Online Sexual Offending: Examining Cognition and Desistance Factors

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Traditional risk factors of contact sexual offending are now investigated for their role in online sexual offending. While a lot is known about offense-supportive cognitions of contact offenders, few studies have examined the cognitions exhibited by child pornography or child luring offenders. Initial studies demonstrated that online sexual offenders possess cognitions that can be categorized following contacts sexual offenders’ implicit theories conceptualization. In addition, these studies suggested that online sexual offenders possess cognitions specifically related to the Internet (Bartels & Merdian, 2015; Paquette & Cortoni, 2015). However, while it is hypothesized that Internet’s characteristics might be associated to online sexual offending, no empirical data have been provided to support this hypothesis. Furthermore, while researches have focused on contributing factors of online sexual offending, no study has examined factors that are associated to the desistance of consumption of child pornography. This symposium seeks to extend our understanding of the factors involved in the maintenance and the desistance of sexual exploitation of children behaviours on Internet. In the first presentation, Dr. Ross Bartels will present a validation of an initial conceptualization of the implicit theories of users of online child sexual exploitation material. The second presentation by Sarah Paquette examines how risk factors for contact sexual offending interact with Internet’s characteristics among child pornography and child luring offenders. Finally, in her presentation, Danielle Kettleborough will explore desistance strategies used by consumers of online child sexual exploitation material.

Child Sexual Exploitation Material Offenders: Pinpointing their Implicit Theories

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According to Ward and Keenan (1999), offense-supportive cognitions reported by contact child abusers are underpinned by implicit theories (ITs) about the self, others, and the world. Recent research has shown that users of online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) typically do not endorse these ITs, or the offense-supportive cognitions related to
them, thereby, identifying CSEM users as a distinct type of sexual offender. Recently, Bartels and Merdian (2016) consulted the existing CSEM literature and identified five ITs related more specifically to CSEM use; namely, Unhappy World, Self as Uncontrollable, Child as Sexual Object, Nature of Harm (CSEM variant), and Self as Collector, each of which is underpinned by an assumption about the Reinforcing Nature of the Internet.

The present study aimed to validate this initial conceptualization by qualitatively analyzing 10 interviews conducted with male CSEM users in the UK, at different stages of the judicial system. The analysis provides empirical support for the theoretical conceptualization of all five ITs, and highlights the interrelationships between them. In addition, some of the ITs reported by Ward and Keenan were also identified. The analysis further explored the role of these ITs, and their differential endorsement, in terms of the individual pathways to offending behavior. The results may, thus, indicate that different ITs are associated with different types of CSEM users (e.g., those that are contact-driven versus fantasy-driven). Implications for the assessment and treatment of CSEM-related cognitions are discussed, along with limitations and suggestions for future research.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**
- Introduce the five implicit theories (ITs) identified by Bartels and Merdian (2016).
- Validate Bartels and Merdian's (2016) initial conceptualization regarding CSEM-specific implicit theories (ITs) using interview data.
- Demonstrate that these ITs may relate to different functions for the offending behavior, and my thus be associated with different subtypes of CSEM users.
- Highlight the possible implications for theory, assessment, and treatment of CSEM-related cognitions.
- Propose ideas for future research and where to go next.

