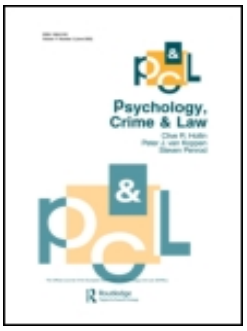

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Are Internet offenders emotionally avoidant?

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Internet child sexual offending through the use of images of child sexual abuse is a prevalent problem. Defining the characteristics of this group has become a research focus, with *emotional avoidance* having been investigated as one potential precipitating psychological feature. There are grounds, therefore, for investigating emotional avoidance in this group.

This study investigated emotional avoidance in Internet child sexual offenders. Four groups of men recruited from the community were compared: Internet child sexual offenders; contact child sexual offenders; non-sexual offenders; and non-offenders. Self-report assessments of emotional avoidance; and measures of potential confounds (e.g. psychological distress and socioeconomic status) were used. Analyses showed that non-sexual offenders were most emotionally avoidant. Several covariates correlated with the dependent variables.

Mostly not reaching statistical significance, the findings did not support current views that Internet child sexual offenders have particular difficulties with emotional avoidance. This has implications for clinical work based on such assumptions.

Keywords: Internet child sexual offenders; contact child sexual offenders; non-sexual offenders; non-offenders; emotional avoidance

Introduction

Internet child sexual offending

Internet child sexual offending through the use of images of child sexual abuse is a prevalent problem, with an estimated one million images of abuse available online (Calder, 2004). The exact prevalence is difficult to determine, as it is estimated that only a small proportion comes to the attention of the law (Renold & Creighton, with Atkinson & Carr, 2003; Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Nonetheless, offences are reportedly increasing in number and downloading images of abuse is the most common example of illegal Internet activity (Akdeniz, 2006; Carr, 2006). However, still relatively little is known about this form of child sexual offending and research is required that might inform interventions designed to reduce it (Quayle, Erooga, Wright, Taylor, & Harbinson, 2006a).

The growth of Internet sexual offending has understandably caused mounting concern as increasing numbers of users have access to home-based terminals. Police

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statistics have revealed the extent of Internet use not only for disseminating images of abuse, but also for creating opportunities for motivated offenders to establish and in some cases exploit contacts with potential victims.

However, for a proportion of those who make use of Internet sites, access is an end in itself. Regarding those whose offences adopt that pattern, the possibility arises that there may be distinguishing psychological features that are activated by the opportunity for sexual excitement while remaining distant from the emotional risk involved in direct contact with others. There are grounds, therefore, for investigating whether such a pattern of offending is a function of a tendency that some individuals manifest towards *emotional avoidance*. In the first section of this paper, we seek to locate that variable in the wider context of theoretical accounts of sexual offending behaviour.

Emotional avoidance

Theories of sexual offending and abusiveness have undergone a period of rapid development in recent years (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006). In common with attempts to account for other types of criminal and antisocial behaviour, the study of sexual offences has been heavily influenced by the 'risk-factors' approach. Broadly speaking this holds that research may be able to identify specific variables that differentiate individuals at higher or lower probability of engaging in or persisting in criminal activity, or in one type of offending rather than another. Going further, the possibility arises that it may be feasible to identify specific risk factors for different types of sexual offence, or to ascertain 'pathways' whereby individuals are channelled into victim selection. Until recently, while models were available of sub-types of sexual deviance and offending (e.g. exhibitionism, fetishism, paedophilia, sexual sadism, or rape; Laws & O'Donohue, 2008) conceptual development in the field has arguably been in need of unification, or at the very least of an attempt to compare theories with a view to examining their relative explanatory scope, or the extent to which they could be combined.

