



Identity manipulation in online grooming: Gendered strategies among male suspects

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Online child sexual grooming
Online child sexual exploitation
Online sexual offenders
Child sexual exploitation material
Child sexual abuse

ABSTRACT

Deception plays a crucial role in online grooming (OG). Identity manipulation, such as misrepresenting age or gender, is common due to the lack of face-to-face cues in online environments, which makes detection difficult for minors. This study aims to enhance understanding of identity manipulation in OG, focusing on differences related to the victim's gender. We analyzed 249 OG cases from Spanish law enforcement records between 2008 and 2021, involving 112 male suspects and 227 victims. Differences in grooming strategies and offender goals were examined, comparing cases with real identities to those involving identity manipulation. Analyses were conducted separately by victim gender. Identity deception, especially age deception, was more frequent in cases with male victims. Gender-based deception showed no overall significant differences by victim gender, except for revenge-driven cases against female victims, where suspects often posed as female. Posing as female was strongly linked to grooming behaviors: with male victims, it correlated with sexual conversations, image requests, reciprocal image exchanges, and offering sexual images; with female victims, it was mainly associated with threats. Age deception was uncommon when suspects aimed to meet victims in person but was prevalent in sexual conversations or role play for both genders, and more frequent in revenge cases involving female victims. Among female victims, age deception was linked to threats, while for male victims, it was associated with initiating reciprocal image exchanges and fostering exclusivity, but less with requesting or offering sexual images. The study reveals gender-specific patterns in the use of identity manipulation during OG.

1. Introduction

Technological advancements (particularly the rise of social media, messaging apps, and online gaming platforms) have significantly facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (Seigfried-Spellar & Soldino, 2019). These online environments enable offenders to communicate simultaneously with multiple minors across geographic boundaries and time zones, increasing opportunities to identify vulnerable victims and pursue sexual objectives such as contact offenses, the production of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), or live-streamed abuse (Cubitt et al., 2021; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018a,b; National Center for Missing & Exploited Children [NCMEC], 2017; Quayle et al., 2014; Save the Children, 2025). As a result, online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) has become a key priority in the European Union's fight against serious and organized crime, as outlined in the EMPACT 2022–2025 strategic framework

(European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2025).

Online grooming (OG) refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to interact with children or adolescents for sexual purposes (Mitchell et al., 2007; Schulz et al., 2016; Seto et al., 2012). In Spain, the Criminal Code punishes individuals over the age of 14 (the age of criminal responsibility) who, through ICT, contact minors under sixteen to arrange a meeting with the intent to commit a contact sexual offense (provided that such a proposal is accompanied by material acts aimed at approaching the child) and/or engage in acts intended to deceive minors into providing or showing CSAM. However, sexual conversations with minors that do not pursue either of these objectives are not considered criminal offenses. For offenders seeking to arrange a physical meeting, the Criminal Code also establishes an increased penalty in the upper half of the sentencing range when the approach involves coercion, intimidation, or deception. More recently, the Draft Organic Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2026.109056>

Received 14 August 2025; Received in revised form 18 May 2026; Accepted 21 May 2026

Available online 22 May 2026

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Environments (currently awaiting approval by the Congress) proposes introducing as an aggravating factor the use of a false, fictitious, or imaginary identity, or misrepresentation of age, gender, or other personal characteristics by the offender.

Another distinctive feature of the Spanish legal framework is the restrictive use of undercover operations in OG police investigations. Unlike other jurisdictions, the deployment of undercover agents is considered an exceptional investigative measure in Spain due to legal and ethical concerns (Bueno de Mata, 2017; Sánchez González, 2024). Consequently, Spanish police data relies on real victim-offender interactions, offering a unique opportunity to study authentic grooming dynamics. According to the Criminal Statistics Portal (Ministerio del Interior, 2025), 528 OG cases were recorded in 2023 (a 171% increase since 2015) though clearance rates remain low (Dirección General de Coordinación y Estudios, 2023). Most suspects were men aged 18–40, and two-thirds of victims were female, consistent with prior research showing higher prevalence among adolescent girls (Águila-Otero and Pereda, 2024; Calvete et al., 2021; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2023; Gámez-Guadix, Román, et al., 2021; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Montiel et al., 2016; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022; Pereda et al., 2014; Villacampa & Gómez, 2017).

1.1. The role of deception in online grooming

OG involves a range of manipulative strategies used by offenders to build trust and exploit minors in digital environments (Ringenberg et al., 2022). Among the various tactics employed by offenders, identity deception stands out as a prominent but not universal feature. Drawing on Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), the Cyber-Routine Activity Theory (CRAT; Choi, 2008; Choi & Lee, 2017; Leukfeldt & Yar, 2016) explains how offenders exploit opportunities that emerge from the online convergence of motivated offenders, suitable cyber-targets, and the absence of capable guardians. Within this framework, identity deception may be conceptualized as a situational strategy used by offenders to reduce perceived guardianship and increase target suitability (e.g., pretending to be a peer to lower a child's defenses).

Building on this, OG offenders often engage in identity performance through the deliberate construction of online personas that manipulate macro-level aspects of identity, such as gender or age, to align with victims' expectations (Chiang & Grant, 2019). The affordances of online communication facilitate this process by enabling the selective and strategic presentation of identity-related cues (Tagg, 2015). Moreover, offenders' identity performances may vary across interactions, adapting to the specific relational dynamics established with each victim (Chiang & Grant, 2019).

