



Salla Huikuri

The Darkest Side of the Darknet

How Do Online Communities of Pedophiles Contribute to the Justification of Sexual Violence Against Children?

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Salla Huikuri

Police University College
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Tiivistelmä

Pedofiilien yhteisöt pimeässä verkossa edistävät lapsiin kohdistuvaa seksuaalista väkivaltaa. Ne tarjoavat sosiaalisesti syrjäytyneille rikollisille hedelmällisen maaperän jakaa ja siten vahvistaa seksuaalisia vääristymiään. Ne sisältävät laitonta lapsiin kohdistuvaa seksuaaliväkivaltaa kuvaavaa materiaalia ja mahdollistavat sen jakamisen ja vaihdon sekä sillä kaupan käynnin. Pimeän verkon yhteisöissään pedofiilit tarjoavat toisilleen neuvoja identiteetin suojaamiseen ja siihen, miten edetä fyysiseen lapseen kohdistuvaan seksuaaliseen väkivaltaan. Tämä katsaus käsittelee verkkovälitteistä lapsiin kohdistuvaa seksuaaliväkivaltaa. Se määrittelee aihepiiriin liittyvät keskeisimmät termit ja käsittelee erityyppisiä pimeässä verkossa toimivia lasten seksuaalisen hyväksikäytön tekijöitä. Lisäksi katsaus valaisee lapsiin kohdistuvan seksuaalisen väkivallan psykologista puolta – pedofiilien perusteluja ja oikeutuksia rikoksilleen – sekä selvittää pedofiilien verkko-yhteisöjen taustalla olevaa toimintalogiikkaa.

Tämän tutkimuksen on rahoittanut ReDirection-hanke ja End Violence Against Children¹

¹ <https://suojellaanlapsia.fi/redirection-fi/>, <https://www.end-violence.org>

Abstract

Online communities of pedophiles in darknet facilitate sexual violence against children. They provide a criminogenic space for socially sidelined offenders to share and reinforce their sexual distortions. They accommodate illegal Child Sexual Abuse Material and enable its trading, sharing, and exchange. They offer advice on how to protect one's online identity and how to physically proceed into sexual violence against children. This review deals with online child sexual offenders and their communities in darknet. It defines key terms dealing with online sexual offences against children and discusses different types of child sexual abuse offenders operating online. Moreover, it sheds light on the psychological side of offending – the justifications for sexual violence against children – and elaborates the underlying logics underpinning the respective trains of thought in the online communities of pedophiles.

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² <https://protectchildren.fi/redirection/>, <https://www.end-violence.org>

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1. Introduction

This review scrutinizes online communities of child sexual abusers on dark-net and sheds light on how such communities enable sexual violence against children. Thereby, it informs law enforcement practitioners, civil society actors, and the academia on recent scholarly findings on online sexual violence against children.

It is estimated that every fifth girl and 1 in 13 boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18 (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Sexual violence traumatizes children and severely impacts their physical and mental health causing depression and anxiety, substance abuse, offending behavior, and lower educational achievements. The social-economic consequences from it may extend into adulthood and lead to severe problems in personal relationships and professional life (End Violence Against Children & UNICEF, 2021).

At the global scale sexual violence against children is criminalized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, which has been ratified by all United Nations member states except the United States, and its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography of 2000, ratified by 177 states (United Nations Treaty Series, 2022). Moreover, Sustainable Development Goals of 2015 underline the global commitment for the fight against sexual violence against children, as they aim at ending all sexual violence against children by 2030 and are ratified by all UN Member States (United Nations, 2022). Yet, all forms of sexual violence against children are legally proscribed in only 60 countries (End Violence Against Children, 2019). In most countries sexual violence against children is proscribed at least to some extent, but the age of consent varies. Furthermore, in many regions early marriages, genital mutilation, and sexual abuse of boys are not prohibited (End Violence Against Children & UNICEF, 2020).

Vocabulary related to sexual violence against children is as diverse as are the offences related to it. In this review, sexual violence against children is used as an umbrella term for child sexual abuse and exploitation (exploitation is often used to describe the use of children for one's advantage, while sexual abuse refers to regular and repeated cruel or violent sexual misconduct/offence) that cover both physical and mental violence. There

is no common definition for sexual violence against children, however, as ECPAT points out, international conventions provide grounds for categorization. Accordingly, physical sexual violence includes, amongst others, rape, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and enforced sterilization, while mental sexual violence includes “psychological maltreatment, mental abuse, verbal abuse and emotional abuse or neglect” (ECPAT International, 2016, p. 14).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, INTERPOL and Europol reported increases in online activities related to sexual violence against children. This increased activity is not only due to increased amount of time spent online by offenders and the restricted possibilities to travel to countries where physical sexual violence against children is easier to organize, children are less protected against sexual violence and, therefore, the offenders less likely to face judicial consequences, such as the Philippines. Online sexual violence against children has also increased because the guardians of potential victims – parents, teachers, doctors, and social workers – have had limited means to effectively control children’s increased use of the myriad online platforms during the pandemic (ECPAT International, 2020; Europol, 2020a, 2020b; INTERPOL, 2020).

This review starts by broadly defining online offences that deal with sexual violence against children. Internationally, the terminology and domestic legislations regarding these offences are, at the very least, varied and therefore this section stays at a general level. Part two discusses the research on online child sexual abuse offenders. It starts by defining pedophilia and then discusses whether there are differences between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ pedophiles. It concludes by inquiring into the specific characteristics of online offenders: academic typologies, their psychological profiles, and motivations for Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) use. Third part of this review scrutinizes different explanations for the offending of online pedophiles. It introduces the concepts of cognitive distortions, implicit theories, and neutralizing accounts, which have been developed to understand deviant sexual behavior. These models throw light on the diverse ways to justify and neutralize their offences against children that are prevalent in the respective online communities in darknet. The online communities in darknet actually refine, elaborate and nurture such justifications and, thereby, have an impact on sexual violence against children or condition it. The last part of the review focuses on

the online communities of pedophiles in darknet. It elaborates different types of members in, and their differing roles within, such communities. Moreover, with the concept of subculture this part seeks to provide an understanding of the (emotional) support these communities offer for individual offenders. Lastly, it explores different models or accounts on how such communities facilitate criminal behavior. The last chapter, i.e. conclusions, summarizes the key findings of this review.

2. Online Sexual Violence Against Children

Online sexual violence against children includes all sexually violent acts

“carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the online environment” (ECPAT International, 2016: 27).

