acts rather than emotional meaning (Greenfield, 2004a). Links have been found between exposure to sexual explicit content and beliefs of women as sex objects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). The effects are such that increased and prolonged exposure to sexual content can lead to desensitization of sexual responses and sexual disinhibition which can further lead to early real-life sexual experiences and an increase in adolescents' sexual drive (Freeman-Longo, 2000). Overall, however, if age appropriate and non-traumatic, online sexual content including discussions about sex can lead to healthy development of adolescent sexuality (Barak & Fisher, 2002).

Online Victim Profile

Normally developing adolescents' interest in relationships, romance, and sexuality acts as the foundation for their vulnerability for sexual solicitation online (Wolak et al., 2010). The online activities adolescents engage in to work through these developmental issues are what put them at risk. These activities include establishing relationships online, engaging in conversations with strangers, and experimenting with

identity. Along with the fact that online communication enhances self-disclosure (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), engaging in these activities and discussing sexual issues with unknown people makes adolescents particularly vulnerable to solicitation (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2006; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Wolak, 2007a; Wolak et al.). Through online communication activities, adolescents often reveal personal information, such as full names, ages, phone numbers, and addresses (Huffaker, 2004; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001; Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2005; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Stahl & Fritz, 2002; Turow & Nir, 2000; Ybarra, Alexander, & Mitchell, 2005). With free access to adolescents' personal identities and information, online sexual predators use the Internet to their advantage in search of potential victims. Interaction with strangers online in and of itself is not a risk for sexual solicitation (Wolak et al., 2008), but the number of risk-taking activities teens engage in online increases their odds of interpersonal victimization (Wolak et al., 2010; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007).

There are more personal characteristics that lead to online vulnerability. For example, adolescents with depressive symptomatology experience greater unwanted sexual solicitation (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra, Leaf, & Diener-West, 2004). In addition, adolescents with sexual, physical, psychological, or emotional abuse histories (Mitchell, Ybarra et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2011; Wells & Mitchell, 2008), along with other troubled youth (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Becker-Blease, 2007), are vulnerable because their emotional needs or developmental distortions "make some youths less able to assess and more responsive to inappropriate sexual advances" (Berliner & Elliott, 2002; Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Aber, 1995; as cited in Wolak et al., 2010, p. 19). Some of these youth purposely seek attention and affection (Lanning, 2002)

and take greater sexual risks compared to non-troubled peers (Wolfe, Jaffe, & Crooks, 2006). Ultimately, these factors create greater vulnerability for the most aggressive forms of online sexual solicitation (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007b).

Adolescents' vulnerability for victimization increases when they consciously search out sexual relationships with others on the Internet. These situations are known as "nonforcible" sex crimes in law enforcement because these relationships do not involve force or coercion to engage minors into sexual relations (Walsh & Wolak, 2005); victims enter these relationships willingly. In an examination of randomly selected law enforcement agencies and cases involving online sex crimes, 83% of victims met offenders willingly and alone, spending nights together, going to motels, travelling in vehicles, or even living with offenders for a short period of time (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004). With a complex array of factors influencing adolescents' online vulnerability, Wolak et al. (2010) suggest that these factors relate to teens' immaturity, inexperience, and impulsiveness when responding to and exploring sexual urges online. Teens are aware of the potential threats and risks of their engagement in online sexual activities; however, the negative consequences that can occur through such participation can be particularly challenging for them and can affect developmental trajectories (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010).

There are diverse consequences for victims of online sexual solicitation similar to victims who experience offline solicitation. Victims have reported feeling very or extremely upset, afraid, or embarrassed (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). Feelings of emotional distress are greater among adolescents with major depressive-like symptoms (Ybarra et al., 2004). They also indicate post-traumatic stress symptoms such as intrusive

thoughts, avoidance behaviours, irritability, and/or loss of interest in things (Wolak et al.). Clinicians further report an array of mental health diagnoses and life challenges for such victims (Wells & Mitchell, 2007; Ybarra et al.). Compliant victims, adolescents who actively cooperate in sexual relationships, often express feelings of love and develop close bonds with perpetrators (Wolak et al., 2004). How victims feel in response to sexual solicitation may play a role in how they handle such encounters online.

Online Sexual Predators

To scan and select their victims, online sexual predators use the same aspects and features of the Internet that developing adolescents do (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004). Predators visit communication domains and scan these environments to look for vulnerability suggested through adolescents' individually created computer identities. Predators further scan personal Web sites, use Trojan and worm viruses, and "eavesdrop" in online conversations to extract personal identifying information and gain access to interests and emotional states that they then use to establish quick connections with vulnerable adolescents (Dombrowski et al.). Predators establish relationships with young adolescents, most often 13 – 15 year old girls, who express feelings of love and view such relationships as real romances (Wolak et al., 2010). Therefore, sexual predators online typically do not use information to stalk and abduct victims nor do they need to use deception and violence; they are open and straightforward regarding their sexual intentions (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009; Wolak et al., 2010).

The online environment provides predators access to unlimited victims and provides a venue for their grooming process (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2012; Dombrowski et al., 2004; Livingstone & Bober, 2006). Grooming describes how

predators gain victims' interest, trust, and affection. Initially, predators offer victims kind words and deeds. Adolescents often find these actions appealing based on their strong desire for attention, validation, and acceptance from others. For these reasons, adolescents who are troubled or lack support systems in their lives may be especially vulnerable to the attention, acceptance, and affection that perpetrators offer them online (Dombrowski et al.).

Perpetrators also take their time in establishing relationships with adolescents. Often they wait months (Wolak et al., 2004) and sometimes years to gain victims' trust before attempting to meet them offline (K. Fald, personal communication, March 28, 2007). Considering such extensive conversation and patience on behalf of perpetrators, adolescents' perceptions of these relationships can transition from that of being online strangers to relationship partners (Wolak et al., 2010). During the relationship-building stage, perpetrators will slowly start to desensitize victims to sexual content through conversation about sexual topics, presentation of pornography, engagement in cybersex, or soliciting self-produced sexually explicit images from victims (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2012; Dombrowski et al., 2004; Wolak et al., 2004; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Jones, 2011). This tactic assists predators when attempting to engage adolescents in physical sexual acts when meeting face to face; it creates situations in which adolescents are less anxious, more pliable and more agreeable. In situations where adolescents are reluctant to engage in sexual activities, threats or coercion, most often the threat for distribution of self-produced sexual images (Canadian Centre for Child Protection), may be used following online and/or offline sexual advances to conceal

abuse, depending on the interpersonal dynamics between perpetrator and victim (Dombrowski et al.; Wolak et al., 2004).

Purpose of Research

Adolescents face many developmental tasks, a critical one being the development of romantic relationships. Experiencing the positive developmental benefits of relationships can be difficult if one's personal and social resources are limited. The Internet opens up opportunities for adolescents to create and maintain relationships and to develop and experiment with identities. Because one aspect of their identity development includes their sexuality, adolescents are prime targets for perpetrators engaging in online sexual crimes.

Current research offers insight into the vulnerability of adolescents online. The literature further outlines some actions taken by adolescents who experience online sexual solicitation. However, research has yet to provide a clear understanding of the social influences and psychological processes adolescents engage in when experiencing these types of encounters. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions. From young adults' perspectives: How do adolescents who experience online sexual solicitation understand, perceive, and respond to their encounters? What are the psycho-sociological and decision-making processes adolescents engage in when encountering online sexual solicitation? These issues lack an indepth description.

The nature and seriousness of adolescents being sexually solicited online warrants greater understanding of this process. The factors and dynamics of adolescents who are sexually solicited online are unclear. The complexity of this situation suggests that qualitative methods would best examine the processes they go through when

encountering sexual solicitation online. As a qualitative method, thematic analysis

provides a new way of describing and understanding adolescents' psycho-sociological

and decision-making processes during their encounters. It offers the opportunity to

explore and develop themes within their experiences – what they go through and how

they handle situations of solicitation. Through qualitative methods, a greater

understanding and perspective can enhance the growing literature on, and society's

understanding of, this important topic. In order to address this aim, the presentation of a

thematic analysis approach under the framework of a pragmatic and symbolic

interactionist perspective follows in the next chapter.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to better understand how adolescents understand, perceive, and respond to their online sexual solicitation encounters from the perspectives of young adults. This encompassed exploring the psycho-sociological and decision-making processes they go through when engaged in such encounters. Using thematic analysis to address these research inquiries, this chapter details the research design, sampling procedures, participant considerations, data collection, data analysis, rigor, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

A paradigm and worldview encompasses ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that guide researchers in their investigations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigm of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism has been chosen as a guide for this study.

The pragmatic tradition arises out of the seminal contributions of William James and John Dewey (Borden, 2013). Both James and Dewey considered the world pluralistic where experiences are multifaceted, complex, and full of ambiguity, confusion, and contradictions. From this perspective, James highlighted how we can only explain a small fraction of an experience; we cannot capture the totality of a phenomenon in a single truth or explanation. All we can ultimately produce is a "fragmentary provisional rendering" (Borden, p. 261) of an experience. Contradictions in thought are embraced, are considered equally valid, and aid in obtaining insight, understanding, and in taking action. Uncertainty becomes a condition of knowledge where ideas are tools used by individuals in order to cope with their world. Actions serve as a final test of ideas and

beliefs. Thus, ideas become one's truth when action is taken. Dewey builds on James's

theory and bridges the gap between thoughts and actions. He proposes that people learn

by doing. We gain knowledge through the physicality of taking action. Action creates

consequences that feedback and expand our understanding which we then use in

subsequent experiences. Learning is experiential, ongoing, and self-corrective where we

gain "clarity and revise our conceptions of knowledge in light of changing circumstances

and outcomes" (Borden, p. 263). A pragmatic philosophy views human beings as

adapting to a constantly changing world using the power of the mind to contemplate

situations (Jeon, 2004).

The foundation of symbolic interactionism (SI) comes from George Mead and

Herbert Blumer (Oliver, 2012). SI's major premise is that people take action by meanings

derived from individual interpretation. We temporarily align ourselves to perspectives

based on how we define ourselves in any given situation. Meaning-making is a

continuous process of reflection on self and others though which circumstances are

interpreted and choices of action are taken (Oliver). SI searches for a description and

understanding of the meaning-making process through individuals' social and

psychological actions and interactions (Schwandt, 1994) to understand an experience in

all its complexity from the perspectives of the individuals who are living it. From a

pragmatic and SI worldview, people go through a process of interpretation to derive

meanings that arise out of social interactions, then use these meanings as a basis for

action (Blumer, 1986). Thus, meanings are the fundamental essence through which a

social process is fully understood. Using this paradigm as a guide, researchers elucidate

the process of meaning making and the nature of such meanings found within social

interactions (Schwandt), taking into account irreducible complexities and ambiguities of such a process (Borden, 2013). Corresponding to this worldview, the goal of this study is to discover and explain adolescents' process of meaning- and decision-making in their online sexual solicitation encounters.

Fundamentally important to researchers operating from a pragmatic and SI paradigm is the understanding that human complexity is best understood using inductive inquiry (Oliver, 2012). Qualitative methods as an inductive approach to analyzing data are largely thematic in purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study performs a thematic analysis under the framework identified by Braun and Clarke and utilizing grounded theory concepts. These concepts include purposive sampling, constant comparison, coding, categorizing, and memo writing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser 1978, 1992). These techniques serve the necessary reflective and critical examination required by pragmatism and SI (Oliver). Emerging variations across adolescents' experiences of online sexual solicitation is expected and a thematic approach can aid in understanding this phenomena. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedures create the structure necessary to move beyond organizing and describing data sets to analyzing and reporting interpretive aspects with validity and reliability. Their method offers one of the few clearly defined processes and procedures of data analysis when researchers do not desire to develop theory under the fully worked up grounded theory approach.

Sampling

Most qualitative studies begin with purposive sampling, selecting participants who are most likely to provide the best experiential data on the researcher's topic of interest (Cutcliff, 2000; Jeon, 2004). As Morse (1991) highlights, it is vital that

qualitative research maintain an appropriate sample for quality results. It was imperative that participants in this research were experts in their experience of online sexual solicitation. As such, this study did not seek to obtain a representation from the general population but rather obtain a purposive sample of adolescent experts who have encountered and gone through online sexual solicitation experiences in order to appropriately investigate this research topic.

Participants

Participants were recruited through brochures posted in post-secondary institutions and newspaper advertisements both off and online. Online advertisement also included Facebook networks. Community service agencies were contacted requesting their permission to display brochures and refer potential participants. These agencies included those offering both clinical and social support.

Advertisements requested that potential participants contact the researcher by email. Upon contact, a brief telephone interview screened candidates for the following criteria:

- were between the ages of 18 and 25 years.

- had experienced an online sexual solicitation incident between the ages of 12 – 16 years.

- were willing to engage in an audio-taped interview with the researcher and discuss their experience of being sexually solicited online.

A total of 10 potential participants contacted the researcher expressing their interest in this study. One participant did not meet the age selection criteria and another contacted the researcher near the end of data collection and did not respond to follow up

contact. This resulted in a total of eight participants who met the selection criteria. Upon inclusion, participants were informed as to the extent of their time and involvement in the research. Once confirming participants' verbal assent to participate in the research, a mutually convenient time was scheduled for an interview.

All eight participants were between the ages of 20 and 25 years. Five participants were female and three were male. Two male participants described themselves as gay. One female described herself as asexual. There were six Caucasian participants, one First Nations female, and one Latin-American male. All experienced online sexual solicitation encounters between the ages of 13 and 16. Four of the encounters remained online only while four led to offline meetings. Three resulted in the engagement of physical sexual activities. Three participants' encounters were brief one-time episodes while the remaining five lasted anywhere from 5 months to 1½ years.

Data Collection

The sensitive nature of Internet sexual solicitation suggests that interviews may be the most appropriate for offering participants an environment conducive to the telling of their stories. Such environments necessitate a quiet, comfortable, and private place with an interviewer who can empathically and actively listen with minimal interruptions (Richards & Morse, 2007). Interviews lasted no more than one hour and were held in a private and controlled setting.

At the time of the interview, each participant was fully debriefed on the purpose of the study, the interview process, their right to end their participation at any time, along with researcher's practices for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Each was informed of the researcher's adherence to the removal of any identifying information in

the course of discussion and/or presentation of the research and that pseudonyms would

be used; of practices to keep to the storage of identifying data separate from working

data; and of the fact that only the researcher would have access to identifying information

for the purpose of follow up interviews and for maintaining data files. The scope of these

issues was outlined in the research information letters and informed consent (see

Appendix 1 and 2 respectively). The researcher provided participants with an information

letter outlining the research project and informed written consent was obtained.

Demographic information, including gender, current age, age at the time of solicitation,

etc. from screening interviews was confirmed.

My goal as the interviewer was to approach informed consent and demographic

confirmation gently and slowly to help establish rapport before delving into the sensitive

subject matter of online solicitation. Because these interviews aimed to achieve a rich

detailed description, participants were gently reminded of the nature of the research and

invited to reflect on their experience and relay that experience in as much detail as

possible. Broad general statements were then used to transition participants from

reporting demographics to relating their story. After thanking them for their willingness

to share their story, participants were prompted to begin with a statement, "Can you

describe what your offline world was like at the time?" A copy of the general guideline

for these interviews can be found in Appendix 3.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcriber and

the researcher. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix 4)

before receiving access to any data. Verification of transcriptions occurred by

simultaneously listening to audio recordings while reading the transcripts. Interviews were repeatedly listened to and read to immerse the researcher into participants' narratives. Participant synopses were created to assist the researcher's efforts at immersion and to assist readers' connection to participants' stories. These tasks assisted the researcher's efforts to familiarize herself with the data – the necessary first phase in performing a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis occurred following immersion with the data and included coding and categorization, constant comparison, and memo writing. Data management software, ATLAS.ti, was used to store and manage data files.

The next phase performed in a thematic analysis is the generation of initial descriptive codes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The process of coding is the term Glaser (1992) used to describe the conceptualization of data through the constant comparison of "incident with incident, and incident with concept" (p. 38). It is the procedure that "fractures" data and groups these fractures into conceptual codes encompassing categories, properties, and dimensions. In the initial stages of coding, the researcher fractures the data line by line, creating the most basic meaningful units, and then explores all possibilities of issues and ideas found within these units. Using this procedure, the researcher began a systematic review of the entire data set taking time and care to go through and identify any and all meaningful units of data. All interviews were read and completely fractured using this open coding procedure. Descriptive codes were developed simultaneously to capture the meanings represented by arising issues and ideas within fractured units and as concepts emerged. Coding continued until all meaningful units of data were identified and collated using the process of constant comparison

described below. Descriptive codes were then further grouped and conceptualized more abstractly through the investigation of how the codes were related and interconnected. Those similar in content were reanalyzed, and if necessary, incorporated together. Any unit of data that did not fit into regrouping was assigned an appropriate category. Through this process, the researcher identified central categories from which behavioural patterns and experiences could be explained in terms of change and/or dimensions. Once central categories were established, selective coding began which involved examining issues and ideas selectively in relation to core categories, comparing and contrasting between and within cases and making adjustments to categories as necessary.

Constant comparison is the term used to describe the process of comparing components of data while asking questions in efforts of clarifying concepts and testing hypotheses in the development of descriptions and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison identifies the way in which data analysis as a recursive process is carried out. Constant comparison involves two analytic procedures used for the creation of categories and their properties (Glaser, 1978, 1992). In the first, the researcher created categories through comparisons of events within the data, then compared new events that arose to these categories. The second procedure utilized asking neutral questions such as, "what category would this belong to?" in order to further scrutinize and sort data.

Searching for themes was the next phase in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A review of existing codes took place to explore patterns, linkages, and potential themes. The technique of constant comparison helped to carry out the task of sorting and collating codes within identified themes with a goal to identify an overarching theme. Themes were also reviewed to identify the potential for subthemes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define the fourth phase in thematic analysis as a review of themes. All the data within each theme was reread and reviewed to ensure they merged into a coherent pattern. The researcher explored the initial set of themes where some were collapsed together and some separated out based upon how the data meaningfully captured the theme. This task was performed until individual themes held a coherent pattern and there were identifiable distinctions between themes. The themes were then compared against the entire data set. Transcripts were reread to verify that themes fit within each data set and to account for additional data that might have been missed in earlier stages. This process continued until additional refinements had little more to offer thematic understandings.

One of the final phases was the process of defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher closely reviewed the themes for presentation and analysed the data within themes to identify representations. Selections of quotations were put together to highlight themes. The two final phases of analysis resulted in the hierarchical development of six core themes under the umbrella of one main theme that were prepared for the results of this study.

Rigor

Qualitative researchers readily accept Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) seminal idea of trustworthiness as an overriding goal for establishing validity and reliability in qualitative research (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Under the umbrella of trustworthiness and displaying aspects of validity and reliability, Lincoln and Guba identify criteria for conducting sound qualitative research. These include: 1) credibility/validity – the level of confidence in research findings, 2)

dependability/reliability – the ability of findings to be replicated, and 3) confirmability –
that research findings are participant-based and not biased on behalf of the researcher.
Verification strategies assist the development of these criteria, enhancing a study's
overall trustworthiness (Morse et al.).