Typological frameworks help clarify these variations in identity deception. Tener et al. (2015) and Webster et al. (2012) identified offender types ranging from intimacy-seeking individuals who present themselves authentically, to hyper-sexualized offenders who escalate interactions rapidly and often assume multiple false identities. These typologies underscore that deception is not monolithic: some offenders fabricate identities to gain trust or obscure intent, while others rely on real self-presentation to legitimize their actions and reduce cognitive dissonance. Empirical data from Spain further illustrate these patterns. In a study of 257 OG cases investigated by Spanish law enforcement, Soldino and Seigfried-Spellar (2024) found no overall difference in the use of deception between online-focused and contact-driven offenders. However, strategies varied by offender type: online-focused suspects were significantly more likely to misrepresent their gender, while both groups were equally likely to lie about age. Offenders alternating between true and false identities were more often contact-driven, reflecting a more adaptive and strategic use of deception (Quayle et al., 2014; Soldino & Seigfried-Spellar, 2024). This behavior aligns with the "adaptable style" described by Webster et al. (2012), in which offenders tailor their identity presentation to the behavior and preferences of each potential victim (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018a,b; Quayle et al., 2014).

When deception is employed, it most commonly involves falsifying age to appear younger, though gender and other personal details may also be manipulated (Bergen et al., 2014; Briggs et al., 2011; Chiang & Grant, 2019; de Santisteban et al., 2018; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Joleby et al., 2021; Kleijn & Bogaerts, 2021; Kloess et al., 2017; Kloess, Larkin, et al., 2019; Malesky, 2007; Quayle et al., 2014; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; Shannon, 2008; Tener et al., 2015; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2021; Webster et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2017; Wolak et al., 2004). In some cases, offenders go beyond basic demographic falsification, constructing elaborate personas that include fabricated interests, emotional compatibility, and idealized physical traits (de Santisteban et al., 2018; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Quayle et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2014). These personas are often reinforced through stolen images, fake profiles, and language mirroring, all designed to align with the perceived preferences of the victim and facilitate sexual solicitation (Bergen et al., 2014; de Santisteban et al., 2018; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Kloess, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2019; Quayle et al., 2014; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021).

The work of Bergen et al. (2014) provides further insight into the impact of identity deception across contexts. Their analysis of adult-adult and adult-child/adolescent online sexual interactions revealed that identity manipulation was prevalent in both groups. However, offenders engaging with minors were significantly more likely to employ deceptive tactics such as pretending to be younger or under 18, and to use photos of other individuals. These forms of deception were associated with an increased likelihood of obtaining self-generated CSAM and engaging in cybersex with minors. Interestingly, identity deception did not increase the odds of offline sexual contact; in fact, pretending to be younger or more attractive reduced the likelihood of meeting in person. This suggests that minors may exercise caution when detecting signs of deception, or that some offenders using fabricated identities never intend to pursue physical contact.

Importantly, deception is not always employed to conceal identity. A recent systematic review underscores this variability, showing that explicit identity manipulation was documented in fewer than half of the studies examined (Moosburner et al., 2025). Some offenders disclose genuine personal details, relying on the perceived anonymity of online environments or acting impulsively (Balfé et al., 2015; Kleijn & Bogaerts, 2021). Others openly emphasize their age or sexual experience to appeal to adolescents (Aitken et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2017), while some abandon deceptive tactics altogether when transitioning to offline contact (Quayle et al., 2014).

Court case analyses in Spain further illustrate this complexity: Riberas-Gutiérrez et al. (2024) found that while half of offenders created false identities to initiate contact, deception did not always result in physical meetings. Some offenders used real photographs while falsifying age, whereas others constructed entirely fictitious profiles. Fabricated narratives, such as posing as photographers or peers, were frequently used to solicit sexual material or arrange meetings. Similarly, in 50% of Spanish court cases from 2017 to 2020 (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024) and 77.3% of cases from 2019 to 2023 (Matthews Bautista and Maldonado-Guzman, 2024), offenders did not conceal their identity, challenging the stereotype of the OG offender as someone who exclusively uses false personas. Victim perceptions further support this variability: most adolescent victims believed the information provided by groomers to be truthful, with deception most often involving identity (26%), age (14.5%), and least frequently gender (5.8%) (Villacampa Estiarte, 2017). Collectively, these findings underscore that deception is a flexible, strategic tactic shaped by offender goals, victim characteristics, and situational context.

1.2. Victimological differences between male and female victims

Victimological research consistently shows that gender influences

both vulnerability and offender tactics. Girls are generally more likely to receive sexual solicitations (de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Montiel et al., 2016; Quayle et al., 2014; Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024; Sklenarova et al., 2018; Villacampa & Gómez, 2017; Whittle et al., 2013b; Wolak et al., 2008), yet they tend to perceive such interactions as more dangerous and are less likely than boys to respond or engage in sexual exchanges or offline meetings (Calvete et al., 2021; Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024).

Data from Spanish police investigations (Soldino & Seigfried-Spellar, 2024) identified significant victimological differences based on the type of suspect. Online-focused offenders were more likely to target younger, female victims. Conversely, victims of contact-driven offenders were more likely to be male and older, and were also more likely to offer exchanges for sex or sexually explicit images. In this context, some offenders deliberately target homosexual or questioning boys, encouraging them to explore their sexuality. The stigma and shame associated with disclosing their sexual orientation or past same-sex experiences may lead these boys to seek validation or experimentation with adults (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024; Whittle et al., 2013b; Wolak et al., 2008).

Despite these gendered patterns, few studies have systematically examined how deception itself varies by victim gender. van Gijn-Grosvenor and Lamb (2016) analyzed the grooming behaviors of convicted offenders who engaged in online conversations with decoys posing as girls ($n = 52$) or boys ($n = 49$), with the intent of arranging offline sexual encounters. Offenders approaching boys were significantly older and more likely to misrepresent their age by a larger margin, often pretending to be much younger. In contrast, those targeting girls tended to build more rapport, approached sexual topics more cautiously and indirectly, and employed more concealment strategies, suggesting a more romanticized and emotionally manipulative approach.

