LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

SELF-PRESENTATION, NETWORKING, PLAYING, AND PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

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Stranger Is Not Always Danger: The Myth and Reality of Meetings with Online Strangers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with the topic of face-to-face meetings with people known only from the internet. First, the popularized picture of online strangers as online pedophiles searching for children on the internet is presented and contradicted to empirical evidence from actual internet-initiated sexual crimes with minors. Next, the chapter focuses on findings from the general population of young internet users and shows the typical meetings with online strangers as an activity which mostly happens among adolescent peers and only in a minority of the cases results in negative outcomes. Lastly, the focus shifts to a description and discussion of the nature of such negative experiences based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The consequences of the inaccurate media portrayal of online strangers are also discussed, as well as future directions for research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Face-to-face or "offline" meetings with so-called online strangers (i.e., with people known from the internet one has not met before) is considered one of the most risky online activities in which children and youth may engage (Fleming & Rickwood, 2004; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). This is reflected in the high proportion of parents reporting such concerns in the United States (53% of parents were *very* concerned and another 19% *somewhat* about their children's interactions with online strangers; Madden, Cortesi, Gasser, Lenhart, & Duggan, 2012) as well as in Europe (60% of parents reported being mostly concerned about their children being a target of online grooming; European Commission, 2008). It makes perfect sense – online activities happen, according to the definition of "online" (i.e., in a virtual

space), where youth are physically distant from other internet users, often in their homes and under (at least some) supervision by parents. Offline meetings with online strangers, on the other hand, start as online activity, but then move to the physical world, where we are all more vulnerable – especially when compared to the relative safety of being online in one's own home.

Concerns over youth safety in meetings with online strangers include mainly the fear of sexual or physical abuse, and these concerns are widely supported by highly publicized cases of online pedophiles or cybergroomers. Empirical evidence, however, shows a different picture: negative experiences from meetings of online strangers are not common and do not correspond to the media coverage. In this chapter, I will focus on this discrepancy between the popular portrayal of cybergrooming and reality, and present an alternative picture of meetings between online strangers that is grounded in empirical data. To understand this discrepancy, it is important to first describe how the media present the problematic of online pedophiles or cybergroomers, therefore it is a subject of next section.

Media Portrayal of Cybergrooming
In general, presentations of any problem in the media are very important because they shape the perceptions of the general public as well as the professionals who can then be requested to propose and implement prevention and intervention strategies. Misguided portrayals in the media can thus lead to misguided policies that target mistaken issues and/or populations. It is, therefore, important to compare the media coverage of meeting strangers with empirical evidence.

When we search for information about meeting online strangers, terms such as "cybergroomers", "online pedophiles", and "online predators" are common. Marwick (2008) argues that the online pedophile issue has expanded from a few sensationalized media cases into widespread and disproportional moral panic. Based on the usage of the phrase "online pedophiles" in articles in popular U.S. press between January 1995 and February 2008, she showed how the term became popular in 2007 when 457 articles were found as opposed to 58 in 2006 and only 12 in 2005. She links this spike to the reality show "To Catch a Predator"[9] and a few cases of teens being sexually abused by people met through the social networking site MySpace (see Marwick, 2008 for more details). Similar moral panic, even though based on different cases, could be

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9   In this reality show, volunteers pretended to be minors and set up a meeting with an online stranger
     for sexual purposes; the stranger was then publicly exposed and arrested by the police.

identified also in Europe (Facer, 2012). This wide media coverage led to a generalized fear of a very specific online stranger both in the U.S. and Europe – an adult man with pedophilic sexual orientation who uses the anonymity of the internet to search for unsuspecting children while pretending to be their age, and then manipulates them to meet him offline where he can sexually abuse them (Fleming & Rickwood, 2004; Marwick, 2008; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009).

Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2004; see also Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010) conducted a study to address whether this popular picture of online pedophiles corresponded to reality. The National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) study focused on internet-initiated sex crimes with juvenile victims. Using stratified sampling from law enforcement agencies in the U.S., they were informed about 1,723 cases of internet-related sex crimes, from which another subsample was randomly selected. This process produced a sample of 129 internet-initiated cases. Most of these cases (73%) were completed crimes (with charges such as sexual assault or the production of child pornography), the rest fell under attempted crimes. The study then focused on the characteristics of victims and offenders in these cases, as well as on the case stories. These are the most important findings which can be compared to the aforementioned media portrayal of online predators: 1) most victims (99%) were between the ages of 13 and 17 (76% between 13 and 15), 1% was 12 years old and there were none younger; 2) offenders were mostly male (99%) and aged 26 or older (76%) with almost half more than 20 years older than the minor (47%); 3) only 5% of offenders pretended to be their victim's age; 4) most offenders (80%) openly discussed sex with their victims during online interactions; 5) most offenders and victims met offline (74%) and most of those more than once (73%); and, 6) only 5% of cases involved violent offenses (mostly attempted or actual rape).

These figures show that, in a typical case, the minor knew who he/she was about to meet (e.g., the age of the stranger) and knew about and agreed to sexual activities with the stranger, resulting mostly in statutory rape because the victims were under the legal age of consent. In half of the cases the investigators even reported that the minor was in love with the offender.

This already shows a different picture from the one presented in the media: offenders (mostly) do not lie about their age, nor their motives, and the minors are willingly (albeit illegally) engaging in sexual activities, possibly because, from their perspective, they are in a romantic relationship with the offender.

Further, the age range of the victims in this study shows that offenders were not pedophiles (i.e., interested in prepubescent children); rather, their sexual orientation might better be described as hebephilia (i.e., attraction toward adolescents). Since adolescents are sexually mature, this preference does not represent deviant orientation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), even though it does not conform to accepted social and legal norms in Western societies.

Wolak et al. (2004) also explain that the internet is not such a convenient space for pedophiles to look for children. Children usually do not engage in interactions with strangers with the frequency of older youth (e.g., Livingstone et al., 2011), because they are not yet interested in searching for relationships or romance (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). They also tend to have more restrictive or supervised access to the internet (both at home and at school) and they are generally more discouraged from interacting with strangers than adolescents (Livingstone et al., 2011). Further, when children encounter something online that makes them uncomfortable, they are more likely to inform parents or another authority and stop the activity when compared to adolescents (Livingstone et al., 2011). This environment is also not friendly toward impulsive and violent offenders, as establishing the relationship with a youth typically requires time and patience (Wolak et al., 2004).

When we recall the online pedophile portrait in the media, we can see that in this sample (i.e., the sample of actual criminal internet-initiated sex crime cases with minors), there was not one that would fit this popular image. Rather, there were cases of adolescents willingly meeting with adults for the purpose of a relationship with a sexual component. However, it is extremely important at this point to state at least two qualifications.

First, this does not mean that pedophilic individuals cannot try and sometimes even succeed in finding vulnerable children on the internet. After all, there have been several such documented cases (see Facer, 2012; Marwick, 2008).

Second, the predominant picture of a minor meeting an adult on the internet for the purpose of romantic and sexual relationship formation should not be understood as a positive message, per se. Surely, when we compare such a meeting with an assumed pedophile reaching out to sexually abuse children, it seems that we can exhale with relief that this is an extremely rare reality. But, adolescents forming sexual relationships with (often quite older) adults also represent a major concern because of the inevitably unbalanced dynamic in

such relationships. On the other hand, it is a concern quite different from the one presented in the media.

The popular portrayal of the dangers of unknown people on the internet as online pedophiles is thus widely inaccurate and its representation should be changed, as its current version has led to several unfortunate consequences, which will be the subject of next section.

Online "Stranger Danger"?

Fear for children's wellbeing and safety both online and offline is a natural and important part of society, and is especially pronounced for parents. It helps to prevent or decrease many problems in children's lives. But, public concern can also easily lead to exaggerated moral panic, as described above. The main problem with moral panic over online pedophiles is that when people take such a generalized inaccurate picture for granted, they start to fear something which is rare, they start to misdirect public policy, and, as a result, they do not pay enough attention to more real (or more probable) dangers. This also misguides youth as to what they should really be careful about (see Wolak et al., 2004).