These include (i) grooming, (ii) manipulating or threatening child to perform sexual acts in front of a webcam, and (iii) producing, distributing, disseminating, importing, exporting, offering, selling, possessing of, or knowingly obtaining access to child sexual abuse material (ECPAT International, 2016: 28; Europol, 2020b). These crimes often interrelate with each other.

Grooming is a sexually abusive process in which an adult develops a relationship with a child by using online technology, including social media such as Facebook, TikTok and Youtube, different messaging boards, such as WhatsApp and Signal, and game consoles such as Play Station and Xbox. The offender seeks to gain the victim’s trust for the purpose of sexually abusing her/him (Gupta et al., 2012). As Lorenzo-Dus and Izura point out, the

“interactions that groomers have with minors online already provide them (the groomers) with sexual gratification. This is why, regardless of whether it is followed by sexual abuse offline, [grooming] constitutes a form of child sexual exploitation and is classified as a specific type of internet offence.” (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017, p. 68).

Blackmailing and psychological violence are part of the picture as the groomer pressure the child to remain silent about the sexual abuse.

Instead of seeking physical sexual contact with children, groomers often manipulate children to generate sexualized images of themselves. While willingly taking sexualized pictures of oneself is not illegal, their abusive use and distribution is. Circulating own pictures through mobile phones is part of sexting, which often includes receiving unwanted harassing messages, leads to bullying among peers or is part of a groomers blackmailing strategy. As part

of the grooming process, children may also be exposed to harmful contents, such as pornography and violence for the purpose of getting them used to sexual violence (ECPAT International, 2016).

Distant live streaming of sexual violence against children differs from other online child sexual abuse crimes in two ways. First, it is financially motivated and second, it has physical and virtual elements (Cubitt et al., 2021). The facilitators of the live streaming are often the child's family members and commit physical sexual offences for financial benefit. The child victim and her/his molesters are mostly based in the poor developing countries, such as Philippines, but the problem persists also in Europe (Europol, 2020b). 'The customers', in turn, order illegal virtual sessions and for instance specific acts of sexual violence to be conducted on the child victim without being physically present (ECPAT International, 2020; Europol, 2020b). The customer offenders often gain access to victims by first establishing contact with their mothers, e.g. through online dating services or forming intimate relationships during traveling in the country, and then starting to request the live streaming sessions (Napier et al., 2021).

Distant live streaming of sexual violence against children is particularly challenging to the police. When the live streaming ends, the material is gone unless the customer has captured it for his own use or for the purpose of capping, that is editing, circulating, and/or trading it (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2018). However, police cooperation between the Philippines and Australia shows that it is not impossible to get hold of this kind of offenders. In 2018, the Philippines provided Australia with a list of 118 arrested CSA offenders and Australia matched the transactions of 299 Australian based persons to these offenders. Some of them had already been arrested, or were under investigation, for child sexual abuse related crimes. Eventually 256 persons were found to have been sent payments for the child sexual abuse facilitators in the Philippines (Brown et al., 2020; Cubitt et al., 2021).

The possession of CSAM, also called as child sexual exploitation material (CSEM), child abuse material (CAM), or child pornography (CP), is globally the most widely criminalized online child sexual abuse crime, as it is a criminal act in more than 140 countries. However, the criminalization of further online child sexual abuse crimes varies significantly from country

to country and therefore policing these crimes is challenging (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2018). Since online sexual violence against children is frequently global by nature due to the global nature of the internet, international cooperation is a fruitful way to advance in policing it. Accordingly, in addition to the international and regional conventions demanding states to address these crimes,³ a multitude of governmental and non-governmental networks and actors work on the issue.

At its broadest sense CSAM can be defined as ‘any representation, by whatever means’ of a child that is intended to sexually arouse or gratify the user (ECPAT International, 2016). Such material usually depicts sexual violence against a child under the age of 18 and includes photographs, videos, and movies, but also live performances and audio recordings. The media, however, does not need to be intended to sexualize children – they can be regular family vacation pictures shared on Facebook which end up in illegal circulation on CSAM forums (ECPAT International, 2016). In addition to depicting real children, sculptures, and toys, stories, drawings as well as cartoons, such as manga and anime, are counted as illegal CSAM in many countries. Drawings can be regarded as pseudo CSAM, which most prominently includes computer generated realistic images of children and is prohibited by the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime.

Europol has recently reported signs of emerging commercialization of CSAM in both clearweb and darknet. This is a new turn, since the material has traditionally been available for free (Europol, 2020b). Hence, although the CSAM scene in the darknet evolves, the takedown of a large darknet community called ‘Boystown’ is an example of successful policing against CSA

³ International conventions include, amongst others, Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, The International Labour Organization Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. Regional conventions include, among others, The Council of Europe’s Convention on Cybercrime and Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, European Union’s Directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and Arab Convention on Combating Information Technology Offences (See International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2018, pp. 20–21).

criminality. Here too, the arrest of the four active offenders behind the illegal forum required international police cooperation. The investigations were initiated by Germany, coordinated by the Europol, and implemented in cooperation with The Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, United States, and Canada (Bundeskriminalamt, 2021; Europol, 2021). This case shows that despite the technical impediments posed by the darknet, it is possible to carry out successful investigations against these communities.

3. Online Child Sexual Offenders

3.1. Defining Pedophilia

Compulsive collecting and organizing CSAM is often associated with on-line pedophiles, the main objects of study in this chapter (Jenkins, 2001, p. 102; Soldino et al., 2020). However, collecting was a distinctive characteristic of pedophiles long before the cyber-era. In the 1980s, Hartmann, Burgess and Lanning identified four types of CSAM collectors (Hartman et al., 1984; Lanning, 1984). Closet collectors kept their actions secret and were in contact with children or other collectors. Pedophile collectors gained material from their contact sexual abuse of children, while systematically denying of harming children in any way. Cottage collectors represented in the 1980s the largest unit of collecting pedophiles. The sexual abuse of children here took place in a group and, thus, had a strong social aspect – like today’s on-line environment. CSAM was a means of communication with peers through sharing collections and experiences. Cottage collectors managed groups of children together and produced of CSAM collectively. Linked to the cottage collectors were commercial collectors, who financially benefited from the collections, made of their own group of children and purposed for commercial distribution (Hartman et al., 1984). Below I will deal with different types of child sexual abusers operating in the online and offline environments.

