PREDATORY COERCION IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN ONLINE – A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Protecting children online has been a focus of research in psychiatry and sociology for many years. However, the anonymous nature of the Internet has made finding a solution to the problem of child protection online difficult. The current study proposes going beyond the identification of an individual online predator to the recognition of predatory discourse enacted via coercion within frames of communication in the discursive system of social media. The framework proposes the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to over 500 transcripts between adult online predators and adult volunteers of the group Perverted Justice. This framework lays the foundation for further research on the topic of protecting children online. Additionally, researchers, practitioners and public policy individuals are provided a suggested method for examining discourse in social media and improve upon the tools and methods for protecting children online.

Keywords: Protecting children online, online predators, critical discourse analysis, frames, framing, coercion, online alternate realities, social media, discourse, deception, public policy
Introduction

Social media has made it extremely easy for individuals to form virtual friendships with people across the world. Unfortunately, the virtues of online friendships often overshadow a much darker side of the cybersociety and cyber relationships where children fall victim to online sexual predators. In 2007, Alicia Kozakiewicz recounted, in front of the House Judiciary Committee, how she was kidnapped, tortured and raped in 2002 by an online sexual predator she had befriended in an Internet chatroom. Michael Mason, executive assistant director of the FBI’s Criminal, Cyber, Response and Services Branch was quoted, “[t]here can be no tolerance and no retreat in our efforts to combat this scourge. We cannot and will not rest until these predators are shut down and locked up” (Jaffe, 2007). However, the headline of a February 21, 2012 article at ArkansasOnline.com read “Body of teenager identified, apparently strangled”. Angela Allen, a sixteen year old Arkansas teen, disappeared on February 10, 2012 after meeting up with an individual whom she had chatted with online. Sadly, Angela was killed by this individual, a registered sex offender. A decade has passed between these tragedies and yet Angela’s story points to the continued existence of a threat to our children, rooted in the ability of individuals to utilize the Internet to hide the reality of who they are in an attempt to solicit children for illegal sexual purposes. There is significant concern that the information divulged on social networking sites is being used by sex offenders to identify potential victims (Quayle, 2002; Quayle and Taylor, 2003; Wolak, et. al., 2004).

Social media is defined as web sites with structural and interactive features which “seem to foster ongoing discussions between their authors and their readers making them more dialogic in nature than traditional Web sites” (Dickey and Lewis, 2010, p. 140). Within this globally connected virtual social world “multiple worldviews coexist within processes of negotiated interaction” (Vasconcelos, 2007, p. 125). Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, Ehrlich and Sabshin (1964) defined these as “universes of discourse” (p. 130). This universe of discourse is evident in the communications which take place inside of social media, characterizing it as a discursive system. As a social network, social media plays a critical role in connecting children with potential sexual predators. As a discursive system, social media play an even more crucial role by allowing predators to construct an alternate social reality attractive to children through discourse (conversation) on the other. Alternate social realities are created by the predator through the manipulation of the existing reality shared by the individual child. The predator develops an environment in which it is acceptable for the child to act out behaviors which might not be approved of by parents or guardians. Within this new environment or ‘alternate social reality’ the predator’s intentions become what the child thinks is his/her own desired behaviors.