What is happening is basically that we now see a new version of "stranger danger" rhetoric, which was previously used in the offline world and should lead to the prevention of sexual abuse and dangerous situations that children may generally encounter. But, there is a lot of oversimplification in this slogan, which eventually led even official agencies dealing with child abuse (such as, for example, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children; McBride, 2005) to withhold its support. These are the reasons why "stranger danger" rhetoric is problematic: 1) it is not clear who constitutes the "stranger". According to McBride (2005), when asked about a "stranger", children tend to describe him/her as someone who is ugly or mean – i.e., children do not consider friendly people to be strangers they should fear. Similarly, when children know the person from somewhere, they may stop perceiving the person as a "stranger" and therefore, as a "danger". "Somewhere" in this instance might be the neighborhood, school, or simply repeatedly seeing someone on the street. And, 2) this slogan also ignores the facts about child sexual abuse – that in the vast majority of cases, the offender is not actually a stranger, but rather someone well known to the child, such as a family member, a teacher, or a neighbor (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005). Thus, "stranger danger" advice fails to address the real problem.

The situation is similar in the case of online pedophiles. Once again, youth are taught to fear someone while ignoring the fact that this specific someone represents only a very rare danger. For example, in the European Grooming Project (Webster et al., 2012), adolescents were asked to describe an online groomer. Their answers covered characteristics such as: old, creepy, fat, bold, mentally disturbed, sweaty, wearing big thick glasses, and more similarly stereotypical ones. This is the person who we teach youth to fear. The problem is that at the same time we also implicitly teach them that they can trust everyone else who does not fit this profile. By spreading around the online pedophile stereotype, we tell them to be aware of online strangers, *because they are creepy pedophiles acting as peers*. In the qualitative research conducted in the Czech Republic in 2011, we interviewed youth about their negative experiences with meeting online strangers. This is an excerpt from one interview conducted through instant messenger with a 15-year-old girl who had met several boys from the internet:

> **Interviewer**: *And did you think about the potential dangers of the meeting when you did not know the guy?*
>
> **Girl**: *Not really, that never happened to me… It was always absolutely ok, because I saw them on webcam…*
>
> **Interviewer**: *And when you saw them and talked to them online prior to the meeting, then you thought it is safe?*
>
> **Girl**: *I did, because I was certain, that they are not old pedophiles, who will kill me :-D*

This girl clearly had heard about the dangers of online pedophiles, who might use the internet to search for children, but she assumed that meeting with verified peers was danger-free simply because they were verified peers. Similarly, another girl in the same project said that she did not expect anything dangerous and did not employ any safety or protection measures because she was about to meet her friend's brother, i.e., not a complete stranger.

Similar to offline "stranger danger", the "stranger" label is rather ambiguous and misleading in the case of online strangers. Youth interact with online "strangers" often for a long period of time before they decide to meet in person. There is a valid question whether these previously unknown people from the internet are really "strangers" after this online phase of interaction, and whether we should continue to label them as such. But I will get back to this question later.

Until now I have shown that sexual abuse from online strangers is problematic and, in fact, quite different from what we would expect based on media reports. But, the issue is more rich than described thus far and it would be a mistake to understand the results of Wolak et al.'s (2004) study as a typical scenario for meeting online strangers. Bear in mind that their data is based only on criminal records and, therefore, shows typical scenarios only for internet-initiated sexual crimes against minors. To learn about a typical scenario of youth meetings with online strangers in general, we have to take a look at empirical evidence that stems from researching the general population of online youth.