Pedophilia is a medical diagnosis. It is defined as a persistent and intense sexual attraction to prepubescent or pubescent children. Pedophilia can be diagnosed only if the person has acted on it or is markedly distressed due to it for at least six months (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Doshi et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2018).

Pedophilia often manifests itself already in puberty and its subgroups include nepiophilia (attraction to infants and toddlers), hebephilia (attraction to pubescent children) and ephebeophilia (attraction to postpubescent children). The attraction may lead to sexual urges and physical abuse of children, but also to mere fantasies (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2018). There is no exact information about pedophilia’s prevalence in the general population, but estimates circle around three percent (Santtila et al., 2015; Seto, 2018).

Psychiatric and neuropsychological research has inquired into the physical aspects of pedophilia and it has been found that neurochemistry, genetics, and hormonal as well as brain alterations may cause pedophilia (Camperio Ciani et al., 2019). The risk of pedophilia may be increased due to head injuries before the age of 13 (Blanchard et al., 2003), prenatal neurodevelopmental problem (Cantor et al., 2004; Dyshniku et al., 2015; Fazio et al., 2014; Seto, 2018, p. 118ff), or white matter deficiencies in brain (Cantor et al., 2008). These neurodevelopmental processes may not only predict pedophilia, but also broader, rare, and persistent anti-social and criminal behavior from early childhood to adulthood (Moffitt, 2018).

Recent neurological research suggests that pedophilia could be divided into developmental and acquired types. Developmental pedophilia corresponds with the psychiatric diagnostic and is as such a permanent disorder. Acquired pedophilia in turn is a neurological condition which develops later in life, due to, for instance, a brain tumor or dementia. The offences of 'acquired pedophiles' are impulsive and unorganized. They do not actively seek for victims, or to mask their offences. While developmental pedophilia cannot be treated without the consent of the individual, acquired pedophilia can be addressed by treating the underlying medical condition (Blagden et al., 2018; Camperio Ciani et al., 2019).

3.2. Do Online Offenders Cross-Over to Offline Offending?

The routine activity theory suggests that crossing over from online to offline sexual violence against children requires not only motivated offenders, but also access to suitable victims and an unchecked environment, which the cyber space can offer (Babchishin et al., 2015; Fortin et al., 2018). Fortin et al. construct a causal model based on learning and consisting of obstacles, which elaborates the path from online use of CSEM into a physical abuse of children. After exploring the opportunities of the virtual space, the offender has to establish social connections if he wishes to gain access to a more deviant, specific, or exclusive material. Socialization succeeds through adopting the community's standards of behavior and communication, such as different keywords and virtual spaces. The offender engages more and more with the virtual community and his real-world presence decreases. In some

cases, however, the virtual space is not enough and the offender decides to seek real-world contact with children (Fortin et al., 2018). This path from online to offline sexual violence occurs most likely when the abuser gains access to children. And this development echoes with routine activity theory that derives from the idea of opportunity making the thief, where we have a motivated offenders and also suitable, easily accessible victims in an unchecked environment (Babchishin et al., 2015; Fortin et al., 2018).

Whether there are differences between online and offline child sexual abusers is disputed. Some argue that the internet simply offers new venues to perform sexual violence against children. Indeed, some child sexual abusers solely use virtual environments for grooming with the purpose of exercising physical sexual violence against children. However, others only view, share, and trade CSAM (Buschman et al., 2010; Lanning, 2010, p. 127). A question also arises whether CSAM use is a gateway to physical sexual violence or whether the two are separate issues. In 2010, McCarthy found out that in more than 80 percent of cases, physical sexual violence had preceded CSAM use (McCarthy, 2010), while five years later, McManus et al.'s results showed that grooming serves as the gateway to physical sexual violence, not least since it offers a window of opportunity for contacting victims (McManus et al., 2015; Owens et al., 2016). As Seto points out, this discrepancy may well be explained with the fact that access to high-speed internet has significantly increased in the last decade (Seto, 2013, p. 188).

Wilson and Jones suggest that internet is a place of pseudo-reality, where fantasies meet sexual violence against children through the production of CSAM (Wilson and Jones, 2008). This space and the CSAM it offers may reinforce pedophiles' fantasies and by so doing incite them to start producing corresponding real-life materials or experiences (Bartels et al., 2019; Wilson and Jones, 2008). Thus, fantasies facilitate the planning and preparing of child sexual abuse offences or serve as generators of sexual sensations, preceding sexual violence against children (Sheldon, 2011; Sheldon and Howitt, 2007). Fantasies may also lower self-control and by so doing smooth the way to physical sexual violence against children (Babchishin et al., 2018). The recent ReDirection-survey conducted in the darknet for individuals who view CSAM confirms that 44 percent of respondents had thought of seeking contact with children after viewing CSAM and 37 percent had done so (Insoll et al., 2021, 2022).

While the distinction between online and offline pedophiles is disputed, there is a group of offenders who limit their criminal behavior to the virtual space. Thus, there is a classifiable group of online child sexual offenders (Henshaw et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2016) and, accordingly offenders could be split into two categories: contact and fantasy driven ones, in which case sexual climaxing is either reached in an online fantasy environment or through contact sexual violence against children (Broome et al., 2018). In the case of contact offenders, CSAM is a

“behavioral substitute, facilitatory factor, or product of contact offences” (Merdian et al., 2018: 232; Merdian, Curtis, et al., 2013),

while fantasy offenders use it for fantasizing or collecting. Fantasy offenders are unlikely to commit contact crimes and they reach sexual satisfaction online (Babchishin et al., 2018; Beech et al., 2008; Merdian et al., 2018).