1.3. Current study

Previous research on OG has often relied on offender-decoy interactions (Arett et al., 2025; Briggs et al., 2011; Chiang & Grant, 2017; Moosburner et al., 2025; Quayle et al., 2014; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016, 2021; Williams et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2017), which have been shown to differ meaningfully from real offender-child interactions (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Joleby et al., 2021; Ringenberg et al., 2024; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021). In contrast to other jurisdictions, Spanish law enforcement agencies do not employ decoy victims in OG cases (Bueno de Mata, 2017; Sánchez González, 2024). Therefore, this study draws on de-identified law enforcement case files that include real conversations between suspects and minors.

In criminological research, age and gender are among the most common demographic variables used to construct comparison groups (e.g., Hamby et al., 2013; Soldino et al., 2024). Much of the existing OG literature reflects this pattern, emphasizing descriptive differences such as the greater vulnerability of girls or the heightened risks faced by younger adolescents. Yet, few studies have systematically explored how these demographic characteristics intersect with specific grooming tactics. The present study addresses this gap by examining how identity manipulation varies according to victim gender. We compared OG cases in which suspects used their real identities with those in which they misrepresented key attributes, such as age or gender, and analyzed how these practices related to offenders' grooming strategies and goals. Our findings aim to inform the development of more targeted prevention strategies and training materials for professionals involved in child protection and online safety.

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection & sample

Spanish law enforcement agencies, Policía Nacional and Guardia Civil, provided a total of 98 police reports documenting OG investigations conducted between 2008 and 2021. The study was authorized by the Spanish Secretariat of State for Security and received ethical approval (Universitat de València Registration #120381). The reports were securely transmitted to the research team between September 2020 and January 2022. For security reasons, full access to the information was restricted to the second author (trained in the analysis of sensitive forensic material), while the first author had access exclusively to the anonymized, quantitatively coded dataset.

To be eligible for inclusion, each case had to contain at least one chat log between a suspected OG offender aged 14 or older (the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Spain) and a minor under the age of 18.¹ From the submitted reports, we extracted 295 OG cases that met these initial criteria. The variables were manually coded solely by the second author, who was trained in content analysis and had prior experience coding similar data. Coding decisions were based on both the police report and the full chat transcripts, following a detailed codebook developed from prior research (Soldino and Seigfried-Spellar, 2024). The codebook was developed and refined through pilot coding rounds and consensus meetings, ensuring consistent interpretation of variables.

Of the 295 cases initially reviewed, 46 were excluded for the following reasons: 18 involved alleged adult victims, 11 pertained to unrelated criminal offenses (e.g., non-sexual harassment, scams), six included only chat logs between the suspect and the victim's parent, five lacked information on the suspect's gender, three involved female suspects,² and three contained only conversations between two adult suspects. The final dataset comprised 249 OG cases, involving 112 male suspects and 227 victims (65.6% female, 34.4% male). The mean age of suspects was 28.2 years ($SD = 12.01$; min. = 14; max. = 73; $Mdn = 24.5$), while the mean age of victims was 13.2 years ($SD = 2.26$; min. = 7; max. = 17; $Mdn = 14$).

2.2. Variables of interest

Identity manipulation was examined using three dichotomous variables (see Table 1 for variable definitions). First, OG cases were categorized based on whether the suspect engaged in *identity manipulation* (1 = Yes; 2 = No). For cases involving identity manipulation, two additional variables were created to capture the most common forms of deception observed in the sample: *changing gender* (1 = Yes; 2 = No) and *pretending to be younger* (1 = Yes; 2 = No). These variables were coded by comparing the suspect's actual identity, as documented in the police reports, with the identity information the suspect disclosed to the victim during the chat conversations.

Grooming strategies and suspect goals were coded using a series of non-mutually exclusive dichotomous variables (1 = Yes; 2 = No). Table 1 provides definitions for each variable. Grooming strategies included: *sexual conversation or role play*, *requesting sexual images*, *establishing positive rapport*, *sending unprompted sexual images*, *offering sexual images*, *reciprocation*, *offering something in exchange*, *promoting exclusivity* and *issuing threats*. Suspect goals included the following categories: *sexual images*, *meeting in person*, *sexual conversation*, *revenge* and

¹ Given that any material depicting sexually explicit conduct involving a minor or their sexual organs is categorized as *child pornography* (i.e., CSAM) in accordance with the Spanish Criminal Code, we made the decision to incorporate cases involving victims who were aged between 16 and 18 into our analysis.

² Female offenders were excluded from the final sample due to their low representation and because gender swapping was a key variable in the analyses.

Table 1
Variables of interest.

Variable	Description
Identity manipulation	The suspect adopted a false identity, posing as someone else (e.g., as a child, talent agent, or model)
Changing gender	The suspect presented himself as a female
Pretending to be younger	The suspect presented himself as a younger person
Grooming strategies	Methods used by the suspect to groom their victims
Sexual conversation or role play	Engaging the victim in sexual conversation/role-play
Requesting sexual images	Asking the victim for sexually explicit images of themselves
Establishing positive rapport	Developing a positive rapport with the victim
Sending unprompted sexual images	Sending unprompted sexually explicit images of themselves to the victim
Offering sexual images	Offering sexually explicit images to the victim
Reciprocation	Asking the victim to reciprocally/mutually exchange sexually explicit images
Offering something in exchange	Offering something (other than images) in exchange for fulfilling their goal
Promoting exclusivity	Creating a sense of trust and exclusivity (e.g., "it is our secret", "only we understand", "you are my girlfriend")
Issuing threats	Threatening the victim (e.g., to share their images)
Suspect goals	Goals sought to be achieved by the suspect with their crime
Sexual images	The suspect wanted sexually explicit images of the victim
Meeting in person	The suspect wanted to meet the victim and engage in a contact sexual offense
Sexual conversation	The suspect wanted to engage in sexual conversation/role-play with the victim
Revenge	The suspect wanted revenge on the victim
Children offending against other children	The suspect wanted the victim to offend upon other minors

encouraging children to offend against other children. Most of the categories related to grooming strategies and suspects' goals were adapted from data reported by NCMEC (2017).