Efforts to advance this challenging task received a major impetus from the publication of the *Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending* (hereafter, the ITSO), by Ward and Beech (2006, 2008). Ward and Beech (2006) contend that the ITSO possesses the attributes of a good scientific theory, which they list as empirical adequacy, internal coherence, external consistency, unifying power, heuristic value in generating hypotheses, explanatory depth, and simplicity. In addition, they regard it as important that a theory in a specific domain be connected with broader conceptualizations of human behaviour. The ITSO synthesizes variables from a wide array of domains – evolution and genetics, brain development, the physical and cultural environment, individual circumstances, social learning, and interlocking neuropsychological and cognitive functioning – in explaining the emergence of clinical symptoms or state factors associated with sexual offending.

Ward and Beech (2006) do not seek to dispense with the risk factors approach but to incorporate it in what they consider a more formal theoretical framework. Within the ITSO, four broad categories of dynamic risk factors or domains of problematic psychological functioning are identified. Respectively they are (a) deviant sexual interests, (b) dysfunctional schemas, (c) problematic attachment, and (d) impulsivity/mood problems. Ward and Beech (2006) propose that '... combinations of these

vulnerabilities may result in illegal sexual behaviours under certain circumstances' (p. 47). Within the third of the domains (c) there may be several aspects of the 'motivational/emotional system' that constitute 'stable dynamic risk factors' (Thornton, 2002) and include patterns of social isolation, psychological and social deficits, or intimacy problems. The associated cluster of symptoms, such as '... emotional loneliness, inadequacy, low self-esteem, passive victim stance, and suspiciousness. ... can be viewed in terms of attachment insecurity leading to problems establishing intimate relationships with adults' (Ward & Beech, p. 55).

The ITSO assimilates elements from an earlier 'Pathways' model of sexual offending proposed by Ward and Siegert (2002). This held that there were four discrete routes to sexual offending, respectively via: intimacy and social skills deficits; antisocial cognitions; distorted sexual 'scripts'; and emotional dysregulation. To these Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, and Beech (2006) proposed adding a fifth trajectory which combined ingredients of the other four. Of primary interest here is the aetiological pathway of emotional dysregulation.

Numerous findings indicate that various forms of emotional dysregulation may contribute to the development and maintenance of some patterns of offending. However, while the ITSO provides a valuable framework for synthesizing a broad spectrum of variables, when addressing the detailed processes whereby specific combinations of them make offending more likely, there is a considerable lack of precision. For example, emotional dysregulation may itself take a number of different forms. The variable of *negative emotionality* has emerged in several longitudinal studies of the onset, establishment and escalation of delinquency and other antisocial behaviours (Lahey & Waldman, 2005). Difficulties in managing or channelling negative emotion are implicated in various forms of rule violation including delinquent acts. Interview-based research with high-frequency adult offenders has shown that unwillingness or inability to address personal problems and the accompanying dysphoria was associated with an accumulation of such difficulties to a point where coping mechanisms failed and a re-offence occurred (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997).

By contrast, difficulties of emotional self-regulation may also be manifested in, amongst other features, a pattern of emotional avoidance. Where an individual encounters aversive feelings and has problems of emotional self-management, avoidance is one strategy that might be adopted. The secondary reinforcement of escape from unpleasant situations may be amplified by positive reinforcement contingencies operating in others. Although the possibility that emotional avoidance is associated with any specific type of offending has not been the subject of systematic empirical investigation, some studies have indicated that this may be a useful direction for research. Recently Quayle (2008) reviewed several possible explanations of Internet sexual offending including the hypothesis that 'people use sexual activity to cope with difficult emotional situations' (Quayle, 2008, p. 451). Shepherd and Edelmann (2005) suggest that there is an association between social anxiety and the reasons individuals give for Internet use. Factor analysis of their measures yielded a single predominant factor on which items such as the following showed high loadings: 'I feel less inhibited online', 'I can be whoever I want to be online', 'I stay online to escape offline pressures'. The findings led the authors to re-label an initial pilot measure as the 'Internet use to Regulate Social Fears Questionnaire' (IRSFQ). The sample used in this study was not representative of the

community in general, as it consisted of students and was 73% female, therefore it would be unwise to extrapolate from the findings. However it may be that the association between these variables measured is stronger within sub-groups and that this might characterize those who use the Internet to sexually offend.