Differences between the social characteristics of online and offline offenders have been inquired by Babchishin et al. (2015, 2018). Contact offenders have more commonly criminal history, substance abuse issues, and a pedophilia diagnosis. Moreover, they tend to masturbate to, and maintain a larger collection of, CSAM and have significantly more online contacts with children (Babchishin et al., 2018; McCarthy, 2010). Mixed offenders (offenders with a history of online and physical abuse) are criminally the riskiest and most pedophilic group. They have high sexual interest in, and less access to, children and more empathy deficits as well as less impulse control than online and offline offenders (Babchishin et al., 2015). Regarding physical sexual violence, internet provides a gateway to groom children for the purpose of physical sexual violence (McCarthy, 2010). It has been found that contact offenders in fact have more online contacts with their peers and maintain large collections of CSAM than online offenders (McManus et al., 2015; Owens et al., 2016). Accordingly, in this sense the distinction between online and offline abusers is rather insignificant (Broome et al., 2018; Owens et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2016)

Both offender groups use internet for social purposes. Offline offenders, interestingly, communicate more with their peers online and in person and use chat rooms for the purpose of cybersex (McCarthy, 2010), but online offenders are in contact with their likes too. They tend to use more sexually

deviant online contents than offline offenders (Babchishin et al., 2015, 2018). Intriguingly, illegal use and possession of CSAM is a stronger indicator of pedophilia than is contact sexual violence against children. This is so, because some antisocial men sexually abuse underaged girls with pubescent appearance without being sexually attracted to children. Here, the age of the victim and not the offender's attraction to children makes him a child molester. Such offenders favor pornography that depicts teenagers or very young-looking adults, while pedophiles choose material that depicts sexual violence against children. The reason here is simple: people tend to use online contents that correspond with their age preferences (Seto et al., 2006). Moreover, approximately 40 percent of pedophiles cross-over from CSAM possession to physical sexual violence against children (for discussion on possible physical offending of CSAM offenders, see Eke et al., 2011; Long et al., 2012; Owens et al., 2016).

3.3. Online Pedophiles and CSAM Offenders

Internet facilitates all kinds of child sexual abusers' access to victims (Babchishin et al., 2018; Fortin et al., 2018). Therefore, some argue that distinguishing different offender groups according to the types of crimes they commit into online and offline abusers has become rather outdated (Broome et al., 2018; Powell & Henry, 2017). However, the use and role of online technology in sexual violence against children still takes different roles in the offending (Owens et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2016). As several studies point out, contact offenders mainly use internet to groom of children for the purpose of physical sexual violence, while online offenders reach their sexual satisfaction in the internet (Babchishin et al., 2018; DeHart et al., 2017; Insoll et al., 2021).

According to research on the demographics of CSAM offenders, an average online offender is likely to be a 39 years old, single Caucasian male, who probably has attended college, had issues with substance abuse, and mental health problems (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Webb et al., 2007). Up to 20 percent of online offenders have experienced some sort of sexual abuse as children and have been convicted for a sexual crime (See e.g. Elliott et al., 2009, 2013; Long et al., 2012; McCarthy, 2010; McManus et al., 2015; Owens et al., 2016; Seto et al., 2006; Shelton et al., 2016; Wolak et al., 2003; K. Young, 2008). Their motivations for CSAM use can roughly be organized

into satisfaction of sexual attraction to children and into emotional purposes in the sense that CSAM allows the escape from negative feelings, such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, sexual frustration, or boredom (Babchishin et al., 2018; Insoll et al., 2021; Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013; Morgan & Lambie, 2019).

Recent research on CSAM offenders characterizes them as less emotionally deviant than contact offenders (Seto, 2013, p. 141; Babchishin et al., 2015; Elliott et al., 2009). They have more psychological barriers for their offending, such as more empathy for the victims (Babchishin et al., 2015). Although they show less distorted personality traits, they are socially less likely to have functioning relationships – especially romantic ones (Henshaw et al., 2017) – and more likely to feel lonely and have a low self-esteem (Armstrong & Mellor, 2016; Babchishin et al., 2018). Perhaps because of the feeling of being socially detached, sex-related matters, including sexual and pedophilic fantasies, attraction to children, and sex as a coping strategy, play a more significant role for online pedophiles (Henshaw et al., 2017). They also tend to be more sexually deviant as they consume more deviant contents (Babchishin et al., 2018).

Several studies have produced different kinds of categorizations for online pedophiles. O’Connell’s categorization is based on different types of online activities that offenders may practice and includes (i) collecting, (ii) active use and producing of CSAM, (iii) collecting of different kinds of omnivorous materials, (iv) curious visitors of CSAM communities, (v) libertarians who strive to keep internet free, and (vi) commercial producing of CSAM. She also categorized users according to their level of activities from passive users and those not interested in communicating with others to those whose level of activities varies (O’Connell, 2000a, pp. 229–230). Succeeding O’Connell, Krone’s typology derives from the seriousness of offending and describes different online behaviors from private use, browsing, collecting, producing, and distributing to grooming and physical abusing. Here, offending progresses from stage to stage and beyond, depending on three behavioral factors, namely nature of the abuse varying from indirect to direct abuse, the level of networking of the offender, and the level of his security measures (Krone, 2004b).

Beech et al. summarize online pedophiles’ under four umbrellas according to their motivation for the use of CSAM into those who access CSAM (i)

sporadically, impulsively, or out of curiosity, (ii) to fuel their attraction to children, (iii) for financial profit, and (iv) to persons who use internet for grooming children or circulating CSAM (Alexy et al., 2005; Beech et al., 2008, p. 225; K. Young, 2008). They moreover argue that the CSAM collections of 'Type 1 offenders' are part of their wider sexual abuse of children, such as contact offending, while 'Type 2 offenders' feed their distorted sexual interest in children through collecting CSAM and may proceed into contact abuse, and 'Type 3 offenders' act out of curiosity and have lower likelihood of shifting into contact offending (Beech et al., 2008, p. 224). Online offenders have further been categorized amongst others according to the gravity of their social problems and the way they use CSAM (Henshaw et al., 2017; For overviews, see Seto, 2013, pp. 163–165).

Thus, the motivations for CSAM use are manifold. Some access CSAM accidentally, sporadically, impulsively, or out of curiosity, while some satisfy sexual attraction to children. Moreover, some use CSAM to escape negative feelings, such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, boredom, or sexual frustration or for financial profit (Babchishin et al., 2018; Insoll et al., 2021; Krone, 2004a; Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013; Morgan & Lambie, 2019).

Whatever the motivation for the use of CSAM, it re-victimizes child victims of contact abusers who produce pictures and videos. This is the least common denominator between online and offline offenders. More generally, internet facilitates both contact and fantasy users' access to victims through e.g. grooming (Babchishin et al., 2018; Fortin et al., 2018). This is the reason why, instead of using the role of technology as a distinguishing factor between different offender groups, it might be productive to concentrate more on offending behavior (Owens et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2016): whether offenders commit solely online crimes or desire physical contact with children. Profiling child sexual abusers from this perspective eases the concentration of investigations on most likely crime scenes (K. Young, 2008).