This study focused on analyzing OG suspects' deceptive strategies in relation to the gender of their victims. Accordingly, the victim's gender was recorded for each case as a dichotomous variable (1 = Female; 2 = Male).

2.3. Data analysis

The analysis first examined the relationship between the use of identity manipulation (both in general and specifically related to gender and age), and the gender of the victims. Subsequently, separate analyses were conducted based on the victim's gender, focusing on the association between specific forms of identity deception (i.e., posing as a female and pretending to be younger) and (1) the suspect's goals and (2) the grooming strategies employed.

All variables included in the analyses were categorical and dichotomous. Therefore, chi-square tests of independence were used to assess

Table 2
Prevalence of identity manipulation by victim gender.

	Female victim n (%)	Male victim n (%)	Total n (%)	$\chi^2 (p)$ [phi/Cramer's V]
Identity manipulation				11.771 (0.001) [-0.217]
Yes	100 (58.5) [-3.4]	63 (80.8) [3.4]	163 (65.5)	
No	71 (41.5) [3.4]	15 (19.2) [-3.4]	86 (34.5)	
Changing gender				0.904 (0.342) [0.060]
Yes	35 (20.5) [1]	12 (15.4) [-1]	47 (18.9)	
No	136 (79.5) [-1]	66 (84.6) [1]	202 (81.1)	
Pretending to be younger				12.949 (0.000) [-0.228]
Yes	88 (51.5) [-3.6]	59 (75.6) [3.6]	147 (59)	
No	83 (48.5) [3.6]	19 (24.4) [-3.6]	102 (41)	

associations. Standardized adjusted residuals were examined to aid interpretation, and Fisher's exact test was applied in cases where expected cell counts were below five. Finally, effect sizes were calculated using Phi coefficients (for 2x2 tables) and Cramer's V (for 2xn tables), interpreted as follows: 0–0.10 = negligible, 0.10–0.20 = weak, 0.20–0.40 = moderate, 0.40–0.60 = relatively strong, 0.60–0.80 = strong, and 0.80–1.00 = very strong.

3. Results

As shown in Table 2, identity deception was more frequently observed in cases involving male victims (80.8%). This trend was particularly evident in instances of age deception, which occurred in 75.6% of cases with male victims, with both results demonstrating moderate effect sizes. In contrast, no statistically significant differences were observed in the use of gender-based deception according to the victim's gender.

3.1. Changing gender

As shown in Table 3, the analysis of gender-based deception and its relationship to suspect goals revealed a statistically significant association only for the goal of revenge against female victims (57.1% of those seeking revenge against a female victim posed as a female), although the effect size was small. No other statistically significant associations were found between gender-based deception and the remaining suspect goals.

Focusing on the grooming strategies used by suspects (see Table 4), posing as a female was significantly associated with specific tactics for both male and female victims. Cases in which the suspect engaged in conversation with a male victim while adopting a female persona were significantly more likely to involve sexual conversations or role play (90.9%; moderate effect size), requests for sexual images of the victim (90.9%; moderate effect size), attempts to initiate reciprocal image exchanges (90.9%; moderate effect size), and the suspect offering sexual images (81.8%; relatively strong effect size). For female victims, this form of deception was more commonly associated with the use of threats (65.7%; weak effect size). In contrast, no cases involved a male suspect both posing as a female and threatening a male victim (relatively strong effect size).

3.2. Pretending to be younger

Table 5 presents the relationship between age-based deception (i.e., suspects pretending to be younger) and suspects' offending goals, analyzed by the gender of the victims. The findings revealed that when the suspect's objective was to meet the victim in person, age deception was generally not employed, regardless of the victim's gender (moderate effect size). In contrast, suspects were significantly more likely to misrepresent their age when the goal was to engage in sexual conversations or role play, with this strategy observed in interactions with both female (92%) and male (84.2%) victims (moderate effect size for both). Additionally, age deception was significantly more frequent in cases

Table 3
Association between gender-based deception and suspect goals.

Suspect goals	Changing gender					
	Female victim			Male victim		
	Yes	No	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]	Yes	No	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]
n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		n (%)		
Sexual images			0.321+ (0.699) [-0.043]			-
Yes	32 (91.4) [-0.6]	127 (94.1) [0.6]		11 (100) [0.8]	61 (93.8) [-0.8]	
No	3 (8.6) [0.6]	8 (5.9) [-0.6]		0 (0) [-0.8]	4 (6.2) [0.8]	
Meeting in person			0.216 (0.664) [-0.036]			3.020+ (0.106) [-0.199]
Yes	7 (20) [-0.5]	32 (23.7) [0.5]		2 (18.2) [-1.7]	30 (46.2) [1.7]	
No	28 (80) [0.5]	103 (76.3) [-0.5]		9 (81.8) [1.7]	35 (53.8) [-1.7]	
Sexual conversation			1.047 (0.306) [-0.078]			0.130+ (1) [0.041]
Yes	27 (77.1) [-1]	114 (84.4) [1]		9 (81.8) [0.4]	50 (76.9) [-0.4]	
No	8 (22.9) [1]	21 (15.6) [-1]		2 (18.2) [-0.4]	15 (23.1) [0.4]	
Revenge			5.009 (0.033) [0.172]			2.177+ (0.349) [-0.169]
Yes	20 (57.1) [2.2]	49 (36.3) [-2.2]		0 (0) [-1.5]	11 (16.9) [1.5]	
No	15 (42.9) [-2.2]	86 (63.7) [2.2]		11 (100) [1.5]	54 (83.1) [-1.5]	
Children offending against other children			0.576+ (0.431) [0.058]			-
Yes	3 (8.6) [0.8]	7 (5.2) [-0.8]		1 (9.1) [0.4]	4 (6.2) [-0.4]	
No	32 (91.4) [-0.8]	128 (94.8) [0.8]		10 (90.9) [-0.4]	61 (93.8) [0.4]	

+Fisher's exact test.