Other data pertaining to this were obtained by Sheldon and Howitt (2007) who reported a psychometric and interview-based study that included a sample of men ($n = 16$) with a history of Internet images of abuse offences but none of direct contact offences. Participants were recruited mainly from vulnerable prisoner units. It was found that 50% of this group, and 40% of a group of 'mixed' sexual perpetrators 'spoke in terms which suggested that their Internet activity was part of the way they avoided problems of their daily reality' (Sheldon and Howitt, 2007, p. 114). The contents of some interviews suggested that Internet use was a coping strategy, allowing access to an 'alternate world' and escape from the stress of direct, face-to-face relationships.

This proposal accords with mounting evidence from adjacent fields of research. Developmental studies suggest that socially withdrawn children are at long-term risk of a range of emotional disturbances such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and internalizing problems (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Moore, Zoellner, and Mollenholt (2008) reviewed evidence indicating that habitual suppression rather than expression of emotionality is associated with the experience of stress-related symptoms and with some pre-morbid indicators of psychopathology.

Approach avoidance is regarded as one of the major dimensions of emotional responding (Koole, 2009). Furthermore, individuals who regularly adopt avoidance goals and select a hedonistic alternative may become progressively more motivated to maintain the negative emotions that initiate such a process (Tamir, Chiu & Gross, 2007). Individuals who are prone to utilize an avoidant or emotionally repressive style in response to negative or threatening information are likely to increase attention to positive information, and while this may be associated with short term relief from stress, it is linked with a variety of adverse long-term outcomes (Geraerts, Merckelbach, Jelicic & Smeets, 2006).

To summarize, first, there are increasing amounts of data showing that Internet use for sexual purposes has risen significantly in recent years and all indicators are that it will probably continue to do so. Second, experimental studies of emotional expression collectively suggest that there is an association between avoidance of stressful or aversive situations and engagement with others that offer uncomplicated forms of gratification. Third, clinically-oriented research findings imply that there are links between social anxiety and avoidance, and inclination to pursue more solitary activities such as Internet use. Fourth, evidence on sexual offending points towards poor emotional self-management as a likely candidate for being a dynamic risk factor. Fifth, from a small number of studies, offenders who have used the Internet have disclosed an association between doing so and other difficulties in their lives.

There are difficulties with both the concepts and the studies in this area, however. Neither the ITSO nor other models of sexual offending has yet become specific enough to directly offer testable hypotheses in some of the domains they define. The lack of conceptual refinement is, of course, partly due to the dearth of available data on some of the issues raised. On the empirical front, most of the studies discussed here and in the field more broadly are rather disconnected. They generally employ

non-offender samples, and when research participants are offenders, their numbers tend to be small. Given the difficulty of accurately defining variables in this area, the measures they employ are often in need of more formal and extensive validation.

The present paper seeks to test components of the ITSO with reference to the third domain of stable dynamic risk factors mentioned above, focusing on the problem of emotional avoidance, and whether this can be observed amongst individuals who engage exclusively in Internet-based sexual offending. In the study to be reported here, we sought to evaluate that possibility by assessing a number of psychological features of individuals convicted of such offences, and comparing them with those whose offences entailed direct victim contact, and also with non-sexual offenders and non-offending controls. In order to clarify the basis of the study, prior to describing the methodology itself, the next section of the paper reviews literature relevant to this objective. Specifically, this will entail examining first, the nature of emotional avoidance, second, its possible links to sexual offending against children, third, its specific role as a factor influencing offending via the Internet.

