Journal of Pragmatics 249 (2025) 44–56

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

“Not right now”: Children's resistance during online grooming interactions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 May 2025
Received in revised form 21 August 2025
Accepted 30 August 2025

Keywords:
Online grooming
Discourse
Children's resistance
Pragmatics
Politeness
Impoliteness

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine children's resistance strategies during online grooming interactions, specifically the different ways they use facework to counter groomers' advances. The study identifies types of children's discursive resistance based on established politeness and impoliteness taxonomies (Brown and Levinson, 1987; and Culpeper, 2016; respectively), and quantifies the tendency for children to produce these based on evidence from a specialist corpus of 80 online grooming chatlogs, shared by UK law enforcement for research purposes. The study also examines how children perform resistance discursively as part of a dynamic interactional process. Our research finds that children produce resistance that is fairly evenly balanced between politeness and impoliteness-based types. The majority of politeness-based resistance is oriented to positive face needs, reflecting children's personal/romantic relationship goals, while children's negative politeness-based resistance is attributable to adult-child/manipulator-victim power imbalance in online grooming interactions. The majority of impoliteness-based resistance is also oriented to positive face needs, primarily acting against these through the strategy ‘Ignore, snub’, while children's negative impoliteness-based resistance tends to take the form of blocking. This is the first study to systematically identify resistance types and their discursive realization in a sizeable corpus of real online grooming chatlogs. Its findings help inform preventative technologies to counter the globally escalating problem of technology facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

1. Introduction

Online child sexual grooming (henceforth OG) is a practice of communicative manipulation during which an adult uses language and other semiotic modes, such as emojis, images, and videos, to persuade a child to partake in sexual conduct online and, at times, offline too (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2020). Crucially, from a communicative perspective, OG entails two-way engagement. As an offending adult and a child interact,[1] both display communicative agency. This term is used in a linguistic

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[1] There are contexts in which OG occurs within multi-participant interactions, involving, for example, more than one offender. These are not within the scope of the present study.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2025.08.013

sense, as discussed in Section 2, and therefore as a neutral concept that in no way implies that, within OG, a child's communicative agency incurs a responsibility for the abuse that they experience, which is always solely perpetrated by the groomer.

Our work seeks to fill a crucial gap in our understanding of OG and, in turn, our ability to inform – through pragmatics research – interventions to counter it. Specifically, the study examines resistance, a particular type of child communicative agency exercised during OG interactions. This focus is justified by a dearth of studies of child communicative agency – of any kind, including resistance – when compared with studies of offenders' communicative agency. To our knowledge, too, this is the first study to examine systematically children's communicative resistance through a sizeable corpus of OG interactions. Communicative resistance represents a vitally important means by which children can draw on their own discursive resources to counter groomer manipulation as it occurs in real time. Therefore, our aim is to investigate how children use language to resist groomers in OG interactions in order to highlight these resources and produce insights to help address the problem of OG.

The article is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 respectively review the concepts of child agency and resistance. The study's methodology is presented in Section 4, including a description of the data, the linguistics analytic framework used, and the procedural steps taken. An account of the types and relative prevalence of child resistance identified and of the interactional dynamics involved is given in Section 5. The significance of the findings for our understanding of OG and ability to develop preventative interventions is discussed in Section 6.

2. Child agency

Agency was originally conceptualised as the human, individual capacity to develop and derive personal meaning from social and/or object-orientated action (Bruner, 1990). This conceptualisation has been amply critiqued in childhood studies (see, e.g., Nolan et al., 2022), where relationality has instead been emphasised. Child agency is herein regarded as complex, context-shaped, and context-shaping practices that each child enacts in their own way (Rainio, 2008; Esser et al., 2016; Plowman, 2016: 352). Importantly, conceptualisations of child agency have gradually embraced both the specificities of different children's lives and the differences between children and adults. Regarding the latter, and as Valentine (2011: 352) argues, 'children are not merely adults (or moral agents) in waiting and their differences from adults should be valued rather than classed as deficiencies'. This is also the approach to agency that is advanced within anthropology/linguistics (see, e.g., Ahearn, 1999, 2001; Duranti, 2004; Kockelman et al., 2007).

Discussion around children's agency has been progressively framed in terms of rights to increased participation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) promotes children's agency in all matters affecting their lives: children have the right to express how they think and feel about what is important to them. They should be listened to, heard, and involved in decisions that impact their lives. The United Nations (2021) endorses children's agency in their comment on children's rights in digital environments.

These conceptualisations attach a moral value to the notion of agency, which is seen overall as being positive. For example, studies are designed to investigate whether – and do show that – children demonstrate their agency in decision making about their medical treatment (Alderson and Montgomery, 1996); in dealing competently with adults and with each other (Danby et al., 2004); and in responding strategically to difficult circumstances, such as poverty (Redmond, 2008), to name but a few.

What happens, though, when children exercise agency in contexts that are harmful to them, as is the case in child sexual exploitation and abuse (henceforth CSEA)? Herein, for some time, both academia and practice adopted a binary distinction that placed children as either passive victims or agents, with the latter connoting an element of responsibility – and at times even blame – for their own abuse. The adoption of this binary classification resulted in failure to identify and respond appropriately to some CSEA cases in which children had exercised agency (Hallett, 2017). Recently, a more productive view has been put forward – one that asserts the coexistence of agency and blameless victimisation (see, e.g., Beckett, 2019; Hanson, 2019; Dodsworth, 2022). This is further supported by a linguistic, morally agnostic view of agency (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2023) – one that defines it as communicative action of any kind, including silence (e.g., when language is expected). All communicative actions produced by children during OG thus represent their agency, without there being anything inherent about the actions themselves that makes them 'better' or 'worse' than others. Instead of attributing a moral value to agency, an alternative view is that children are 'reflexive knowledge agents' and their agency is 'a resource through which they can seek to minimise harm and maximise benefit, within the complex and difficult situations in which they find themselves' (Beckett, 2019: 34). The point about complexity and difficulty is far from trivial. Societal forces (e.g., sexualisation of relations), adult–child power imbalance (both prior to the interaction, on account of their biological age difference, and during the interaction because of different communicative competencies and social expectations), digital affordances (e.g., unsolicited contact via social media), and children's cognitive and emotional development constrain children's agency substantially during OG interactions. In the next section, this is further discussed with a specific focus on a type of child communicative agency, namely resistance.