Table 4
Association between gender-based deception and grooming strategies by victim gender.

Grooming strategies	Changing gender					
	Female victim			Male victim		
	Yes	No	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]	Yes	No	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]
n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		n (%)		
Sexual conversation or role play			2.741 (0.098) [-0.127]			4.125+ (0.042) [0.231]
Yes	25 (71.4) [-1.7]	113 (83.7) [1.7]		10 (90.9) [2]	39 (59.1) [-2]	
No	10 (28.6) [1.7]	22 (16.3) [-1.7]		1 (9.1) [-2]	27 (40.9) [2]	
Requesting sexual images			0.270+ (0.566) [-0.040]			10.051 (0.002) [0.361]
Yes	30 (85.7) [-0.5]	120 (88.9) [0.5]		10 (90.9) [3.2]	26 (39.4) [-3.2]	
No	5 (14.3) [0.5]	15 (11.1) [-0.5]		1 (9.1) [-3.2]	40 (60.6) [3.2]	
Establishing positive rapport			0.171 (0.680) [-0.032]			1.704+ (0.192) [-0.150]
Yes	16 (45.7) [-0.4]	67 (49.6) [0.4]		6 (54.5) [-1.3]	48 (73.8) [1.3]	
No	19 (54.3) [0.4]	68 (50.4) [-0.4]		5 (45.5) [1.3]	17 (26.2) [-1.3]	
Sending unprompted sexual images			1.687+ (0.194) [-0.100]			-
Yes	1 (2.9) [-1.3]	13 (9.6) [1.3]		4 (36.4) [4.3]	1 (1.5) [-4.3]	
No	34 (97.1) [1.3]	122 (90.4) [-1.3]		7 (63.6) [-4.3]	64 (98.5) [4.3]	
Offering sexual images			0.011 (0.915) [0.008]			12.952+ (0.001) [0.413]
Yes	12 (34.3) [0.1]	45 (33.3) [-0.1]		9 (81.8) [3.6]	17 (26.2) [-3.6]	
No	23 (65.7) [-0.1]	90 (66.7) [0.1]		2 (18.2) [-3.6]	48 (73.8) [3.6]	
Reciprocation			0.288 (0.592) [0.041]			5.351+ (0.023) [0.265]
Yes	11 (31.4) [0.5]	36 (26.9) [-0.5]		10 (90.9) [2.3]	35 (53.8) [-2.3]	
No	24 (68.6) [-0.5]	98 (73.1) [0.5]		1 (9.1) [-2.3]	30 (46.2) [2.3]	
Offering something in exchange			3.539 (0.060) [0.145]			1.949+ (0.163) [-0.160]
Yes	10 (28.6) [1.9]	20 (14.9) [-1.9]		0 (0) [-1.4]	10 (15.4) [1.4]	
No	25 (71.4) [-1.9]	114 (85.1) [1.9]		11 (100) [1.4]	55 (84.6) [-1.4]	
Promoting exclusivity			0.009 (0.923) [-0.007]			0.625 (0.429) [-0.091]
Yes	7 (20) [-0.1]	28 (20.7) [0.1]		4 (36.4) [-0.8]	32 (49.2) [0.8]	
No	28 (80) [0.1]	107 (79.3) [-0.1]		7 (63.6) [0.8]	33 (50.8) [-0.8]	
Issuing threats			6.380 (0.012) [0.194]			12.202 (0.000) [-0.401]
Yes	23 (65.7) [2.5]	56 (41.8) [-2.5]		0 (0) [-3.5]	37 (56.9) [3.5]	
No	12 (34.3) [-2.5]	78 (58.2) [2.5]		11 (100) [3.5]	28 (43.1) [-3.5]	

+ Fisher's exact test.

where the suspect sought revenge against female victims (72.7%), with a strong effect size observed for this association.

As shown in Table 6, suspects who pretended to be younger while interacting with female victims were significantly more likely to engage in sexual conversations or role play (87.5%; weak effect size) and to issue threats (73.9%; relatively strong effect size). Conversely, this form of deception was less commonly used when attempting to build positive rapport (40.9%) or offer sexual images (25%), with weak effect sizes observed for both analyses. Among suspects interacting with male victims, those who misrepresented their age were more likely to initiate reciprocal image exchanges (70.2%) and promote exclusivity during the

conversation (56.1%), both with moderate effect sizes. However, they were less likely to request sexual images (39.7%; moderate effect size) or offer something in return other than images (3.5%; relatively strong effect size).

4. Discussion

This study analyzed de-identified law enforcement investigations comprising 249 actual conversations between 112 suspected OG male offenders and 227 minors. Consistent with prior research (Balfe et al., 2015; Moosburner et al., 2025), identity manipulation was common

Table 5
Association between age-based deception and suspect goals by victim gender.