The concept of verification as an overriding strategy assists researchers in
identifying when to continue, stop, or modify their research to maintain validity and
reliability and ensure rigour (Morse et al., 2002). A verification process to enhance
validity includes aspects of focussed checking, confirming, making sure, and being
certain. This allows for a correction in procedure to occur when necessary. Supporting
the verification process, inherent within the constant comparison method utilized by this
research, checking and verifying the accuracy of work occurred through the nature of
comparing (Glaser, 1992). Clear and detailed descriptions of participants, procedures and
context assist efforts for enhancing reliability. This study clearly outlines and presents
participants' background and experiences in the following two chapters. The methods
clearly detail the procedures used and consistent effort in data collection using semi-
structured interviews and in data analysis using constant comparison and memo writing
with all participants and cases. All aspects of performing this research, including the raw
data (audio recordings, written transcriptions) and data analysis (coding, memos) were
kept as an additional verification strategy.

Otherwise, the core component of verification adopted by researchers is that of
investigator responsiveness – the ability of the researcher to remain open, sensitive,
creative, and flexible in an effort that all aspects of research are appropriately conducted.
Researchers need to be willing to relinquish previously held assumptions to work

inductively and to relinquish any ideas that are poorly supported (Morse et al., 2002). The data must drive the research. The following strategies adopted for this study stemmed from investigator responsiveness and assisted the verification process, thus enhancing validity, reliability, and rigour.

An important aspect of investigator responsiveness is that of being self-aware. Within the analytic procedures of qualitative inquiry, memo writing acts as a means of capturing researcher's thought processes. Memo writing is part of the analytic process that begins at the beginning of research and continues throughout (Glaser, 1978). Memos act as a means of capturing the researcher's theories of ideas, codes, and their relationship and help the researcher to be analytical and reflective while recording important thoughts and ideas crucial to theory generation and refinement. The researcher began memo writing at the onset of data collection and continued throughout data analysis. Memo writing served to capture the researcher's personal reflections, including notations of thoughts, ideas, hypotheses, themes, personal beliefs and potential biases.

Investigator responsiveness is also important for appropriate sampling. Sampling participants appropriately and ensuring that negative cases obtain the proper attention requires sensitivity and care. First, great care was taken to establish rapport and trust with participants and throughout interviews. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted solely by the researcher which highlights consistency in data gathering across participants. The researcher at all times attempted to elicit rich and detailed descriptions from participants using open-ended questions. Third, all cases were given full and equal attention to address any negative case concerns.

Additional efforts were taken to ensure adherence to verification strategies listed above. Supervision was a very important aspect for ensuring the researcher maintained focus on promoting validity, reliability, and rigour throughout the process of performing this research. The researcher set up scheduled times to review and address research process issues in supervision. Routine reminders of verification issues and strategies, particularly memo writing, were reviewed before entering and exiting all research tasks. Any arising thoughts or ideas pertaining to validity and reliability were discussed in supervision. Although it is plausible that personal beliefs and/or biases impacted the results of this research to some extent, great care was taken to address and discuss these thoroughly in supervision and to maintain these separated from participants' descriptions. However, as Braun and Clarke (2006) remind us, data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum for it is impossible for researchers to "free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments" (p. 84). Quotations from participants are used in the following chapter to help readers gauge the accuracy and credibility of thematic reasoning and develop their own conclusions. This process assists researcher's attempts to maintain credibility (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Ethical Issues

This proposal was submitted for ethical review and approved by the Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. Contact information for ethical concerns was provided to participants at the time of interview in the research information letters they received. The following were the main ethical considerations within this study.

One of the key ethical issues was that of retraumatization for participants. With a background in counselling, the researcher ensured that she followed participants'

disclosure process closely and verified with participants of their ability and willingness to continue if showing signs of undo distress.

One situation arose in which the participant became emotionally overwhelmed. This participant displayed increasing signs of distress when describing childhood trauma. During this part of her disclosure, the researcher watched this participant closely, listening for a natural opportunity to stop the conversation without diminishing her integrity. When the participant began crying, the researcher offered kleenex and reassuringly instructed her to "take a moment," supporting her with a quiet and patient presence while waiting to regain composure. The participant made a couple of statements attesting to the strength and surprise of her reaction amidst considerably long pauses. After a number of minutes, the researcher observed the participant's de-escalation of emotions and then guided her through structured deep breathing in order to ground her more deeply. This process occurred amidst additional long pauses, taking as much time as the researcher felt was necessary in order to further stabilize the participant's emotional state. The researcher validated the participant's experience by acknowledging the amount she had been through. The researcher inquired about external support resources through which the participant admitted processing some of her experience but not is such detail. Again, the researcher validated the extent of her experience and gently inquired if she would like to continue her participation in the research. She wanted to continue to tell her story. The researcher reminded the participant that she could stop at any time and verified her understanding of her right to discontinue by waiting for affirmation before continuing. The researcher then redirected and maintained the focused of discussion using the semi-structured interview questions while watching for further

signs of distress which did not occur. The research later provided the participant with an additional list of community support resources for follow-up.

Because the researcher's background and nature is that of a counsellor, it was important to ensure that dual roles and boundaries between researcher and counsellor were not crossed. Acknowledging the possibility of such a situation was important to monitor throughout the interview process. Self-awareness and reflection helped to guide actions and questions appropriately and were documented immediately upon completing an interview. A list of community support resources was offered to participants if needed.

The following chapter presents an introduction to participants. These synopses offer some basic biographical and contextual information for readers.

Participants

Interviews took place with eight participants who were willing to share their stories of being sexually solicited online. Interviews began with participants' reflections of their offline experience in order to establish a more complete picture of contextual situations. General open-ended questions were used to enhance descriptions of their offline world and then to transition discussion to the online environment. Upon obtaining descriptions of Internet use, basic questions guided them through the telling of their solicitation experience by having them focus on the beginning, middle and ending of their encounter. The purpose of such questions was to capture the process of thoughts, feelings, responses, and actions throughout the encounter.

The following synopses serve to illustrate the experience of individual participants and offer readers some contextual background and understanding. Pseudonyms have been established to protect identities with careful consideration given to details in order not to inadvertently expose who they are and to protect their privacy.

Lisa

Lisa is a 22-year-old female who had a brief one-time sexual solicitation incident online when she was 13 years old. Lisa encountered this incident together with her friend as they were exploring chat sites. They never did meet the other person offline.

Lisa grew up in a nuclear family with a sister and challenging sibling rivalry. Although she was happy, she struggled with the someday syndrome - wanting to grow up quickly and believing that she'd be happier when she had something or another. One of these things was a boyfriend. She was preoccupied with thoughts of boys and wanting a boyfriend, thinking that a relationship will somehow make life better. She did not feel

attuned to her age and did not act or think like a 12-year-old. This orientation toward life created a sense of dislike toward her parents and sibling. Shy, insecure, and self-conscious, her desire for approval from others created a heightened awareness of her actions.

Lisa was quite social and enjoyed being with friends. She spent the majority of summers outdoors and engaged in regular teenage activities such as movies. She had two separate social experiences. One encompassed a good social group of friends at school. This group was "smart" and "religious" and whose interests focused primarily around school performance and whose activities were appropriately age-related. They were "very pure" in their activities and discussions. Discussions of sex never occurred in this peer group. Her other social experience was with a really good neighbor and friend, separate from her school peer group. They did not associate at school but would walk home and spend many after school hours together. In this relationship, Lisa explored her interests in boys. She considered her friend sexually mature and advanced with an inappropriate sense of humor. Lisa and Susie's discussions and explorations of sexuality acted as her primary sexual learning resource. When together, they would spend much time on the computer which occurred at Lisa's house without anyone else at home. With this friend, Lisa encountered sexual solicitation.

Although initially not a major part of her life, Lisa used the computer and the Internet for email, instant messaging, and playing computer games. Her friend was "Internet savvy" and introduced her to some live chat rooms where they would begin conversations with others to have fun and "joke around." Mostly as an observer, Lisa

watched her friend engage in conversations with others online where they laughed about the things people would say.

Their encounter began in conversation with a male on a chat site. They joked about leading him on. The conversation turned to and grew in sexual nature, beginning with general sexual talk that eventually turned personal. He described specific sexual acts he wanted to do to Susie, using language and descriptions that were new to Lisa. Lisa was shocked at both what was said and at her feelings of sexual arousal. Because she was young and inexperienced and this was her first exposure to such sexual things, she felt "strange." She was just becoming aware of herself as a sexual individual and was unaware that her body would respond with such arousal, particularly through the process of chatting. She felt "surprised" and "grossed out." She did not believe her arousal felt right based on the fact that it occurred on the Internet via chat. She was "grossed out" because media's portrayal of "romantic love" instilled the idea that love was to preclude sexual arousal and this led to mixed feelings, including shock and repulsiveness as well as curiosity and interest, in response to this encounter. Concerned about her parents finding out and about moral ethics around right or wrong, Lisa became increasingly anxious compared to her friend. Their online partner asked to meet offline but they stopped their interaction once their arousal turned to disgust and they no longer felt it was funny. Lisa felt they went too far.

Lisa and her friend never talked about the incident directly. She wanted Susie to continue liking her and trusted her implicitly. She did not tell anybody else about this experience. Although not ashamed unless someone found out, she felt that she had done something wrong. After the incident, Lisa became angry and blamed Susie for getting her

involved in this situation. Yet, her curiosity and desire to re-experience sexual arousal led to a couple of independent explorations on chat sites. She did not encounter other sexual solicitations, feeling afraid, uncomfortable and sexually inexperienced. Reflecting back, Lisa wondered at her friend's knowledge and ability to have interacted with this man in such a sexual way. Lisa believed that sexual solicitation happens to those who are "sexual pursuing sexual things" and felt like she understood how easily people can get lured online.

Nancy

Nancy is a 21-year-old female who experienced sexual solicitation online when she was 14 years old. This encounter developed via the internal chat mechanisms in a gaming website and lasted over the period of one year. They did not meet offline.

Nancy's home environment was riddled with parental conflict. Eventually her parents divorced which did not cause her too much emotional turmoil; she did not get along with her dad. Nancy disliked her junior high experience because she had difficulty relating to her same-age peers and her male peers bullied her, making fun of her appearance. She had low self-esteem and had been diagnosed with clinical depression in junior high. She drew attention to herself in class and skipped classes whenever she felt like it. She longed for high school believing it would be a better experience. Nancy's one source of enjoyment was basketball. Otherwise, her junior high years were "mostly a dark period."

With restricted access, Nancy had a computer for a couple of years before interacting on it. Before grade 7, she preferred to read. At the age of 12, Nancy began to play games on an interactive gaming site and eventually developed an Internet

"addiction" to the reward system within the game. Because this was an interactive site, Nancy went onto the internal chat rooms and spoke to people. She made friends this way, mostly with people her own age but not always, and they would become part of her MSN contacts. She often lied about her age, portraying herself to be a couple of years older in order to obtain respect from others.

Nancy's sexual solicitation occurred with a contact she made via the gaming website. She understood that he was 19 years old. He would ask her sexual types of questions that she did not understand and in which she lied in response. She would later investigate the meaning of these comments, feeling uncomfortable about being unknowledgeable around sex. However, she thought it was interesting and nice that a guy was talking to her without making fun of her. This was the motivation behind her desire to continue interacting with him, even though feeling somewhat "dirty" and "cheap" in response to their sexual interactions and learning about sexual meanings after the fact. She desired his attention more than she felt it was wrong to have engaged with him.

As their online relationship continued, Nancy experienced many ups and downs. At times, she felt controlled, "paranoid," and confused; she greatly valued her online partner's opinions. He asked her to do simple non-sexual things, such as changing her desktop picture to a certain image, and threatened to stop communication if she did not comply. At one point in time, he asked for naked pictures. Feeling extremely uncomfortable, Nancy continued to lie about the means by which she could fulfill his request in order to preserve their relationship. Nancy did not give out any personal identifying information; however, they talked about meeting sometime in the future.

During this one-year period, Nancy developed more offline social connections, reducing her desire to be online. Her online acquaintance continued to demand more of her. Nancy was an atheist and he wanted her to explore and accept religion. She felt her personal convictions were being greatly challenged and she was unwilling to negotiate and/or change this aspect of herself. She stopped interactions with him, although she was very conflicted in terms of her desire to be in a relationship and have attention from someone. She still desired to impress and be close to him even though his desire to change her created doubt about how much he actually cared. This led to anxiety and feelings of worthlessness. She told nobody about this relationship, feeling she would get into trouble even though she believed it wasn't her fault.

Reflecting back on her experience, Nancy commented on her current experience of embarrassment, humiliation and degradation, critical of herself as having been "weak-minded" to let a man control her so and how she did not really understand the implications of sex. Although she felt innocent without knowing better, in hindsight she figured she should have known and done something differently. She described this relationship as "sick and twisted" since she now sees herself as a "really strong person" who "wouldn't take crap from anyone" and believed that this experience helped to make her stronger. However, the solicitation affected subsequent relationships where she took extra caution in the formation of relationships and was "paranoid" of men's sexual motives.

Mary

Mary is a 25-year-old female who had a number of online sexual relationships. Two primary experiences were at the ages of 13 and 15 years; both led to offline contact.

Mary discussed the relationship she had when she was 15 years old and lasted one and a half years, significant in the fact that she lost her virginity and resulted in a relationship experience that was different from any of her others.

Mary lived an uneventful, normal and happy childhood growing up in a stable nuclear family: two parents and two older siblings, one brother, one sister. She maintained close relationships with her family, although she experienced a considerable amount of "guilt" in relation to her parents. She regularly challenged her parents, particularly around breaking curfew. She believed her parents were regularly "disappointed" in her.

Mary had two separate peer experiences: those in school she would associate and spend time with and those not geographically based, but with similar music interests. She had close relationships with her friends who were mostly male; however, she remained a private person. Although having many friends, she felt alone and maintained a need for attention. She was used to receiving attention from others throughout her life as the youngest in her family. Mary had confidence in maintaining a strong sense of self and identity, both personal and sexual. Offline, she was very involved in a peer support group that ran workshops on dating violence, sexual health, and other important teen issues. Her involvement in political movements and specific music genres brought her increased awareness of additional identity development influences. Her particular interest in hard-core and punk music was the major foundation to her lifestyle as a teen. Her regular school peer group did not share her music interests. As such, Mary would go to concerts and music shows by herself from the young age of 13 onward. When the Internet became

part of her life, Mary used it to establish connections and create a peer group who shared her musical interests that extended well beyond her local vicinity.

Mary started using the Internet for social and educational purposes, particularly MSN chat. She spent hours talking to random people and engaging in conversations that would quickly become sexual. The social aspect of her Internet experience grew when her interest in music began. She visited music websites and became part of the online subculture centered on her music tastes. Creating a sense of community with other like-minded individuals, Mary often blanket copied contacts into her MSN listing. She found the Internet "alluring" – a space that offered her a sense of "freedom, autonomy, independence and privacy for exploration" beyond her temporal and geographical location. This allowed her to explore her sexuality without the social repercussions that might otherwise occur in the presence of her offline peer groups.

When she was 15 years old, Mary initiated contact with a 21-year-old man she met through thread discussions on a music message board. She preferred older men in relationships. Although not necessarily maintaining high self-esteem, she liked the idea that her sexual confidence and knowledge allowed her a sense of power and control in relationships with men and how this would serve her need for attention. Developing a "crush" quickly, Mary felt excited that such a man would show her interest. They spent many late night hours interacting online. Feelings of jealousy arose because she regarded their relationship as real and romantic but he did not. She did not feel threatened by other people, she felt "slighted" when his attention would wane at times. Mary wanted to be the most important person in someone's life and to have her online partner feel "lucky" to have her.

Eventually, they met offline and their relationship progressed into a physical, sexual relationship when Mary consciously chose to lose her virginity. This initiated a longer term dating relationship that lasted approximately a year and a half, and one that Mary described as something out of a book -- very "alluring, exciting and aesthetically pleasing" even though the sex itself was not great. She liked the way the relationship looked rather than the relationship itself. At times she felt dismissed and used with his nonchalant attitude toward her and this relationship experience was Mary's first of not feeling control over her partner. That produced emotional strain and their relationship eventually dissolved. Mary told some of her liberal peers about her online encounter for attention purposes and bragging rights, indicating that she has always been very conscious of setting herself "apart from other girls" and wanting to feel different. Family and others knew about her relationship, but Mary lied about how they met. She had established a number of offline relationships through the Internet and told others that they met at concerts.

Mary's experience on the Internet allowed her an opportunity she did not feel she had otherwise to explore the way she talked about sex. This did not impact the ways she had sex or with whom. She remained aware of her naiveté, of her trusting nature, of the risks she took, and of the potential of her experience to have put her at risk for something more serious; however, she believed her solid sexual education and background and confidence in feeling in control of her body and sexuality allowed her to make her own choices in safe ways. She never encountered a situation in which she felt a lack of control that could have put her at risk for harm.

Carl

Carl is a 23-year-old homosexual male who had a one-time sexual solicitation incident online when he was 13 years old. This encounter lasted one month. Although wanting to, they did not meet offline.

Carl was raised Catholic in a nuclear home with his half-brother and adopted older sister. He had ambivalent relationships with his parents; they got along when things were going well and did not get along when experiencing difficulties. Carl knew when his parents were "disappointed" in him. He felt closer to his mother since his father was "rigid and strict" and expected things to be done his way. In his teens, Carl began to recognize his own sense of spirituality. Because Catholicism did not fit within his growing homosexual awareness, Carl began to challenge his parents' religion through investigations of the occult and Buddhism. This led to tension in their household and between his parents until Carl moved out when older.

Carl maintained his peer group from elementary into junior high lending to some close relationships. As a group, they were interested in Star Trek and science fiction related topics. Carl was involved in many activities that kept him busy, i.e., student council, basketball, dancing, etc., and liked being social with friends. In junior high, he began to establish relationships with others outside of his regular peer group, particularly upon recognizing his sexual differences. He developed a close relationship with a girl from his folk dance group that lasted throughout high school. However, his sexual experience left him feeling frustrated, confused, alone, and misunderstood as he viewed his peers achieving normal developmental milestones in relationships that felt beyond his reach. He longed for an intimate relationship when his peers began to have them. He

worked on controlling his emotions when around others. He was happy at school because he genuinely liked being around others and sad when alone at home "feeling sorry" for himself for not having a boyfriend. Carl's sexual identity was generally not at the forefront of his early adolescent experience. He focused on his interactions with others and having a good time. At home, however, he felt alone, and this is how the Internet helped him.

Carl's home connected to the Internet when he was a preteen. He used it to pursue and expand on his interest in Japanese anime and Greek mythology. When advancing in age and accepting his homosexuality, Carl reached out to learn about and connect with the online homosexual community. He had initial feelings of excitement in learning that he was not alone. He entered chat rooms for gay teenagers, and using MSN chat features, developed lasting friendships.

Carl's online encounter and first meaningful homosexual interaction was with somebody from the States who indicated he was 18 years old. Carl was 13 years old and felt like their age difference was manageable and acceptable. Carl was attracted to his partner's descriptions of himself as attractive and athletic. They would chat daily and after their third/fourth interaction, his partner indicated that he loved Carl. This declaration meant a lot to him; someone was sexually attracted to him. He desired an intimate relationship and his online partner made him feel appreciated and loved. He had romanticized their relationship and was excited about the potential to eventually meet this person offline.