Adolescents' Meetings with Online Strangers
As mentioned above, children are typically not looking for new relationships or meeting new people online; this is an activity predominantly employed by adolescents. In adolescence, the need to interact with other people increases and it is developmentally appropriate for adolescents to widen their social circle because it is extremely important in fulfilling their developmental goals of identity, intimacy, and sexuality (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Meeting new people (i.e., strangers) is a natural part of growing up, as it had been before the internet. The only difference is that contemporary youth have an additional environment in which to meet new people. And as empirical evidence shows, they do use this environment for this purpose quite often:

Fully 30% of respondents interacted with an unknown person (or people) online during the last 12 months, according to findings from the EU Kids Online II project, which questioned children and adolescents 9–16 years old in 25 European countries (N = 21, 142; Livingstone et al., 2011). But there were substantial differences with regard to age (see Graph 1). While just 13% of younger children (9–10 years old) communicated with a stranger online, almost every other (46%) did so at 15–16. This age trend nicely demonstrates the developmental conditionality of this activity. The same age trend is clearly visible in the frequencies of actual offline meetings with people from the internet, i.e., the focus of this chapter.

On average, 9% of European children questioned in EU Kids Online II had met someone from the internet in the previous year. This number is quite low and shows that the majority of children in Europe actually do not embrace this activity. Even in the oldest group in this research (15–16 year olds), only 16% went to such a meeting. Empirical findings from other studies regarding the frequencies of meeting strangers vary depending on age and the specificity of their sample. For example, a Romanian study by Barbovschi (2009), showed
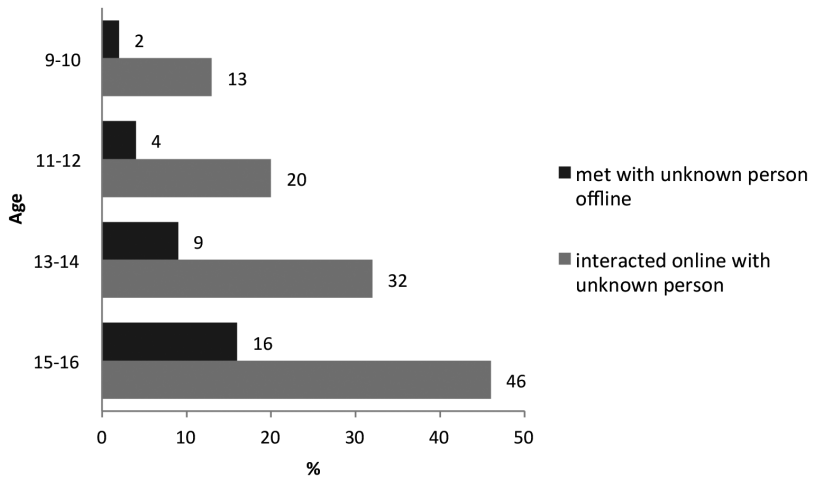
Figure 1: Online and offline interactions with online strangers among European children (EU Kids Online II, *N* = 25,142).

around one third of 10–20 year olds (*N* = 1, 806) met someone from the internet. The American Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS, Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002) found 7% of 10–17 years old (*N* = 1, 501) did. And the SAFT Singapore survey concurred with 16% of 12–17 years old (*N* = 1, 241) (Liau, Khoo, & Hwaang, 2005). We can thus see, that even in the sample with the highest proportion of respondents meeting strangers (one third of the respondents in Barbovschi's study), the majority of the sample still does not meet people from the internet.

Typically, youth meet with a peer or someone of approximately the same age (a year younger or older) and, in the majority of cases, the meeting included a male and a female participant (Livingstone et al., 2011; Walsh, Wolak, & Mitchell, 2013; Wolak et al., 2002), which is also in line with the adolescent's developmental needs, as mentioned above (Brown, 2004). Moreover, the "strangers" are also often connected to the youth's offline lives: they are friends of friends or distant relatives, i.e., people somehow "verified" by one's existing social circle. In EU Kids Online II, 57% of youth who met someone from the internet encountered someone in this fashion (Barbovschi, Marinescu, Velicu, & Laszlo, 2012).