Suspect goals	Pretending to be younger					
	Female victim			Male victim		
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]
Sexual images				1.117 (0.291) [0.081]		
Yes	84 (95.5) [1.1]	75 (91.5) [-1.1]		55 (96.5) [1.2]	17 (89.5) [-1.2]	
No	4 (4.5) [-1.1]	7 (8.5) [1.1]		2 (3.5) [-1.2]	2 (10.5) [1.2]	
Meeting in person			11.251 (0.001) [-0.257]			7.197 (0.007) [-0.308]
Yes	11 (12.5) [-3.4]	28 (34.1) [3.4]		19 (33.3) [-2.7]	13 (68.4) [2.7]	
No	77 (87.5) [3.4]	54 (65.9) [-3.4]		38 (66.7) [2.7]	6 (31.6) [-2.7]	
Sexual conversation			10.688 (0.001) [0.251]			5.683+ (0.026) [0.273]
Yes	81 (92) [3.3]	60 (73.2) [-3.3]		48 (84.2) [2.4]	11 (57.9) [-2.4]	
No	7 (8) [-3.3]	22 (26.8) [3.3]		9 (15.8) [-2.4]	8 (42.1) [2.4]	
Revenge			78.147 (0.000) [0.678]			1.736+ (0.273) [0.151]
Yes	64 (72.7) [8.8]	5 (6.1) [-8.8]		10 (17.5) [1.3]	1 (5.3) [-1.3]	
No	24 (27.3) [-8.8]	77 (93.9) [8.8]		47 (82.5) [-1.3]	18 (94.7) [1.3]	
Children offending against other children			0.013+ (1) [-0.009]			-
Yes	5 (5.7) [-0.1]	5 (6.1) [0.1]		2 (3.5) [-1.9]	3 (15.8) [1.9]	
No	83 (94.3) [0.1]	77 (93.9) [-0.1]		55 (96.5) [1.9]	16 (84.2) [-1.9]	

+ Fisher's exact test

Table 6
Association between age-based deception and grooming strategies by victim gender.

Grooming strategies	Pretending to be younger					
	Female victim			Male victim		
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	χ^2 (p) [phi/Cramer's V]
Sexual conversation or role play				4.774 (0.029) [0.168]		
Yes	77 (87.5) [2.2]	61 (74.4) [-2.2]		39 (67.2) [1.1]	10 (52.6) [-1.1]	
No	11 (12.5) [-2.2]	21 (25.6) [2.2]		19 (32.8) [-1.1]	9 (47.4) [1.1]	
Requesting sexual images			0.415 (0.519) [0.049]			4.757 (0.029) [-0.249]
Yes	79 (89.8) [0.6]	71 (86.6) [-0.6]		23 (39.7) [-2.2]	13 (68.4) [2.2]	
No	9 (10.2) [-0.6]	11 (13.4) [0.6]		35 (60.3) [2.2]	6 (31.6) [-2.2]	
Establishing positive rapport			4.574 (0.032) [-0.164]			0.768 (0.381) [0.101]
Yes	36 (40.9) [-2.1]	47 (57.3) [2.1]		42 (73.7) [0.9]	12 (63.2) [-0.9]	
No	52 (59.1) [2.1]	35 (42.7) [-2.1]		15 (26.3) [-0.9]	7 (36.8) [0.9]	
Sending unprompted sexual images			1.574 (0.210) [-0.096]			-
Yes	5 (5.7) [-1.3]	9 (11) [1.3]		4 (7) [0.3]	1 (5.3) [-0.3]	
No	83 (94.3) [1.3]	73 (89) [-1.3]		53 (93) [-0.3]	18 (94.7) [0.3]	
Offering sexual images			5.955 (0.015) [-0.187]			0.078 (0.780) [0.032]
Yes	22 (25) [-2.4]	35 (42.7) [2.4]		20 (35.1) [0.3]	6 (31.6) [-0.3]	
No	66 (75) [2.4]	47 (57.3) [-2.4]		37 (64.9) [-0.3]	13 (68.4) [0.3]	
Reciprocation			0.722 (0.395) [-0.065]			11.350 (0.001) [0.386]
Yes	22 (25) [-0.8]	25 (30.9) [0.8]		40 (70.2) [3.4]	5 (26.3) [-3.4]	
No	66 (75) [0.8]	56 (69.1) [-0.8]		17 (29.8) [-3.4]	14 (73.7) [3.4]	
Offering something in exchange			0.309 (0.578) [0.043]			18.578+ (0.000) [-0.494]
Yes	17 (19.3) [0.6]	13 (16) [-0.6]		2 (3.5) [-4.3]	8 (42.1) [4.3]	
No	71 (80.7) [-0.6]	68 (84) [0.6]		55 (96.5) [4.3]	11 (57.9) [-4.3]	
Promoting exclusivity			0.112 (0.738) [0.026]			7.037 (0.008) [0.304]
Yes	19 (21.6) [0.3]	16 (19.5) [-0.3]		32 (56.1) [2.7]	4 (21.1) [-2.7]	
No	69 (78.4) [-0.3]	66 (80.5) [0.3]		25 (43.9) [-2.7]	15 (78.9) [2.7]	
Issuing threats			54.238 (0.000) [0.567]			2.967 (0.085) [0.198]
Yes	65 (73.9) [7.4]	14 (17.3) [-7.4]		31 (54.4) [1.7]	6 (31.6) [-1.7]	
No	23 (26.1) [-7.4]	67 (82.7) [7.4]		26 (45.6) [-1.7]	13 (68.4) [1.7]	

+Fisher's exact test

(65.5%) but not universal, as many offenders communicated with minors using their real identities. The most frequent deceptive tactic involved age misrepresentation (59%), typically by pretending to be younger, whereas gender deception (18.9%) was less prevalent. These patterns are consistent with findings from Bergen et al. (2014), Villacampa Estiarte (2017), and Joleby et al. (2021), suggesting that deception is selectively employed rather than a defining feature of OG.