With daily contact, their relationship quickly evolved in sexual content and moved from text to audio conversations. Carl was a nervous that others in the house

might overhear their communication and so he planned conversations when no one was home or others were preoccupied. Upon hearing his partner's deep and mature voice, Carl believed his partner to be older than he stated but this did not dissuade him. They engaged in cyber-sex. Carl initially felt uncomfortable with these sexual experiences in part because he lacked sexual knowledge and experience. He feigned responses to make his partner happy, and eventually, his comfort in these interactions grew. His partner wanted him to obtain a webcam so that they could visually connect online. This was a significant amount of money for a 13 year old with a paper route and he was not able to make that happen. His partner became angered. Carl experienced guilt and confusion over his partner's response to his situation. They talked about their desire to meet in person but resources were not available to make that happen. Eventually, the man withdrew his attention and their online communication stopped because Carl did not obtain a webcam. Carl attempted to stay connected, feeling guilt-ridden, sad, and frustrated when receiving no response. However, his self-confidence grew as he continued interactions with others online in the homosexual community. It was years later when Carl began to talk about his online experience with offline peers in a nonchalant, uneventful way.

After this experience, Carl recognized his fear of connecting with others offline. He lied and/or embellished his sexual experience with potential partners. He sought out an encounter to lose his virginity and obtain experience before entering a meaningful relationship, which later led to a sense of regret. Carl talked about the importance of being digitally connected for the homosexual community. The computer and Internet remain his primary means for establishing personal romantic relationships.

Ivan

Ivan is a 24-year-old homosexual male who had a number of online sexual relationships, beginning at the age of 14. Many of these relationships led to offline contact. Ivan spoke primarily of a solicitation experience at the age of 15 that lasted four to five months, significant in the fact that it was with a man much older and was highly sexual.

Ivan was raised in a Christian nuclear family with an identical twin brother and half brother. His Christian conservative family environment created a life with rules "different" from other families. By appearances, his family was close and projected an image of the ideal family, but in reality it was chaotic without a lot of open communication and understanding of one another. Ivan was the opposite of his identical brother. His brother was a bully, in trouble with the law, and was often suspended from school. Ivan, on the other hand, enjoyed junior high as an academically driven, ambitious, "artsy," and musical individual. Although he had a variety of school experiences, the focus of his attention centered primarily on relationships. He had been bullied most of his life without feeling traumatized. This experience, however, led to a need to hide and avoid those he did not want to be around, but also helped him identify who his friends were and who they weren't.

Feeling his experience was different from most adolescents, Ivan went through sexual identity crises. He went through crises at the age of 8 and 10, but it wasn't until the age of 13 through 15 that he experienced a lot of confusion. During this time, he recognized and accepted that he was gay but did not know who or how to tell people. He came out to his mother at the age of 14 and recognized in hindsight that his age of

disclosure might have impacted her ability to accept and support him. Her lack of acceptance led to self-acceptance struggles and withdrawal from his family members, and lying became a typical response pattern. He was generally happy but regularly frustrated which led to irritable mood swings.

Ivan's household got a computer when he was 12 years old. The Internet was not established until sometime after. He used the Internet for email and chatting with school friends. Ultimately, with his focus centered on relationships, Ivan used the computer for social purposes. He began speaking to random people through a chatting service and switched to MSN chat when it became popular. Ivan frequented gaycanada.ca with a need to talk to other people about being gay. He met his first boyfriend at the age of 14 through this website while continuing to connect to others in the online gay community. He established a number of online to offline sexual relationships through this website with an increasing need to establish relationships with older men. He believed that older men could teach him things about life that he didn't know and that they could offer him protection and sexual experimentation. By the age of 15, Ivan had offline sexual encounters with 25 to 30-year old men from relationships established online. His time online became an "addiction" lost in the fantasies of his own projections. Without fully realizing it, the Internet became a separate life with various online identities, experiences and relationships that were very different from his offline world. He used the Internet as an escape and distraction from life.

When 15 years old, Ivan encountered a 39-year-old male who initiated contact with him through gaycanada.ca. His online partner normalized their age difference. Regardless, Ivan liked and desired the age difference because he felt more mature than

his peers and wanted someone older to teach him about life. His only concern at the beginning of this relationship was the possibility of his parents finding out. Otherwise, he enjoyed the attention he received and his partner's declarations of love. They chatted extensively for weeks building a relationship that felt normal to Ivan. Sexual conversation grew in the same way. Ivan was interested and wanted to initiate and maintain sexual intimacies in this relationship. As such, he had no reservations about meeting him offline a couple of weeks into their relationship. However, at the moment of first visual contact, Ivan encountered the shocking realization that this person did not meet his fantasy projections. His initial feelings of nervousness and excitement turned to feeling "grossed out" to be with someone perceived older than his father. It suddenly felt wrong. He lost attraction but put up a front and continued in interactions. His partner displayed opposite feelings and reactions. He was affectionate but sensed Ivan's discomfort so they spent leisure time together over dinner before returning to the hotel to engage in sexual activities. Ivan spent the night, even though he did not want to.

Their relationship continued online even though Ivan had reservations. He felt guilty because his partner had a history of trauma and was infatuated with him. The next time they met, Ivan attempted to end their relationship. Unfortunately, his partner did not want to let go, so he attempted to maintain contact with Ivan online. As was Ivan's nature, he avoided and ignored online contact by deleting messages and avoiding the Internet altogether for a period of time. This relationship lasted a total of 4 to 5 months. Ivan ran into him a couple of years later, which rekindled this man's desire for their relationship. This time, Ivan was able to be more honest with himself and his partner about how this relationship was not going work. No one knew about this incident or

about Ivan's online experiences until years after, and then, this information was reserved for friends; his parents did not find out.

This experience changed Ivan's orientation toward much older men and highlighted his tendency to attract attention from others in order to enhance his self-esteem only to withdraw when they did not meet his perfectionistic standards. The Internet remains his only means of establishing relationships; however, he takes new relationship contacts quickly offline to establish more realistic connections. He believes that adolescents' vulnerabilities lie in their lack of understanding right and wrong and that they "don't plan for worst-case scenarios." Interestingly, in light of the illegality of his solicitation experience and potential risks, nothing would have stopped him from engaging in this encounter; he had no regrets and would not have done anything differently.

Brad

Brad is a 25-year-old Brazilian male who had an online sexual encounter in Brazil when he was 16 years old. This encounter lasted 5 to 6 months. They met offline.

Having parents who separated when he was 12 years old, Brad lived primarily with his mother and sister. Brad felt his parents' separation was best for their family and experienced "relief" because his parents' anger and conflict affected his sense of self. Although living with his mother, he had flexibility to be with his father whenever he wanted. His parents later became civil to one another, even dating at times. His relationship with his sister was generally good, although they fought in their later teen years.

Although not popular, Brad generally had good peer relationships maintaining two or three really good friends. They gathered at each other's houses and played games. Otherwise, he spent his time on schoolwork. He lost one of his social peer groups when trying to help a friend through a bullying situation. This created temporary "isolation" and the need to reestablish peer connections. "Free-spirited," Brad enjoyed good things in life without too many personal challenges or difficulties. His parents taught him the dos and don'ts in life and he was free to do whatever he wanted as long as he understood and accepted the consequences. During his teens, he became reflective and curious about his emotional self, mind and body. He felt incongruent emotionally – internally "raging" while externally calm – and he sought out psychological help to better understand himself and reconcile his psychological experience.

In his experience of Brazilian culture, Brad partied regularly at a country club. These parties were structured to explore attractions to others and then meet up at the end to connect and have sex before going separate ways. His culture readily accepted sexual exploration with the majority of children losing their virginity between the ages of 11 and 13 years. Boys and men pursue and encourage all types of intimacies, and in fact, sex, and the loss of virginity, is an accepted and desired status symbol in peer groups. The Internet was a welcomed asset that expanded youth's ability to chat with friends and to meet others, particularly under the influenced of "hormone bursts." Internet cafes were the main means of accessing the Internet, and along with the slow speed of connection, chat with others was the main Internet draw.

Brad's sister introduced him to the Internet and chat features. He began to use chat when 14 years old out of boredom and a desire to connect with girls. Because he

preferred physical contact over online contact, he spent minimal time online. Further, Brad did not feel popular either off or online and preferred to stay in the "periphery" of social experiences; however, he realized that the positive aspects of the Internet helped his "ego" and "insecurities" in social situations.

Brad's online encounter was with a 24 year old woman who initiated contact with him. Brad considered her to be much older than his 16 years. The encounter was not problematic for him in light of the fact the he was a heterosexual male. Once contact had been established, Brad took control over their conversations and intentions to meet as expected by males in his culture. They discussed personal interests and shared pictures online. The attention he received boosted his "ego." Brad desired love and became excited over the possibility that this relationship could be the one where he might also lose his virginity. He experienced considerable pressure from friends to have sex and he longed to share the same sexual status. He knew that having sex and losing his virginity would increase his ability to relate to his peers. The expectation of sex from this encounter created feelings of insecurity around his lack of sexual experience. He was also concerned about whether they would truly like each other. They met offline at the end of a country club dance evening where Brad instantly became disappointed and lost all attraction to this woman. Her online picture did not match the reality of her appearance and appearances were very important to him. He was concerned that if he engaged sexually with her, he would have to commit to their relationship and keep up some sort of pretense. He did not want to hurt her feelings and indirectly and politely let her down when she attempted to initiate sex. His consideration of her feelings extended to their continued online contact in which he pretended to be her friend. Although seeing each

other at future parties, they never connected offline again and their online contact lasted approximately 5 – 6 months before it dwindled. His friends knew about this online encounter and labeled him a "coward" for refusing to have sex. Although admittedly uncomfortable, Brad would have engaged in sex had she been more forceful. His parents and his sister remained unaware.

Brad walked away from his experience feeling that he did the right thing regardless of strong peer and societal pressure to engage sexually with his partner. He sees himself as someone who thinks about consequences rather than momentary rewards and feels like he held a mature response to his situation. He believes himself to be a better man today with women because of this experience, noting that he often receives positive feedback from women in relationships.

Patti

Patti is a 20-year-old female who had a number of online sexual relationships. Many led to offline encounters. Patti spoke primarily of a solicitation event at the age of 14 that included expectations of harm. This represented a pivotal experience for her subsequent teenage years.

Patti's life was riddled with many traumas. She lived in an unstable household with a mother and aunts involved in drugs, prostitution and gangs, and males who sexually abused her. At age 3, their house burned down as a result of her parents' drug affiliations. At age 4, her father who tried to engage intercourse sexually molested her. At age 5, child welfare moved her and her siblings to their grandmother's. Patti considered her grandmother "worse;" somebody who "sold her daughters and beat them." At age 6 and 7 years, Patti lived with her parents. Her mother attempted suicide and child welfare

separated her and her siblings into foster homes where she experienced more sexual, physical, and emotional abuse from her foster mother and brothers. During her time in foster care, Patti had a home visit with her dad and new wife. Her dad again attempted to solicit her sexually. It was a few years before she saw her father again.

When 8 through 10 years old, Patti lived again with her mom and older brothers who regularly "raped" her and her sisters. Patti attempted to tell her mother one evening which resulted in her mother running at her with a knife swearing and calling her names and threatening to stab her brothers. The police became involved in this incident; however, Patti had a hard time when the police did not do anything. She felt abandoned and afraid to be left at home trying to make sense of the people who were her family. Grade 5 was the last grade Patti attended and she began using drugs. At age 13, she took turns with her older sister engaging in sex with a group of males, and by age 14, Patti had a 22-year-old boyfriend.

Patti's and her siblings had everything they wanted in terms of material things. However, she felt vulnerable as a young girl who should not have been exposed to such trauma and abuse. She lacked understanding of the world, hating her life and herself. Patti lived in fear throughout most of her childhood and felt too afraid to tell anyone about what was happening to her.

The Internet was introduced into Patti's home around the age of 12. She used it primarily for Facebook and Plenty of Fish, a dating website. She wanted to meet someone older to party and have sex with. She wanted to be in "pornography" and hoped to connect online with someone older who could help her obtain her desires. She believed she was to blame for her life's situation and that she was unworthy and undeserving of

love and happiness. Her world felt "dark" and she maintained the worldview that everything that was going to happen to her "was going to be bad."

Patti's online sexual solicitation incident happened as a 14 year old when a chat website matched her up with a local older man. They chatted for about a half an hour and met up offline an hour later. Patti admitted that she was looking to "get killed." Her desire for living was gone and she thought that if she chatted with someone online who talked dirty, he would likely hurt her. As Patti was getting ready to meet up with this man, she was both scared and happy, wanting her "dark days" to be over with and everything in her offline world to stop. She said her goodbyes to her family and then went to her online partner's residence. She began to notice how his online story differed from the way he presented himself initially. Patti began to have second thoughts about dying. She no longer felt alone as she thought about other people who might have experienced the same things she had and was; other children that this man might have had encounters with. She became frightened knowing she willingly went to his home. Her thoughts drifted to her life as a little girl and of how others would feel if she died. She kept her feelings to herself and continued to go along with their sexual interactions. Their encounter ended fairly quickly; they had sex, he paid her and then he drove her home. They never saw each other again and nobody ever found out.

After her online experience, Patti entered three years of prostitution. At age 16, she began to reevaluate her life and attempted to make some changes by reaching out to her social worker. In hindsight, Patti views her incident as "life changing" even though it led her deeper into darkness for a while. In her need to escape, she began to write, something she had always enjoyed. This initiated her desires for something more and

"good" in her life. She began to think about the possibilities of a real relationship and family and developed hope for her future.

Rachel

Rachel is a 21-year-old female who had a one-time sexual solicitation incident online when she was 14 years old. This encounter lasted the brief time that they were interacting online. They did not meet each other offline.

Rachel grew up in a nuclear family; however, it was her father's second marriage. She lived with her parents, younger sister, and older brother. She had two half-siblings that were 13 to 14 years older than she. She had close relationships with most family members, feeling closest to her mother and younger sister. Rachel had very little social interaction outside of her family, particularly from age 12 onward. At that time, Rachel stopped attending regular school due to an anxiety disorder that left her highly "agitated" with many psychosomatic challenges. She experienced strong emotional mood swings that were difficult to control. She maintained one friend from school who moved away from the area a couple of years later. Otherwise, "socially savvy girls" in school, whom Rachel felt had the support of "authority figures," regularly bullied her. She felt unheard and misunderstood which led to resentment and anger toward the world and "people as a whole" except her immediate family. Although Rachel logically understood that authority figures did not purposely defend bullies, she experienced heightened emotional responses and internal conflict. Rachel otherwise was a "happy" child. She liked to read and spend time with her siblings. Leaving school helped her emotionally, and since she did not like her peers, she did not miss them or social interactions.

Rachel's began using the Internet at the age of 10, although she noted how bandwidth restrictions limited her use for a couple of years. The Internet supported her research and learning capacities on her multitude of interests. One of her primary online activities was to visit information sites. As a secondary activity, Rachel studied people and their interactions online as a discrete observer. She examined chats and was interested in following discussions and studying reactions without being an integral participant. She spent time on fan fiction sites to address this activity. She found the Internet had an "odd social structure" where it is "perfectly okay to simply lurk" and watch what other people are doing.

Rachel was "eavesdropping" on a conversation when the name of a chat site piqued her interest. She visited the chat website where she was randomly connected with someone. She started the conversation with a greeting to someone she quickly assumed was a male based upon his pronoun and language use. She then introduced a topic for discussion and asked for his opinion. He quickly dismissed the topic and began making sexual statements and invitations. Rachel felt "shocked and extremely embarrassed" at that time, describing herself as an "asexual" person who was interested in everything else but sex. As he continued to make sexual comments, Rachel attempted to divert the conversation using sarcasm and mocking statements. In response to her embarrassment, Rachel refused to engage. She wondered at her mother's potential reactions to her the situation. Eventually, her online partner inquired about her gender and instantly cut off their communication upon learning she was female. She remained confused as to why he asked such a question.

Rachel felt a mixture of emotions as a result of her experience. She was aware of online dangers and predators on the Internet, but with a lack of experience, she did not knowing how to react. Rachel felt dismissed which upset her when he completely cut communication off. She did not close off communication herself when she felt uncomfortable for a couple of reasons. One, she thought that it would have been "rude" to do so. Two, although she felt uncomfortable with the interchange, it never felt overwhelming. Rachel told none about this encounter until a few years later because she was embarrassed. When she told her mother, she did so in a "humourous" uneventful way.

This event was a small incident in terms of Rachel's life as a whole; however, the experience revealed to her an aspect of human nature that she was unaware of and did not care for. She compared her solicitation experience to bullying and continued in her struggle to make sense of the interpersonal violence she has been exposed to in life.

Summary

Most participants were very forthcoming in sharing information about their online sexual solicitation encounters. Nancy struggled expanding on some discussions, easily distracted. However, sharing her story and volunteering for this study was important to her; she believed others would not readily do so. Participants told relatively few acquaintances otherwise and only after some time from encounters had passed.

Perusal of these eight synopses highlights various contexts and occurrences of online solicitation and includes representation from both hetero- and homosexual adolescents. Some were brief one-time unexpected incidents, while others were desired lasting relationships that incorporated offline sexual contact. Sexual orientation was not a

distinguishing factor in the initiation or progression of encounters. The presentation of

themes within and across participants' experiences occurs in the next chapter.

Results

This chapter provides a detailed description of the themes discovered within participants' account of their online sexual experiences. Themes attempt to address the research questions from young adults' perspectives: How do adolescents who experience online sexual solicitation understand, perceive, and respond to encounters? What are the psycho-sociological and decision-making processes adolescents engage in when encountering sexual solicitation online? This presentation highlights the complexity of adolescents' decision-making processes and action taking in such situations.

Participants' experience of online sexual solicitation varied. Three experienced brief one-time exposure incidents while five established some form of "relationship" from their online interactions. Whether brief or longer-term, three established offline sexual relations in addition to their online sexual encounters, one established offline contact that did not result in sex, and four remained only online. Six desired some aspect of their interaction, one did not, and one remained ambivalent.

Although the variability of participants' online sexual experiences is great, themes across their experiences emerged. Some themes were present in both their offline and online environments, as well as, outside of and within their encounters. Embedded in layers of complexity, these themes interacted in a dynamic and multidimensional process that had a significant impact on participants' understandings, perceptions, decision-making and response patterns. These results have been organized into two major theme groupings (see Appendix 5): Social Isolation and Exploring Sense of Self.

Social Isolation

Social isolation was a prevalent theme in all participants' offline experience. Participants felt alone and lacked connection to others that diminished opportunities to share personal intimacies and/or explore aspects of self. All participants described emotional separation from peers and strained family relationships that varied in nature and strength. Additionally, two participants experienced a lack of social support that added to their felt sense of isolation and distress. Although participants' personal circumstances differed, with limited social interactions and support, they looked online to expand their social network and to fulfill personal needs. The subthemes representing social isolation included isolation from peers, family, and additional social supports.

Peers. Participants had some, or at least one, friendship yet felt quite disconnected. Most often, they could not relate well to peers. Outside of being bullied, most participants felt a lack of similarity with peers and questioned their sense of belonging. Varying factors influenced such challenging peer experiences including sexual minority status, lack of peer status, lack of shared interests and/or lack of presence in school. Whether by circumstance or by choice, ultimately, limited social networks were available.