Further, we should ask who the children are who not only communicate with strangers online but who also decide to meet them offline (according to EU

Kids Online II, this is 30% of online interactions versus 9% of offline meetings). Empirical evidence suggests that those who actually meet with strangers tend to be somehow more vulnerable: they tend to have more difficulties in their lives (such as problematic relationships with peers and/or parents), higher levels of depression, and they use the internet with higher frequency than those who do not meet with online strangers (Barbovschi, 2009, 2013; Liau et al., 2005; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). These findings could be interpreted with the so-called "social compensation hypothesis", which suggests that people may engage in online relationships to compensate for poor, unsupportive offline relationships (for more details see e.g., Laghi et al., 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

So when we look at findings based on the general population of young internet users, we see a different picture from the one presented earlier in the sample of internet-initiated sexual crimes with minors. We see youth who seem not to have sufficiently strong (or diverse or frequent) social ties in their offline lives, and who seek to fulfill their developmental goals by searching for new relationships on the internet. We see youth communicating and meeting peers of the opposite gender, perhaps to try to form desired (and, again, developmentally appropriate) romantic relationships or to develop a new friendship. And we see them succeed in their effort, finding new friends or partners, but, indeed, we also see some of them getting hurt by such meetings. That is the topic of next section.

Unpleasant Meetings with Online Strangers
As in the physical world when we meet someone new, not every meeting with an online stranger goes well. Unfortunately, gaps in current knowledge remain when it comes to the question of what went wrong during negative meetings with online strangers. We know that youths' negative experiences are not frequent. EU Kids Online II findings show that only 1% of all respondents had a negative experience (11% of those who went to an offline meeting). When asked about the extent of their negative feelings after the meeting, about half of them indicated they were bothered "not at all" or "a bit" as opposed to the second half, who said they were bothered "fairly" or "very" (Livingstone et al., 2011). An even lower number of youth upset after meeting a stranger were reported in the aforementioned YISS (3% of those who went to such a meeting, Wolak et al., 2002) and the Singapore study (2.4% of those who went to such a meeting, Liau et al., 2005). It is interesting to note that meetings resulting in a negative experience are not different from other meetings with respect to the level of "familiarity" with the stranger. In other words, meetings with complete strangers are no more or less harmful than meetings with people

known through one's existing social circle (Barbovschi et al., 2012). Moreover, most negative meetings (similar to most meetings in general) are the ones with peers, not an adult, as would be expected based on the previously discussed "online pedophile" scenarios (Livingstone et al., 2011).

To better understand the negative experience, researchers in EU Kids Online II asked youth upset by the meeting what happened. (Due to the sensitivity of the question, only respondents older than 11 were asked, $N = 231$). They could choose multiple answers from these options:

- The other person said hurtful things to me: this was true for 22% of respondents
- The other person did something sexual to me: 11%
- The other person hurt me physically: 3%
- Something else: 10%

Interestingly, a lot of these respondents did not provide a specific answer to this question by choosing: *I do not know* (37%) or *I do not want to answer* (22%) (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 94). When we add the 10% who reported *something else*, we do not have any clue what happened to quite a large amount of respondents in this project. In the Singapore study (Liau et al., 2005), researchers asked all youth who went to such a meeting (not solely those with negative experiences, $N = 1, 241$) if something bad had happened. There were only two respondents who reported that the stranger said nasty things to them and two who reported that the stranger tried to hurt them physically. But they also had quite a large amount of respondents who avoided the answer: 22% stated that they did not remember/did not know.

Besides these obviously missing answers, the pre-specified options typical for quantitative research also do not give us enough specific details about the upsetting experience. For example, the concrete interpretation of "sexual" largely differs among individuals (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004) and "something sexual" can thus cover a wide range of behavior, from actual intercourse to non-coital experiences such as kissing (Crockett, Raffaeli, & Moilanen, 2003). Therefore, it is hard to understand the real meaning behind these statistics.

To get a deeper understanding of the nature of negative experiences with meeting online strangers, we interviewed 14 Czech adolescent girls (aged 15–18) who claimed to have had such an experience (Dedkova, Cerna, Janasova, & Daneback, 2014). The "prototypical" negative meeting in this small sample