3. Child resistance

In an article titled 'What is resistance?', Raby (2005: 155) critically reviews cross-disciplinary approaches to the concept of resistance, echoing concerns that the term has become so widely used, in so many and varied contexts, that 'it has become almost meaningless'. Raby considers modernist and post-modernist approaches to resistance. It is the latter that we are concerned with here. Vis-à-vis modernist approaches, post-modernist positions de-prioritise collective, organised, oppositional resistance, focusing instead on 'complex flows of power relations, fragmented, constructed subjectivities and local and individualized activities' (2005: 161). Post-modernist work on resistance has examined contexts linked to governmentality (e.g., Tait, 2000), culture (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003), and feminism (e.g., Hey, 1997). Hardly any such work has examined the language of resistance; that is, and paraphrasing Austin's (1989) famous dictum within speech act theory, how we 'do resistance with words'. The importance of doing so resides in the fact that resistance is performative: it arises in the gap that exists between speech acts and their uptake, for there is no guarantee that their illocutionary force will be heard as intended (Butler, 1993). As Mills (2000) shows, for instance, hate names such as 'queer' can be reappropriated and redeployed by those originally targeted through them. Such practices of resistance through language are subject to relations of power that can threaten the resisting self (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1993).

Children's resistance to OG and other forms of technology facilitated CSEA may be conceived of as an example of what Scott (1985) calls 'disguised' resistance. Scott's (1985) work distinguishes between two main forms of resistance: public and disguised. Examples of public resistance include land invasions and open revolts; disguised resistance examples include squatting, desertion, and foot-dragging. Everyday resistance may be 'done routinely but is not politically articulated or formally organized (yet or in that situation)' (Vinthagen and Johnsson, 2013: 10).

Within the field of CSEA, research has tended to use interchangeably a series of terms, including children's 'coping' (e.g., Whittle et al., 2013), 'resilience' (e.g., May-Chahal and Emma, 2020), 'self-protection strategies' (Leclerc et al., 2011), and 'resistance' (e.g., Jojo et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). In the present study, resistance is used as an umbrella term to refer to a child indicating to a groomer their intention to not engage – or engage further – with the groomer's goals. The concept of communicative resistance operates at a macro level, its meso level being the different pragmatic acts, or pragmemes (Mey, 2001), through which resistance may be realised: denying, refusing, and so on. Each of these pragmemes is a 'general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation' (2001: 220). 'Practs' constitute the actual execution or instantiation of pragmemes at the micro level – for example, practs of the pragmeme of denying may include 'I have not done X' (negative statement of denial), 'you are wrong' (affirmative statement of accusation), and 'are you crazy?' (a rhetorical question). As Mey (2001: 221) argues,

> since no two practs will ever be identical (being realized in an actual situation, and every situation is different from every other), every pract is at the same time its own allopract, that is to say a concrete and different realisation of a particular instantiation of a particular pragmeme [… and] there is no way of determining a priori what an allopract should look like (and, a fortiriori, what it cannot look like).

The distinction between practs belonging to the same pragmeme can therefore only be made *in situ*; that is, in relation to a specific context. The contexts in which the various pragmemes relating to resistance have been linguistically examined range from doctor–patient interactions (e.g., Stivers et al., 2018; Boluwaduro, 2021) through to television show host–participant conversations (Rovita and Gulo, 2022). The contexts thus include interactions between different sociodemographic groups, primarily in terms of culture, gender, and age (see, e.g., Shishavan et al., 2016; Ho, 2021). These are all important aspects, given that they are impacted by varying power relations (Butler, 2015). As Foucault (1978: 95–96) infamously put it, 'Where there is power, there is resistance' – and as Abu-Lughod (1990: 42) observes, 'where there is resistance, there is power'. This, as Section 2 argued, is particularly relevant in the power-imbalanced context of adult–child, typically (respectively) male–female,[2] OG communication. Power imbalance and abuse on the groomers' part significantly constrains children's communicative agency and, therefore, their ability to perform pragmemes, and practs, aligned with resistance.

Research into child agency and specifically resistance in the context of *technology-facilitated* CSEA is scarce, especially vis-à-vis studies of perpetrators' communicative agency. Extant research has tended to deploy surveys, interviews, or focus groups; that is, retrospective account elicitation methods (e.g., De Santiesteban et al., 2018; Smahel et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2023). Across these studies, different ways to account for child resistance have been identified. In some cases, a distinction has been made between 'active' and 'passive' resistance, with both having been found to be used simultaneously (Smahel et al., 2020). 'Active' resistance includes pragmemes such as a child disclosing to a third party what has happened. 'Passive' resistance includes silence-based realisations, such as ignoring the groomer; that is, avoiding further communication.

[2] Different sources confirm that girls are more likely to be the victims of technology-facilitated CSEA, including OG, than boys, with the exception being that boys are at a particularly high risk of *financial* sexual extortion (see, e.g., Thorn, 2024). Similarly, (technology-facilitated) CSEA offenders, including once again those committing OG offences, are primarily male. However, as technology develops, so do changes in offending, with females being known to play an important part in the possession, production, and distribution of child sexual exploitation and abuse material (CSEAM) (see, e.g., Bickart et al., 2019).