One circumstance limiting three participants' social connection was that of being bullied. Overall, these participants described a reduced level of trust and desire to connect with peers and a strong desire to withdraw and avoid peers. However, the effects of bullying on participants varied in strength. At one extreme, Rachel's emotional state was such that she was diagnosed with an "anxiety disorder" accompanied by many psychosomatic symptoms that led to her withdrawing from regular school in Grade 6.

Upon leaving school, Rachel's anxiety felt manageable. However, the impact on her

social situation and lack of desire for peers was great:

> I had one friend if we're not counting family… Around when I was 14, she
> moved back to Newfoundland. So I did not have a lot of social contact outside
> of my immediate family at least with my peers. I had a singing teacher and I
> had a volunteer position in a library but I very rarely interacted with people
> my own age. Highly socially isolated, I suppose you could say…I didn't miss
> my peers at all largely because I'd been bullied in school. So it was more that
> I disliked them enough that I didn't miss them.

In contrast, other bullied participants' maintained school and peer interactions but kept to

themselves and avoided others. The impact for Ivan was such that he was very aware of

his peer relationships and focused most of his energy on trying to discern whom he

considered friends while avoiding those who weren't:

> I was really focused on who my friends are, who weren't my friends and
> avoiding the people that I didn't want to be around…I projected kind of that
> gay kid vibe and I think that I got bullied for that you know and I got used to
> that. It's hard for me to remember it because I don't really know any different.
> I think it happened from when I was really young. I don't think I was
> traumatized by it. I don't think I was scared but I definitely avoided people so
> my offline world was a little bit about kind of going back to that thing where I
> was hiding a little bit and trying to avoid certain people.

Two participants struggled with connection to peers because of their growing

awareness of their homosexuality. They often felt confused and had difficulty relating to

peers. Although both had friends and participated in some peer activities, they found

themselves feeling isolated and alone in their experience. Their heightened awareness of

their sexual minority status left them feeling disconnected, different, and at times

excluded:

> All throughout Elementary, dealing with my homosexuality, I thought that
> other boys felt that way, too and I thought it was normal and it was in Junior
> High like Grade 6, Grade 7, Grade 8 when, you know, boys started interacting
> with girls in different ways when I started noticing that difference and that
> kind of left me in an odd spot… I remember feeling alone for sure. I was

definitely feeling like nobody around me could understand what I was going through because everyone else seemed to have achieved this sense of normalcy…It was that alone time when I was left to my own thoughts and, when I was physically alone, where I felt alone. (Carl)

Brad considered himself a sexual minority as a 16-year-old virgin in a culture where he believed that the average age for the loss of one's virginity is 12 or 13 for girls and 11 or 12 for boys. His virginity created a barrier between himself and his peers that led to extreme peer pressure to belong. In addition to having been separated from his peer group by an influential member, Brad lived life "in the periphery" of peers and constantly battled external and internal pressures to fit in:

He was an influent person in the group. He just drove out people from my company so I was isolated from that peers. It was bad… The pressure, I was virgin at that time… The pressure about my peers and colleagues, so hard right to have my first girl and things like that so I was pressured... I was looking for a kind of easy girl to be in the noose with the same level of my peers and to experience and to speak about the same things.

For some, a combination of circumstances and conscious choice led to separation and distance from peers. Carl and Ivan were coping with a sexual minority status. Mary's friends did not share her strong subculture music interest. Lisa had "religious and pure" friends with whom sexual issues were not talked about. These participants chose to maintain separate and distinct peer groups while experiencing some feelings of isolation. Mary stated "you feel alone when you're 13, 14, no matter where you are and you're trying to separate yourself from everyone else." Participants still associated regularly with their offline school peers; however, they did not feel close enough to share personal thoughts and feelings and as such established some level of interpersonal distance. Instead, they created an online presence and social group that fulfilled what they felt was

lacking in their offline worlds and which was mostly "hidden and separate." It was so

different for Ivan that he referred to his experience as living a "dual life."

As an exception, Lisa created an offline friendship rather than an online

connection that was distinct and separated from her primary peer group. This relationship

offered her a means for exploring what she did not feel comfortable to do with others.

Their primary activity together was exploring online. Regardless, participants spoke to

the same theme of exploration outside peer groups:

> It was a strange friendship me and Susie had. We were very much friends
> because we were neighbours and we were friends during the weekends and
> after school when she would come over and there was no homework and
> stuff. But when we were at school, she wasn't really my friend. She had other
> friends there… My friends were more, I hate to say it, but like the smart ones
> and the ones that talked about school… I had very religious friends so they
> were very pure and we stayed our age and we would play tennis, but I was
> always well aware of you know the pursuit of boys but never, never talked
> about sexually or at any point. (Lisa)

> I had friends that I hung out with at school but most of my friends outside of
> school would've again been more related to the music… What I noticed is, I
> was never close enough to any of my friends really that I would've talked
> about this stuff with them. (Mary)

Family. Family relationships and stressors were important factors in participants

overall experiences of isolation. Not only did participants feel unconnected to peers, they

also experienced some disconnect within their family systems. All but one participant had

strained relationships with at least one, sometimes both, parents. The remaining

participant had good relationships with his parents but felt strained by his parents divorce.

Divorce, strict religious backgrounds, and trauma were some of the family stressors that

created additional tension and resulted in conflict that made it difficult for participants to

feel close to family members and want to share personal thoughts and feelings.

Impacted by various circumstances, the amount of strain in relationships with parents differed greatly among participants. Lisa "disliked" her parents and those around her based on her own orientation to her world. She lived in a state of "Someday Syndrome" which resulted in a constant unsettled feeling. Nancy's parents were going through marital conflict which eventually led to divorce but she "didn't get along with dad" so their divorce was welcomed. Similarly, Brad also welcomed his parents' divorce because his parents were always fighting, crying, and taking their anger out on him and his sister. Challenges inherent in these situations highlighted participants' lack of desire, lack of ability, and lack of opportunity for establishing connections with parents who might otherwise have been able to support some of their children's interpersonal needs.

Most participants felt close to parents and siblings; however, their reality encompassed relationship ambivalence and strain which challenged interactions and affected how open they were to and in familial relationships. Personal responses of guilt, confusion, avoidance, and withdrawal suggests distance and isolation within families. Such situations added interpersonal strain and further limited relationship opportunities. Mary and Carl both recognized their parents' disappointment in them:

> I put pressure on my parents which was more of the - we're disappointed in you - like a lot of guilt. I guess guilt would've been a major emotion with my relationship with my parents … Mostly it would've been a curfew thing and a general kind of disregard for the safety aspect, not the control aspect, that stressed them out. You know all this was before cell phones or anything when it would've been easier to keep in touch, but the guilt was mostly; I've always had the parents that I could tell they were disappointed. I could tell they thought I could've made a better choice. (Mary)

> I went to a Catholic school, raised in a traditional Catholic family … My relationship with my parents was very like hot and cold at times. I felt really close to them, like times when you'd just be like watching TV and I'd feel very close to them, but other times when say I didn't perform well in school and my parents were disappointed, they would let me know. I was definitely

closer to my mother. My father was rigid, strict brought up a certain way and expects everything to be done in a certain way as well. So that definitely caused some tension like within our family and within their marriage. (Carl)

Carl and Ivan felt the additional strain of growing up and living in religious households under perceptions of having firmer rules and less flexibility:

> My family life, I think we all were pretty close in the sense that we had this idea that we could have open communication but I don't know if we did. We were raised Christian so we had some kind of restrictions; we had more rules than other families that I knew. My family is quite open-minded, though, so I didn't feel like scared to talk to my parents. I had told my mom at 14 actually that I was gay but I think it was way too young for her to understand. Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, I withdrew when I was 15 from my mom because she didn't accept it right away. So that's where this idea came that she said we could always talk but then I slowly kind of became more and more sheltered, away from my family. But I always thought that I could talk, I just never did … My dad was the one that's most conservative so I always felt like I couldn't really talk to him … so I didn't really have a lot of communication with my family. (Ivan)

Rachel's parents did not understand and relate well to her experience:

> My father is a lovely human being. You know he cares. He doesn't understand. He tries to understand but he doesn't. But he supported nonetheless. I actually have a closer relationship with him now than I did when I was younger. He was always somewhat distant. He didn't really talk to me about more than shallow things I suspect because he didn't really know how to. Most of my in-depth conversations were with my mother, and my mother, she understands me better now than she did then. Then, she did not understand my emotional problems. She tried to understand but she'd get frustrated. (Rachel)

Extremely isolated having dropped out of school in Grade 5 and experiencing a particularly traumatic childhood, Patti lived in an unstable household with estranged parent-child relationships. Child Social Services was a regular part of Patti's life since her parents were involved in gangs, drugs, and prostitution. Experiencing sexual abuse at the hands of her father and brothers, along with a suicidal mother, Patti moved in and out of foster care. Abused both at home and in foster care, Patti's relationships were anything

but stable. She lived in fear for the abuse she had to suffer without a safe means to communicate, let alone connect, to parents. Her isolation was great. Patti described her fear of communication and a traumatic breaking point between herself and her mother shortly after moving back home from foster care at the age of 9:

> Every day, we used to get raped by our oldest brother and I remember one night when our mom was yelling at us…I was just getting so mad and me and my sister were just looking at each other, and I was like, "Should I tell mom?" and then she's like "Don't, Don't she'll hurt us." I told her. I just blurted it out. I'm like "My brother rapes us every day, mom. He touches us. He does all these things to us" and my mother pulled out a butcher knife and she came at me. She's like "Don't fucking lie to me. Don't fucking lie to me you little bitch." She was saying all this stuff and she didn't believe us.

Additional social supports. Two participants experienced the added effect of isolation when external social supports were perceived as failing them. Aware of their existing isolation from peers and from family, the compound effect of lacking support from external authority figures such as teachers and law enforcement led to overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, resentment, anger, and disbelief. These situations accounted for the more extreme cases of isolation among participants:

> A strong pattern in when I was bullied as a child was that nearly every time, the authority figure in the situation would defend the person who had been picking on me because I tended to be picked on by socially savvy girls of my own age. Girls who had lots of friends, girls who were normal, girls who were pretty, and girls who the authority figure would understand. They were more normal than I was… and because they were more normal, they were easier to sympathize with and they knew how to manipulate the situation better than I did. I was not socially savvy as a child. I was genuinely quite awkward and I resented that. I resented the fact that I couldn't get people to understand what I was saying, that it always felt like they weren't listening. (Rachel)

> I was so afraid at the same time and [the police] didn't even want to help us or anything. They just said, "Oh, there's nothing wrong with these kids and let's just go" and they just left. Just like that, you know. Just left me in a home with these people who were supposed to be my family and they just totally abandoned me with monsters. (Patti)

Summary. Whether by circumstances or choices, social isolation was present in peer, family and additional support contexts. The greater the strength and number of social factors participants struggled with, the greater their isolation. Each additional interpersonal strain limited social resources and opportunities to connect. Social isolation as a theme in participants' offline experience was an important consideration in understanding their developmental and psychological needs and was intricately connected to the following theme highlighting their need for connection to others online in order to explore and help define their sense of self.

Exploring Sense of Self

Participants' exploration and search for sense of self was an overriding theme that ran throughout their online experience. This theme presented in participants' motivations for Internet use and online interactions and in online sexual encounters regardless of whether solicitation experiences were brief or long-term. The subthemes that represented exploring sense of self include: (1) Belonging, (2) Personal Insecurities, (3) Internal Conflict, (4) Sexuality, and (5) A Significant Experience. The complexity and inter-relatedness of these subthemes are such that most themes occurred and co-occurred both outside of and within sexual solicitation experiences.

Belonging. The theme of belonging was prevalent in participants' processes. A need to connect with others and feel a part of something highlighted their motivations for online activity. The computer and Internet was used as a means for exploring and connecting to personal interests and/or building and expanding social communities and relationships. From this starting point, many of participants' sexual encounters originated.

Chat, gaming, dating, and information web sites formed the foundation for connection with others. Most incorporated new contacts from various sites into an ongoing and growing list of personal MSN contacts with whom they were in regular contact. Participants actively created and developed their social milieu based on personal needs and interests. For some, this was more than simple exploration; their need to belong and feel connected with similar others was important, particularly in light of offline social isolation. All participants' descriptions took into account the impact of social isolation on their sense of self and need for connection:

> I started going to shows by myself when I was 13, 14, and 15 because I was interested in it and no one else would go. So the way I would find out about those shows was online and also the way I would have any outlet for talking about music or feeling like there's people like me. In retrospect, it was more about, the kids at school aren't like me, these people are like me…connected with people like myself. Belonging, there that's what. I'm belonging more belonging. (Mary)

> I couldn't wait to get out of junior high school and start high school because I figured maybe it would be better. I didn't want to go to school so I just stayed home a lot … I'd go on this stupid site called Neopets and play around cause it was fun and there's kind of a source of satisfaction getting Neopoints which were the currency of that little thing and so I'd go on the chat boards and talk to people on there and add them to MSN and talk to them. Mostly people my age, but sometimes not, really depends. I would often say that I was maybe like 15 or 16 instead of 13 or 14 because I wanted to be treated like someone older and have maybe more respect instead of people being focused on my age. (Nancy)

> Even in that group of Internet people, you know each other and things like that. I was not the famous guy so I just stayed in the sidewalks of the groups, in the periphery. But it was good because I know lots of people and make lots of friends, which obviously in that time it was really good especially for my ego because everyone is going to Internet, I have to go, too. So I manage and it fits my way of liking Internet things and how to find people. (Brad)

Sexual minority participants directly identified the importance of using the Internet to connect with others within their same sex community in order to explore their

sense of self, to create a sense of belonging, and to establish relationships. Although they

had friends, social opportunities to connect and establish relationships with other

homosexuals were limited. This additional element of social isolation resulted in a

heightened awareness of their sexual minority status and difficulties in coping with social

limitations. Watching peers establish relationships and progress in the natural course of

development left them in the periphery desiring similar experiences. These participants

highlighted how the Internet was and remained their only means of establishing contact

with other gays whether friends or potential partners. The Internet became their social

space and opportunity for connection and belonging:

> Ever since Grade 1 and Grade 2, I knew that I had been attracted to men and it was in junior high when I really started to want to explore that aspect of my life more because developmentally like everyone else, I wanted to feel some sort of connection to or some sort of intimacy… to reach out and find a community… find people who can identify with me. I was really excited cause for the first time I heard well like not necessarily that I'm not the only one but there are others out there like me. (Carl)

> I wanted to talk to other people about being gay is what I wanted to do…I actually met a friend of mine who was my age on there…I wanted to just meet more people. I just wanted to know what other people were like that were gay. (Ivan)

It is important to note that not all participants' connection needs were for positive

or adaptive purposes. For example, living a traumatic life with dysfunctional parents,

Patti developed maladaptive coping behaviours at a very young age. Having dropped out

of school in Grade 5, she had limited social resources and opportunities available to

connect with others and feel like she could belong. Patti wanted to connect with others

who wanted the same things:

> When I was a teen, I used to, basically mostly just Facebook and Plenty of Fish. Like, I lied about my age type of thing, you know, and I kind of desired somebody older than me. I wanted to meet people to drink and do drugs and

that type of thing. Never really wanted to just meet someone to just meet someone. I wanted to meet someone to do things….I kind of wanted to be in a porno and I don't know why. It was weird and I wanted to find people who would like allow that.

In contrast to most participants' desires to expand social resources and enter into new online relationships, Rachel's experience of belonging was different. Not only was she highly socially isolated offline, she remained highly socially isolated online. She consciously chose not to interact with others. Her description of self as "socially awkward" highlighted aspects of her self-perceptions and how she used the Internet and online interactions to explore her sense of self. Through her description, Rachel explored the extent to which she belonged in social interactions:

> I never really interacted with people on the Internet, I would, I don't know how to describe this, I would study them. I would read what they wrote to each other. Read what they talked about, you know, look at their interactions that sort of thing. It was interesting because often on the Internet people will act is if they're in private. They will talk as if they're in private, on blogs that are actually open to anyone, which I found interesting … I could look at people's interactions. How people would react without actually being there myself because when I'm in a room, I affect what's happening in the room, but since I wasn't in the room with these people, I could look at what how they would act like if I wasn't there.

Summary. Attaining developmental needs in a context of social isolation created a need for participants to feel like they belonged somewhere with others like them. They identified aspects of themselves they could relate to and found the means online to connect with others sharing similar traits and interests. These needs became important for developing their senses of self, but the process was not without the added elements of personal insecurity and internal conflict.

Personal insecurities. All participants identified personal insecurities. Inherently part of exploring sense of self, insecurities developed as a theme through participants'

descriptions of the way they saw themselves and their circumstances; participants described themselves as being insecure and lacking self-esteem and self-confidence at the time of their sexual solicitation. These insecurities had a significant impact on participants' motivations and decision-making processes in both offline and online interactions, as well as throughout sexual solicitation encounters. Most recognized their personal insecurities but few held sufficient internal strength and external guidance to make positive and proactive decisions for their best interests when engaged in online experiences.

The theme of personal insecurities presented in two ways: outside of sexual solicitation encounters, and within encounters. Participants' insecurities outside of encounters spoke to their general view of self and living experience. Insecurities within sexual solicitation encounters spoke to the impact of these on personal motivations and decision-making processes.

Outside of encounters. Participants' generally experienced some intrapersonal struggle in their view of self. Most maintained aspects of self that they liked, but simultaneously struggled with these aspects or the ways in which these aspects were maladaptive. Others did not like anything about themselves or their lives. These participants displayed greater intrapersonal conflict and more difficult living experiences. Regardless, insecurities led participants to struggle with self-confidence.

In their offline worlds, participants spoke about general insecurities, view of self and view of others in relation to self. Self-conscious and insecure, they felt discontented and sought appeasement of their insecurities through others. Whether positively or

negatively, the way others treated them was seen as a reflection of self. They discussed

the inter-relatedness of these aspects on their given situation and intrapersonal struggle:

> Definitely a lot of insecurities. I think at that age feeling like you couldn't wait to grow up cause then you get all these things. I don't think I was ever really present in my childhood. Didn't really act like a 12 year-old or thinking that I was a 12 year-old, it was more about once I get this I'll be happy, once I get this and be happy … I worried a lot about what others thought and what others would react towards me, so I was pretty conscious of what I did. (Lisa)

> I was looking for attention specifically from men because I had a lot of other attention. I was pretty popular and you know lots of attention at home. I was the baby, so more than a need. It was just exciting for me, like I kind of could bask in it, I guess. And really, probably starting about that time or earlier, I have always been very fascinated with the idea of making men feel lucky, I guess which defined a lot of my teenage years. I kind of really wanted to be the most important thing, person I should say, to someone whether or not that person was really significant or important to me didn't matter. I just wanted to be the focus of their attention. (Mary)

> I would go over the situations that have happened, you know, repeatedly. I would dwell on them trying to find a way to communicate with other people but it was never very effective. It wasn't that logically I thought that the authority figures in my life would have something against me but emotionally that's what it felt like. I was aware of the fact that that they weren't trying to do what they were doing but that just gave me more emotional conflict because I was simultaneously resentful of the fact that they always took someone's view over mine and resentful of myself for being angry. (Rachel)

The Internet, as an aspect of their environmental context, acted as a tool to address

and work through aspects of participants' views of self and intrapersonal conflicts:

> I was constantly trying to meet these people off the Internet to feel good about myself. If they loved me and they cared about me, then I could love myself more and that's how I always felt… I had this routine as I would kind of talk to people and I would tag them along and I would make them like me a lot. Then I would feel really good about myself and I just would get this high, and then this fantasy of this person that I thought was so attractive, would just like me and just felt more confident…. So the fantasy at the time was exhilarating and it was kind of disguising like this fact that, you know, I couldn't be honest with people around me, so like maybe I can just create this other identity where I could just be who I wanted to be. (Ivan)

I was involved with a life that I really didn't love. I didn't really love myself. I actually really hated myself…I kind of wanted to get killed in a way I guess you could say. I didn't really want to live so I kind of looked for that. I kind of looked for somebody who, you know, would maybe talk dirty in a way. I thought that if this person's going to talk like this he's obviously going to hurt me, you know, I kind of don't even want to live anymore. My life is freaking bullshit. Like, I just, I can't deal with it anymore. (Patti)

Within encounters. All participants spoke about aspects of insecurities going through online sexual solicitation encounters. All but one participant identified the link between their insecurities and their actions and decision-making processes in these relationships. However, one important mediating element is that most participants' desired to establish and/or maintain a relationship. Exploring their sense of self and theme of personal insecurities occurred in relation to someone else. For example, although Rachel was one of the few who did not consciously desire an intimate relationship, she explored through her "eavesdropping" of others conversations online which led her to initiate contact with someone. Rachel's insecurities were reaffirmed:

I started off the conversation on something and to have it immediately derailed, you know, it was dismissive of me. It was dismissive of me as a cognitively aware individual and that was upsetting in its own right.