can be described this way: a girl met a boy or a young man on the internet and interacted with him for some time. During that time, she appreciated his language and attention and she found him attractive based on his pictures. When she agreed to the meeting, it was for dating purpose (even though this was sometimes not explicitly formulated); the girl thought that they might form a romantic relationship if they proved to be compatible. However, when the girl first saw her counterpart, she realized he looked different than she had expected and that she was not attracted to him. Consequently, she felt disappointed and did not find his welcoming kiss or hug as appropriate or desirable. Further, during the meeting, he behaved differently than she expected, tried to kiss her or touch her repeatedly, was rude, or inattentive. The girl felt upset, disgusted, bored, and sometimes scared, but she somehow could not express herself and, rather than directly asking him to stop his actions, she remained silent and tried to avoid physical contact by keeping physical distance or by staying in a public place. After the meeting, the girl shared her experience with someone close (e.g., a friend, a cousin, an aunt), listened to loud music, and participated in other activities to avoid thinking about the meeting. She felt guilty that she went to the meeting in the first place and she also felt angry at herself for not being able to tell the stranger what she really thought.

Based on the specifics of each meeting (e.g., the stranger's specific behavior), the resulting negative feelings of the girls included (and mostly were a mix of) fear, anger, embarrassment, remorse, disappointment, and boredom (Dedkova et al., 2014). We can also identify three main sources of the girls' negative feelings:

1. The appearance of the stranger – his age and physical attractiveness, despite the fact that in most cases the girls knew the (correct) age of the stranger and saw his photo during the online interaction phase;

2. The stranger's behavior – negatively perceived behavior mostly covered the strangers' attempts to physical contact (e.g., kissing, hugging), or actual physical contact (rape in one case and inappropriate touching in another), but also rude language, overconfidence, and aggressive behavior; and

3. The girls' reflections on their own behavior – the girls felt they should not have agreed to meet the stranger or should have acted differently during the meeting.

The main problem thus seems to be the differences between the girls' expectations and reality. However, lots of information still remains unknown or was not captured in our interviews. For example, we do not know the basis for the girls' expectations: was it the strangers' behavior during the online phase that lead the girls to expect a handsome gentleman (which would suggest that strangers did purposefully alter their self-presentation online), or was it the girls' imagination and a projection of their ideal counterpart onto the stranger, facilitated by the lack of audiovisual cues in the online environment? Or did gender and age differences – in other words, non-internet-related factors – play the most important role? While these expectation sources are extremely hard to assess (impossible, even, when interviewing only one side of the interaction), it is plausible that all these processes played some role.

The cue-less online environment allows us to massively project our own wishes and desires onto our counterpart as we are forced to create a complex picture of the individual with a limited amount of information (Suler, 2004). Also, the same cue-less nature of the internet provides users with control over their self-presentation that would be hard to achieve offline. For example, one can think carefully what to write, let the system check spelling mistakes, present only information that shows one in a positive light. At the same time, the receiver of this information mostly cannot validate it (e.g., one cannot verify the information about appearance by simple observation as one would face-to-face; Walther, 2007). These two processes can be easily combined to create an expectation so different from reality that discovering the discrepancy inevitably leads to negative feelings. Furthermore, people tend to self-present themselves in a positive light as well as (often) subconsciously fill-in the gaps in others' presentations. Therefore, these differences could be produced without ill will on either side.

Gender and age differences might also be an important step in the process. A different developmental phase or the socialization of gender roles may lead to expecting different outcomes from the meeting and, therefore, can lead to perceiving strangers' behaviors as undesirable (more in Dedkova et al., 2014). These "demographic" differences work the same way when we meet new people in our offline lives as well – meetings with online strangers are no different from what we already know and experience offline in these respects.

One interesting point was also captured in the interviews and was briefly outlined before in section on "stranger danger" rhetoric. Should we label people from the internet who youths meet in the physical world as "strangers"?

We saw that in more than half of the cases, youths met someone connected to their existing social circle (e.g., a friend of a friend; Barbovschi et al., 2012). Moreover, the online phase of interaction can be quite extensive. For example, one of interviewed girls in our study interacted with her "stranger" for two years and actually reported that they had been in a romantic relationship for three months prior to the face-to-face meeting. This does not strongly correspond with the "stranger" label. On the other hand, several girls in our study did use the word "stranger" or described in different words that the person was in fact someone unknown. And even this particular girl, who said she was actually in a relationship with her online "stranger" during the online phase of their interaction, said: *"We did not know each other and suddenly this"* when she described why she was unpleasantly surprised by his attempts to kiss her when they first met face-to-face. It seems that for these girls, the online interaction phase was not enough to really get to know the person, who, in some respect, remained a "stranger". But, it is also possible that this holds true only (or predominantly) for negative meetings. The girls might have relied on the stranger label as it provided them an excuse to not engage in unwanted physical contact. For positive encounters, the stranger label may be inappropriate because youth might be meeting an online friend who then continues to be their friend offline and there is no "relationship drop" after the face-to-face meeting.