Based on secondary analysis of data collected by Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2020) and supplemented by thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 10 children, Thomas et al. (2023) propose a taxonomy of child resistance in OG contexts. The taxonomy identifies three sub-themes: ending the abuse, de-escalating the abuse, and resisting the abuse. Each of these contains a series of strategies. Ending the abuse strategies include leaving or deleting the communication app, blocking the perpetrator, and deleting the contact information of the perpetrator. De-escalating the abuse strategies include pretending misinterpretation has happened, strategic avoidance, and invoking guilt. Resisting the abuse strategies include directly refusing to comply, providing excuses, questioning perpetrators' requests, and using prior knowledge of internet safety (Thomas et al., 2023: 6–8). The taxonomy brings together different levels of linguistic description, from the macro level (e.g., strategic avoidance) to the meso level (e.g., refusals) and the micro level (e.g., direct refusals), which makes it difficult to operationalise across datasets. The study also notes differences across some of these strategies in terms of indirectness and directness – a feature that, in linguistics, can be aptly examined through the concepts of facework and politeness and impoliteness strategies (see Section 4). These studies succeed in identifying a range of communicative resistance strategies. However, their explanatory potential could be further enhanced by applying a systematic linguistics analytic framework to the datasets examined. Moreover, reliance on retrospective recalls in research within this field, especially within what is undoubtedly a highly emotionally charged and cognitively demanding context (i.e., an OG interaction), means that the identified strategies may be incomplete and/or only partially accurate.

The difficulty in accessing chatlogs for linguistic analysis is a key reason why only a limited number of studies have examined child resistance in actual OG interactions (Kloess et al., 2017; Seymour-Smith and Kloess, 2021; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2023).[3] This work varies in terms of data size and methodology. Kloess et al.'s (2017) study examines five cases (29 transcripts from 23 different child victims – 17 females, 6 males) using thematic analysis. Seymour-Smith and Kloess (2021) examine five transcripts of chatlogs between one adult male posing as a teenage girl and five male children. They adopt a discursive psychology methodology and focus on groomer–child deal making, which entails some instances of child resistance. Neither of these studies proposes a linguistics-informed taxonomy of resistance strategies *per se*, although they do identify a range of such strategies, including 'indirectness'/'face-saving' behaviour, such as making excuses, alongside directness, for instance 'assertive refusals' (Kloess et al., 2017: 626) and challenges to groomers' 'deontic right and attempting to work up an equal deontic status' (Seymour-Smith and Kloess, 2021: 998).

For their part, Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2023) examine children's agency holistically in a corpus of 80 OG chatlogs, sampled purposely to account for groomer and child socio-demographic variables from a larger dataset of approximately half a million words. Their approach entails 'broadly "chunking" [children's] talk into agency-based categories that are linked to groomer tactics', which they term 'start' (a child 'begins a sequence that is aligned to a groomer tactic'), 'go' (a child 'follows the groomers' [tactical] lead'), and 'stop' (a child 'brings a sequence linked to a groomer tactic to an end') (2023: 56). These categories account, respectively, for 27 %, 65 %, and 8 % of all the children's talk in their data. The analysis also shows the 'stop' category, which designates resistance, to be primarily aligned to groomers' sexualised communication (46.71 % of all 'stop' instances), followed by groomers' deceptive trust development (33 % of all stop instances), groomers' attempts to extend or maintain their communication with the child (11.75 % of all 'stop' instances), and groomers' attempts to isolate the child (1.87 % of all 'stop' instances). These findings suggest that children are more attuned to the inappropriateness of groomers' sexualised communication than to any of the other tactics used by groomers, which 'points to the need for a greater spotlight on interactions aligned [to these other tactics] to inform preventative approaches to counter technology facilitated CSEA' (2023: 65). Although the study does not conduct a linguistic analysis of resistance ('stop') strategies, it identifies three broad types at the meso level (pragmemes): rejecting, avoiding, and delaying. The present study seeks to further this line of inquiry through a systematic linguistic analysis of children's communicative resistance in OG interactions. Section 4 details the methodology deployed to this end.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data

The corpus used in this study comes from a large dataset of chatlogs that reproduce technology-facilitated CSEA interactions, including between groomers and children, via a variety of social media platforms during an eight-year period (2014–2022). The chatlogs were shared by UK law enforcement for the purposes of developing research-informed, anti-CSEA solutions. The dataset was securely stored and anonymised by the research team (which includes the study authors) prior to analysis. Corpus pre-processing, including converting files – e.g., from screenshots to CSV format – as well as spelling standardisation and transliteration of emojis and other graphicons, was also undertaken prior to analysis.

[3] Chiang and Grant (2018) deploy sophisticated linguistics methods to examine OG chatlogs overall, making reference to – as opposed to undertaking a systematic analysis of – child resistance strategies.

4.2. Analytic procedure and framework

From this dataset, we built a specialised corpus comprising 80 OG (one adult – one child) chatlogs and approximately 150,000 words. Specialised corpora are commonly employed in cyber-crime research, given the broad societal relevance and prevalence of the contexts involved—evident, for example, in rising figures for online grooming (NSPCC, 2024). Access to such data, however, remains a considerable challenge for researchers (see Section 3). In constructing our specialised corpus, we adhered as closely as possible to established principles of corpus design, with particular attention to representativeness. Owing to the conditions of our data-sharing agreement, detailed demographic profiles of groomers and children (e.g., gender, age, and other social characteristics) cannot be disclosed. Nevertheless, all groomers in the corpus were adults, over two-thirds of whom were male, while more than 80 % of the children were female, aged 13–17. To ensure diversity, we selected chatlogs varying in both length and duration, excluding those under 200 words. Furthermore, we removed cases where a single groomer contributed more than three chatlogs with different children, or where a child engaged with multiple groomers in the wider dataset.