Patti was another participant who did not desire a personal intimate relationship, but rather sought out someone to fulfill her personal death wish because her insecurities were so great, her resiliency was low, and she lacked motivation for life. So overwhelming was her experience that she did not need a relationship to explore her sense of self; Patti needed someone to carry out a previously made decision:

I was kind of scared but I was kind of happy at the same time. I was stuck in between that scared and happiness like, you know, I thought maybe if I just if I did this then my confusion would go away and all my dark things so I wouldn't have to live, and I just like, I wanted everything to stop. That's what I wanted.

All other participants wanted to establish and/or maintain a relationship of some

sort. All occurred with an online other, except for Lisa. Her motivation was to maintain

an offline relationship where together they encountered sexual solicitation online.

Regardless, the theme of personal insecurities presented the same across participants'

experiences. Insecurities often led to making decisions that were not grounded in self-

confidence and healthy self-esteem:

> She was the reason why we got all kind of uncomfortable because it's like man you kind of forced me into this situation. Yeah, the only reason I think. I would never have done that on my own for sure. But she was my friend and I wanted her to like me and I don't know get a laugh out of it. She was really, really funny and I trusted whatever she said and did. (Lisa)

> I thought it was interesting that a guy was talking to me and not making fun of me. So, that was good and that's why I continued to talk to him … I just liked the fact that someone was paying attention to me. (Nancy)

> Really excited he would have been paying attention to me and showing an interest. I think also at that age I was quite confident, not necessarily high self-esteem but very confident in my sexuality so very into the stage of not necessarily exploring my own sexuality but of the power it could hold over others, so very entranced with the idea that this was a control I could have very easily but also very flattered by the attention that would be shown to me for the same reasons. So those would've been definitely my main motives for getting involved, definitely. (Mary)

> It was small talk and he felt like he actually cared is what it felt like and it felt like someone liked me a lot and or loved me or whatever. I felt like it was just so powerful and so meaningful and I really wanted to meet this person. (Ivan)

> He typed in I love you and at that point for me that meant at lot. Like to believe that somebody was sexually attracted to me that meant a lot to me … I just remember feeling like appreciated, loved for like who I was and that meant a lot to me. (Carl)

Brad appeared to have greater personal security compared to other participants;

however, it is important to remember that Brad lived in a peer culture that promoted

sexual relations and activities. In fact, using the Internet to connect with others for the

hopes of establishing intimate and/or sexual relationships was considered acceptable.

Meeting others offline occurred as part of this process in structured social events. He

desired a relationship and the loss of his virginity to gain social status with his peers.

However, Brad still spoke directly of his personal insecurities throughout this process.

Upon meeting his partner and faced with a difficult situation, he did not know how to

handle it; however, he appeared to have a greater understanding of and connection to his

sense of self that led to increased confidence in his decision-making process. Although

his insecurity impacted aspects of his decision-making process, Brad seemed to maintain

greater control and awareness of these insecurities:

> I was, you know, hands in pocket completely insecure about what should I do
> … I tried to be polite because I don't like to hurt people especially their
> feelings and when they're drunk, you're feelings can be hurt easier. So I just
> I tried to work out in a good way not to give her what she wanted but also to
> not commit myself with something that I discovered that I don't like. So I
> tried to manage that out and when that things happens, when I saw her drunk
> and she wasn't to my liking, I decided and this is not going to happen really.

Further, Brad identified the pleasing aspect of this situation on his personal insecurities

and sense of self. He was not directly open and honest with his partner in order to

appease his insecurities: "because you know it's good for your ego, and ohh, she is still

hitting on me. So it was good. I was a teenager and I kept that for some time."

Summary. Personal insecurities were an integral aspect of participants' living

experience both off and online. These led to intrapersonal challenges in self esteem, self

worth, and self confidence and impacted motivations and decision-making in

relationships; most wanted to maintain relationships even if not healthy. Those with

greater personal security engaged in more positive responses and actions; however, all

struggled with their sense of self that included chronic and acute states of internal conflict and confusion.

Internal conflict. A salient theme that developed out of participants' experiences is that of internal conflict. All participants described times of uncertainty and confusion in their online sexual solicitation. Participants' confronted challenges to their sense of self, sense of other, and personal perspectives creating states of internal conflict that were difficult for them to sort through. Further, many felt similar internal states in offline experiences. Inherently complex and interrelated with all other themes, these states of internal conflict greatly impacted participants' interactions and decision-making processes both offline and online.

Similar to the theme of personal insecurities, the theme of internal conflict existed in participants' experiences both outside of sexual solicitation encounters and within these encounters. States of internal conflict outside of encounters spoke to their existing wavering senses of self. When engaged in online encounters, participants' were confronted with elements that either heightened current internal states and/or introduced new information that created additional conflict.

Outside of encounters. Most participants identified general intrapersonal difficulties, confusion around their sense of self, and difficulties navigating experiences. Each maintained conflicting internal states that felt irreconcilable, and for some, this extended to a lack of understanding how their world worked. Participants acknowledged their own "vulnerability" and lack of personal strength for dealing with issues. Avoidance and distraction tactics were often used to help cope with internal conflict and confusion around their senses of self.

Internal conflict varied in strength, personal understanding and impact. Ivan and

Brad's experiences directly addressed the theme of internal conflict and struggling sense

of self but also highlighted personal differences in coping and resiliency:

> I felt a little bit confused for sure. Confused because I was trying to accept myself but other people weren't really accepting me because I was bullied. And I knew my mom wasn't accepting me. I was just confused a lot of the time… I was completely confused and I was lost for sure, 100%. And I think I used the Internet as some sort of outlet to basically escape and to get to know these people so that I could kind of distract myself from other stuff that was going on in my life. (Ivan)

> I was kind of, it's not like closed emotion those feelings, but I like it to understand the feelings within myself first then you know just to stay yelling and pushing my emotions to everybody. So I was really in the exterior world. Like exterior appearance I was calm with no problem but my interior was like raging sometimes, and some other times, I was just calm. I was getting like this opposite feelings and emotions and try to reach an agreement with them. I had the chance to go to a Psychologist that time and then I spoke a little bit about things I was feeling and things like that and it was like kind of surprising when she said that I was trying to go in the right direction but using like wrong methods. There was like best methods to fit that thing. So in the end I had my bad face obviously because everyone has but I tried to manage that so far. (Brad)

Although all participants' internal conflicts highlighted their wavering senses of self,

some addressed this indirectly in relation to discussion of specific topics, e.g. Carl's

discussion of his homosexuality and Rachel of authority figures' responses to her

bullying experiences:

> My level of attraction was different and I felt it was like a combination of feeling alone, feeling like nobody could understand, feeling confused about, you know, why I was attracted to men like that. (Carl)

> I was aware of the fact that they weren't trying to do what they were doing, but that just gave me more emotional conflict because I was simultaneously resentful of the fact that they always took someone's view over mine and resentful of myself for being angry. (Rachel)

Within encounters. All participants described internal conflict going through online sexual solicitation encounters. Participants were confronted with situations that challenged their view of self, their view of other, and/or their view of the world. These challenges led to internal conflict full of uncertainty and confusion. As a result, some internal states of conflict were heightened, some experienced the creation of additional conflict and some experienced both. In addition, most were subjected to more than one form of internal challenge that compounded states of internal conflict. The complexity of internal conflict can be witnessed directly through layers of confusion and issues they were trying to work through and make sense of in their experience.

Sense of self. Many participants identified aspects of online encounters that triggered internal states of conflict around their sense of self. Different aspects of self were challenged and varied from their view of self in relationships to personal values to insecurities. Nevertheless, the theme of internal conflict existed across experiences.

Mary's experience highlighted internal conflict around her understanding of self in relationships. In light of Mary's multiple online relationships, she acknowledged this aspect as her primary motivating factor in choosing to share this experience. In response to her encounter, Mary was confronted to work through her existing view of self. Mary discussed aspects of her internal conflict, with the added element of newer insights at the time of telling her story, and how this was not an easy task for her:

> So how it all manifested was this kind of really late night relationship that went on for a while that was mostly sexual and still with him making those comments that drove me crazy about how he didn't have a girlfriend and didn't have any women in his life which drove me nuts. It was just totally dismissive. I guess really I would've felt objectified by that… The dismissive way he treated our interactions probably would've been the only part that made me feel used. Although, I guess those aren't really as separate as I think they are now… I had never had a relationship that I wasn't always in control

of. Like, I only ever seemed to be involved with men that I could drop and they would follow me around and take me back and that was like really probably my first experience of not being like top dog.

Nancy was challenged in two ways in response to her encounter. One was tied into her insecurity. Considering that she grew up being bullied by males, she was surprised that a male would show interest in her. She was challenged by the idea that she might be worth a male's attention which she identified as "interesting" and contradicted her view of herself as unworthy. Another occurred later in her online encounter when her online partner confronted her personal values. Her partner wanted her to become more involved in religion when she considered herself an atheist. In her reflection, internal conflict regarding Nancy's sense of self was evident:

> Maybe I should try just so that he doesn't leave and stop talking to me. But then the second voice in my head is, well obviously he doesn't like you as a person that much if he wants you to change something that's fundamental about your personality.

Ivan's sense of self was challenged in connection to his sense of morality. His conflict in trying to work through his situation heightened his existing state of confusion which was further exacerbated by multiple internal struggles. This occurred at the time shortly after meeting his online encounter partner offline:

> I warmed up a little bit more because I realized okay, this is a human being you know, maybe what I'm doing isn't necessarily that wrong, but maybe I'm just uncomfortable for some reason, but I never thought maybe that's because it might've been wrong.

One of Brad's experiences triggered his existing insecurity. Brad battled his sense of self-confidence:

> It was like mixed with feelings because sometimes I was really secure of myself. "Yeah, let's go, that I will do great." And some other times, "Oh my God, if I screw things up and if she doesn't like me." I was really in this two extremes.

Sense of other. Going through online encounters, many participants also faced challenges to their view of other. In response, they displayed uncertainty, confusion, and difficulty sorting through their realities and making decisions. Conflict generally occurred in relation to the presentation of information that contradicted initial understandings, expectations, and/or projections of their online partner:

> He wanted me to go buy a webcam and, how for me at that time, that wasn't plausible at all… He lost his temper with me and he just expressed frustration. That really turned me off because initially, you know, he was really sweet and said things like, "Oh well, I really want to take it slow. I want to make sure you're comfortable." (Carl)

> We met at the gate of the country club and then I was, whoa, that was her? Oh no. She wasn't of my liking, and oh boy, I was kind of depressed, but I noticed that because the pictures were all good and she was all handsome. But obviously, pictures differ in real life. And then I went the insecurity, that's like again, a weight in my shoulders because well, if I do that and if she falls in love I have to keep up, but I don't want to keep up. (Brad)

> He was telling me that he used to work in the army and he used to do all these things, and I don't know, it felt really weird to me because when we were online, it was a totally different story. He was telling me that he was a writer and it kind of made me laugh because it was like okay, alright, so you used to work in the army and now you are a writer. And like okay, maybe this guy is one of the biggest liars I know. Maybe that's a good thing for me. (Patti)

Rachel's internal challenge was not directly related to her online solicitor but more so to her sense of a general other. Instigated by her encounter, she experienced internal conflict in trying to make sense of the motivations of those who solicit others. Rachel's questions of uncertainty and confusion were left unanswered:

> Why would you just randomly solicit someone? Why would you? I think the aspect of the continuing even after I showed discomfort was the most bizarre part of it. I mean it's one thing to solicit that kind of behaviour, and you know if the other person responds in kind, but when the other person is clearly uncomfortable and the other person refuses to engage, why continue?

Personal perspectives. An additional form of internal conflict for some participants was that of challenges to their worldview. These were very confusing and difficult experiences to make sense of because confrontations required participants not only to consider a new perspective but also to rework their sense of self in this new perspective. For example, Lisa was greatly conflicted by her physiological arousal in response to her sexual solicitation. From her worldview, people were supposed to be in love before having sexual experiences. Knowing that she was not in love in her online encounter yet feeling a state of arousal in response to sexual content challenged everything she ever thought about love, sex, and relationships. This led to an internal battle that Lisa continually tried to reconcile between opposing beliefs and feelings states, along with confusion about the impact of her sexual arousal on her sense of self:

> I think that's exactly it, grossed out and interested. Because, as much it was I knew it was gross, it was like that feeling. I was still interested because, I mean, there was arousal there… I was grossed out because I knew that that feeling wasn't right. And the fact that it was on the Internet, and the fact it was from some guy, and it was just through chatting grossed me out because growing up, you've been watching the stuff on TV about romantic love. That's not the way it's supposed to be. And then, I just felt gross about that because I was supposed to be in love first, right?

Ivan's internal conflict occurred in response to his beliefs about maturity. Ivan felt more mature than his peers and talked about his need to seek out older and older partners to feel intellectually and physically stimulated. He believed that with age came experience and that older partners could teach him about life in ways younger partners could not. Older partners also represented a sense of security and protection which Ivan felt was lacking in his life. Complicated by his personal insecurities, all of these factors led Ivan to fantasize about the perfect older partner. Upon coming face to face with his

online partner offline, Ivan's fantasy turned into reality and his perspective of maturity

and age, as well as his sense of morality, was greatly challenged:

> I always had this fantasy of talking to someone older and maybe meeting someone older and I don't know where that fantasy came from. At that time, it just felt so right to just want to be with someone older. It felt like they knew more than me and that they could just teach me things about life that I didn't know and that I could have more of an intellectual conversation. I just felt excited by the fact that someone was older than me and, that maybe, could also protect me a little bit. I felt like I needed some sort of protection. And just sexually, it just felt more exciting just because I had sex before then. The sex before then was still very experimental, so I was still in this very experimental phase and I wanted to test all areas… I was nervous to meet him for sure. I was definitely nervous but I was excited and so the second that I opened the door, I felt completely gross. I felt like what I was doing was wrong and I didn't feel attracted to him at all. I felt more confused like what the heck was I doing? Like why was I meeting this person that looked older than my dad?

Patti's current reality was also shaken upon meeting her online solicitor offline.

Like Ivan, when meeting offline, she questioned everything she thought she knew about

herself and the world. She was exposed to additional information that contradicted her

understandings of her partner and experienced a state of confusion. This led to an

awareness and perspective shift that she was not alone in suffering and challenged Patti to

confront her reality:

> Well, it kind of all changed to me because when I got to his house and I seen like all these toys and all these rooms and he tells me that he doesn't have kids, it really scared me. And it's like, what does this guy do? What does he do? And I just thought of myself when I was a little girl, you know, all these things that happened to me. It's like, oh my god, this is happening to everybody. This is happening to so many people.

Rachel struggled greatly in her attempts to make sense of her perspective on

bullying and interpersonal violence in response to her online encounter because she felt

victimized in similar yet different ways. She felt confused when attempting to separate

her experience of bullying from solicitation. She was able to rationalize bullying but not

the motivations of others who caused harm soliciting others. This was critical for Rachel

because explaining and understanding her experience was her primary coping strategy.

Understanding herself, others, and the world helped to ease her personal discomfort.

Through her online encounter, Rachel was faced with a new way of being victimized

which led to confusion when she attempted to sort through her understanding of

interpersonal violence and the impact this had on her:

> The bullying was easier to understand. The bullying I could dismiss as
> insecure kids hurting other people just as a way of dealing with the insecurity.
> The incident was harder to understand. They were both forms of interpersonal
> violence I suppose you could say. Not violence in the physical way but
> hurting somebody using social tactics. But while the bullying was an attempt
> to hurt me, the solicitation was just more selfish than anything. It was just
> simple disregard for my emotional state. It was, I suppose you could say, it
> was casual and anonymous whereas the bullying was pointed, petty and
> intended, and to be honest, that sort of casual disrespect for someone else's
> emotion is more disturbing because when it's intentional, you know the other
> person intends to cause harm. When it's that sort of casual thing, they don't
> care if they cause harm or not, which is more disturbing in at least its
> implications.

Summary. States of internal conflict and confusion were regular occurrences in

participants' lives that impacted their senses of self and ability to make good decisions in

relationships. Online solicitation encounters either created or exacerbated confused states

through challenges in the way they saw themselves, others, and/or the world. Many

struggled with multiple challenges leading to greater difficulties in sorting through

confusion and engaging in positive decisions and responses. For most, this impacted the

development of their sexuality.

Sexuality. By nature of this research topic, the theme of sexuality was prevalent

in participants' experiences. Participants talked directly about their own sexuality in

response to encounters, and for some, in reflection of their Internet use. They identified

how the Internet acted as a buffer that allowed them to explore sexuality in ways they would not, or felt they could not, have offline. This was particularly evident for sexual minority participants. Further, two subgroups arose: (1) those who were sexually inexperienced, lacked sexual knowledge, and learning, and (2) those who were sexually knowledgeable and initiating sexual relations. These backgrounds influenced how participants interacted online within sexual encounters.

Irrespective of background, a salient theme was that of a sexual initiation process in which participants' online sexual solicitation encounters clearly played a role in the development of their sexuality. However, this was not straight forward as most did not make conscious concrete choices to engage in sexual acts but rather went along with interactions regardless of their discomfort or sense of morality. The interaction of other themes, such as personal insecurities and internal conflict, were also present and highlighted how participants' weakened sense of self impacted their decision-making process through their encounters.

