Do Perverted Justice chat logs contain examples of Overt Persuasion and Sexual Extortion?
A Research Note responding to
Chiang and Grant (2017, 2018)

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Abstract. *Studies by Chiang and Grant (2017, 2018) on the rhetorical moves of online child sexual abusers suggest that interactions between offenders and adults posing as children differ in various ways from those between offenders and genuine child victims. They point specifically to the use by one offender of moves identified as Overt persuasion and Extortion in his interactions with real children noting that these were absent from data featuring adults posing as children. The current study investigates whether these more coercive and forceful moves are in fact absent in sexualised interactions between offenders and adult decoys by applying corpus linguistic techniques to a corpus of 622 chat logs. It is shown that overtly persuasive language is rare in the texts, and that no extortion occurred. This finding supports Chiang and Grant's claim and their assertion that data featuring adult decoys is not truly representative of interactions between child victims and their abusers.*

Keywords: Child abuse, CSE, CSEA, grooming, sexual abuse, CMC, computer-mediated communication, IRC, moves.

Resumo. *Estudos de Chiang and Grant (2017, 2018) sobre os passos de retórica de agressores sexuais de crianças online sugerem que as interações entre os agressores e os adultos disfarçados de crianças diferem, de diversas formas, daqueles que ocorrem entre agressores e genuínas vítimas infantis. Esses estudos apontam especificamente para a utilização, por um agressor, de passos identificados como Persuasão direta e Extorsão nas suas interações com crianças verdadeiras, destacando a ausência destes passos nos dados relativos a adultos atuando como crianças. O presente estudo investiga se estes passos mais coercitivos e forçados estão, de facto, ausentes das interações sexualizadas entre os agressores e os adultos usados como engodo, aplicando técnicas de linguística de corpus a um corpus de 622 registos de conversas. Este estudo revela que a linguagem abertamente persuasiva é rara nos textos e que não se registou qualquer ocorrência de extorsão. Este resultado reforça o argumento de Chiang e Grant e a sua afirmação de que*

os dados com adultos atuando como engodo não são verdadeiramente representa-tivos das interações entre vítimas infantis e os seus agressores.

Palavras-chave: *Abuso de crianças, CSE, CSEA, aliciamento, abuso sexual, CMC, comunicação mediada por computador, IRC, passos.*

Introduction

Chiang and Grant (2017) investigated the rhetorical moves (Swales, 1981, 1990) used by online groomers in sex abuse conversations. Following many researchers from psychology, criminology and computational text analysis work (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2013; Marcum, 2007; Cano *et al.*, 2014, respectively) their data comprised transcripts taken from the perverted-justice.com (PJ) website, in which the potential offenders are actually interacting with adult 'decoys' posing as child victims, rather than interacting with real children. Chiang and Grant (2018) is the first linguistic study to analyse the naturally occurring sex abuse conversations between adult offenders and actual children and this analysis pointed to a set of further persuasive and coercive linguistic moves used by the offender which appeared to be absent from the PJ data. This brief research note reports a more comprehensive investigation of that observation, in an attempt to confirm whether or not the PJ data does indeed differ in this regard from the naturally occurring data, and if so what the implications of that are.

Chiang and Grant (2017) took a small set of seven PJ transcripts and noted that the different offenders in these transcripts used common moves in their interactions. These clustered around themes of victim selection, rapport and various assessments and sexual activities. Example moves included *Rapport building, Assessing likelihood and extent of engagement*, and *Maintaining/escalating sexual content.* They comment particularly that in the complex network of moves and strategies used by offenders, no obviously persuasive moves were identified in the transcripts.

In Chiang and Grant (2018), a subsequent study into online abusive interactions between an adult offender and genuine child victims, however, they noted the presence of two previously unseen moves which they labeled *Overt persuasion* and *Extortion.* They argue in that paper that these moves occur (at least in part) as a result of the victims being genuine children, who display a degree of resistance to the offender's sexual advances. This contrasts with the adults posing as children in the PJ data, and causes the offender to occasionally resort to the more coercive, forceful moves. Although Chiang and Grant (2018) note that several other studies using PJ data also fail to observe overtly persuasive or coercive moves (e.g. Black *et al.*, 2015; Lorenzo-Dus *et al.*, 2016; Winters *et al.*, 2017), their 2017 study was based on a small sample – just seven transcripts, each detailing a single interaction. Furthermore, the selection made by Chiang and Grant was also based on the presence of some preparatory rapport building work in the chat; those transcripts where explicitly sexual topics were introduced at the outset were excluded. This study therefore aims to further investigate the possible presence of coercive linguistic behaviours by taking the entire PJ dataset of 622 conversation transcripts and using corpus linguistic techniques to try and identify examples of overt persuasion or sexual extortion.

Data and Methods

A corpus of chat log transcripts was created comprising all 622 chat logs from Perverted-Justice.com's archive (as accessed in January 2018). Two scripts were written in Python

3.6 to achieve this. The first script was used to download the raw chat log files into a local folder and to remove unwanted material such as HTML, metadata and the adult decoy's comments and also to automatically extract a list of usernames from the corpus. The second script (and some manual editing) was used to further clean up the files and create a usable corpus.