The consequent specialised corpus was manually searched, and coded in NVivo14, to identify all the instances in which a child displayed communicative resistance. The authors reviewed all the samples for the purpose of inter-rater reliability. Through this process, 150 samples representing child resistance were selected for analysis. The samples represent conversational fragments that included resistance pragmemes and any additional surrounding text necessary to aid interpretation of the represented exchange.

A facework framework was then used to examine each sample. This was done on account of the significance of facework in OG, which has hitherto been examined in relation to groomers' agency (e.g., Grant and Mcleod, 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016, 2020; Lorenzo-Dus, 2022; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2024; Schneevogt et al., 2018) and is incipiently being recognised as relevant, yet underexamined, in relation to children's talk (Kloess et al., 2017; Chiang and Grant, 2018; Thomas et al., 2023; Evans and Lorenzo-Dus, 2025). Moreover, by its nature, resistance has strong potential to cause offence, which is a type of face threat.

Specifically, facework-based resistance was examined through discourse politeness and impoliteness, each of which is primarily orientated to, respectively, protecting and threatening face needs. For politeness, Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy of positive and negative politeness strategies was applied. For impoliteness, Culpeper's (2005) taxonomy of impoliteness strategies was deployed, in which a distinction is also made between attacks on positive and negative face. Impoliteness also includes off-record impoliteness, in which the performance of a given face-threatening act is achieved through an implicature such that one attributable intention clearly outweighs any others.

As Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010) and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. (2013) argue, if handled critically, these taxonomies can be used as helpful analytic categories that expose behavioural patterns (see also Culpeper, 2016). This includes the contention that one aspect of face (say, negative face) may take precedence over the other (say, positive face) in interaction, even if both aspects may be simultaneously threatened, in the case of impoliteness, and protected, in the case of politeness. (Im)politeness must therefore be understood dialectally, as a cline. Moreover, the use of taxonomies does not entail adopting a top-down, analyst approach. Instead, the analysis was conducted such that analysts (here, the study authors) relied on hearers' (here, groomers') uptake for their assessments of (im)politeness while also focusing on speakers' (here, children's) choices regarding production of (im)politeness (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou, 2019 for a critical review).

Our approach is therefore aligned to third-wave politeness and impoliteness research, which moves beyond both earlier universalist models and discursive critiques, focussing instead on how evaluations of (im)politeness emerge in specific interactions. Rather than treating (im)politeness as a fixed practice, analysts are guided by interactants' own judgements, as discursively expressed. These judgements are shaped by context, relationships, and wider social norms. A key development has been the integration of genre approaches, notably Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (e.g. 2010), which highlights how (im) politeness is mediated by the communicative conventions of different genres. This approach underscores that what counts as (im)polite is not only situational but also influenced by genre expectations and constraints.

Finally, and acknowledging the debate around the notion of 'strategy' in (im)politeness research, and echoing Culpeper (2016), we understand and use this term not solely as a rational linguistic means of achieving certain goals, as traditionally used in linguistics, but also as 'the coordination of communication through routine and shared linguistic means that are recognised within particular communities' (2016: 421).

5. Results

5.1. Towards a facework-based understanding of child resistance to online grooming

Table 1 lists the different facework-based strategies used by children in the data when performing communicative resistance and provides an illustrative example per strategy from the corpus.

Several observations are in order. Firstly, not all politeness and impoliteness strategies from, respectively, Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Culpeper's (2005) taxonomies were identified in the corpus. This is not to say, though, that they may not manifest within resistance pragmemes in other similar datasets. Secondly, politeness-based resistance involved children using language in a way that supported groomers' face needs when children were resisting them. With positive politeness-based resistance, this entailed the child using resistance-aligned pragmemes while expressing the fact they

Table 1
Facework-based child resistance to OG (G: groomer; C: child).

Strategy	Illustrative example
	Positive politeness
1. Notice, attend to G	G: Come on I may be ugly but come on *C: You're not and nooo*
2. Use in-group identity markers with G	G: Just miss baby
	C: I miss you too daddy I have to go
3. Joke (or expressed jovial attitude)	G: Sure whenever
	C: It'll soon make sense, I swear I'm not a prude lmao
4. Offer, promise	*C: I'll say yes to the date, but you'll have to wait for the bedroom bit.*
5. Give reasons	G: Do you want to call
	C: Can't right now on facetime with my mate x
6. Gives gift to G (e.g., sympathy or compliments)	G: If I drive up now will u meet me?
	C: Aw babe it's a bit late
	Negative politeness
7. Be conventionally indirect	G: I'd cam for you if you wanted lol x
	C: i'm not a fan tbh x
8. Question, hedge	C: atm i just want a chat
	C: normally
	C: :) if thats ok?
9. Be pessimistic (esp. Self-deprecation)	*C: No I'm really spotty I look so ugly*
10. Minimise the imposition on G	G: Able take another pic? But surprise me
	C: Not right now
11. Give deference to G	G: awh ill take you out; D:P x
	C: Nah im okay sorry just dont think ill enjoy myself.
	What would your friends say eh
12. Apologise to G	G: Can't call?
	C: I can't call I'm sorry
	Positive impoliteness
13. Ignore, snub G	G: ready for me on cam?
	C: i cba [can't be arsed]
14. Disassociate from G	*C: it's just not working is it*
15. Be disinterested in, unconcerned about, unsympathetic towards G	G: Well in gunna block you cos I don't want the temptation of speaking to you …
	C: Don't care
16. Seek disagreement with G	G: Delete the chat pls
	C: No lol
17. Use taboo words against G	*C: Fucking hell calm down Jesus*
18. Call G names	*C: you're grim*
	Negative impoliteness
19. Frighten, threaten G	*C: if you accidently got me pregnant you would be arrested for rape!*
20. Condescend, scorn, or ridicule G	*C: No I'm not doing anything for you when you hurt her*
21. Explicitly associate G with a negative aspect	G: not as filthy, naughty, bad as me I take it)
	C: That's just a bit gross
22. Hinder or block G, physically or linguistically	*C: I deleted you … But you came back … Idk how to block you*
23. Off-record impoliteness (e.g., withheld politeness or use of sarcasm	G: Wouldn't it be weird just him outside while you are in my car and I'm in it too haha
	C: You'd just be helping me get in the outfit