Researchers in the fields of sociology and psychiatry have examined the issue of online predators. Regarding the predators, research has been conducted on the identification and understanding of predators’ characteristics (Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Quayle, 2002; Quayle & Taylor, 2003) and the websites they frequent most often (Mitchell et al. 2008; Ybarra and Mitchell 2008). Additionally, researchers have studied how children are vulnerable to the threat of online predators (Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2008; Wolak et al., 2004). Although these studies have provided significant insight into predatory behavior and child victimization, most studies have ignored the mechanisms, used by sexual predators, in discourse to solicit and victimize children online. Information systems (IS) researchers have been taking up the subject in recent years. Research has examined laws and technologies regarding the protection of children’s online privacy, as well as the technologies and techniques used by parents to enact that protection (Albert & Salam, 2011; Hsiao et al., 2007). Also, De Souza and Dick (2008) looked at what children are sharing on social networking sites and what their parents know about that information. Similar research proposed technological solutions to parental control over the information shared by children online (Xu, Irani, Zhu, and Wei, 2008). Eneman, Gillespie and Stahl (2010) added to the research through the examination of a high-profile case in Sweden, increasing the understanding of how individuals are using information and communication technologies to engage in grooming types of behavior. While this literature has been valuable for increasing the knowledge regarding this subject, a critical element has been missed: how social media, as a discursive system, allows predators to manipulate conversations with children leading to child victimization. To address this gap in the extant literature we propose the use of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how the discursive system of social media creates a platform on which online predators can engage in coercion through communicative acts to gain control of the discourse and seduce children.
online. The outcomes of coercion are viewed through the lens of framing which is seen as allowing for the creation of alternate ‘false’ realities that draw the children to the predators, like moths are drawn to a flame. In this study we address the question: How do online sexual predators use social media as a discursive system to manipulate, control and victimize children through alternate construction of ‘false’ social realities? According to the authors’ best knowledge, this is the first study to investigate this phenomenon using Critical Discourse Analysis. This study is critical in the sense that by being able to develop a theoretical model of coercion based on discourse analysis of manipulation techniques used by predators to control and manipulate alternate social realities for children with full intent for victimization, we should be able to develop behavioral, social and technological solutions that begin to minimize child victimization by online sexual predators. IS research has remained relatively silent in this context and as a discipline it is critical that we begin to address these larger societal problems related to Information Systems, given the rapid and unending proliferation of social media technologies in all spheres of our lives. This study aims to make a contribution to this larger research context with the hope that further IS research will bring significant societal benefits in relation to our children. In the following sections, we provide the research method, proposed theoretical framework, implications of the study and plans for future research

Research Method: Critical Discourse Analysis

The data set for this research is comprised of over 500 chat transcripts between adult online predators and adult volunteers of the group Perverted Justice. Although the adult volunteers were posing as youth, the adult predators were under the impression that they were interacting with a child. These transcripts have been used in previous research as grounds for examining the conversational techniques of online predators (Marcum, 2007).

Discourse analysis is situated on the idea that language has meaning when it communicates a socially situated identity in a socially situated activity. When language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places are put together so that the identity engaged in an activity can be recognized, then a discourse exists (Berente, Hansen, Pike, and Bateman, 2011;Gee 2005). In our study the focus is being able to recognize the coercer/predator engaging in coercion/victimization through the frames used to create alternate false realities with which to draw coercees/children. In this study we follow Norman Fairclough’s “three-dimensional framework for conceiving of and analyzing discourse” (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p.448). Within the first dimension, discourse-as-text, choices and patterns in vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure are systematically analyzed. Within the current study this will involve analyzing the text, at face value, of the social media conversations between predators and children. The second dimension, discourse-as-discursive-practice, involves giving attention to three aspects of text that link it to its context: speech acts, coherence and intertextuality (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000). This will involve examining the aforementioned communicative (speech) acts within the coercive frames created by the predators as well as how “utterances are selected, changed, contextualized” (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). In the last dimension, discourse-as-social-practice, examines hegemonies and how they change in relation to discursive change. Applied to the current study, this dimension will involve determining the point within the discourse where the predator exerts his/her power to control the child.

Proposed Theoretical Framework of Predatory Coercion and Child Victimization

The current study proposes the creation of a framework of discourse analysis which allows for the examination of predator/child conversations within social media. To do this we examine how, within the discursive system of social media, predators are able to coerce children through the creation of frames of alternate ‘false’ realities. It is within those coercive frames that predators are able to manipulate, control and victimize children. The constructs of this framework are presented next:
**Coercion**

