Suojellaan Lapsia
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DARKNET ONLINE COMMUNITIES

OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSERS

REINFORCING AND RATIONALISING OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR

REDIRECTION REPORT

Peer-Support of Child Sexual Abusers in
Darknet Online Communities

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Contact between CSAM Users as a Risk Factor
for Contacting Children Online

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Darknet Online Communities of Child Sexual Abusers: Reinforcing and Rationalising Offending Behaviour
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Peer-Support of Child Sexual Abusers in Darknet Online Communities

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When planning the ReDirection project, we decided to inquire into the largest darknet communities of child sexual abusers and examine their members' attempts to refrain from sexual violence against children and their support for each other in such endeavour. Accordingly, this report consists of a qualitative and quantitative analysis of chat room discussions of those who have a sexual interest in children and those who search for, use, and distribute child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The aim is (i) to provide information for those who work with potential sexual offenders or with CSAM users and (ii) to improve the ReDirection Self-Help Program by considering aspects that may not surface in questionnaires or other forms of research.

The overall idea of this report was to deepen our understanding of people who have a sexual interest in children and their needs and thoughts on refraining from child sexual abuse (CSA). We read over 300 chats published in three major darknet communities but were not able to identify chats where *refraining* from CSA would play a central role. There are sites in the clear web that are directed to those who seek to refrain from CSA, but as our original aim was to concentrate on darknet communities and the ReDirection project targets CSAM users on the darknet, we selected 18 chats from three major darknet communities. These chats deal with peer-support, however, not with a type of peer-support that has to do with refraining from CSA, but rather the contrary. Here, peer-support serves as a reinforcer for CSA as our report elaborates. This interesting result does not decrease the report's meaning for further work on rehabilitating child sexual abusers, but quite the opposite. It underlines the fact that darknet communities are not optimal places to invest in rehabilitative actions since their members are not likely to be receptive. Instead, it is vital to intervene before individuals enter such communities.

Online Communities of CSAM users

Online communities are important for understanding CSAM related crimes and offenders. The communities facilitate contact with fellow offenders and the exchange and trading of CSAM. From a psychological point of view, access to a community of like-minded individuals facilitates deviant behaviour (Krone, 2004) and leads one to feel that his sexual desires are in fact much more common than they are. Accordingly, online interaction with peers may facilitate sexual violence against children.

Jenkins calls online communities of CSAM users a subculture because its deviant members share special knowledge and an exceptional interest: pedophilia. He argues that in addition to shared standards and language, hierarchies and especially the 'respect' paid for eminent users characterise subcultures (Jenkins, 2001). CSAM users find a safe haven in the darknet, which provides them with a sense of a desired community. This haven, as it is often called, offers its members global access to hundreds of thousands of peers and an endless amount of CSAM, which promotes socialisation and provides justifications in support of CSA. The common sense of danger and political statements, for instance the desire to join the LGBT movement, further promote socialisation (Jenkins, 2001; Prichard et al., 2011).

Marginalisation and the subsequent need to defend deviation feed the subculture in several ways. For instance, judgment of CSA by society leads to justification of the community's normative perimeters, such as CSA actually being in the interest of children or the necessity of distinguishing between 'child lovers' and 'child molesters'. Moreover, online communities provide a safe place to discuss sexual interests, such as pedophilia. Lastly, the members share a worry about their online and offline security as well as legal actions and, accordingly, they advise each other on how to enhance anonymity and how to approach children in real life (Holt et al., 2010).

Peer-Support in Online Communities

Penney defines peer-support as "a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience" (Penney, 2018). It is argued that the concept of cognitive distortions can be used to understand the content of peer-support chat discussions dealt with in this report (Abel et al., 1984). Such cognitions help to justify illegal acts based on distorted explanations about the victims, the surrounding world, and the offender himself. The distortions also serve the purpose of freeing offenders from the "anxiety, guilt and loss of self-esteem that would usually result from an individual committing behaviours contrary to the norms of his society" (Abel et al., 1989, p. 137). As such, cognitive distortions may explain why a group of people can sexually abuse children and create communities around their violent behaviours (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007).