These interviews provide deeper insight into what went wrong on negative meetings with online strangers and how such a negative meeting might really look, but it is important to keep in mind that the data comes from a small sample of girls who reported, and were willing to share, their negative experiences with meeting online strangers. Therefore, the data should not be generalized to every meeting with online strangers. Furthermore, in this study we have only analyzed interviews with girls; therefore, we lack the perspective of boys and men, which would definitely provide interesting information and explanations for upsetting meetings, and I would welcome future research in this direction.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was to show that the media portrayal depicting online strangers is widely inaccurate and, in fact, leads to some undesirable consequences in the form of misguided advice and policies. According to empirical evidence from many studies presented in this chapter, most youths' meetings with online strangers do not result in negative experiences, and when they do there is no correspondence to the media's online pedophile scenario in an absolute majority of cases.

In contrast to the media portrayal, meetings with online strangers typically happen in adolescence, not childhood. Meeting strangers is a natural part of the developmental and social processes: we should not forget that we were all once strangers to our friends and partners and we all have met a lot of strangers during our lives. One's social circle is constantly growing, especially in adolescence, because adolescents simply need other people to achieve their developmental goals. This is why meeting strangers rapidly increases during this life period – it is beneficial and developmentally appropriate. And this is also why advising youth not to meet strangers (online or offline) is, by default, dubious.

Therefore, parents should acknowledge that at some age (adolescence) it is normal that their offspring want to meet new people, and, because the internet is now a natural part of youth lives, children might utilize this environment for this purpose as well and not depend solely on the physical world. Parents should let their children know that under some conditions and while taking safety measures meeting people from the internet can be allowed and will not result in restrictions or punishment in form of e.g., limited internet access. Stating the opposite might lead youth to hide planned meetings from parents and consequently increase the potential risk. Further, it is important to encourage youth to leave the meeting if they do not like the other person.

Fear about strangers also leads to another consequence: it inherently makes children and youth believe that meeting familiar people is without risk. Debates about the dangers of meeting online strangers implicitly suggest that meetings with people not fitting the "online stranger" label is safe (e.g., meeting an online friend; meeting someone connected to offline life, for example, a friend of a schoolmate). However, negative meetings with other people are not a new phenomenon that developed with the invention of the internet and for which complete strangers are to blame. These experiences have always been here (see, for example, the wide literature on adolescent dating violence). And, as empirical evidence shows, harm does often come from familiar people known from "reality" and not from random strangers. As mentioned above, in most cases of child sexual abuse, the perpetrator is someone very close to the child; and meeting and dating people known from real life can and does result in negative feelings, too. Therefore, instead of supporting general "stranger-danger" rhetoric, we should address the fact that every meeting has the potential to be dangerous, be it meeting with an absolute stranger, an online friend whom one has known for two years, or an uncle. Surely, I am not saying that we should be paranoid about every encounter in our lives; rather, I suggest

we should not limit our advice to prevent improbable meetings with online pedophiles, but expand them with more general safety measures.

Finally, in our small sample of negative experiences from meeting online strangers by adolescent girls, the unpleasant feelings in most cases seemed to be based on discrepancies between expectations and reality. The question of whether these discrepancies should be attributed to the strangers' deceptive online behavior (i.e., strangers acting differently online and offline) or the youth's projection and idealization of the stranger remains open and challenging for future research to address. Nevertheless, we should teach children and youth that the features of the internet can lead to distorted perceptions of other people, even if they are not being deceptive or lying, and that they should, therefore, be careful when evaluating other people based on online behavior.

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