

## The Instrumentalization of Digital Media in the Context of Sexualized Violence

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**Abstract :** Sexual online grooming is generally defined as digital interactions for the purpose of sexual exploitation of children or minors, i.e. as a process for preparing and framing sexual child abuse. Due to its conceptual history, sexual online grooming is often associated with perpetrators who are previously unknown to those affected. While the strategies of perpetrators and the perception of those affected are increasingly being investigated, the instrumentalisation of digital media has not yet been researched much. Therefore, the present paper aims at contributing to this research gap by examining in what kind of ways perpetrators instrumentalise digital media. Our analyses draw on 46 case documentations and 18 interviews with those affected. The cases and the partly narrative interviews were collected by ten cooperating specialist centers working on sexualized violence in childhood and youth. For this purpose, we designed a documentation grid allowing for a detailed case reconstruction i.e. including information on the violence, digital media use and those affected. By using Reflexive Grounded Theory, our analyses emphasize a) the subjective benchmark of professional practitioners as well as those affected and b) the interpretative implications resulting from our researchers' subjective and emotional interaction with the data material. It should first be noted that sexualized online grooming can result in both online and offline sexualized violence as well as hybrid forms. Furthermore, the perpetrators either come from the immediate social environment of those affected or are unknown to them. The perpetrator-victim relationship plays a more important role with regard to the question of the instrumentalisation of digital media than the question of the space (on vs. off) in which the primary violence is committed. Perpetrators unknown to those affected instrumentalise digital media primarily to establish a sexualized system of norms, which is usually embedded in a supposed love relationship. In some cases, after an initial exchange of sexualized images or video recordings, a latent play on the position of power takes place. In the course of the grooming process, perpetrators from the immediate social environment increasingly instrumentalise digital media to establish an explicit relationship of power and dependence, which is directly determined by coercion, threats and blackmail. The knowledge of possible vulnerabilities is strategically used in the course of maintaining contact. The above explanations lead to the conclusion that the motive for the crime plays an essential role in the question of the instrumentalisation of digital media. It is therefore not surprising that it is mostly the near-field perpetrators without commercial motives who initiate a spiral of violence and stress by digitally distributing sexualized (violent) images and video recordings within the reference system of those affected.

**Keywords :** sexualized violence, children and youth, grooming, offender strategies, digital media

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