The traditional understanding of coercion dates back to an edition of Thomas Aquinas’ work published in 1920, *The Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Aquinas asserted that coercion “is a kind of necessity in which the activities of one agent – the coercer – make something necessary for another agent” (Anderson, 2011, p.4). As Anderson (2011) stated, the common understanding of coercion is “use of a certain kind of power for the purpose of gaining advantages over others, punishing non-compliance with demands, and imposing one’s will on the will of other agents” (p. 3). Over the centuries the discussion of coercion has focused on issues where a power difference is visible: law enforcement, business, and international as well as domestic issues. While these fields, at first pass, seem to be all over the map in terms of context, the point made by this diversity is that coercion is a human behavior which can take place in various contexts, throughout various aspects of one’s life. Robert Nozick wrote of coercion as “techniques that influence or alter the will of the coercee, by altering the intentions or dispositions of the coercee” (Anderson, 2008, p.16). This view of coercion removes the necessity of typical influencers such as force, violence or deprivation and opens the definition of coercion to include “all kinds of alterations to the coercee’s costs and benefits to acting” (Anderson 2008, p. 19). In order for predators to make the path to their intentions a necessity for the child, they must exert their power over the child’s decisions and actions. This can be accomplished through what Beynon-Davies (2010) refers to as enactment through three communicative acts: formative, informative and performative. Formative acts refer to the representation of data, which in the case of predators and children is the structural nature of the social media conversation such as common language and the use of emoticons. Informative acts consist of message generation and interpretation; in this study it would be the predator’s substantial acts of coercion through text to move the child toward the desired outcome. Lastly, performative acts are the coordinated actions which result, in the fulfillment of the predator’s intentions, a face-to-face meeting with the child and subsequent physical and emotional victimization (Beynon-Davies 2010, 2012). Situated within the discursive system of social media, our study examines predators’ use of communicative acts within coercive frames as the means to alter the targeted children’s choice of actions. Table 1, Section 1 contains transcript excerpts which demonstrate coercion between a predator and child/youth.

**Alternate Social Reality**

In the current study, informative acts manifest as coercion, the act of asserting power in order to achieve one's intentions through affecting the actions of another. It is the means by which predators control discourse within social media. We propose that this manifestation is the creation of alternate ‘false’ realities within contextual frames of conversations with children. Azad and Faraj (2011) defined frames as “relatively stable interpretive schemes through which actors makes sense of events and situations they come across” (p. 37). The authors go on to state that the act of framing “involves the virtual drawing of a boundary, much like a picture frame, emphasizing what is inside vs. outside and thereby making the former more salient” (Azad and Faraj, 2011, p37). While it is important to understand the difference between the artifact of the frame and the act of creating that frame, the two are pieces of one puzzle created, within the scope of this study, through interaction via social media. Given that focus, the frames which coercees ‘come across’ in social media are the conversations in which they engage with coercers. These are the social media interactions between children and online predators. Within that frame, the online predator engages in coercion through framing to create an alternate false reality appealing to a child.

The concept of alternate false reality creation is inherent within framing. The act of framing requires the coercer to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, p.52). In the case of online predators, the ‘perceived reality’ is shared with them through text by the child. The predators then work to paint the picture of an alternate reality within the frame, a reality which differs from the child’s true reality and is thus appealing. The shift in realities provides a space for the coercer and coercee to engage in shared meaning which exists within the framed alternate reality painted by the coercer. The step toward shared meaning moves the coercive act closer to the predator’s intentions. Section 2 within Table 1 provides examples of alternate false realities created by predators.
**Reactance, Learned Helplessness and Social Control**