Some participants spoke about exploring sense of self and sexuality via the Internet medium. The Internet offered a different and separate space for exploration that allowed greater socially liberties. These individuals identified personal insecurities around the thought of exploring their sexuality offline. The Internet's anonymity and free and open forum for exploration offered a form of social self-preservation and self-protection. Through this medium, participants explored sexuality in ways they would not have otherwise and in ways that would not result in difficult or uncomfortable offline social consequences:

> Easier to say the things I wanted to say, and I guess more to the point on this
> as far as sexuality, much more, much easier to explore when you're faceless

on the Internet. There's not the social repercussions of all of a sudden talking about sex with the girls that you've known since you were 3 years old in the schoolyard which I had never been, and I guess that was the only area I kind of was shy in, which was weird because I had no problems doing personally, personally talking about it. I could talk about it objectively. (Mary)

Basically, the problem is that it kind of fuels these sexual parts of people cause you don't have to be yourself. You can just, like you would never want to just go up to someone and be like, you know, "Oh I'm attracted to you, and like, I would want to do this and this." But through the Internet why not say that? (Ivan)

As highlighted in Ivan's personal reflection, there is also an element to exploration that initiates, or in Ivan's words "fuels," sexual desires and interests. Lisa spoke to this same theme in terms of her physical "arousal" in response to her encounter and resulting "curiosity" to seek this arousal again. For sexually inexperienced participants, this theme is that of a sexual initiation process. Initial sexual exposure led to a process of learning, growth, and preparation for the further development of their sexuality. Whether desired or not, inexperienced participants' online encounters exposed them to new sexual content which, in order to save face, motivated them to seek out sexual knowledge or feign responses until their comfort level with sexual exposure became manageable. Exposure to new sexual content influenced participants' motivations to explore their sexuality and prepared them for the next phase of their sexual and self development:

I was just learning that I was a sexual person and didn't realize that my body would respond that way and that there was such a matter to discuss with someone…So you get aroused once, you're just kind of going to do it again…I tried to engage in some sort of sexual content after. (Lisa)

He asked various questions like do you masturbate. I didn't know what that was at the time. So I just kind of lied and said yeah because I figured it was something that people would normally be doing…I was uncomfortable with the fact that I didn't know what those things were. So I would have to look them up after. (Nancy)

> He would ask me to masturbate for him and make noises and he would do the same for me even though at that point, oddly, I didn't understand masturbation in that sense. I didn't know how to like jack off for example. I was more used to kind of a form in my bed, right? Kind of just like thrust my hips against the pillow or something. And so, I'd pretend that I was doing it and just making noises… I just remember hearing him the first time, and just listen to him kind of grunt and exclaim and like say my name like, and it was just odd being exposed to that. But then like the second or third time when he did that, by that point, I had felt more comfortable with it or with at least with feigning the act of masturbation…. After all those experiences, I felt like I was more ready to be physical with somebody. (Carl)

Carl continued to seek out sexual encounters and within a year lost his virginity.

Similarly, Patti's experience fell between the sexually inexperienced and experienced. Having been sexually abused throughout her childhood, she had a lot of previous exposure to sexual content; however, her encounter initiated a new phase in the development of her sense of self and sexuality. Her online encounter resulted in an offline experience of paid sex which solidified Patti's experience of her sexual sense of self that led to a new phase in her life – prostitution:

> We had intercourse and he gave me money. He dropped me off and that was it. I never talked to him. I never seen him again… I never talked about it. It was weird because I started prostitution when I was 14 and it carried on until I was about 17.

The theme of sexual initiation was present throughout regardless of whether participants were sexually experienced and/or knowledgeable. The difference for participants who were knowledgeable was their personal sense of control and active participation in instigating sexual content and relations. With some sexual knowledge and background in place, these participants felt excited and ready to engage in further sexual intimacies. They displayed greater willingness to begin sexual conversations and to arrange offline meetings with full awareness of the potential for intercourse. Instead of

simply responding, sexually knowledgeable participants were active in making these and

further sexual interactions happen:

> It wasn't our sexual encounters that made me feel like, if anything, I was much more pushy about those happening. I think because of my experience with peer mentoring and sex ed, I think I felt very in control, very willing to say no, and I did say, you know. We didn't have sex until I was very interested in the idea of losing my virginity. (Mary)

> I just felt excited by the fact that someone was older than me, and that maybe, could also protect me a little bit. I felt like I needed some sort of protection, and just sexually, it just felt like more exciting because I had sex before then. The sex before then was still very experimental, so I was still in this very experimental phase and I wanted to test all areas…we were having kind of sexual conversations about you know what it might be like to experiment together…I like definitely helped instigate the sexual conversation because I was very interested in it and I wanted to engage in this you know. (Ivan)

> Obviously, I was also in the hormones burst…I was really excited about the chance because obviously you think about how you're going to grow yourself and your ego when your fame between you colleagues and peers, so I saw that when I got the opportunity, I was like, oh yeah, that's good. It's all advantage. Now I'll become a man and manly things like that … I was already assuming that it goes smoothly because all the chats on the Internet were pointing that direction. (Brad)

The one exception to the theme of a sexual initiation process was Rachel. Under

the overriding theme of sexuality, Rachel's sexual encounter was similar to others in how

it impacted her sense of self and the development of her sexuality. Her experience

reaffirmed her "asexual" nature and general disinterest in sex:

> I was, even now, I'm fairly, you could say, asexual. Statistically, people think of sex especially younger people often, frequently at least, like once every few minutes at least. I don't. It's not something that's ever really interested me so I've never done that sort of social, that sort of exploration of the topic. I find it quite interesting because nearly everything else interested me except that.

However, Rachel engaged in similar response tactics as others during her

encounter. When exposed to uncomfortable or confusing sexual situations, most

participants could not say no and went along with interactions. Many tried to engage in avoidance or deflection strategies that worked only some of the time. Blaming others was sometimes used in order to appease senses of morality or justify participation in ways that diminished their own accountability. As an example, Lisa's account highlighted her passive attempts at stopping interactions and her justifications for continuing on in her situation:

> I do recall feeling like with Susie she did go too far. I remember thinking, "Oh, I don't want to do this. I don't want to go this far with the conversation." Always, and also being worried about my parents coming home, too. If my parents caught us talking like this like, it would be bad. So, I was always the one being like, "No, Susie, let's close," but she'd always brush me off and somehow make a joke out of it and, you know, it will be fun…I think I just put it on her fault. It wasn't my problem. It was hers. She was the one that did it. If I were to get caught I could always just say it was Susie and she couldn't say no because it was true. So, it's her fault.

In many cases, participants directly acknowledged how they went along with sexual interactions. In the most extreme case, for Patti, this meant the possibility of death. Even so, she clearly displayed the inability to say no or change her mind:

> All of it made me think, holy crap, I am actually going to die this time. I felt really scared and I was terrified. I put myself out there to be in that situation and when I was in that situation, it was like I shouldn't be in here. I should get out of here. Yeah. At that moment right, I thought of all of the people in my life and how hard it would be if they did find out that I was gone, and scary…We just had intercourse and he didn't, he didn't like harm me.

Ivan's situation was quite similar. He also met his online partner offline and had intercourse. He openly admitted how did not say no when he felt he should have. The interplay of his internal conflict and confusion greatly impacted his ability to define and set necessary personal boundaries, as well as impacted his understanding of sexual practices at the time of the interview:

I put up a wall for sure. I did not let that show because I knew I was too far in here. So when he saw me, he was the exact opposite. He was very affectionate and he wanted right then to just lay with me and be with me. I just went along because I knew I was confused and I just didn't know how to get out of it… So then, we went back to the hotel and that's where things obviously started and we definitely had sex. We didn't use protection because he told me, and luckily, nothing went wrong with that you know. I got tested afterwards but because I didn't really know, do people use protection? I was really confused. He said, "I've been tested, you know. We don't need to use protection" and at the time like I just trusted everything he said… The experience felt like it would be so exciting. It just felt weird, actually, but I just kept going along with it. We spent the night together and then I went home and I realized I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this.

Ivan then turned to engage in avoidance strategies to protect himself from having to deal directly with his online partner who was even more infatuated with him after having their initial sexual experience together. Ivan's avoidance worked only to create ongoing tension as his partner continued to pursue their relationship. He met his partner again at a hotel to end their relationship. Unfortunately, he was still unable to say no to further sex before leaving. Ivan acknowledged his lack of personal strength and self-confidence in his confused state without a clear sense of self:

I felt very vulnerable and I think vulnerable in the sense that I didn't know how to speak up. I never knew how to do that properly at that time in my life. I never knew how to just say what I wanted, what I felt. I didn't know how to be honest… I didn't know how to be honest with people because I wasn't being honest with myself at all…I lied a lot. I became a compulsive liar for sure at that time in my life. I lied about everything and anything. If my mom ever asked me anything, I knew how to lie inside and out because I felt just confused all the time.

Other participants also identified how the interplay of their insecurities impacted their decision-making when dealing with their online sexual encounters. Simply going along with sexual interactions and/or avoiding issues is prevalent:

Since I still wanted to keep the contact going, I think I just kind of went along with it because I think the fact that someone was paying attention to me over-

rode the fact that I didn't think it was necessarily right to be doing that. (Nancy)

I can tell he's trying to shut me out. I don't think I ever addressed it directly. I was kind of too afraid to say, "Oh well, why don't you want to talk to me anymore" even though the whole webcam issue. (Carl)

The other individual continued to make sexual comments. I tried to divert the topic using mostly sarcasm because that is my favourite form of changing the topic. I would make sarcastic remarks in return in to the more sexual comments that the other individual made. Like somewhat mocking. Because well on the defensive, I will mock. The other individual attempted to draw me out into returning the sexual comments. I believe it's called cybersex. It's like phone sex only typing. He tried to draw me out into making sexual comments. I refused, generally speaking, just kept making mocking comments. (Rachel)

There is an element in which some participants went along with interactions because they lacked the knowledge or experience, and in essence, had yet to develop their sexual self. Inherent in the sexually inexperienced is a sense of sexual naïveté where the process of exploring and learning about sexuality required them to go along with the unfamiliar not necessarily because of a displaced sense of self. In these circumstances, the response pattern of going along with sexual interactions formed the basis for sexuality development. Carl highlights this best:

I remember awkwardly just saying things back to him like, "Oh, I like that." Saying things like, "Oh, that sounds really hot," but in that tone, that awkward, I don't know what I'm doing kind of tone. So, I kind of just rolled with it.

The impact of a stable sense of sense on participants' experiences spoke to their ability to implement personal boundaries that best served their personal interests. This becomes particularly evident when comparing those without a stable sense of self to those who appeared more grounded and connected. Those who presented with a stronger understanding of self were able to make tougher decisions when needed and stick to these decisions. They also displayed greater ability to work through their personal insecurities

and inner conflict, which as previously discussed, occurred regularly in all participants'

sexual encounters. Somehow, they found a way to make decisions they felt in control of,

whether or not they chose to have sex. Brad, for example, described his process of

making some difficult decisions even though he was under much pressure. We see in his

account, personal strength in his sense of self that allowed Brad to make an important

decision that later he became quite proud of:

> What should I do? Because, I already spoke with her about things and we
> tried to work out some other stuff. She want sex, but now I don't want sex.
> But maybe if we can only kiss each other and it will be just good, but yuck, if
> I kiss her, I don't like her. So this situation passed through my head in a real
> quick way and then I made a decision to tell the truth. It was like, especially if
> compared to some of my friends that time, it was like a coward act because
> you're a man. You have to face women. You have to kiss. You have to prove
> you are a manly way. I was never at that and people usually called me
> coward… I thought that my action was pretty mature to tell the truth because
> again I went through going on contrary of every common knowledge and
> every common folk that my peers were trying to put. Because, oh, you had to
> have girls, you had to have sex, and I did not act that way. So, I was just
> acting the opposite acts they wanted and that is what makes me, for now, my
> common behaviour toward women today a better person.

Mary was another participant who presented with a stronger sense of self,

including a sexual self. She noted that this aspect was the most important consideration in

how her online sexual encounters turned out. Even though Mary eventually had sex with

her online partner, she did so consciously while grounded in her reality. Mary was not

oblivious to the fact that she put herself at risk through her online actions of instigating

and participating in sexual relations. She did, however, feel confident and personally in

control which included her ability to say no if desired. Although it is evident in her

reflections that she is still working on understanding herself and sexuality, Mary

displayed a greater sense of personal strength when compared to other participants that

resulted in an experience of making conscious and informed choices rather than simply

going along with sexual interactions:

> I think I was fortunate to have parents that allowed me a great support if I needed it but privacy and freedom for when I didn't and also that great backbone of a really good sexual education and relationship education, too. It made a big difference and probably made much more of a difference than anything else online or offline in my life, and as something, I wouldn't say obviously not preventative, but…that would have been a lot more risky and turned out a lot worse had I not had that experience and not been made to feel always in control of my body and my sexuality…But I think that always the very idea of saying no…were so engrained in me, I guess…I always felt the value and the worth of controlling my own body and that I could and have that control. But having said that, I never, not from my experience but from other stories I've heard, I never had an event where I was out of control and lacked control to change my mind one way or another. I was very fortunate in every encounter I've had. In general, I've always felt in control and that's never been challenged.

Summary. The development of sexuality was an integral part of adolescents'

online encounters. Some had previous sexual experience and knowledge. When

accompanied by a stronger sense of self, these participants made conscious choices of

their level of engagement in sexual interactions which resulted in more positive personal

outcomes. Those who lacked sexual experience were initiated into further exploration

amidst confusion and uncertainty where personal and relationship boundaries were weak.

Participants went along with situations when confused and not knowing what to do and

then engaged in responses that diminished personal accountability. These circumstances

led to more challenging personal outcomes.

A significant experience. A prominent theme through participants' experience

was that of significance, which spoke to the impact of online sexual solicitation

encounters. There were a number of individuals who had experienced more than one

online encounter; however, when choosing to share particular experiences, they identified

the relevancy of the one that was most memorable. Most walked away from encounters with insight into themselves or how their experience changed them. Others developed greater insights of the world and their place in it. Regardless, all participants acknowledged some level of significance even though some circumstances were more positive than others.

All online sexual encounters played a significant role in the way participants saw themselves. Some also identified the impact of these changes on interactions, decision-making, and response patterns in future sexual relationships. These participants came to see themselves and/or intimate relationships with some new perspective. Influenced by online encounters, participants gained some additional insight that affected experiences in subsequent relationships. However, not all of these experiences were necessarily positive. For example, Nancy's online encounter presented her with sexual experiences that she felt she was too young to be exposed to and engaged in. Along with her struggling sense of self, this had a significant impact on her view of men's motives in relationships. Her online experience led to increased suspicion over the reasons why her current partner was in a relationship with her and suggested that Nancy may have became overly cautious as a result of her encounter:

> It's made me kind of paranoid about people's ulterior motives. For instance, I've been dating my boyfriend for 2 years now and I was convinced that the only reason why he was with me was for the sexual aspect of it. Which wasn't true, obviously. He's dealt with a lot of my crap, but yeah, I've been a lot more conservative when I'm forming relationships. More cautious to make sure that everything will be ok. It hasn't worked. Sometimes, but it's serving me well now.

Carl also experienced a more negative impact when compared to others. Already burdened by personal insecurities, he felt personally rejected when his online sexual

partner stopped their interactions because he was financially unable to take their sexual activities to another level. This situation exacerbated his lack of self worth. He had difficulty accepting himself which ultimately impacted his orientation in future sexual relationships. He embellished his sexual experiences creating a situation in which he was not honest with himself or others. Although, he admitted to being more ready for sexual intimacy with someone after his online encounter, the results were not what Carl hoped and he ended up with regret:

> With people after that, I would talk about experiences and stuff that I never had. It was always that I kind of like find a guy who I would want to hook up with but then I'd look for somebody else just to actually get that first experience with, just so that when I actually met up with the person who I wanted to, it would be something nice. But, it didn't work out that way… When I lost my virginity, looking back now or even at the time, well at the time I'm not sure if that was an engrained Catholic guilt, but I just don't think I was ready. Yes, yeah, so I probably should have waited longer. For me personally because I know some people you know lose it early and they function normally. For me, I don't know, maybe he just wasn't the right person.

For other participants, solicitations resulted in increased awareness of their personality that led to some significant personal change. Encounters allowed them to see, and opened their eyes to realizations that were not within their awareness previously. In contrast to Carl, Ivan's experience was such that it ultimately strengthened his personal resolve. His experience brought to light important aspects of self and relationships that needed to be worked on. As a result of his encounter, he better understood why he had been seeking out older partners. Although he continued to struggle with his insecurities and at times felt lured to seek out an older partner, his awareness as a result of his encounter allowed him to re-examine his relationship choices. Ivan reflected regularly on

this particular online encounter, since he had others, in order to make better decisions for

himself in future relationships:

> I realized, what I didn't understand exactly, why I was continually meeting
> people and meeting older guys. Like I was with someone that was 25 when I
> was 15. I was with someone that was 30 when I was 15. They weren't as
> sexual but I was constantly trying to meet these people off the Internet to feel
> good about myself. If they loved me and they cared about me, then I could
> love myself more and that's how I always felt… I think he was one that really
> kind of altered the way I thought a little bit because I knew I didn't feel right
> and after that I really steered away from older men. These days, sometimes I
> think about what it would be like to just date someone older but not like that
> much older. But even today, I try to avoid that for some reason just because I
> think back to that situation and I was uncomfortable.

Mary was another participant who had a number of online sexual relationship

experiences and identified this one as "pinnacle" to her personal growth and

development. She was very reflective in terms of how her encounter impacted her sense

of self, particularly her sexuality. Mary's encounter was significant in the fact that it

helped her to define her sexuality and helped her to understand the nature of the influence

her sexuality had on others:

> It was one of those pinnacle events that allowed me to see that I have always
> been interested in that idea of making men feel lucky, which I think has
> coloured the way I talk about sex and flirt more than it would've impacted
> really the way I have sex or who I have sex with, which has always kind of
> been different. I would say the Internet and being online and being from that
> group of people is one of the reasons I talk about sex much more openly than
> I probably would've otherwise.

The significance of Patti's online sexual encounter encompassed both a negative

and a positive impact. The negative influence of Patti's situation was such that it led her

into a period of prostitution for approximately three years. As such, it took a few years

for the impact and significance of her online encounter to manifest into positive change.

Nonetheless, it was through her direct experience within her encounter where she shifted

from desiring death to desiring life. Patti eventually made changes to her life and attributed her personal growth and development to the pivotal event of her online encounter:

> It's really life changing to me. It's something that opens my eyes to the future that I have now. It actually made me right because all the bad stuff and all the things that I was doing, I literally seen myself seeing me. And I just needed to escape it, you know, and so I started writing a lot. I've always written things through my whole life ever since I was a little girl. I always wanted to be a writer and I just needed to change something. I guess you could say I wanted something good for myself. I didn't want to put myself out there anymore and I didn't want to be somebody's prey and I didn't want to be a toy. I wanted something. I actually wanted a family. I wanted a boyfriend who cared about me. I wanted, I just wanted one person, not many, and all those things that I did really helped me. It really helped me to be that person I am. That's what it did to me. It put me in the right direction even though it was all wrong from the beginning.