Importantly, our findings indicate that identity manipulation is influenced not only by the victim's gender but also by offenders' specific goals and broader grooming strategies. This supports the conceptualization of OG as a flexible and adaptive process rather than a linear

sequence of behaviors (Broome et al., 2018, 2024; de Santisteban et al., 2018; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Joleby et al., 2021; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2021; Webster et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2013a). Within the framework of CRAT (Choi, 2008; Choi & Lee, 2017; Leukfeldt & Yar, 2016), identity deception can be understood as a situational strategy that increases target suitability and reduces perceived guardianship by manipulating key social cues such as age and gender. In this sense, identity deception functions both as a targeting tool (to enhance approachability) and as a control mechanism to manage resistance during the grooming process.

4.1. Deceptive strategies and victim gender

Identity manipulation was significantly more prevalent in cases involving male victims (80.8%), particularly through age deception (75.6%). Offenders targeting boys often impersonated younger females, strategically exploiting heteronormative assumptions to elicit sexual engagement. Such deception served to reduce cognitive dissonance and resistance by aligning with victims' presumed heterosexual orientation, thereby normalizing sexualized exchanges (Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Lamb, 2016). This pattern suggests that deception functions not merely as concealment but as a persuasive psychological mechanism shaping victims' perceptions of legitimacy and reciprocity.

Age deception was also more common in cases involving male victims when suspects emphasized exclusivity in the relationship and encouraged reciprocal exchanges of sexual images (e.g., "I'll show you if you show me"). Notably, suspects who misrepresented their age to male victims were significantly less likely to offer anything beyond images in return, indicating a narrowly defined, sexually transactional dynamic centered on visual exchange. In contrast, age deception was less frequent when suspects directly requested sexual images from male victims without offering reciprocation. By portraying themselves as peers and aligning with the victim's developmental stage, offenders may cultivate a sense of friendship, mutual sexual exploration, or peer-like intimacy—mechanisms that reduce resistance to sexually explicit exchanges between males (Bergen et al., 2014; de Santisteban et al., 2018; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Kloess, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Beech, 2019; Quayle et al., 2014; Seymour-Smith & Kloess, 2021).

In contrast, when offenders interacted with girls, impersonation often served relational or retaliatory purposes. Offenders posing as same-gender peers or younger males tended to build emotional intimacy and trust (de Santisteban et al., 2018; de Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2017; Quayle et al., 2014), later exploiting that trust through threats or revenge after victims refused to share sexual material. These dynamics resonate with research showing that adolescent girls prioritize emotionally close relationships and are more susceptible to trust-based manipulation (Dunbar et al., 2024; Underwood & Rosen, 2009). In such cases, deception appears to facilitate emotional dependency, enabling both sexual exploitation and coercive retaliation.

Age deception was less common when building rapport with female victims or when offering sexual images to them. This may be because, when a victim believes they are interacting with a peer, the suspect may not need to invest as heavily in rapport building as when the victim knows they are communicating with an adult. In the latter scenario, establishing trust through subtler influence techniques becomes essential to gain compliance and maintain engagement (Chiang & Grant, 2019; Moosburner et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2013). Regarding the offering of sexual images, as noted by Aitken et al. (2018), some offenders deliberately present themselves as adults to attract younger individuals, emphasizing their perceived sexual experience to suggest they can provide pleasure; a strategy that often includes sharing adult erotic material.

4.2. Functional adaptation of deception

The differential use of deception across victim gender and offender goals reinforces the idea that impersonation is functionally adaptive. Offenders who sought online sexual exchanges (e.g., image sharing, sexual conversation) were more likely to misrepresent their age, whereas those intending to meet victims offline tended to present themselves more truthfully. This finding mirrors prior evidence that offenders who deceive about age or identity are less likely to pursue physical meetings (Bergen et al., 2014; Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024). From a situational perspective, maintaining a false identity would hinder offline contact, whereas authenticity may serve as a pre-screening mechanism for compliance and reduce the risk of rejection

once the real identity is revealed. These results suggest that deception is more prevalent in online-only grooming contexts, where offenders can sustain a fabricated persona without exposure.

Furthermore, when interactions escalate into more aggressive or coercive behaviors (such as threatening to distribute the victim's images) identity deception may serve an additional function. In these cases, offenders may be more consciously aware of the harm they are inflicting (Bartels & Merdian, 2016; Paquette & Cortoni, 2020, 2022; Paquette et al., 2020; Soldino et al., 2020), and deliberately adopt a false identity either to mask their real selves or to facilitate more violent or psychologically damaging forms of abuse. This suggests that impersonation is not merely a tactic for initiating contact or gaining trust; it can also play a pivotal role in enabling behaviors that go beyond the socially "normalized" sexualization of adolescent girls (McGladrey, 2015; Meyers, 2021; Sidani, 2023; Smolak & Murnen, 2011), extending toward actions that even offenders may perceive as distinctly deviant or morally reprehensible.

4.3. Limitations

Despite analyzing the largest sample of OG cases investigated by Spanish law enforcement agencies to date, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting and generalizing these findings. First, the dataset included only cases formally reported, investigated, and documented by Spanish law enforcement between 2008 and 2021. This reliance on official police records inherently excludes unreported incidents and cases that, for various reasons, never came to police attention. Consequently, the sample likely overrepresent more severe, detectable, or successfully investigated cases, while underrepresenting subtler or less overt forms of grooming. This selection bias may have shaped the findings by emphasizing behavioral patterns and tactics typical of offenders whose actions led to formal police involvement, rather than reflecting the full continuum of grooming behaviors occurring online.

Moreover, the 13-year data collection period (2008–2021) coincides with substantial technological, legal, and sociocultural changes (e.g., the widespread adoption of smartphones, evolving reporting mechanisms, legislative reforms). Such temporal variability may have influenced both offender strategies and institutional responses, introducing heterogeneity that complicates the interpretation of observed patterns across time.