While online communities provide individuals with a space to nurture distortions in support of CSA, they also serve as places for peer-support. We made a simple quantitative analysis of 18 discussion threads of three large online communities of child sexual abusers in the darknet. We charted the content of these discussions with Atlas.ti qualitative analysis tool which facilitates content analysis of discussion threats. We carefully read the threads, then coded altogether 44 keywords that best related to peer-support, and, facilitated by Atlas.ti, observed their occurrence in separate paragraphs of the discussion threads. 10 of the 44 keywords had more than 30 hits, only four of them one hundred or more. We grouped the results according to the hits to +100, 80-40 hits, and 39-30 hits. We excluded words (altogether 34) with less than 30 hits. Interestingly, one can distinguish three patterns from this rough analysis as elaborated in the table:

Grand themes
Feel (150), Love (139), Child (102), Alone (100)
Self-perception
Feeling (80), Help (58), Real (54), Understand (54), Guilt (46), Pedo (45)
Peer-support
Support (36), Boylover (33), Share (33), Care (32), Close (30)

The most frequent words address the overarching theme of the peer-support chats, namely 'child' 'love' and 'feeling' 'alone'. First, regarding the words 'child' and 'love', a common distortion that is shared within online communities of pedophiles independent of whether they deal with peer-support or not, is that their members perceive themselves as 'girl lovers' or 'boy lovers' and not as criminals, whose sexual violence seriously harms children: "*The main idea of my moral code is "Don't hurt people". So if someone's idea of "boylove" includes violence before, during, or after sex or threats or blackmail, that's clearly wrong.*" (all direct quotations in italics originate from the 18 chats that were analysed for this report). Moreover, in line with the central topic of this report, these persons "*feel so alone in this*" and seek the support of their kind in darknet communities. Loneliness and

being an outsider characterise the members' relation to the outside world whenever they speak about the topic in the darknet communities.

Discussions related to words with hits between 80-40 tell us a commonly repeated story of pedophiles soothing their feelings of guilt and justifying their criminal behaviour with the inevitability of their sexual orientation and the need to accept themselves way they are: "*This is not meant to be some sort of grand confession, mass penance... it is simply meant to highlight that all the things we have done after we start feeling the pain is to look outside ourselves - and each time we do this, we are rejecting ourselves. And when we abandon ourselves, we have stopped loving ourselves.*" Moreover, "*I felt a lot of shame and guilt at first, but over time as I came into my own and started maturing as an adult I felt it less and less. These days I see CP as our community sharing our interests as best we can, and honoring the boys we love, and I think there's been a focus in the last 10 years or so making sure the boys who are being shared are happy.*" Hence, if the overall ethos of the darknet communities is that their members do not harm children, the consequence of this thought is that there is no reason to feel guilt of shame for one's criminal behaviour. Instead, one can find in the peer-support discussions the tone that the community helps one to accept his deviance.

Words with hits between 39-30 show us how the darknet communities provide their members with platforms for support, sharing, and caring. For instance, "*[name of the community] is where I find comfort. Eventho we are all different and don't even know each other (because of the anonimity XD) we share same interest and that make us strong.*" This feeling of closeness among the members despite of anonymity is a fundamental characteristic of the darknet communities in general. Here is a 'textbook' example of a peer-support discussion related to this topic: Person A: "*I can't picture 30 to 50 more years of a pointless life, of having no goals, nothing to fight for, not being able to share my secret. […] I don't see the point of keeping living this life as a masturbating lonely man... So I ask this question in particular to the oldest among us, those who experience the struggle of being a BL [note: BL stands for 'boylover] for the longest times (although everybody is welcome to answer), did you find yourselves a purpose as a BL?*" Person B: "*PLEASE, don't think of your sexuality as shameful, or wrong! You were genetically built to love Boys. That's a very rare and special gift that you've been handed. Boylovers are the highest evolution of the human species. We're super intelligent, and are very in touch with our inner selves.*" This thread underlines the constantly repeated ethos of pedophiles being superior to the mainstream, which, again, is used to justify CSA.