This brings the framework around to the coercees, the targets of predators’ coercion. As coercees, children are enticed by the prospect of getting what they don’t have. In this case, they have identified behaviors in which they should have the freedom to engage but are no longer allowed to by others in their reality. Feeling restricted, they seek out realities in which they have the freedom to engage in those behaviors. This is referred to as reactance theory (Thacker, 1992). Reactance within the current study is often the normal struggle of children seeking more independence. Parents may restrict computer time, monitor chats, and prohibit the child from having a webcam or even grounding the child from real life activities. It is natural for a child to push against those restrictions. If the child views his reality as restrictive and/or perceives him/herself as having no control over the environment, his/her self-esteem can be reduced. So, they live with the acceptance that no matter their effort to change their reality, they can’t avoid negative outcomes. This state is coined learned helplessness (Thacker, 1992). Learned helplessness within the current study can be viewed as a willingness to accept restrictions without resistance. For example, they may refuse to ask their parents for things, such as a webcam, because they think that nothing they say or do will change their parents’ minds about them having one. Yet, as children grow they search for ways in which to get beyond those restrictions and are thus drawn into the alternate false reality created by the coercer. They look outside of their reality for ways to be happy, satisfied. They engage in social control through activities, in this case online communications, seeking fairness as compared to others and a desire to feel connected (Selymes 2011). These longings make children vulnerable to the power exerted by predators through coercion. Through the painting of frames coercers create a false reality in which the coercees see a chance to move beyond restrictions within their environments and fulfill those longings. Their actions in alignment with the intentions of the predator complete the coercion through the performative act. Section 3 within Table 1 lists examples of predators’ manipulation of reactance, learned helplessness and/or social control.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Excerpts of Predator/Youth Chat Transcripts as they Apply to Discourse Acts</th>
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<td>No wut that all means but it sounds awesome</td>
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<td>breeisme93: omg. never mind. I don’t want to hear more. I won’t ever get to go camping. I will be totally jealous. chaznd74: at night we have a campfire and roast marshmellow chaznd74: you might get to go someday breeisme93: no, my mom hates it. breeisme93: she is lucky she goes camping with you. chaznd74: yeah chaznd74: care to join us this summer in bismark? breeisme93: ha ha breeisme93: really? breeisme93: or are you playing with me? chaznd74: well there will be room in the camper if you want to</td>
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<td>bluebentleydog: not too sure i be good at be gentleman but id try Decoy: lolz cuddling is fun bluebentleydog: would u like to have forplay at all Decoy: like what? bluebentleydog: u know kissin lots undressin then just touching mostly Decoy: mite b fun bluebentleydog: u never done that</td>
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The fourth section in Table 1 provides specific and disturbing examples of the victimization of children online prior to any offline contact with the predator. The psychological victimization in some transcripts begins within 5 minutes of the start of the conversation. This fact alone provides motivation for the current study, however, we also feel that the potential to cull this type of victimization before it goes on for days (as some transcripts do) is also just cause for investigation. As such, we propose the examination of predator/child conversations within social media through a framework of discourse analysis. The frames of alternate false realities in which predators manipulate, control and victimize children would be examined within the discursive system of social media.

**Implications and Future Research**

The proposed study holds implications for academia, practice and public policy. Academicians are presented with a new method for examining online coercion. This could be applicable in contexts other than child victimization by online predators. Future research could include examining cyber-bullying and the hegemony changes which occur as they relate to discursive changes. Understanding how the coercion takes place within social media could aid in treatment of victims and rehabilitation of predators as well as improved educational programs for children and parents/caregivers. Computer programmers have the challenge of not only creating systems which can identify this type of coercion within the discursive system of social media, but also alert potential victims and adults/caregivers when the discourse has been recognized. This challenge leads into the implications for public policy. Once the ability to recognize this type of coercion within discursive social media systems is developed the appropriate uses of the software would need to be determined. There is a perception held by many Internet users that anonymity, in addition to privacy, is a right. This idea of a right to anonymity as well as factors such as protected free speech, sensitivity of data and working with minors may create barriers to the application of this analysis. Additionally, in conjunction with the laws regarding information sharing, public policies would need to be addressed. The field of sociology could aid in the research regarding acceptance and usage of such software.

The current study will be developed through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to the 500+ transcripts from Perverted Justice. Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000) is the chosen method of application due to its inclusion of the third step: discourse-as-social-practice. The results of that method will inform the creation of frames of alternate false realities for use in testing adults and children to determine their aptitude of recognition of predatory discourse via coercion within social media. Understanding this recognition aptitude will aid in developing educational programs for children and adults, as well as set the stage for further research.

**Conclusion**

Protecting children online has been a focus of research in psychiatry and sociology for many years. However, the anonymous nature of the Internet has made finding a solution to the problem of child protection online difficult and up until recently IS literature has remained largely silent on the issue. The current study proposes going beyond the identification of an individual online predator to the recognition of predatory discourse via coercion within social media. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first
study which has proposed the use of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the acts of online predators. The framework proposed in this paper lays the groundwork for further research on the topic of protecting children online. Also, researchers, practitioners and public policy individuals are provided an opportunity to examine discourse in social media and improve upon the tools and methods for protecting children online.

References