liked/appreciated the groomer. In the data, six different positive politeness strategies were used: '1. Notice, attend to G', which occurred when a child showed they were interested in or concerned about the groomer, such as by expressing reassurance that their resistance is not a rejection of the groomer themselves; '2. Use in-group identity markers', for example pet names or other terms of address that express familiarity and closeness and mitigate the potential face threat of resistance; '3. Joke', where humour or expressions of joviality were used by the child to represent a light-hearted, friendly attitude towards the groomer (this was often done through the use of graphicons that represented laughter); '4. Offer, promise', such as by way of compromise to make the groomer feel less bad about being refused the thing they desire, typically sex, with the child making a non-sexual romantic offer instead; '5. Give reasons', which showed the child being concerned enough about the feelings of the groomer to provide some explanation for why they were resisting them; and '6. Gives gift to G', for example the 'gift' of expressed sympathy and caring, especially in response to the groomer expressing disappointment when being resisted by the child.

Negative politeness-based resistance entailed the child using language in a way that lessened the imposition on the groomer caused by their resistance while still expressing that resistance. In the data, children made use of six negative politeness strategies: '7. Be conventionally indirect', which typically involved the use of vague or indirect language to represent the child's resistance; '8. Question, hedge', where the child expressed uncertainty and sought reassurance from the groomer about their resistance being okay; '9. Be pessimistic', when the child used language in a way that suggested their resistance was due to their negative attitude rather than fault with the groomer; '10. Minimise the imposition', which was achieved in a number of ways such as suggesting that the resistance may be temporary only; '11. Give deference', when

the child represented their resistance as being out of respect for the interests of the groomer, such as by suggesting that they could do better; and 12. Apologise', an admission of fault that was often expressed through use of the word 'sorry'. All these negative politeness-based resistance strategies represented the child's agency being orientated towards minimising the potential effect of their resistance being experienced as a face-threatening act by the groomer.

Our third observation is that impoliteness-based resistance involved children using language in a way that caused offence to the groomer by acting against their face needs when resisting. Positive impoliteness-based resistance entailed a child denying groomers the attention or interest they desired and their need to be liked or appreciated. In the data, six positive impoliteness strategies were deployed: '13. Ignore, snub the other', which took the form of the child expressing themselves in a dismissive way when resisting a groomer or not acknowledging the groomer's attempt to get them to do something the child did not want to do; '14. Disassociate from the other', whereby a child overtly stated their intention to end the conversation and/or their relationship with the groomer; '15. Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic', when the child used language in a way that denoted as much to the groomer; '16. Seek disagreement', whereby the child explicitly expressed their differing view or intention; '17. Use taboo words', where the child used language that might be deemed offensive (based on cultural convention), often swearing at the groomer; and '18. Call the groomer names', where a child used insults to resist by expressing their negative feelings towards the groomer in a clear and direct way.

Negative impoliteness-based child communicative resistance entailed children resisting in a way that went against the groomer's possible negative face need of not being imposed upon. In the study, this took the form of: '19. Frighten, threaten', where a child warned, including making conditional verbal threats to, a groomer about the negative consequences of their behaviour if they tried to go through with the action the child was resisting; '20. Condescend, scorn, or ridicule', whereby the child expressed contempt towards the groomer when resisting; '21. Explicitly associate the groomer with a negative aspect', where the child criticised the groomer's behaviour; and '22. Hinder or block the groomer, physically or linguistically', where the child did this digitally by deleting the groomer as a connection on a social media platform (an intention they sometimes expressed) and discursively by using language in a way that created communication barriers, such as the repeated use of 'why' questions in response to groomers' offers or requests. Finally, off-record impoliteness was also used to perform resistance. This entailed the child not using politeness strategies when they may be conventionally expected and also using sarcasm.

Overall, children made use of rich and sophisticated facework, aligned to politeness and impoliteness, to perform resistance in OG interactions. This is testament to their ability to display agency creatively, even against the backdrop of significant constraint and power imbalance.

5.2. Patterns in the use of child communicative resistance in the context of online grooming

The analysis revealed a relatively even balance between children's use of politeness-based and impoliteness-based strategies, 47 % and 53 %, respectively, to perform communicative resistance in OG interactions. This is broadly supportive of the Conversation Analysis notion of preferred organisation, specifically the view that the structure of human interaction is such that it favours actions that underpin social affiliation (through face-preservation – or politeness) at the expense of conflict (resulting from face-threat – or impoliteness) (Pillet-Short, 2017).[4] Within politeness-based resistance, the distribution between positive and negative politeness was, respectively, 62 % and 38 %; that is, children performed communicative resistance by attending to the groomers' face needs to feel liked and appreciated more frequently than they attended to the groomers' face needs not to feel imposed upon. Fig. 1a and b respectively show the frequency of use of positive and negative politeness-based resistance in the data.

As Fig. 1a shows, over half of positive politeness-based resistance was represented by the two most frequent positive politeness strategies: '5. Give reasons' (28 %) and '3. Joke' (27 %), and a third was represented by the two next most frequent positive politeness strategies: '6. Give gifts to G' (18 %) and '4. Offer, promise' (16 %). The remaining two strategies displayed frequencies lower than 10 %: '1. Notice, attend to G' (7 %) and '2. In-group identity markers' (4 %).