4. Justifications for Sexual Violence against Children

4.1. The Concept of Cognitive Distortions

The users of pedophiles' darknet communities usually offer accounts for their deeds. In their chat discussions, they collectively sooth their feelings of guilt and support each other by justifying their criminal behavior e.g. with the misconception that they would not harm children or the perceived inevitability of their sexual orientation (Huikuri, 2022). Psychology uses the concept of cognitive distortions to understand pedophiles' behavior and justifications (Abel et al., 1984). Such cognitions help to rationalize and justify illegal and deviant actions through distorted accounts about the victims, the world, and the offender himself (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Moreover, they serve the purpose of freeing one from "anxiety, guilt and loss of self-esteem that would usually result from an individual committing behaviors contrary to the norms of his society" (Abel et al., 1989, p. 137). As such, cognitive distortions may explain why a very narrow group of people can sexually abuse children (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007).

Able et al. introduced the concept of cognitive distortions to understand offensive-supportive behavior of pedophiles (Abel et al., 1984; Gannon, 2009). Distorted cognitions accommodate the rationalization and justification of illegal and deviant sexual violence against children. The cognitions are based on distorted accounts about the victims, the world, and the offender himself. They serve the purpose of freeing the offender from the

"anxiety, guilt and loss of self-esteem that would usually result from an individual committing behaviors contrary to the norms of his society" (Abel et al., 1989, p. 137).

By so doing, it is suggested that cognitive distortions explain pedophiles can sexually abuse children (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007).

Cognitive distortions can be identified to appear at different stages of offending (Steel et al., 2020). First, long-term distortions, such as childhood

experiences of being a victim of violence of sexually abused, originate from the history of the offender and facilitate offending by normalizing sexual violence (for childhood abuse and sexual offending, see Seto & Lalumière, 2010). Second, short-term distortions appear shortly before offending, e.g. when the offender, in the state of arousal thinks that sexual abuse of children is acceptable (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006). Third, post-hoc cognitions, such as minimization of caused harm, serve as rationalizations and justifications for offending (Ward & Keenan, 1999). According to Steel et al. there are differences between contact and non-contact offenders and, thus, need to further inquiry into the cognitive distortions of online offenders (Steel et al., 2020; for a contrasting view, see Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013).

In their seminal work, Abel et al. argue that cognitive distortions are central for being able to sexually abuse children and for avoiding feelings of guilt (Abel et al., 1989, p. 137). Online offenders commonly perceive children as sexual objects and by so doing justify their actions as not being abusive (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007). Howitt and Sheldon compared convicted contact and online offenders and found that the differences in cognitive distortions between the groups were insignificant, although online offenders perceived children as sexual objects more commonly and by so doing justified their actions as not being abusive. Moreover, they find that most online offenders endorse most cognitive distortions, providing grounds to hypothesize that these

“distortions may have a role in offending behavior because of their superficial ordinariness and acceptability rather than because they are overtly bizarre.” (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007, p. 481)

From here follows the hypothesis that cognitive distortions are not necessarily distortions, but rather ‘cognitions conducive to offending’. Thus, their origins may not lie in the need to justify or rationalize criminal acts, but in distorted childhood experiences (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon, 2011). Hence, the argument of children being sexual beings may derive from the offender having been sexually abused as a child, in which case online CSA would not be the result of cognitive distortions, but for instance of traumatic childhood experiences (Babchishin et al., 2011, 2015).

4.2. Justifying Pedophilia with Implicit Theories

Originally, the concept of cognitive distortions is loosely defined and much of the research on it builds up on Ward and Keenan's argument of cognitive distortions deriving from implicit theories (Gannon, 2009; Ward & Keenan, 1999). Implicit theories originate from childhood: to understand and explain her surrounding environment and the complexities of the world, a child creates and revises causal theories, which help her to make sense about future events and others' behavior (Ward & Keenan, 1999, p. 823). Such theories have much in common with scientific ones, as they are based on observations of, for instance, interconnected events, behaviors, and different concepts (Ward and Keenan 1999, 823). Thus, human beings construct the world mentally and it

“is this construction that guides their actions and interpretations of others' actions.” (Ward, 2000, p. 498)

Accordingly, childhood provides the window of opportunity for the formation of cognitive distortions, which may appear if the child misinterprets the basic concepts of the underlying the society.

Implicit theories of pedophiles circle mostly around their victims and their relationship to the surrounding world. First, pedophiles frequently assume that *children are sexual beings* and that children actually initiate and enjoy sex – and benefit from it (Szumski et al., 2018). Second, pedophiles may believe that they have a *superior status* in the society for instance due to their gender or class, which justifies their right to have sex whenever desired and without respect to the victim (Ward & Keenan, 1999). A third implicit theory is based on the idea of a *dangerous world*. In such world other people may seek to dominate or harm the offender, which permits the offender to retaliate or dominate, for instance ‘to teach a lesson’ (Ward & Keenan, 1999). In such threatening world, children may also be perceived as the only ones to be trusted (Bartels & Merdian, 2016). Fourth, sexual feelings, actions of the offender, and the surrounding environment may also be thought of being *uncontrollable*. In this case, the offender argues of being a victim of the child (Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013). The last implicit theory considers caused *harm* of sexual violence to the child victim. On the one hand, affected harm can be belittled by comparing it to arguably more harmful sexual violence. On the other hand, it can be argued that sexual intercourse would be beneficial for

children and does not harm them (Ward, 2000). When reality contradicts with implicit theories, it commonly leads to the offender's reinterpretation or rejection of his theory (Ward & Keenan, 1999).

Two recent studies argue that child sexual abusers use implicit theories to justify their criminal behavior. Dangerous world due to unreliable and threatening adults and problems with interpersonal relationships were commonly referred to by offenders as reasons for sexual violence against children (Paquette & Cortoni, 2020; Soldino et al., 2020). However, characteristic for online offenders was their seeming sociability, which surfaced for instance in that they commonly define themselves as 'child lovers', who protect and cherish children (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010). This relates to the idea that cognitions lead to sexual violence against children and are no distortions (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Paquette & Cortoni, 2020).

The main finding in these two studies refers to internet. The cyberspace was perceived by a vast majority of online offenders as an uncontrollable environment, which was often entered out of curiosity. It facilitates crimes, especially if boredom or loneliness are part of the picture. Moreover, 90 percent of all offenders shared the view that the cyberspace is fictive and, thus, for instance children in the CSAM are not victims – and perhaps not real at all (Paquette & Cortoni, 2020; Soldino et al., 2020).