The final dataset also excluded all cases involving female suspects ($n = 3$). Although this number was too small for meaningful statistical analysis, their absence limits the study's ability to explore gender dynamics beyond the predominant male-offender/female-victim paradigm and may have reinforced existing assumptions about offender typologies.

Additionally, the study relied on retrospective police records originally compiled for investigative rather than research purposes. These records varied in completeness, consistency, and level of detail, which may have affected the availability of key variables (e.g., victim reactions, suspect identity verification). The resulting case exclusions due to missing data could have further biased the sample toward better-documented investigations. Moreover, coding decisions were restricted to information explicitly recorded in police files and chat logs, which may not capture the full complexity of the interactions or the motivations involved.

For confidentiality and security reasons, full access to the raw data was limited to the second author, preventing independent coding verification. While this ensured compliance with data protection requirements, it inevitably reduces confidence in the robustness and reproducibility of the coding process.

Although chat logs were the primary inclusion criterion, the analytical framework prioritized dichotomous, observable behaviors (e.g., issuing threats, requesting sexual images). While this ensured methodological clarity and comparability across cases, it likely

oversimplified the communicative and relational complexity of grooming (Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). Elements such as tone, emotional manipulation, escalation, or grooming progression may therefore be underrepresented. Similarly, the binary classification of gender (male/female) does not account for gender diversity among victims or suspects, potentially obscuring dynamics relevant to transgender, non-binary, or gender-questioning youth.

Future research should address these limitations by using larger, more diverse and representative samples, while remaining responsive to the evolving nature of digital environments, including emerging platforms, anonymity features, and new grooming tactics. Incorporating qualitative approaches, such as discourse analysis or interviews with victims and offenders, could offer richer insights into the emotional, relational, and communicative dimensions of grooming interactions. Expanding gender classification frameworks would also allow for a more inclusive understanding of identity-based deception and its impact across different groups of children and adolescents. In parallel, future studies should include a sufficiently large and representative sample of female offenders to examine the deceptive strategies they employ and to identify potential similarities and differences with male offenders. Moreover, applying multivariate analyses would help clarify the interplay between offender, victim, and situational variables. Building on the findings of the present study, future research could also investigate whether the use of false identities increases the likelihood of obtaining self-generated CSAM or committing contact sexual offenses. Finally, future analyses should consider the age of both victims and offenders, allowing for the classification of cases based on age differences and their potential influence on grooming dynamics.

4.4. Potential implications

Overall, these findings have several practical implications. For law enforcement, understanding how the use of identity deception varies by gender can improve both risk assessment protocols and investigative prioritization. Cases involving male victims and cross-gender impersonation may warrant particular attention, as these were associated with higher levels of sexual explicitness and manipulation. Given that identity manipulation occurred in 80.8% of cases involving male victims, early recognition of such patterns could support more efficient case triaging and enhance victim safeguarding.

For educators and child protection practitioners, the results highlight the need to move beyond generic “stranger danger” messages and to incorporate more nuanced discussions of online identity, deception, and trust-building into digital literacy curricula. Adolescents (particularly boys) may lower their guard when they believe they are interacting with someone of a similar age or gender (a potential friend or romantic partner). They should therefore be informed that online interlocutors may misrepresent themselves not only to gain trust but also to exploit curiosity, affection, or sexual exploration.

Prevention programs and awareness campaigns should avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and instead tailor messages to gender-specific risks and offender tactics. Training materials for professionals could include practical scenarios showing how offenders adapt their deception strategies according to victim demographics and intended outcomes. At the same time, prevention programs that focus exclusively on exposing false identities risk overlooking many cases in which no overt deception occurs. Effective prevention must therefore raise awareness not only of the potential for deception online but also of the broader power imbalance inherent in adult–minor relationships, which always carries significant risks to the minor's well-being (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024).

Boys, in particular, should not be overlooked in prevention initiatives. Previous research (Calvete et al., 2021; Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2024) has shown that boys may be more likely to engage in sexual exchanges or agree to offline meetings. Our findings reinforce the need to emphasize that boys can also be sexualized and exploited, and that their

images can be misused or distributed without consent. Prevention messages targeting boys should explicitly convey that online interlocutors (whether they appear to be girls or same-age peers) may not be who they claim to be, and that sharing intimate material online always entails risks, regardless of the other person's perceived age or gender. For girls, prevention efforts should stress that deception can be used not only to gain emotional trust but also to facilitate coercion, revenge, or the non-consensual dissemination of intimate content. In these cases, identity manipulation often functioned as a mechanism of emotional leverage, underscoring the importance of addressing how affection, empathy, and loyalty can be exploited by offenders.

From a theoretical perspective, the gender-specific patterns identified in this study underscore the importance of integrating intersectional dynamics into grooming theory; specifically, how gender, assumptions about sexual orientation, and offender intent interact to shape grooming behaviors. For policymakers and professional training, these insights highlight the need to develop materials and simulations reflecting realistic, gender-differentiated strategies rather than relying on stereotypical portrayals of online offenders. By tailoring prevention and educational initiatives to these nuanced, empirically grounded patterns, interventions can become more relevant, realistic, and effective in protecting minors from online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jorge Santos-Hermoso: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Virginia Soldino:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

While preparing this work, the authors used chatGPT-4 to improve readability and language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed, and we take full responsibility for the publication's content.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

This research forms part of the project CIGE/2023/14, funded by the Conselleria de Educació, Universidades y Empleo (Generalitat Valenciana, Spain). Virginia Soldino's work was additionally supported by Google's Trust & Safety Research Awards. We are grateful to the General Directorate for Coordination and Studies of the Secretariat of State for Security (Ministerio del Interior, Spain) for their collaboration in facilitating this study. We also extend our sincere thanks to the officers of Policía Nacional and Guardia Civil who contributed to this research and carried out the investigations on which it is based.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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