As seen in Fig. 1b, '12. Apologising' was the most frequent negative politeness strategy, accounting for just over a third of all negative politeness-based resistance (35 %). Three other strategies were relatively frequent: '10. Minimising the imposition' (22 %), '8. Question, hedge' (17 %), and '7. Be conventionally indirect' (11 %). One strategy displayed a frequency of use lower than 10 %: '9. Be pessimistic' (9 %).

As with politeness-based child communicative resistance, impoliteness-based child communicative resistance was more often orientated to the groomers' positive (65 %) than negative (30 %) face needs (this time in the sense of acting against these). In 5 % of the instances in which impoliteness-based resistance was deployed, this took the form of off-record impoliteness, specifically withholding expressions of politeness where this was expected. Fig. 2a and b respectively show the frequency of use of positive and negative impoliteness strategies in the data.

[4] We are grateful to one of the article reviewers for having suggested this interpretation.

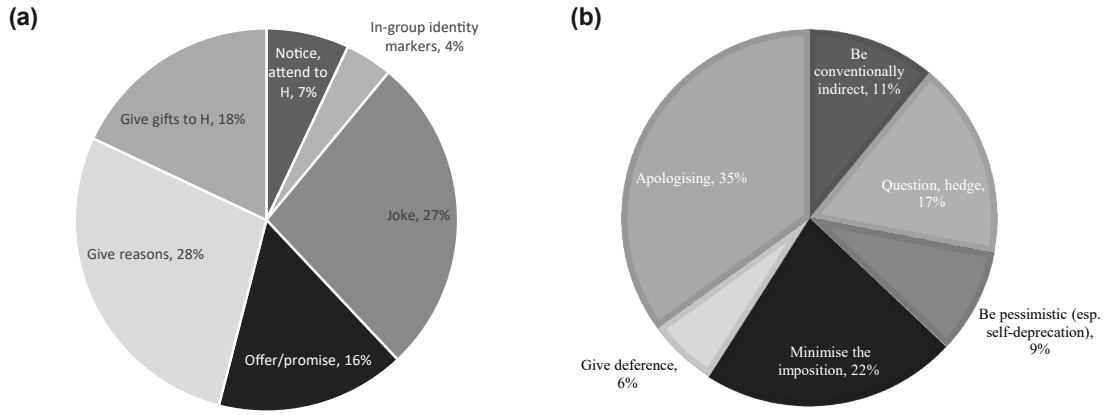

Fig. 1. a Positive politeness in child communicative resistance in OG interactions; b Negative politeness in child communicative resistance in OG interactions.

As Fig. 2a shows, by far the most common positive impoliteness strategy that children in the data used to communicate resistance was '13. Ignore, snub G′, counting for 60 %. The second most common type of positive impoliteness-based resistance was '15. Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic', which counted for one-fifth of positive impoliteness-based resistance (20 %). The remaining strategies displayed frequencies of use lower than 10 %: 7 % in the case of '16. Seek disagreement' and '14. Disassociate from G′, 5 % for '17. Use of taboo words', and 1 % for '18. Call G names'.

As for negative impoliteness-based resistance, and as shown in Fig. 2b, '22. Hinder, block G, digitally or linguistically' was the most frequent strategy, accounting for just over half of the total (51 %) and nearly twice the proportion of the next most frequent strategy: '20. Condescend, scorn, ridicule' (27 %). This was followed by the strategy '21. Explicitly associate G with a negative aspect' (17 %). Children made use of the '19. Frighten, threaten' strategy 5 % of the time.

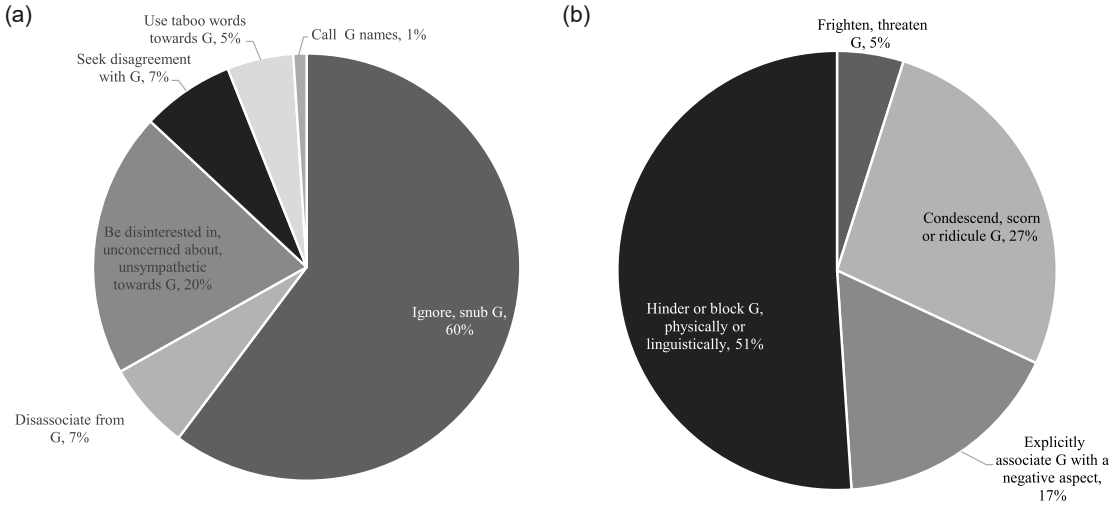

Fig. 2. a Positive impoliteness in child communicative resistance in OG interactions. b Negative impoliteness strategies in child communicative resistance in OG interactions.