Online communities in the darknet provide individuals with special spaces to nurture implicit theories (Ward & Keenan, 1999). According to Bartels and Merdian, internet is a reinforcing and uncontrollable environment and therefore furthers implicit theories (Bartels & Merdian, 2016). First, unlike contact offenders, online offenders do not see the world as a dangerous, but as an unhappy, limiting, and unsatisfying place. Accordingly, they often have emotional, intimacy, and attachment problems and feel lonesomeness. This increases the importance of social interactions within online communities and their rewarding virtues (Soldino et al., 2020). Second, regarding uncontrollability, online offenders tend to believe that they are addicted to the material and unable to control its use (K. Young, 2008). Third, online offenders perceive children as sexual objects that are used to satisfy sexual needs. They depersonalize their victims and detach them from their bodies, which leads to the idea that using CSAM is harmless. Accordingly, online offenders tend to downplay the consequences of sexual violence against children depicted

in CSAM by arguing that there is no physical dimension involved (Bartels & Merdian, 2016).

To summarize, research on cognitive distortions of online offenders is somewhat contradictory as is the generalizability of the findings. Accordingly, the explanatory power of cognitive distortions has also been questioned in some empirical analyses. For instance, Merdian et al. found that cognitive distortions had a only limited explanatory power for the behavior of online offenders, although those offenders who had self-admitted attraction to children and those who had no explanation for their behavior, commonly appeared to possess such distortions (Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013).

4.3. Neutralizing Accounts as Explanations for Sexual Violence against Children

While Ward and Keenan created their account of implicit theories to explain why some individuals end up abusing children (Ward & Keenan, 1999; Ward, 2000), Durkin and Bryant were the first to analyze pedophiles' justifications and explanations in an online setting. They generated the concept of neutralizing accounts, which concentrates on explicit justifications and explanations for sexual violence against children (Durkin & Bryant, 1999).

Neutralizing accounts rely on Sykes and Matza's seminal research on techniques of neutralization and Scott and Lyman's theory on accounts. First, according to Sykes and Matza, *neutralization* techniques protect the offender from the blame of himself and the society, but also enable the transit from law abiding behavior to criminal one. They include denial of responsibility, injury, and victim, condemnation of condemners, and appeal to loyalties to a small group such as a family or a gang (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Second, while neutralization "precedes the act and hence allows it to happen by supplanting moral constraints" (Hamlin, 1988, p. 435), *accounts* are linguistic means to explain one's illegal actions and its consequences. Scott and Lyman identify two types of accounts, namely excuses and justifications. With justifications, the offender admits his responsibility, but denies that his act is reprehensible, while with excuses he admits the inappropriateness of his act, but refuses to take responsibility for it (Scott & Lyman, 1968). To summarize, neutralizations, excuses, and justifications allow the offender to feel better about himself and about their

offences, to mentally escape responsibility, and, in the worst case, repeat criminal behavior (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010, p. 72).

Already in the 1980s de Young had inquired into the neutralizations expressed in the publications of pro-pedophilia organizations in Europe and the United States, such as the UK Paedophile Information Exchange, Norwegian Pedophile Group, Amnesty for Child Sexuality, Netherlands Association for Sexual Reform, Rene Guyon Society, Childhood Sensuality Circle, and North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). She found that these organizations systematically (i) denied of causing harm to the children by arguing that children are sexual beings and benefit from sex; (ii) denied that children are victims and instead willing sex partners; (iii) condemned their condemners as hypocritical child exploiters; and (iv) appealed to the liberation of children from sexually repressive society (M. de Young, 1988,; 1989).

Durkin and Bryant were among the first to analyze pedophiles in an online setting (Durkin & Bryant, 1995). In their seminal study, they identified five neutralizing accounts used by pedophiles in online forums (Durkin & Bryant, 1999).⁴ First, through the condemnation of condemners, pedophiles argue that the society unjustly riots against them and restricts the rights of children for love and sexuality (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Second, they deny of causing injury or harm to children, which, thirdly, may lead to the argument that children actually benefit from sexual violence (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010). Fourthly, according to the concept of appeals to loyalties, they perceive themselves as the emancipators of children's right to sexuality (M. de Young, 1988). Lastly, they may bask in the reflective glory of 'great pedophiles', such as Oscar Wilde, and by so doing justify their criminal acts (Durkin & Bryant,

⁴ Malesky and Ennis were among the first to transfer the cognitive distortions hypothesis into an empirical research on online pedophiles. They analyzed a randomized set of posts from the 'boychat' message board with the aim to find out what kind of functions do such forums provide for their users, whether they strengthen cognitive distortions, and what kind of distortions can be found in such a setting. Surprisingly, the absence of cognitive distortions was remarkable, as they were referred to in less than 30% of the messages. Neutralizing arguments and especially denial of injury, denial of the victim, and the condemnation of condemners, were the most commonly used ones. They further observed that the website served mostly for communication and media sharing, followed with discussions on validation of pedophilic behavior and information on pedophilia-related issues (Malesky & Ennis, 2004).

1999, pp. 112–113). Durkin and Bryant found that around half of the examined users of an pedophiles' online discussion board offered some sort of an account for their actions. They most commonly denied of causing injury for children, followed by the condemnation of their condemners. Notably, in an online environment, pedophiles provided only justifications for their actions, while in interviews offenders also presented excuses for their crimes (Durkin & Bryant, 1999, p. 114).

O'Halloran and Quayle replicated Durkin and Bryant's study a decade later. The use of justifications had increased into 65 percent and, intriguingly, the condemnation of condemners was now used by 57 percent compared to previous result of 31,7 percent (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010). O'Halloran and Quayle point out to two further developments. First, as Paquette and Cortoni also find out (Paquette & Cortoni, 2020), child sexual offenders seem to alleviate their negative self-image by referring to themselves as 'child lovers'. Respectively, instead of seeing their offences as sexual violence against children, they maintain that there are only 'consensual romantic relationships' between adults and children. Second, interaction with like-minded individuals alleviates extreme marginalization and the resulting isolation and feelings of loneliness. As O'Halloran & Quayle put it:

“supportive community-like environment allows paedophiles to manage actively the impression they impart to society by giving an account of their atypical sexual orientation” (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010, p. 84).

The turn side of such a society is that it potentially normalizes sexual violence against children and supports criminal activities.