Other participants described a new or clearer way of seeing the world as a result of encounters. Through processes of making sense of their online sexual solicitation encounters, participants gained some measure of understanding their perspective on the world even though it was clear that they were still trying to figure things out. This had a greater effect on some than on others. For example, Rachel's insight had more of a negative impact on her sense of self which was already quite weak:

> It revealed an aspect of human nature that I was previously not aware of and I did not care for that aspect, that aspect of not respecting someone else's comfort. The aspect of not respecting who they are, what they have to say. That aspect of really of, I don't know if objectification is the right word, but it sort of is the idea of making someone into an object, of making them less than a person because I wasn't a person to that other individual. I wasn't a person to them. I wasn't an individual to them. They were uninterested in me as a person and uninterested in whether what they were saying was upsetting. Uninterested. They did not care if it upset me and that was something that I have encountered along the way. I have encountered that again and it's something that makes me very I hurt, you know. It's not something I like about other people. Normally, I have a fairly positive view of human nature but when I encounter individuals like that, I often become quite, I suppose

you could say, down. Not really, morose, perhaps. I don't like encountering that mentality.

Rachel withdrew from interacting with people online for a number of years following her encounter, continuing to isolate herself further.

Lisa's experience was different based on the fact that she engaged in online sexual encounters in the company of a friend who led their interactions. However, her description indirectly addressed the impact on her sense of self and implied that Lisa's encounter influenced her global view of sexuality that she is still attempting to sort through:

> It's funny. I never thought about the fact that I did go back to the chat rooms after, but I guess it makes sense learning that you're a sexual person and it'll happen…I really feel that sexual people will take pursue sexual things… I don't think [online chat rooms and what not] are a bad thing, but some people that can't control those urges are more sexual than others and they'll just feed it more, I think sometimes. And then they can't behave normally, I guess. I don't want to say you should be normal but just adapt to the way we need to as a society where we don't pursue our sexual desires inattentful, which I could see how. I mean you hear so many stories about these girls getting lured and these older men doing that. I can see how it happens so easily if you live such a lonely and separate, isolated life and you're constantly feeding that part of you, your sexuality. It's going to lead you down that road, right? To the online.

Summary. The impact of online sexual solicitation on participants was both positive and negative. Positive outcomes resulted in those who displayed growing strength in their senses of self and who achieved greater awareness of aspects of self that needed to be worked on to promote change. Awareness came in the form of perspective shifts of self, others, or the world. Negative outcomes occurred when encounters validated participants' weak sense of self, reaffirmed maladaptive perspectives, and/or heightened personal insecurities. However, not all negative outcomes remained static.

Some continued to work through their solicitation challenges after encounters had passed gaining further insights and making significant personal changes over time.

Results Summary

Participants had considerably different experiences of online sexual solicitation. Regardless, all felt the impact of social isolation on their ability to feel connected to others. Offline opportunities were limited for personal exploration and development of self. All eventually turned to the Internet to expand social resources, to feel a sense of belonging and connection to others, and/or to alleviate personal insecurities. Through the establishment of additional relationships and sexual encounters, situations of internal conflict and confusion made good decision-making challenging. When not knowing what to do, participants generally went along with interactions. Some eventually made decisions to discontinue relationships while others ended based on the decisions made by online partners. All encounters impacted various perspectives of self, others and/or the world, creating lasting impressions. Discussion of these themes occurs in the following chapter, along with considerations of adolescents on the Internet and online solicitation.

Discussion

This chapter offers a detailed discussion of the themes discovered across participants' experiences of online sexual solicitation. The implications of understanding adolescents on the Internet and the impact of online solicitation are reviewed and presented. Research considerations, implications for counselling, and future research directions conclude this chapter.

There was considerable variability in participants' experiences of online sexual solicitation. Some were sought out and desired while others were unexpected, shocking, and caught adolescents off guard. There was also a combination where some were sought out but led to unexpected situations of discomfort and to difficulties making decisions and applying appropriate boundaries. In these circumstances, adolescents responded and acted in ways that contradicted what they desired, needed, thought or felt. Also for some, what they thought they wanted changed during their encounter but they did not know how to adjust and respond. This study highlights the complexity inherent in these experiences and identifies a dynamic and multidimensional process that neither begins nor ends solely with encounters. The consequences can move adolescents positively forward in the course of development or can create developmental difficulties and challenges.

The results of this study highlighted the impact of social isolation that was a key element in all participants' offline environments by circumstance or by choice. Chronic bullying and trauma led some adolescents to withdraw from offline social environments. Some cases were so severe that they left formal school institutions at considerably young ages (12-13 years), creating extreme social isolation and seclusion, limiting social

interactions with same-aged peers of any kind. These situations were often compounded

by psychological, emotional, and/or physically absent parents. Alternatively, some

participants consciously removed and distanced themselves from family members and

peers, creating isolating circumstances by choice. They did not feel they could relate well

to the people in their lives. Regardless of circumstances or choices, all felt limited by

social conditions which made it challenging to address some important developmental

and personal needs.

Developmentally, current literature highlights the importance of peer groups and

relationships, particularly in adolescence, for exploring and developing personal identity

(Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Relationships are an important dynamic through which

adolescents can be exposed to aspects of self, personality, and relationships that they

either like and want to maintain or dislike and want to discard (Bouchey, 2007; Davila et

al., 2007; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Sippola et al., 2007; Tabares & Gottman; Vogensen,

2003). There is practical significance of such developmental needs on experiences of

online sexual solicitation. Participants labeled part of their experience as "identity"

related. Personal states of confusion surrounding their identity created a need to establish

connections with others to help explore and understand who they were. Some also desired

a romantic partner. Florsheim (2003) and Sigelman and Rider (2009) discuss the increase

of adolescents' fixation in establishing romantic relationships as an increase in desire to

relate and connect with others. The implications are such that socially isolated

adolescents often turn to the Internet for expanding their social milieu and involvement

(Kraut et al., 2002; Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006). Remaining socially isolated

without a sense of connection to offline peers, and in most cases family members as well,

created a situation that led participants to find the missing pieces of their social experience online. Several talked about maintaining separate and distinct peer groups during this time for exploratory purposes. Contacts online offered an experience they felt could not be accessed offline. From participants' perspective, there were no other social and relational alternatives than the online.

Heightened by isolation, participants' offline experiences were fraught with personal insecurity. Positive relationships felt, and sometimes were, unavailable to address personal needs for attention, protection, status, and respect. The felt absence of these aspects in their lives challenged self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence. Generally in adolescence, individuals begin to transfer attention away from primary caregivers in search of others that can fulfill some basic relationship needs (Marvin & Britner, 1999). Adolescents first turn to peers for such purposes (Markiewicz et al., 2006; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). However, adolescents in this study found peer situations isolating. They longed to connect with others, longed to feel a sense of belonging, longed to develop relationships, and/or longed to have personal insecurities alleviated through validation from others; insecurities created vulnerability to attention from anyone and to solicitation online. Insecure adolescents often turn to the Internet looking specifically to have their interpersonal needs met (Lanning, 2002) sometimes without sufficient censorship or awareness of the impact their insecurities have on interactions and decision-making processes. Ultimately, the Internet helped to address a majority of social and relationship needs. Congruent with other adolescent studies, participants went online to look for connection with others like them (Becker, Mayer, Nagenborg, ElFaddagh, & Schmidt, 2004), for companionship purposes (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002), for

personal intimate relationships (Wolak et al., 2002, 2003), and for sexual experiences (Boies, 2002; Boies et al., 2004).

It is important to note that participants' experiences of isolation did not cause the development of personal insecurities, but rather there existed a reciprocal effect of personal insecurities with social isolation. Insecure adolescents in this study avoided others, and as such, actively enhanced feelings of isolation. Alternatively, experiences of isolation validated and heightened pre-existing insecurities. Feelings of worthlessness were common. Because of their recursive nature, insecurities did not diminish once connections were established online. In fact, these had a great impact on motivation and decision-making, whether positive or negative. Motivations often stemmed from intense need fulfillment that was compounded by a lack of connection to others. However, online relationships that offered fulfillment and positive personal feedback simultaneously contradicted the way they felt about themselves. Adolescents struggled with conflicting messages and desires around their senses of self. Pre-existing self-perceptions and personal insecurities resisted change.

Online experiences were filtered based on their sense of self and an understanding of how the world operated, whether right or wrong, good or bad. For the more secure adolescents, online sexual experiences were generally positive. Although insecurities still impacted both motivation and decision-making, maintaining a sufficient sense of self enhanced the development of relationships through which some interpersonal needs were met and through which experiences impacted their identity development in healthy ways. They presented greater ability to set up personal boundaries within relationships, to say no when necessary and made conscious choices that were not driven solely by

insecurities. They were further able to be more honest with online partners. Research on identity development in adolescence would consider these participants more competent and able to present genuine selves to online partners while going through the challenge to find a balance between autonomy and connectedness when negotiating needs with an online partner (Davila et al., 2007; Tabares & Gottman, 2003).

Comparatively, other participants had considerable difficulty with personal boundaries and experienced greater negative consequences. Challenging situations, filtered through distorted worldviews, reaffirmed negative views of self. Personal accountability and responsibility was also lacking, creating a means to justify poor decisions. With a weakened sense of self, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence, these adolescents were unable to be assertive. Insecurity, and sometimes inexperience, made it challenging to say no when appropriate and/or when wanting to. They could not follow through. How can adolescents apply appropriate boundaries and take actions in such situations when not knowing who they really are and without sufficient education, parental guidance and modeling, and practice? Distinguishing what is good and what is not becomes compromised. However, regardless of distinctions, participants' defaulted to familiar decisions and responses. For the sake of need fulfillment, they ignored or diminished the significance of negative situations. This resulted in greater personal consequences and developmental challenges, including an increase in confusion and internal conflict and a decrease in self-confidence. Dishonest and avoidant responses helped them to cope and when these strategies did not work; participants would simply continue in interactions. They were exposed to sexual content or engaged in sexual

relations, driven by insecurities and confused states, without making conscious decisions and regardless of discomfort.

Identity researchers believe that few adolescents are competent enough in relationships to make good decisions and engage effectively because obtaining a stable identity necessary for such interaction is a process that develops over the lifespan, often not reaching a sufficient level in adolescence (Vogensen, 2003). In this study, adolescents laden with insecurity displayed challenges in understanding thoughts and emotions clearly which made it difficult to engage in effective interpersonal communication with online partners necessary to set boundaries. This study supports Seefeldt, Florsheim, and Benjamin (2003) argument that adolescents have difficulty engaging in complex communications that require articulation of clear and coherent feelings. Supporting additional research (Shulman, 2003), participants with insecurity and less sense of competence generally went along with sexual advances for the benefit of maintaining relationships and a sense of intimacy, which ultimately created greater potential for harm. Participants put themselves in unsafe situations that would legally be considered sexually exploitative based on Canadian age-of-consent laws (Miller et al., 2010). However, none of the participants viewed their situations as illegal or exploitive because of their own willingness to engage in sexual relations.

Additionally, an important element to consider in participants' decision-making process is that of their morality – moral convictions and sense of right and wrong. Research has identified the societal significance of this issue highlighting how it may not be clear to adolescents and adults alike that relationships with under-aged willing adolescents is in fact a criminal offense (Wolak et al., 2010). However, outside of legally

defined laws, right and wrong only exists to the extent of one's personal sense of morality. Participants in this study identified moral dilemmas, often amidst confused states. Those who struggled with their sense of self felt some wrongdoing but continued with interactions and justified reasons for doing so. When not assertive or applying boundaries, they lied, deflected, or diminished the significance of situations. These passive and maladaptive responses may be difficult for adults, and particularly parents, to accept. There is a societal expectation that adolescents should have the ability to apply appropriate boundaries, say no, and stop inappropriate interactions. Unfortunately, the situation is not that simple. Expectations for youth to simply say no in a context riddled with a complexity of influences on motivations are not realistic. How can adolescents be expected to do what they do not know how to, what they have never done, what they might not have the capability to, and what they do not want to?

Investigation into the development of morality highlights how by the age of 16 years, individuals resolve moral dilemmas using contextual information and under the influence of individual personal perspectives (Kohlberg, 2008). Thus, if participants filter their experience through a weak sense of self, and under a myriad of both known and unknown influences, then their overall moral conviction and sense of right and wrong may be skewed. Even if not skewed and sense of wrong prevails, some cannot act or follow through on convictions. Some also simply do not care, particularly those with a weak sense of self. These factors result in an increased risk for harm. Interestingly, participants who struggled in these ways did not express regret, and in fact, all indicated they would not have done anything differently. Safety was secondary to their desire to have personal insecurities alleviated and interpersonal needs met.

The development of sexuality was a major component of participants' online experience. Their sexual backgrounds before encounters ranged from inexperienced and lack of knowledge to having an extensive sexual education to experienced. Regardless, all participants experienced something sexually unfamiliar whether it was exposure to sexual content, engaging in physical sexual actions, or engaging with different partners. All of these highlight the normative initiation of adolescents' sexuality which Tolman and McClelland (2011) identify as positive sexuality development. All encounters led to some form of gaining greater insight into their individual sexual identity. For some, it was about being exposed to and learning about sexual language and acts without engaging physically while others experienced some of their first physical sexual encounters. Experiences brought an increase in awareness of themselves as sexual beings and offered opportunities to explore and define their sexuality. Through the nature of seeking out connection and relationships online and the process of participation, whether consciously or not, whether desired or not, they were active in enhancing sexual understanding and growth which supports current understanding of adolescent sexuality development (Tolman & McClelland).

Adolescents' sexual exploration online can have developmental benefits (Barak & Fisher, 2002). Like other researchers have identified (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Longo, et al., 2002), the results of this study confirm that the Internet's anonymity and freedom offered a forum for discussing sexual issues and exploring sexual aspects of self that could not have occurred in offline social circles. The offline social repercussions of doing so felt too high. Research indicates that online sexual content and sexual conversations can lead to healthy adolescent sexuality development if age appropriate and non-

traumatic (Barak & Fisher). The key factor is age-appropriateness and sense of trauma from sexual exposure.

In hindsight, a number of participants admitted to a lack of readiness for sexual interactions and online encounters that occurred when too young. This led to some challenges in sexual development. Supporting Freeman-Longo's (2000) findings, these participants experienced an increase in sexual arousal and experienced earlier-than-desired real-life sexual experiences. Although they wanted to engage in sexual exploration and were active in doing so, in actuality, they were not ready for the impact or long-term consequences. This raises the question of how adolescents perceive sexuality and sex and whether sexual liberation habituates and normalizes sex to the extent that it creates a false sense of readiness. Coming to terms with one's sexual minority status in the absence of parental supports, may complicate matters further when working through mixed messages of what is normal. If experiencing sex as normal, yet receiving messages that their sexuality is abnormal or different, adolescents may make decisions to engage in sexual exploration before they are psychologically ready in order to alleviate inner conflict and to sort through confusion around their sexuality.

As discussed earlier, these adolescents simultaneously had no regrets. The differentiation of needs for relationships compared to sex might explain this inconsistency. Adolescents desired relationships; they did not regret these. Sex, on the other hand, was a different matter. The consequences of early sexual experiences left difficult lasting impressions, impacting the way they saw themselves, sex, relationships, and the world, all aspects of their identity and sense of self. Experiences created negative or narrow perspectives which resulted in some developmental challenges. Insecurities

increased creating situations comparable to research (Valkenburg et al., 2006) that advocates adolescents' self-esteem and well-being can decrease when faced with negative online interactions, especially when socially isolated (Valkenberg & Peter, 2007a). Ramifications included a lengthy process of living with a false sense of self, feeling confused, and engaging in additional unhealthy relationships and sexual activities. Some were still in the process of working through these issues and attempting to redefine themselves at the time of their interviews.

Through online sexual encounters, all participants were faced with situations that challenged their sense of self. This occurred directly for those who were more self-reflective, more conscious of their involvement and for those who acknowledged their accountability and took responsibility. Others experienced challenges to their sense of self indirectly through conflicting views of others and/or the way they understood the world. Ultimately, the results were such that all struggled with conflicting identity related issues putting them in a state of cognitive dissonance. In some form or another, online encounters introduced information that contradicted their understanding of self, others, or the world which resulted in states of confusion and internal struggles to figure things out. This reworking of identity when faced with new information and confusion is congruent with the theoretical constructs of accommodation, assimilation and equilibrium (Markstrom-Adams, 1992). Individuals are biologically and cognitively motivated to achieve a state of equilibrium. When faced with the presentation of new and unfamiliar experiences, individuals attempt to make sense of their experience via two distinct processes. If individuals assimilate, they will change or alter their external perceptions to fit into their current internal understandings. If individuals accommodate, they will adjust

or adapt their internal understandings to fit with new external information. Both these processes have been implicated in adolescent identity formation (Markstrom-Adams) and can explain the process through which new information created confusion and internal struggles for participants. The drive to achieve equilibrium and alleviate tension resulted in efforts to align understandings of self throughout their experiences.

In light of these theoretical underpinnings, some level of confusion is natural and necessary for personal growth and development. However, internal states of confusion can make rational thinking and good decision-making difficult, particularly when put on the spot. Participants turned to the Internet as a means to sort through general states of confusion and/or engaged in passive response patterns when confused. They did not know how to respond effectively. Power differences between themselves and online partners only added to their confusion in which most cases resulted in the desires of partners being met. Feeling isolated and disconnected, they attempted to work through confusion alone in the privacy of their own experience while searching for and needing some measure of understanding to reach internal homeostasis. Unfortunately, these circumstances are not conducive to good decision-making. A lack of clarity requires objectivity which is difficult to obtain in isolation. The results are such that these adolescents made choices by default whether right or wrong, rational or irrational, assertively or passively. The process of sorting out confusion in isolation can occur but generally takes longer than when support is available. Subjective reality limits the process of obtaining insight and understanding. New information is often necessary to offer additional considerations in perspective taking and problem solving. Even so, when is anyone psychologically ready to incorporate new understanding into their experience

and then act on them? Identity development is a process. The adolescents in this study did eventually gain new understandings of their experience. However, these insights did not necessarily lead to automatic changes in response patterns and decision-making. Exploring and implementing alternatives is an ongoing process of learning and practicing new ways of being which coincides with the strength of one's self identity.

There was a distinct element of significance that arose out of participants' experiences. All identified some sort of personal impact from online encounters that made these events memorable. A positive developmental impact occurred when states of identity confusion were experienced and sorted through sufficiently to develop a greater understanding of self. These participants began with a more stable sense of self and grew in personal knowledge and self-understandings. As Luyckx and colleagues (2005) highlight, identity development is the process through which adolescents define themselves further and make greater commitments to who they are. Identity evolves when adolescents are able to integrate personal values and moral beliefs with clear self-definitions and apply these in relationships (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006). Although questioning their values, morals, and sense of self while going through encounters, some participants were able to work through acute states of confusion and integrate their experience positively into new ways of being. The positive development of identity via online encounters captures the aspects of making adaptive decisions and taking actions in these relationships that best suited personal interests. For some, such identity growth occurred within the time frame of their actual encounter.

Other participants struggled throughout their process of identity development and as such experienced developmental challenges congruent with the findings of additional

researchers (Baumgartner et al., 2010). Processes took considerably longer. Some were still working with similar identity issues when interviewed. Their insecurities and negative sense of self was reaffirmed leading these participants to make unsuitable choices during and after online encounters. They experienced additional difficulties and challenges afterwards until the impact of their online experience became clearer and before making personal, more positive changes for themselves. A large part of eventual growth came through the establishment of personal and social resources. As these increased and insecurities decreased, motivations to have interpersonal needs met through negative relationships and interactions lessened. This supports Laursen and Mooney's (2007) romantic relationship model that highlights the importance of adolescents' access to resources in order to be better prepared to overcome adversities and how beneficial versus detrimental outcomes occur based on how adolescents perceive their situations. Regardless of the positive and negative influence on developmental trajectories and the length of time it took to sort through experiences, participants' online sexual encounters had some significant impact on the development of their sense of self.