Using AntConc (Version 3.4.3, Anthony, 2014) wordlists and lists of bigrams and trigrams were created, excluding a stop list of the usernames. Keyterms (words, bigrams and trigrams) were also elicited using the Brown corpus as a reference corpus (Francis and Kucera, 1979). Each of these lists was manually examined for words that might indicate direct persuasion, coercive or threatening language and these items were labeled as such and added to a list of search terms. Further to this a second set of search terms was generated from Chiang and Grant (2018) through an examination of the moves they had labeled as Overt Persuasion and Extortion. Finally, synonyms of search terms were identified using a synonym dictionary and related terms were also added to create a final list. The full collection of search terms (see Table 1 below) was then used to query the corpus of chat logs and examine their use in context.

Findings

The approach described above led to the list of 50 search terms shown in Table 1 below.

as I say	if u	tell you
bitch	if u don't	telling u
dare	if you	telling you
do it	if you don't	told to
don't u dare	just do it	told u
don't you	know where u	told you
don't you dare	know where you	trouble*
dont	lil slut	trubbl*
dont eva	little bitch	u better
dont ever	little slut	u remember
dont you ever	my bitch	wet*
enjoy*	need to	what I say
fault*	now	where u live
fault for being	or I	where you live
fault that	remember	white slut
hard*	slut	you better
i know where	tell u	

∗ these terms suggest victim blaming/complicity and are discussed further below.

Table 1. Search terms used to look for evidence of overt persuasion or sexual extortion

Using these terms the searches provided examples in context of persuasive or coercive language in the PJ corpus. These were generally a small number of isolated cases, which were categorised into orders, conditional threats, and instances of victim blaming/complicity. Occurences for each of these categories are shown below.

Orders by offender:

Examples:

- Offender 1: dress as I say
- Offender 2: you be daddys little bitch do as you are told to

These examples show attempts by the offender to control their victim using the authority they have or believe they have over them. There is no indication in these instances of any consequence that might arise from the victim not following these 'orders'.

Conditional threats by offender:

Examples:

- Offender 3: i will break it then
- Victim 3: break what
- Offender 3: our relation, if u dont open your cloths or dont love me when we meet

- Offender 4: do it now
- Offender 4: do it now or I'm not coming........very serious about this....

- Offender 5: you better not be going any place today or i'm going to be upset..........today is OURS!! I love you@;-

These examples show the offender using some leverage against the 'victim' (who is in reality the adult decoy). The first two examples suggest the threat is to break off the relationship, the final example is emotional, if the victim does not do as asked this will upset to the offender.

Victim blaming and complicity:

Examples:

- Offender 6: I didn't talk u into
- Offender 6: don't u dare blame me, we both talked and were happy 2 do it

- Offender 7: its your fault for being a hottie
- Offender 7: so i blame youi

- Offender 8: and you have to take my shirt off remember

- Offender 6: cause if anyone knows we will be in big trouble

- Offender 9: ya I don't wanna get in trbl

These examples are attempts to coerce the victims by convincing them that their activity has made them complicit in the interaction and that they are responsible for their own abuse. This line of argument might result in a real victim being more open to more direct extortion.

Discussion

These findings are different from the examples found in Chiang and Grant (2018) both in the quantity of overt persuasion and direct extortion and in the nature of the moves in the interaction.

First, the examples of overt persuasion were rare – the ten examples from the nine offenders provided above constitute the complete set of definite examples from the 622 chat logs. There are a further 15 borderline examples which were excluded as being contextually ambiguous and therefore not clear examples.

Second, no examples of explicit sexual extortion were found, and there were no borderline cases to consider as 'possibles'. Chiang and Grant (2018: 10-11 advance access) cite direct examples such as '*… ill just send the pics/vid to all ya contacts*'; and examples which are less direct, '*[I've] got the vide*o'; or less specific, '*ill fuck u around*'. These tend to occur when the child has already provided indecent images of themselves and the PJ organisation specifically states that their volunteers will not transmit such images in their activities. This may provide a partial explanation for the difference as discussed below.

Of course Chiang and Grant (2018) studied just a single offender who used both overt persuasion and extortion and this clearly does not provide a measure of prevalence across offenders but recent academic studies do suggest a broader prevalence for this behaviour with some offenders (see Açar, 2016; Kopecký, 2017; Wolak *et al.*, 2018). There does seem to be a clear distinction between naturally occurring activity and the PJ chat logs.

Third, where examples were found in the PJ data, these do seem to be parallel to examples found in Chiang and Grant (2018: 10-11 advance access) for example, Chiang and Grant also report threats to leave the conversation, e.g. '*get ur cam workin… or im goinn*' and instances of victim blaming, for example '*just remember u caused this…*'.

Overall, this study supports the hypothesis that the PJ data set is different from the naturally occurring data. It is our view that this difference occurs not only because of the difference in participants age (between actual children and adult decoys pretending to be children), and the fact that the offender will not receive indecent images from a decoy (which may become the basis of extortion), but also because of the contextual differences. To us it seems crucial that the child's and adult decoy's understandings of and footings in the respective interactions differ. PJ volunteers posing as children are indirectly but actively trying to get the offender to be sexually explicit and to arrange an offline sexual encounter. The decoys thus seem willing to maintain conversations even when those conversations might be uncomfortable for the child persona they are performing (as predicted by Williams *et al.*, 2013). In this way, they act differently from actual children. From the offenders' perspective this may present the decoy as an ideal victim and seems to create a situation where there is no need for the offender to employ overtly persuasive techniques.

The importance of this finding, that PJ data is not a perfect proxy for naturally occurring child abuse conversations, may depend on the focus of a particular research study and PJ data may still be useful for asking some important questions. Our strong conclusion though is that researchers across disciplines ought to be aware that in analysing

PJ chat logs they are not in fact analysing conversations which involve the abuse of children.

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