To conclude, one could say that cognitive distortions rather serve as offenders' 'inner voices' to justify their sexual violence against children and neutralizing accounts surface more regularly in interaction with offenders as minimizations for the committed crimes. In other words, if cognitive distortions explain why some individuals end up sexually abusing children, neutralizing accounts concentrate on the justifications and explanations for sexual violence against children. Accordingly, investigators of sexual offences against children should be aware of both these thinking models. Moreover, these concepts are helpful to understand different kinds of online discussions between child sexual abusers in the darknet.

5. Online Communities of Pedophiles

5.1. The Operating Logics of the Darknet Communities

In the 1980s, Belanger et al. introduced the idea of syndicated child exploitation rings,

“a well-structured organization formed for recruiting children, producing pornography, delivering direct sexual services, and establishing an extensive network of customers” (Belanger et al., 1984, p. 51).

The rings laundered both CSAM and payments for it from country to country and continent to continent to minimize the possibility of being caught by the law enforcement (Belanger et al., 1984, p. 64). Moreover, the collectors had a strong need to socialize with their peers; for social bonding and for expressing their attraction to children. Lastly, they had clear mechanisms and rules for including and excluding members of the network based on, for example, the number of shared pictures (Belanger et al., 1984, p. 67). Surprisingly or not, in addition to their main purpose – child sexual abuse – pedophiles are organized in a similar way today. Even technically, the way how CSAM and payments for it were ‘laundered’ in 1980s via several persons in different countries corresponds with the TOR-browser’s logic of nodes (torproject.org, 2022).

Understanding the creation and maintenance of darknet communities are significant for understanding online sexual violence against children. The communities allow contact with deviant peers and by so doing enable online offending, such as the exchange and trading of CSAM. Accordingly, several studies show that a vast majority of all online offenders have contact with their peers (Beech et al., 2008; Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013; Shelton et al., 2016) and that access to the community of like-minded offenders facilitates deviant behavior (Krone, 2004b). On the one hand, the ‘normalization’ of deviant behavior allows one to feel that his sexual desires are in fact much more common than they actually are (M. de Young, 1988) and online interaction with peers may facilitate – logistically, emotionally, and socially

– sexual violence against children (Huikuri, 2022). On the other hand, it may substitute physical relationships through peer-support or e.g. age-plays with each other (Carr, 2007; Merdian, Curtis, et al., 2013; Quinn & Forsyth, 2013). Moreover, increased contacts with other offenders is connected to the seriousness of offences, for instance to the transfer from collecting to trading and distribution CSAM, the possession of more deviant materials, and to better knowledge on how to protect oneself technically (Carr, 2007; Merdian, Curtis, et al., 2013).

All members of darknet communities of pedophiles share one distinguishing characteristic: distrustfulness. Although these communities operate with similar logic to mainstream online social networks – their users maintain profiles, communicate with each other both publicly and via private messaging, and share contents – their underlying aim is to support criminal activities (van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2021b; Macdonald & Frank, 2017; Motoyama et al., 2011). Accordingly, all users must remain anonymous.

Empirical research on the members of pedophiles' online communities emerged in the beginning of 2000 when O'Connell's categorized different users of online groups into (i) coordinators of the activities, (ii) reviewers of pedophilia related outlets, (iii) generators of postings; (iv) enthusiasts of CSA; and (v) posters and traders of CSAM. Moreover, she identified passive users and active opponents as large user groups (O'Connell, 2000b, p. 209, 2001, p. 70ff; see also Krone, 2004b). O'Connell argues that the opponents of the webpages may rather fuel than hinder the activities on the webpages, as facing a common enemy nurtures cooperation and cohesion as well as the need to maintain the anonymous community (O'Connell, 2001, pp. 72–73). Her findings have not outdated, except that today opponents within communities are quickly removed from the discussions. However, the wider society serves the function of a common enemy.

Darknet communities of pedophiles have different proceedings of establishing trust between the users: after joining a group, new members must complete assignments to become 'newbies' of the group. They then proceed into established users and further (Motoyama et al., 2011). Thus, integration presupposes the adaptation of virtual rules for the purpose of protecting the members and their criminal activities (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010). The rules are articulated by coordinators of the groups, who also advice newcomers.

These actors

“play a central role in the deviant process, although it may not always be clear whether they are committing an offence” (O’Connell, 2001, p. 70).

Hence, the status of the users is the result of their activities: the more (new or rare) material one shares and/or the more he communicates with other users, the higher is his standing (van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2020). Since collecting is characteristic for the online culture of CSAM users, they may withhold parts of their collections, or be attempted to produce new material, to enhance their standing in the community (Carr, 2007; Merdian et al., 2013).

5.2. Subculture as a Haven for Deviants

Online communities of pedophiles share characteristics of subcultures, since their deviant members share a vast amount of special knowledge regarding CSAM and differentiate themselves from the mainstream through a shared interest: sexual violence against children (Jenkins, 2001). Jenkin argues that in addition to shared values and language, hierarchies and especially the ‘respect’ paid for experienced users, which are all observable in the darknet communities, are characteristic for subcultures (Jenkins, 2001; see also Prichard et al., 2011; Holt et al., 2010). The subculture maintained in the darknet provides sense of a long-longed community and haven, which online pedophiles cannot find in the wider society, which has stigmatized and criminalized their behavior. This haven feeds the individual with never-ending amount of information and media, which promotes socialization and justifications in support of CSA (O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010). The common sense of danger and political statements, for instance the desire to join the LGBT-movement, further promote socialization (Jenkins, 2001; Prichard et al., 2011).

In the footsteps of Jenkins, Holt et al. argue that a normative order, consisting of rules, norms, and practices for behavior, aids members of the subculture to justify, structure, and realize emotional and sexual relationships with children, both virtually and in real life (Holt et al., 2010). Marginalization from the mainstream and the following urge to defend deviance may fuel the subculture in many ways. For instance, condemnation of CSA by the society

aids to justify normative perimeters of the subculture, such as CSA being in fact in the interest of children or the need of making a distinction between 'child lovers' and 'child molesters' (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Holt et al., 2010; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010). Moreover, online forums provide a safe place to discuss sexual interests, such as the interest in children of specific ages or the sharing of experiences of physical sexual violence against children (van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2021a). Lastly, the members of a subculture share a worry about their online and offline security as well as legal actions against them and, accordingly, they also advice each other on how to enhance anonymity and how to approach children in real-life (Holt et al., 2010).