Research has identified that the normal development of adolescents growing interest in romantic relationships and sex, along with the availability of access to the Internet, makes them particularly vulnerable to online sexual solicitation (Wolak et al., 2010). Establishing online relationships, entering conversations with strangers, experimenting with identity, discussing sexual issues all contain elements of vulnerability (Peter et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2007a; Wolak et al.). Troubled adolescents (Mitchell et al., 2007a), particularly those with any type of sexual, physical, psychological, or emotional abuse histories (Mitchell et al., 2007b; Mitchell et al., 2011; Wells & Mitchell,

2008), are at an increased risk for the most forceful forms of online sexual solicitation (Mitchell et al., 2007b). This study's findings are congruent with all these claims. Outside of Canada where statues are less defined, most of these cases would be considered nonforcible sex crimes (Walsh & Wolak, 2005) because participants willingly sought out and entered sexual relationships. Although, considering the psychological complexity presented in this discussion thus far, the issue of willingness could be brought into question. Regardless, these adolescents perceived themselves in real relationships with feelings of intimacy and love (Wolak et al., 2004). With the seamless integration of the Internet in their lives, the idea of online sexual solicitation transforms into normal relationships with sexual interests.

Although negative emotional and psychological distress and disruption results from online sexual solicitation (Wells & Mitchell, 2007; Wolak et al., 2006; Ybarra et al., 2004), most participants, willing or not, did not claim undo distress or shame. The one case exception would be the participant with an extensive trauma and abuse history whose purpose for connecting with and meeting someone online was for death. Even so, none of the participants regretted their experience and instead recognized the way in which it changed them. This suggests that the impact of their experience on the development of their sense of self was of primary importance.

Society is in a challenging state of adjustment with the integration of technology and the Internet. For younger generations, no adjustment is needed; it is seamless. The Internet acts as just another social network in their lives. Social media abounds and a life without Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Vine, etc., is a foreign concept to youth. In contrast, older generations, particularly Generation X (Born in 1963-80) and some of

Y (1981-94), perceive the Internet as something distinctly separate. They have a history of social experience without the Internet, whereas adolescents have not and do not know differently. Parents and educators in these earlier generations likely do not understand technology well and often fear it. Children of these parents live with mixed messages of right and wrong when it comes to the Internet. On one hand, the Internet and social media is the norm, including the development of relationships online. On the other, they are told it's wrong to enter these types of relationships. This dichotomy would make it difficult to distinguish the right and wrong of normal relationship and sexual development when in the normal progression of relationships sex eventually occurs. If they do not view the Internet and the online as something outside of and separate from their living experience, then morality is not involved in decisions of meeting others regardless of where. What really is the difference between meeting someone at school, at a party, or online? The answer will vary for different generations. However, the decisions they make in relationships whether they originate off or online will remain the same. Adolescents at the forefront of Internet integration experience a considerable amount of pressure to do the right thing online where the right thing has been defined by a generation without this technology. In this new era, society is adapting through concentrated efforts at preventing online exploitation and criminal offences and redefining laws.

What more can we do? We can be open to understanding and accepting the changes that are occurring regardless of desires not to. We can get on board and set realistic expectations that can create an environment where adolescents feel they do not have to hide. We can instill personal values, morals, and ethics by which we live,

teaching our children through discussions and experiences, but ultimately, leading by example.

Considerations

The purpose of this research was to capture in-depth accounts of online sexual solicitations from the perspective of those who have lived it and perform a thematic analysis based on these accounts. The nature of having a limited and small number of participants, each with unique experiences, does not discount the ability to perform a sufficient thematic analysis. Common themes emerged; however, these themes represent the experiences of the participants in this study. This means that the themes presented here do not necessarily apply to all adolescents who experience online sexual solicitation. With the ever-changing aspects of technology in the world, along with the increasing integration of technology in society, this study encapsulates a particular moment in time for these self-selected participants. Small sample sizes are used to obtain and review experiences in detail. This process allows for greater understanding of the phenomenon under study. It is difficult to determine whether those who volunteered for this study maintain certain similar characteristics that prompted their participation and/or whether other adolescents' experiences of online sexual solicitation would be similar or different.

Implications for Counselling

Adolescents have increasingly gained access to the Internet over the past decade; technology is now a seamless aspect of their lives. Whether counsellors are knowledgeable of the Internet, and technology in general, or not, they may benefit from taking a curious approach with adolescents and asking questions. Since technology is always changing, adolescents have much to teach us and such an approach can help foster

trust. They can educate counsellors about the ways in which they use technology, offering greater insight into the changing culture, but more importantly, insight into personal experiences with the Internet. Participants in this study commented on how they had never shared the totality of their story with anyone. An aspect of this study encouraged them to tell their whole story, an experience that they valued and found cathartic. Counsellors can be mindful that the sharing of important experiences in and of itself has therapeutic benefit.

The seamless integration of the Internet in adolescents' lives has important implications fraught with contradictions: a situation inherently confusing. Although technology can facilitate education, there exists much misinformation. It can foster social connection; it can also foster isolation. It can offer opportunities for both developmental progression and challenges. Understanding these tensions without criticism can help counsellors to remain neutral about adolescents' realities as they describe Internet experiences. Keeping these tensions in mind, opportunities can be created for open discussions in non threatening ways that validate youths' needs and desires for Internet use while offering them information and education into the potential for negative consequences. Adolescents do not often consider consequences and when they do generally operate from a perspective of invulnerability – that bad things only happen to others. It is vital that attempts at education become purposeful and meaningful. Teens need to feel that information is personally relevant in order to give it proper consideration. This approach attempts to create space for new insights to develop and would best be accomplished operating from a non-authoritative stance in a safe and trusting environment promoting the best therapeutic outcomes. In this case, where

adolescents can seriously consider the opposing positive technological aspects along with negative personal impacts and integrate such information into their experience.

The majority of research investigating sexual encounters involves adolescents who are active and willing participants in creating and maintaining online relationships that then lead to solicitation occurrences. The process through which these events occur serves developmental, psychological, social, and emotional needs. Most adolescents place great emphasis on their social and relationship experiences. An in-depth exploration of their interpersonal needs and social resources can help counsellors to understand some of their unconscious motivating factors. One therapeutic goal would be to assist them in establishing positive external resources in safe and appropriate manners. The more socially resourced they are whether off or online, the less likely they will be to look for and engage in risky/negative relationships. The reality is that the Internet is not going away and adolescents turn to it when needed for many purposes. Accepting this and supporting them in using it safely can offer a valuable resource in their lives.

Another consideration is to fully understand and appreciate the normative and positive development of adolescents' sexuality. They experiment with sexuality in many ways. The establishment of romantic relationships is one way. Casual sexual exploration is another. Whether via the Internet or not makes little difference to them. If the Internet is an integral part of their lives, then helping adolescents to understand the implications of sexual activity more broadly can benefit their overall development and decision-making. Fostering a safe and trusting environment for discussions of sexuality would prove useful to their developing sense of sexual self. When more firmly rooted in this

identity, they can then explore their growing sexuality in safe ways whether it is through online or offline interactions.

It may be important for counsellors and educators to understand that there is a misconception about adolescents as victims of online sexual solicitation. Not all are. As Wolak and colleagues (2010) identify, adolescents' portrayal as being vulnerable does not accurately capture legal age of consent and non-forcible sex crimes. Those who are vulnerable by age-of-consent statutes are those who are younger and considered "innocent." This impacts the way society understands and works to educate adolescents and adults using preventative measures. Education should include validation for the strong sexual feelings and responses adolescents have but with clear messages that adult exploitation of these responses is wrong (Wolak et al.). It is likely that adolescents will not perceive these situations as such. Thus, we cannot teach about online exploitation expecting understanding and results. We teach it to offer additional information into an already existing context that together with an exploration of various motivations can assist adolescents when making decisions. This task requires great sensitivity and tactfulness so as not to belittle or over-exaggerate adolescents' sexual desires and relationship and developmental needs. Counsellors can support their needs while educating, exploring, and encouraging safe and moral practices.

When adolescents bring issues of sexual solicitation into therapy, it would be necessary for counsellors to be aware of age-of-consent statues. Age-of-consent laws for sexual interactions are an important element for the overall wellbeing of those engaging in such encounters. Some adolescents in this study openly admitted that it would not have mattered if they knew what the laws were; they would have engaged regardless.

Situations in violation of laws would need to be reported to the proper authorities. This raises a very difficult ethical dilemma for counsellors. On one hand, supporting clients' autonomy is the foundation to fostering trust within the therapeutic relationship necessary for creating a healing environment. On the other, therapists have a duty to consider and prevent any form of maleficence. Reporting cases of legal violation jeopardizes the therapist/client relationship; clients may no longer trust the therapist and could terminate therapy prematurely. Contexts become particularly important considerations in such situations. Counsellors can choose to discuss the legality of situations with adolescents while attempting to create personal relevancy and encourage self-reporting. Youth stuck in this dilemma will likely struggle with their sense of self, including an aspect of morality, creating confusion and challenges in decision-making. Developing personal self-esteem, self-confidence, and finding alternate ways for coping with life stressors and limitations can help adolescents in making decisions that are best for all involved. Ultimately, the challenge rests in supporting adolescents through the trauma considering the limitations posed by ethical issues.

Counselling adolescents is challenging enough without the added complications of dealing with issues around online sexual solicitation. With personal fable, imaginary audience, and diminished hypothetical thinking capabilities, adolescents think they "know it all" and feel that nobody could possibly understand what they are going through. Gentle support and inquiry using non-directive techniques can assist in fostering trust and credibility. They are likely to resist strong directive strategies that portray another person of authority in their life telling them what to do.

Parents' perceptions of wrongdoing will be different than children's. Negotiating the needs between parents and child can be challenging. Parents' thoughts and ideas can become rigid through years of living an alternate experience and through personal fears and lack of understanding the Internet. Education is necessary in these situations; however, like adolescents, they may or may not accept new perspectives. The goal is to balance parents' desires and expectations with those of their child's. Ultimately, if not supporting both in some fashion, either parent or child could terminate counselling early. Individual counselling with parents can assist counsellors in understanding their concerns and working to alleviate fears and misconceptions; however, some youth feel confidentiality diminishes when counsellors meet parents privately. Family counselling could be undertaken to address this concern and in order to foster communication between parent and child. Mediating communication and problem solving can build effective strategies so both parties feel heard and validated. The challenge inherent in family counselling is whether members can remain open to hearing each other objectively and respectfully within parent/child power dynamics.

The therapeutic relationship in and of itself has the potential to offer much to adolescents' struggling sense of self. A nurturing relationship can fulfill some of their needs for attention, connection, and validation. As these were some primary motivating factors for turning to the Internet and establishing relationships, adolescents can gain much by having a consistent, safe, objective, and unconditional external resource via a therapeutic relationship.

Future Research Directions

Future research might consider a qualitative analysis of victims from online sexual crimes that were coerced. This can offer a separate account of experiences for those who did not enter relationships willing but were coerced in some fashion to engage in sexual activities. This would help to represent a different aspect of online sexual solicitation. Although some of the experiences in this research could have been considered enforceable sex crimes, most participants viewed their experiences as real life relationships with the natural progression towards sexual activity. Consideration for age of consent was non-existent for these adolescents. In other cases, participants considered themselves willing partners and none felt forced in any way. In contrast, use of force or coercion may impact adolescents in different ways. Further, their personal characteristics and contexts may be different to those presented here. Such analysis would offer a more thorough review of this phenomenon.

Another situation worthy of investigation is adolescents who were solicited but did not engage in sexual interactions and told someone of authority. Those who report may present characteristics and contexts that are different than those who are secretive and do not tell anyone. A study of this nature could offer further understanding into the culture of adolescents on the Internet, into the phenomenon of online sexual solicitation, and offer additional important elements for education and prevention efforts.

Aside from solicitation, a broader understanding of adolescent development within the context of a new reality that includes the integration of the Internet and technology would be beneficial. Contexts influence many aspects of psychological, social, and emotional development and encompass elements such as culture, identity,

sense of self, and worldviews. The impact of technology presents a significant change in how we interact with others and manage our day-to-day lives. How does the new reality of technological integration influence adolescent development? This question could consider the psychology of the individual and the collective and some of the societal implications with the advent of this changing context.

Summary

Isolation greatly impacts adolescent development. Social contexts are vital, and as social beings, interactions with others are necessary to address identity and relationship needs. Adolescents who experienced online sexual solicitation were socially isolated. With limited opportunities available offline for connection, the Internet became the avenue to social expansion and belonging. Personal insecurities accompanied isolating circumstances and impacted online interactions. Online encounters, whether sought out and desired or not, resulted in confusion and uncertainty. Isolation, insecurity, confusion, and other personal and social influences made decision making difficult. The impact of sexual encounters led to changes in perspectives of self, others, and/or the world. Some experiences led to psychological and developmental growth, while others perpetuated personal struggles, which highlights the nature of development as an ongoing process. However, all were meaningful, memorable, and important.

Relationship development requires social contexts. Adolescents view the Internet as just another social network in their lives – a means to maintain, enhance, and/or establish relationships. The normal course of development leads to a growing interest in romantic, and often sexual, relationships where the meeting of potential partners is not limited to the distinctive boundaries of off or online. As social resources increased

offline, adolescents felt less of a need to engage in intimate and romantic interactions online. However, offline resources were in part made up of original online contacts. They continued to use the Internet to expand social connections, incorporating online relationships into offline experiences. Society may need the distinctions of off- versus online for conceptual understandings and organization; however, compared to the time period that these terms originated, the lived reality for today's adolescents is different and unique and has yet to be fully understood.

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Informed Consent

Title of Research Project:
Teens' experience of online sexual solicitation.

Researcher: Sylvia Peske   **Supervisor:**   Dr. Robin Everall
                   speske@ualberta.ca   Provost Fellow
                                                       2-10 University Hall, University of Alberta
                                                       Office of the Provost and Vice President
                                                       Office: (780) 492-1163
                                                       robin.everall@ualberta.ca

Consent:

Please circle your answers:

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?   YES   NO

Have you received and read a copy of the attached Purpose of Study information sheet?   YES   NO

Do you consent to being audio-taped?   YES   NO

Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?   YES   NO

Has confidentiality been explained to you?   YES   NO

Do you understand who will be able to see or hear what you said?   YES   NO

Do you know what the information you say will be used for?   YES   NO

Do you give us permission to use your data for the purposes specified?   YES   NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?   YES   NO

May the researcher contact you for another interview if necessary?   YES   NO

Do you understand that you can stop taking part in this study at any time? You do not have to say why and it will not affect you in anyway.   YES   NO

I give my consent to participate in this research.

_____   _____
        Participant's Name   Date

_____   _____
      Participant's Signature   Researcher's Signature

Ethics:
The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Purpose of Study

Title of Research Project:
Teens' experience of online sexual solicitation.

Researcher: Sylvia Peske   **Supervisor:**   Dr. Robin Everall
                  speske@ualberta.ca   Provost Fellow
                                                           2-10 University Hall, University of Alberta
                                                           Office of the Provost and Vice President
                                                           Office: (780) 492-1163
                                                           robin.everall@ualberta.ca

Purpose:

   This research project is to better understand teens' experience of being lured into sexual activities on the Internet.

Methods:

   You are being asked to talk to the researcher about your experience of being lured on the Internet. The researcher will ask you some broad questions to encourage you to share your experience the way you see it using your own words. There are no right or wrong situations. This interview will last for about 1 hour. You may be asked to talk to the researcher again to make sure the researcher understood you correctly the first time. If necessary, this interview would take about 30 minutes.

Confidentiality:

   The interview will be recorded on audio tape. The taped interview will be typed out by the researcher or a transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. Your name will not be recorded on the tape or the paper. Instead a number will be given to your interview. This number, or a false name, will be used on anything that is written about the interview. Only the researcher will know the name of the person on the tape. All of the information that has your name on it will be locked up.

   Interviews will be done in counselling offices at Clinical Services at the University of Alberta. It is possible that office staff will know that you took part in this research study. But, these people will not know what you said.

   Benefits:

   We hope to better understand the experiences of teens who go through these types of situations. The stories you share regarding your experience can help teach teens how to understand and manage the Internet better, particularly if they become exposed to sexual solicitation. It can also help police work with teens when investigating their situations.

Risks:

It is not expected that being in this study will harm you. But, you may feel sad, distressed or angry with yourself or with the person who did this to you. The researcher will talk to you about these feelings and help you find any support you may need.

Withdrawal from the Study:

Even after you have agreed to do the interview, you can decide to stop any time before or during the interview. If you are asked to do a second interview, you can decide that you do not want to. You can also decide after the first or second interview that you do not want what you said to be used in the study up until the time that all the interviews are done and data analysis has begun. The researcher then cannot use what you said.

Use of your Information:

This study is being done for a Ph.D. dissertation. The researcher is a student at the University. She will put together what everyone says and make it into a research study.

Some of the people who want to know about these types of situations include police, parents, teachers, counsellors, and teens. Sometimes the researcher will do presentations so that teens and others can learn about such experiences. Sometimes reports are sent out. None of the presentations or reports will have your name in them.

Ethics:

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Interview Script and Questions

1. "Thank you for coming and agreeing to share your experience and tell your story."

2. "Can you begin by describing what your offline world was like?"
   "What were some of your thoughts at this time?"
   "What were some of your feelings at this time?"

3. "Can you describe your experience using the Internet. For example,
   When was that?
   How old were you?
   What were you using the Internet for?"

4. "And then what happened? Can you describe your initial encounter with the person who solicited you?"
   "What were some of your first thoughts?"
   "What were some of your first feelings?"

5. "Can you describe how this encounter continued?"
   "What were some of your thoughts at this time?"
   "What were some of your feelings at this time?"

6. "Can you describe how this encounter ended or was resolved?"
   "What were some of your thoughts at this time?"
   "What were some of your feelings at this time?"

7. "During this time…
   was there a time when it was not okay for you?
   how did you deal with that?
   what were other people, offline or online, saying?
   what kinds of reactions did you received from other people?

8. In light of everything that you have talked about, at this point in time, is there anything else you might want to say or expand on in terms of what this experience has meant to you and your life as you reflect back on it?

PROMPTS:
   "Can you tell me more about that?"

Confidentiality Agreement

Project Title: Adolescents' Experience of Online Sexual Solicitation

I, _____, the transcriber, have been hired to transcribe audio-taped interviews of individuals who have experienced online sexual solicitation in their teens.

I agree to:

1. Keep all information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (i.e. disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.

2. Keep all research information in any form or format (i.e. disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.

3. Return all research information in any form or format (i.e. disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *Researcher* when I have completed the research tasks.

4. After consulting with the *Researcher*, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher* (i.e. information stored on computer hard drive).

Transcriber:

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| (Print Name) | (Signature) | (Date) |

Researcher:

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| (Print Name) | (Signature) | (Date) |

Appendix 5

Summary of Themes

Core Category	Sub-Category
Social Isolation	
Exploring Sense of Self	Belonging
	Personal Insecurities
	Internal Conflict
	Sexuality
	A Significant Experience