Conclusion

The members of online communities of child sexual abusers in the darknet rarely question their behaviour in open discussions and if they do so, their peers quickly run to the aid to rationalise it. Recent studies find that child sexual abusers use implicit theories to justify criminal behaviour (Paquette & Cortoni, 2020; Soldino et al., 2020). Offenders also often explain their CSA and CSAM use with problems with adults and interpersonal relationships. However, simultaneously CSAM offenders are quite social – at least in their online communities. Paquette and Cortoni's recent study, covering 20 online CSAM offenders, found that the cyberspace is perceived as an uncontrollable environment, which is entered out of curiosity. It facilitates crimes, especially if boredom or loneliness are part of the picture. A vast majority of offenders shared the view that the cyberspace is fictive and the children in the CSAM are not victims – and perhaps not real at all (Paquette & Cortoni, 2020).

In sum, darknet online communities of child sexual abusers provide offenders with spaces to maintain implicit theories. As Bartels and Merdian argue, the internet is indeed an uncontrollable environment that supports implicit theories. First, CSAM users see the world as an unhappy, restrictive, and unsatisfying place. Consequently, they often have emotional, intimacy, and

attachment problems and therefore feel isolated. This increases the importance of communities, the social connections they offer, and their rewarding features. Second, CSAM users are inclined to believe that they are addicted to the material and incapable to control its use. Third, they perceive children as sexual objects, intended to satisfy the offenders' sexual needs. They depersonalise children and detach victims from their bodies, which leads to the idea that CSAM is harmless. Regarding harm, CSAM users also tend to diminish the consequences of their offences by arguing that they do not commit physical crimes (Bartels and Merdian, 2016).

This report provided new data on people who actively engage in discussion in darknet online communities of child sexual abusers by analysing their writings qualitatively and quantitatively. By so doing, we were able to deepen our understanding of people who have sexual interest in children and those who use CSAM in the darknet. Through reading over 300 chat discussions in the darknet communities, we were able to conclude that the members of these communities did not have identifiable significant needs for refraining from child sexual abuse. Instead, we were able to identify a set of cognitive distortions with which child sexual abusers support each other's deviant behaviour in these and, by so doing, maintain illegal actions. We are currently preparing an academic article on the topic.

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Contact between CSAM Users as a Risk Factor for Contacting Children Online

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The creation, dissemination, and use of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is a global problem of immense proportions, which affects millions of children every year. Individuals who search for and view CSAM online are at high risk of further offending behaviour, including directly contacting children through online platforms. This report examines how this risk is heightened when these individuals are in contact with other individuals who view CSAM, revealing a danger of child sexual abusers gathering in online communities: reinforcement and rationalisation of criminal behaviour.
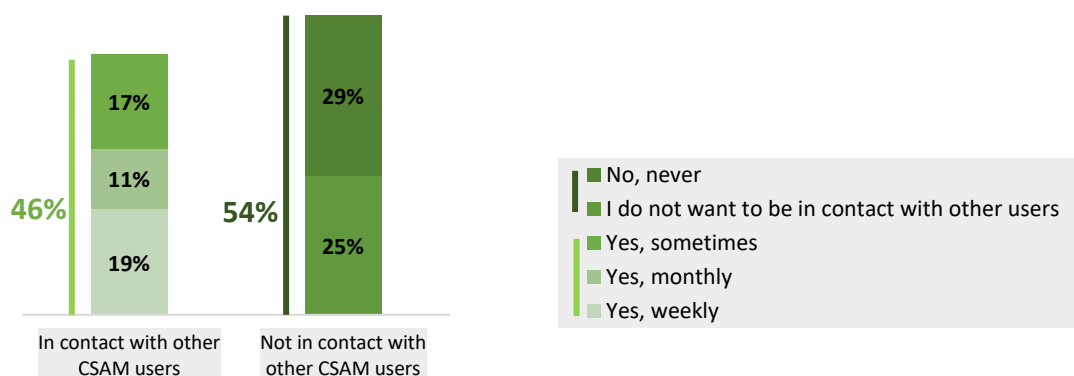
Anonymous self-report surveys of CSAM users in the dark web