5.3. The Criminogenic Nature of Darknet Communities

Social learning theory has been used for decades to understand how criminal behavior emerges (Akers et al., 1979). The underlying assumption is that social behavior develops from direct conditioning – that is positive or negative consequences of a certain conduct – and imitation of others' behavior (Bandura, 1989). Social learning elaborates how, in addition to normative learning and 'cultural' impacts, several learning processes (direct and indirect differential reinforcement, imitations, and differential association) together with non-cultural constraints (such as normative socialization to the surrounding environment's code of conduct) create and maintain criminal behavior (Akers, 1996).

The most influential reinforcers of criminal behavior are peer-networks, family, and other social groups. Criminal behavior emerges in interaction with, and from imitation of, a peer-group, in favor of delinquent behavior, which justifies and over time reinforces continuing deviance from social norms (Akers, 1996; Akers et al., 1979; Jensen & Akers, 2007). This process is called differential association. Such 'non-normative processes' can enable criminal behavior despite the underlying values of the surrounding society (Jensen & Akers, 2007). Virtual peers can play as much role in the learning process as face-to-face peers, meaning that differential association may occur in online pedophile communities too (Miller & Morris, 2016).

Another angle to social learning is a path of socialization to online communities, as described by Fortin et al., that consists of obstacles which an online pedophile overcomes through learning (Fortin et al., 2018). After exploring

the opportunities of virtual spaces, the offender starts to establish social connections, if he wishes to gain access to more deviant, specific, or exclusive material (Westlake et al., 2017). The socialization succeeds through the adoption of the community's standards of behavior and through communication with community members by using different keywords and virtual spaces. As a result of the socialization, the offender engages more and more with the virtual community and his real-world presence decreases. In some cases, online contents are not enough and the offender decides to seek real-world connection with children and commits contact sexual violence against children (Fortin et al., 2018). As already pointed out, the nature of internet allows physical distancing from virtual offences and by so doing can serve as a neutralizing factor for sexual violence against children (D'Ovidio et al., 2009; Rimer, 2017).

Van der Bruggen and Blokland have used crime script analysis (Leclerc & Wortley, 2014) to describe the process of online child sexual abuse offending and to characterize the view point of an individual offender. The process starts with the offender organizing a suitable physical space for offending and ends with him leaving the online community. In between he engages in the activities of the community and, for instance, downloads and shares CSAM. In this model, the offender acts purposefully and the communities provide him with spaces to commit child sexual abuse offences (van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2020). Van der Bruggen and Blokland find that law enforcement authorities should target their investigations on the administrators of the forums as they are the key actors behind the communities (van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2020).

While socialization has been subject to few studies on online pedophile networks, the social nature of the darknet has not been considered systematically (Roberts & Hunt, 2012). The social disorganization theory has been used to highlight the importance of the surrounding community's organization on (offline) crime rates. A disorganized society is unable to hold onto its basic common rights and to maintain social control. The result is an increased rate of criminal victimization (Bursik, 1988).

Sampson and Groves count the degree of local friendships, organizational participation, and supervision of teenagers as well as residential stability, ethnic heterogeneity, family disruption, and urbanization as potential factors

for social disorganization (Lowenkamp et al., 2003; Sampson & Groves, 1989). It is not farfetched to use the social disorganization-theory to explain the criminally enabling nature of darknet as Monk et al. do. The anonymity of darknet frees one from social control and the absence of the surrounding society's supervision may offer opportunities for slowly slipping into criminal activities (Monk et al., 2018).

To conclude, online communities are of central importance for understanding online sexual violence against children. They allow contact with other deviants and by so doing e.g. exchange of knowledge and trading of CSAM. Accordingly, the vast majority of all online offenders have contact with their peers (Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013; Shelton et al., 2016). While providing advice for committing crimes, these groups also serve as platforms to rationalize criminal behavior and to express favorable views on criminal actions (D'Ovidio et al., 2009).⁵ Thus, online communities function as reinforcers of the differential association theory. They create criminogenic environments, where one can learn criminal conduct – virtually without face-to-face communication (D'Ovidio et al., 2009; Westlake et al., 2017).

⁵ The analysis revealed that more than 60 percent of pedophiles used one of the three rationalizations, as put forward by Sykes & Matza (see Sykes & Matza, 1957): 42 percent associated pedophiles with the LGBT-movement and by so doing aimed at neutralizing their deviance while 35 percent respectively condemned the condemners or denied causing any injury by their wrongdoings (D'Ovidio et al., 2009).

6. Conclusions

This review collates research-based insight into the types of sexual violence children are exposed in online environment. By combining explanations and justifications of pedophiles for their sexual offending with the dynamics of online CSA communities one can argue that online communities in darknet advance sexual violence against children in three ways.

First, the hierarchical structure of darknet communities feeds community engagement, because involvement in activities is often the precondition for access to them (van der Bruggen & Blokland, 2020). This also feeds offending, since sharing of CSAM is another means to improve one's status among the members (Carr, 2007; Merdian, Wilson, et al., 2013). In the worst case, this leads to the production of CSAM, through physical offending or 'capping', the recording and sharing of live streamed online CSA (Roberts & Hunt, 2012).

Second, for most pedophiles, anonymous online communities are the only places to safely socialize with their peers. The communities are on the dark side of our society and remaining under the radar of social control is the key for their existence (Monk et al., 2018). In there, on the one hand, individual perpetrators search and find advice on how to remain anonymous, but also on how to safely advance into contact sexual violence against children. On the other hand, the virtual space also allows the impression that victims of online sexual violence are not real children at all (Bartels et al., 2019; Wilson & Jones, 2008).

Third, contact with deviant peers, who share similar cognitive distortions in support of (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007), and justifications and neutralizations for (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010) sexual violence against children, generates an impression that pedophilia is in fact far more common than it is (M. de Young, 1988). These are all ways that normalize and facilitate sexual violence against children (Ward, 2000).

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Understanding the darkest side of the darknet – the online communities of pedophiles – is one of the ways we can serve the tens of thousands of victims of sexual violence against children. The darknet communities come and go, but their underlying logics remain the same: their users seek and find Child Sexual Abuse Material and contact with each other. As the review elaborates, online pedophiles often share cognitive distortions and the darknet communities serve as places to justify their deviant behavior. Combining the justifications of pedophiles for their offending and the myriad ways these communities respond to the needs of persons who feel like outsiders in the society, this review provides new insights for the prevention and investigation of sexual offences against children.

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