5.3. Child resistance in action

Having identified types of child communicative resistance from instances of children using language to resist groomers in Section 5.1, and having quantified these in Section 5.2, in this section we take a closer look at the interactional dynamics of child resistance during OG exchanges through two samples from the dataset that are typical of two key features in the data: children's combination of politeness- and impoliteness-based strategies within single resistance pragmemes (Extract 1) and children's complex facework to try and maintain good relations with the groomer (Extract 2), which highlights the power imbalance between them and the manipulative hold the groomer has over the child.

As shown in Extract 1, children often need to resist groomers across several turns when interacting with them online.

Extract 1:

1	G	Well you wouldn't want to be in a relationship or have sex with this
2		guy
3	C	Yeh so it's all cool, what guy?
4	G	Me
5	C	Nah
6	G	Why nah?
7	C	Cuz idk you
8	G	Yea that's why you wouldn't be in a relationship with me or have
9		sex with me cos I'm way older and you probably like someone else
10	C	Yeh your right haha
11	G	At which part?
12	C	The two last ones
13	G	You like someone else?
14		But can I still get a chance? ☹ □ maybe up to fwb level of friendship
15		Don't know why but I'm starting to get interested in you
16	C	No I don't mess with people even to go down such as fwb way

This example represents a child resisting a groomer's attempt to get them to express a romantic or sexual interest in the groomer. When considering the language of the child's turns individually, several types of child resistance are evident. These include the positive impoliteness strategy '13. Ignore, snub G′ in Line 5, where the child rebuffs the groomer by dismissively responding 'Nah' to their suggestion of the two of them having a romantic or sexual relationship. In their next turn, the child produces another type of positive impoliteness-based resistance, '14. Disassociate from G' (in Line 7), when highlighting the fact they are strangers ('Cuz idk you') in response to the groomer asking the reason for the child's rejection (Line 6). However, this also arguably constitutes the positive politeness-based resistance type '5. Give reasons', particularly given the alternative responses that might be used in this context instead (e.g., clearcut rejections like *you're not my type*, *I don't like you*, *you're too old*, etc). Positive politeness-based resistance also occurs in the child's next turn (Line 10), which represents two types: '1. Notice, attend to G', where the child emphasises agreement with the groomer ('Yeh your right'), and '3. Joke (or expressed jovial attitude)', as represented by the worded laughter ('haha').

Individually, the child's conversational turns in the above example might suggest they are switching between politeness- and impoliteness-based resistance, as well as mixing the two. However, when viewed as connected parts of a dynamic interaction, their turns represent a sophisticated balancing act of politeness and impoliteness – one that is responsive to, and influences, the groomer's own facework and aligned overall to the human 'principle of (im)politeness reciprocity' (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021).[5] For example, the impolite dismissive effect of the child's use of 'Nah' in Line 5 is likely mitigated by the effect of it being a feature of a light-hearted, nonchalant style that is apparent in the way they use language elsewhere in the exchange, such as when they express an easy-going attitude in Line 3 ('so it's all cool'). Likewise, looking at language use across turns in the conversation reveals how politeness-based resistance is offset by impoliteness-based resistance, though one that is implicit and may not be evident when considering language out of its interactional context. This is the case with the positive politeness-based resistance in Line 10 ('Yeh your right haha'), which is actually part of a pattern of the child providing short, vague responses to the groomer's probing questions (as illustrated by Lines 8 to 16), and so also arguably represents a type of positive impoliteness-based resistance, namely '15. Be disinterested in, unconcerned about, unsympathetic towards G'.

Combining politeness- and impoliteness-based resistance when interacting online can be an effective way to balance potentially conflicting purposes. This is the case with the interaction represented in Extract 1, where the child seemingly wants to engage in conversation (as suggested by the fact the chatlog from which the example is taken lasts for over a hundred turns) but resist the sexual advances of the groomer. A review of the entire exchange reveals that this balance is a feature of the child's calm and controlled manner throughout the conversation, which eventually deflects the groomer's sex talk and leads to a change of subject (at least temporarily). That the child seems to want to continue the conversation despite the groomer's sex talk suggests that their goal may be to participate in an online social world in which encountering

[5] For a detailed analysis of this principle, including groomers' own challenges to children's communicative resistance, see Evans and Lorenzo-Dus (2025).

unwanted romantic/sexual proposals is becoming commonplace and a norm of such online communication (Setty et al., 2024). However, when a child's goal may be to develop a personal or romantic relationship, as is often the case, combining politeness- and impoliteness-based resistance may represent too high a risk to achieving that goal, especially given the power imbalance inherent in any OG interaction, as discussed earlier. Moreover, as the groomer's manipulation advances, the child may feel their only option is to use a suite of politeness-based resistance strategies. This is illustrated in Extract 2.

Extract 2

1	C	I should sleep I have school
2	G	😍 So beautiful!
3		Stay up a little longer with me?
4	C	But it's half 1 in the morning
5	G	Ah, that's pretty late.
6	C	Yea I'm sorry wish I could stay up longer
7	G	Will you take me one last pic with you sitting up?
8	C	Yea okay

In Extract 2, the child tries to end the conversation and resist the groomer's attempt to keep them talking through the use of different politeness strategies. These include the negative politeness strategy '8. Question, hedge' in Line 1, where the low modality of 'should' in 'I should sleep' conveys hesitancy and expresses reluctance in a way likely intended to reduce any effect of rejection that the child's withdrawal may have on the groomer. The child also uses the positive politeness strategy '5. Give reasons' to account for their need to leave the conversation; that is, giving the reasons of having school the next day (Line 1) and the lateness of the time (Line 4). They then continue to combine different strategies in their next turn (Line 6) to resist the groomer, using the negative politeness strategy '12. Apologise to G' ('I'm sorry') and the positive politeness strategy '4. Give gift to G' (which here takes the form of an expression of desire to spend more time with the groomer: 'wish I could stay up longer').