Protect Children created and launched two innovative surveys in the dark web to gather unprecedented data about the habits, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals who use child sexual abuse material (CSAM). As of May 2022, we have received over 18,000 responses to the surveys in 18 languages. Respondents were recruited to voluntarily answer the 'Help us to help you' or 'No need for help' surveys after having searched for CSAM on dark web search engines. The surveys were conducted on the dark web, a platform on which the exchange of CSAM often occurs (EUROPOL, 2021), as anonymity enables individuals to engage in illegal activities, including the distribution and use of CSAM (Insoll, Ovaska, Nurmi, Aaltonen, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 2022).

Influence of other CSAM users on feelings, thoughts, and behaviour

In response to the 'Help us to help you' survey, a large portion of respondents reported having contact with other individuals who use CSAM. 46% of respondents said that they are in contact with other CSAM users at least sometimes or more frequently, while 29% of respondents said that they have never been in contact with other CSAM users, and 25% said that they do not want to be in contact with other CSAM users (Insoll, Ovaska, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, CSAM Users in the Dark Web: Protecting Children Through Prevention, 2021).

'Help us to help you' survey Question 26: Have you been in contact with other CSAM/illegal violent material users? (N = 3 340)

(Insoll, Ovaska, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, CSAM Users in the Dark Web: Protecting Children Through Prevention, 2021)

Furthermore, many of the respondents (35%) reported that they have been affected by the feelings, thoughts, or behaviour of other CSAM users to some extent. Of these respondents, 23% reported that other CSAM users have had a strong effect on their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (Insoll, Ovaska, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 2021).

Contact with other CSAM users associated with higher likelihood of contacting children online

Insoll et al. (2022) found being in contact with other CSAM users to be associated with a likelihood of contacting children online after viewing CSAM/illegal violent material (Insoll, Ovaska, Nurmi, Aaltonen, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 2022). Respondents who reported that they had, at least occasionally, been in contact with other users were more likely to report having sought direct contact with children through online platforms after viewing CSAM than those who reported not having been in contact with other users (Insoll, Ovaska, Nurmi, Aaltonen, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 2022).

Thus, there is a heightened risk associated with CSAM users in contact with other CSAM users, as they seem to be more likely to further offend against children than those who are not in contact with other CSAM users. This finding may be theoretically explained in part by traditional social psychology research on social identity and intergroup behaviour (Milgram, 1965; Tayfel & Turner, 1986), which suggests that CSAM users who satisfy their need for social connection and belonging in communities and forums of other like-minded individuals are at greater risk of aggressive behaviour and committing crimes of sexual violence against children, resulting from the normalisation and strong acceptance of pro-offending behaviour by their peers (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010).

The desensitisation and normalisation that comes from groups of CSAM users may increase the risk that these individuals will commit further sexual offenses against children (Quayle & Taylor, 2003). Reinforcing the cognitive distortions and receiving support from like-minded individuals may in turn encourage CSAM users to contact children directly. Thus, Insoll et al. highlight the danger of groups of CSAM users joining communities and "encouraging and endorsing each other's illicit behaviour" (Insoll, Ovaska, Nurmi, Aaltonen, & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 2022).

Conclusion

The association between contact with other CSAM users and a higher likelihood of having contacted children indicates that CSAM users in communities of others with shared interests are at risk of committing further offences against children, as their illicit behaviour may be reinforced, rationalised, and endorsed by their peers. The findings highlight the importance of staging interventions *before* individuals start to contact others with similar interests in CSAM, at which point interventions may be less effective.

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