**Offense-Related and Internet-Related Cognitions of Online Sexual Offenders**

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Research among contact sexual offenders has found that offense-related cognitions contribute to sexual offending (e.g., Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin & Mann, 2012). It is uncertain, however, what role offense-related cognitions may play in online sexual offending. Studies that have investigated the cognitions of Internet offenders have utilized either psychometric instruments developed only for contact offenders (e.g., Bumby scales) or instruments adapted to reflect hypothesized cognitions of online offenders (e.g., Howitt & Sheldon, 2007). There is currently no established measure designed to assess the specific cognitions related to online sexual offending.
In addition to cognitions, sexual deviance, another well-established factor associated with contact offending, is also presumed to be contributing to online sexual offending. It is yet unclear, however, how cognitions interact with sexual offending factors among offenders. According to Pettit, Polaha and Mize (2001), sexual arousal leads individuals to process information with short-cuts. Therefore, it is presumed that sexual deviance is linked to offenders’ cognitions. Moreover, Quayle and Taylor (2003) hypothesized that the interaction between known factors related to sexual offending such as a sexual interest in children and the perceived anonymity afforded by the Internet would give rise to unique cognitions that specifically support online sexual offending. In this context, it is possible that the perceived anonymity of Internet may be related to online sexual offenders’ cognitions. This hypothesis has yet to be empirically investigated.

The current study examines offense-related and Internet-related cognitions exhibited by online sexual offenders, contact sexual offenders, and non-sexual offenders. It also examines the inter-relationships among online and offline sexual offenders’ cognitions, risk factors known to contribute to sexual offending and Internet’s characteristics. Based on a thematic analysis of the discourse of online sexual offenders, a psychometric questionnaire was designed to specifically assess Internet sexual offenders’ cognitions. A total of 180 offenders have completed the questionnaire as well as the Molest scale, the Sexual Interest Cardsort Questionnaire, the Sexual Preoccupation scale, the Coping Using Sex Inventory, the Perceived Anonymity scale and the Social-Desirability scale. Analyses have been performed to compare offenders on their cognitions, their perception of anonymity and their sexual deviance. As expected, preliminary results show that deviant sexual interests, sexual coping, sexual preoccupation and the perceived of anonymity are linked to offenders’ cognitions. Data also show that online sexual offenders endorse cognitions supporting the idea that the Internet is different from reality. These findings suggest that non-sexual factors such as Internet characteristics might contribute to online sexual offending. Clinical implications of the findings and implications for future research will be discussed.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**

- Identify offense-related cognitions and Internet-related cognitions exhibited by Internet sexual offenders.
- Provide a psychometrically sound questionnaire to measure Internet sexual offenders’ cognitions.
- Examine the differences and similarities among online sexual offenders, contact sexual offenders and non-sexual offenders with regard to their cognitions.
- Examine links among online offense-related cognitions, the online perceived of anonymity.
- Examine links between the offense-related cognitions and sexual offending factors.
Different Roles, Same Goals: Preventing Sexual Abuse
2016 ATSA Conference | Friday November 4 | 1:30 PM - 3:00 PM

“I wanted to get away from looking”: Desistance and Users of Online Child Sexual Exploitation Material

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Public Health campaigns targeting the use of online child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) have recently shifted towards primary and secondary prevention by focusing on self-management of the offending behavior, such as through anonymous helplines (Stop it Now! UK & Ireland), or the provision of confidential treatment (Prevention Project Dunkelfeld, Germany). However, while the empirical literature on users of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) has a strong focus on risk factors and recidivism rates, the notion of protective factors has somewhat been neglected.

Reoffending rates for individuals with a CSEM offense are typically low, yet there is still very little that we know with regards to their desistance behaviour: What protects an individual from engaging in first-time viewing of CSEM, repeat offending, or the potential to crossover to a contact offense? This presentation will draw upon self-report data collected from individuals who have accessed CSEM (pre and post-conviction), including qualitative accounts of previous periods of desistance, and self-reported desistance strategies. A range of prevention strategies will be discussed, with a focus on primary prevention and the recent attempts at targeting “potential offenders”. The paper will discuss implications for the education, prevention, assessment, management, and desistance efforts with individuals (including those at risk of) accessing CSEM.

Learning Goals and Objectives:
- Explore current prevention efforts and public health campaigns concerning CSEM use.
- Explore the research surrounding protective factors and desistance of CSEM use.
- Explore how knowledge of protective factors can inform prevention strategies.
- Present empirical data collected from individuals known to have accessed CSEM regarding self-reported desistance.
- Discuss the implications of the findings, in the framework of current prevention efforts of CSEM use.