Resisting groomers while trying to maintain good relations with them represents a potentially very challenging communicative situation for children, especially where politeness-based strategies like apologising wrongly imply that the child is at fault for resisting. This may cause the child to feel they need to make it up to the groomer in some way, a feeling that groomers can exploit, as shown in the extract when the groomer responds to the child's apology with a request for 'one last pic' (Line 7). Where a child's goal is to develop a personal relationship with a groomer, resistance may require them to engage in complex facework; in this respect, as the above example illustrates, resisting groomers is often not a matter of simply saying 'no'.

6. Discussion and conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to have examined a sizeable corpus of children's linguistic resistance samples using a linguistic framework (facework) systematically. The analysis has identified a wide range of both politeness- and impoliteness-based strategies, confirming children's communicative agency and the sophistication thereof, especially given the power-imbalanced, abusive context in which such agency is exercised. The study has also shown a fairly even balance between the use of politeness- and impoliteness-based communicative resistance, the latter being only slightly less frequently deployed than the former (47 % and 53 %, respectively). This is unexpected given that resistance, by its nature (e.g., expressing rejection, refusing to give someone something they want), has strong potential to cause offence. In this way, anybody wanting to resist when engaged in online chat may be inclined to use language in a way that mitigates the face threat that can arise when resistance is taking place; that is, politeness. Moreover, the power imbalance between children and goal-driven, abusive groomers who are determined to get children to do what they want may create the expectation that children would deploy politeness-based strategies more frequently than was the case in our study.

An explanation for this unexpected result may be provided by considering patterns in the use of impoliteness-based strategies in the data. These were often deployed in the context of groomers' sexualised talk, including requests for nudes and other child sexual abuse material. Impoliteness-based strategies orientated towards attacking the groomers' positive face were almost twice as frequently used as those attacking their negative face needs. In both cases, the most frequent single strategy, accounting for over half of all the instances in each category, entailed children making use of technology affordances, either disregarding messages received ('13. Ignore, snub' – 61 % of all positive impoliteness-based resistance) or preventing these messages from reaching them ('22. Hinder or block' – 51 % of all negative impoliteness-based resistance). Interactionally, these strategies are less demanding than those requiring the textual articulation of reasons for the child's resistance, be that through politeness or impoliteness, which might explain why impoliteness-based resistance was slightly more frequent than politeness-based resistance.

As for politeness-based resistance, the findings show a marked preference for positive over negative politeness. This likely speaks to the manipulative hold that groomers exercise over children, whereby children may feel a level of emotional attachment to the groomer – a sense of 'relationship' – that makes them want to make the groomer feel liked and/or appreciated even when being resisted. Children's justification of their reasons for resisting ('5. Give reasons'), their trying to keep a harmonious interaction through the use of a jovial tenor ('3. Joke'), and their providing the groomer with material (e.g., images) and/or immaterial (e.g., empathy) gifts, as well as 'offers and promises' – another type of gift in this context – all point to the deceptiveness in groomers' manipulation: their reframing of abuse as an emotional relationship that the children feel they must protect through showing that they 'like' their abusers. Children's talk in OG is more orientated towards relationship building than towards sex – and the inverse trend is found in groomers' talk (Evans and Lorenzo-Dus, 2025). This may contribute to accounting for the preference towards positive politeness-based resistance in children's interaction, whereby they try to balance their relationship goals with resistance to groomers' attempts to engage them in sexual activity. Child communicative resistance in OG interactions, in this context, is not simply a case of children pulling away from groomers through politeness and/or impoliteness. It may also be part of how, manipulated into trusting by the groomers, children try to move relationally close to the groomers.

Negative politeness, although used less frequently than positive politeness, also points to children's desire not to cause offence when performing communicative resistance, specifically their intention not to be seen to impose on the groomers. Negative politeness arguably reflects a careful or respectful manner that people may adopt when communicating with others they perceive as having more authority or power. In this case, children's use of apologies, questions/hedges, and imposition minimisers in particular suggests that they are aware of – and find it challenging to redress – the power imbalance that exists between them and the groomers who abuse them.

Overall, the study has shown children's adeptness in performing resistance pragmemes/practs that contain sophisticated facework, especially when considering the power-imbalanced relations with the groomer and the significant constraints they face. These findings can support the development of prevention- and support-orientated resources, for child safeguarding practitioners and children alike, which integrate child agency and blameless victimisation. Such resources should be clear about the impossibility of identifying a closed list of resistance types at the pragmeme, let alone the pract, level. This is because the effectiveness of resistance is dependent on too many variables, such as the individual nature of the child–groomer relationship, where in the conversation resistance is taking place, what is being resisted, what in particular the child may be trying to achieve through their resistance, and so on. In this way, what constitutes effective resistance is very context specific. While the data has shown that groomers persist in their challenging of children's resistance, for instance, this is not only the case when such resistance is discursively performed through politeness strategies.

Further research would benefit from expanding the dataset used in this study, including across languages and geographies, where our knowledge of children's digital agency – and of OG communication – is comparatively scarcer than it is in English. Further analysis of child–groomer interactional dynamics, around child resistance but also other forms of child communicative agency, should also be conducted. Indeed, academia should aim to push the child prevention, protection, and support agenda such that children's voices – including their *in situ* discourse – are properly considered and accounted for. After all, and as the results of this study show, even amidst the most constraining and imbalanced of communicative contexts, children are able to display agency in matters that critically concern then. While it is society's – and adults' therein – responsibility to keep children safe from all forms of violence, including OG, children's agency – in all its manifestations – must be adequately considered, understood, and never questioned. Children must never be held accountable for the abuse perpetrated upon them.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nuria Lorenzo-Dus: Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Craig Evans:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Funding statement

This work was supported by Safe Online, Tech Coalition – Safe Online Research Fund, and the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades (MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude and appreciation to the police forces involved for their assistance, time and effort in providing access to the data examined.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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