Characteristics of the Internet child sexual offenders and the Internet

Emotional avoidance has been examined in clinical groups such as those people with anxiety or personality disorder diagnoses. It has been defined as being 'unwilling to remain in contact with particular private experiences' and includes 'both avoidance and escape in all of their forms' (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996, p. 1156). Research shows that individuals who are prone to avoidance attempt to suppress emotion and report more negative emotions (Feldner, 2001). Coping with negative emotions through avoidance is considered a maladaptive strategy and is related to psychological distress, anxiety disorders, substance misuse and personality disorders (Bryant & Harvey, 1995; Forsyth, Parker, & Finlay, 2003). Taylor, Laposa, and Alden (2004) suggest positive emotions may also be experienced as difficult by some groups of people due to a deficiency in the experience of pleasure. These authors locate emotional avoidance as part of a wider avoidant personality style. Of course, it is possible that those who have difficulty dealing with emotion may have maladaptive coping styles other than avoidance, however the concern of this paper is avoidance as a coping style.

Some argue that the Internet serves particular functions for those who use it to offend and these relate to certain underlying characteristics. For example, it may provide the function of what the user considers to be meaningful contact as a result of poor social skills, particularly in establishing face-to-face, age-appropriate relationships. Also, it may serve a collecting function as a way to compensate for lack of (career) success as a result of low self-esteem (see Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Although many functions such as those above and others (addiction, sense of community, sexual interest in children) have been examined (Taylor & Quayle, 2003), the one of relevance to the current study is emotional avoidance (Quayle, 2005).

Another function of the Internet has been purported to be increasing social activity and thus is intuitively at odds with emotional avoidance. However, Quayle and Taylor (2003) suggest that the social element is non-normative and this is supported by research in the general population regarding abnormal and or excessive

use of social networking sites that paradoxically reduces actual social contact (Kraut et al., 1998).

The Internet is considered to allow for escape and avoidance of life difficulties. It is posited that negative reinforcement occurs through the reduction of negative affect whilst online. This exacerbates the problem as the deviant fantasies themselves elicit negative mood and so a vicious circle is thought to develop (Quayle & Taylor, 2002a; Middleton, 2003). In addition, use is thought to be positively reinforced through the gratification provided by sexual arousal and masturbation (Taylor & Quayle, 2003).

The indication that emotional avoidance may be a factor in Internet offending has led others to consider this concept more directly.

A discursive analysis of 13 interviews with Internet child sexual offenders showed that using the Internet to avoid real life was a theme that emerged (Quayle & Taylor, 2002b).

Laulik, Allam, and Sheridan (2007) reported that 63% of their sample of 30 Internet child sexual offenders scored above average on a set of traits that included a withdrawn personality style, and 75% reported emotional problems. They also showed that greater problems were associated with more time spent online. They conclude that pre-existing difficulties may trigger Internet use, which is used as a way to avoid emotion. This in turn exacerbates difficulties by reinforcing Internet use.

A study by Middleton et al. (2006) also concluded that Internet child sexual offenders have difficulty managing emotion, with avoidance being one aspect. Images of abuse are thought to be used as a coping mechanism for stress and lack of real-world intimacy (Middleton et al., 2006). Middleton considered the applicability of the Pathways Model (Ward & Siegert, 2002) to Internet child sexual offenders. This model proposes that maladaptive strategies such as avoidance of emotion are causal mechanisms for contact child sexual offending. Middleton's study found that 33% of a sample of 72 Internet child sexual offenders fitted what Middleton et al. (2006) entitle the 'emotional dysregulation pathway'. This is characterized as having difficulties dealing with negative emotion and stress and using avoidance as a strategy to cope with aroused negative emotions. On the basis of this and clinical experience, Middleton makes a specific prediction in relation to emotional avoidance: that it may be a feature of Internet child sexual offenders (Middleton, 2004; D. Middleton, personal communication, 26–27 April 2005).

Avoidance of negative emotion is seen as a defining feature of Internet child sexual offending as a way to deal with aroused negative emotions and intervention techniques for addressing this in this group have been developed (National Probation Service, 2006; Quayle et al., 2006a; Quayle, Vaughn & Taylor, 2006b). Clearly, if emotional avoidance is a factor in offending, then improving it through intervention may contribute to reducing recidivism.

There are several difficulties with the studies just reviewed. Laulik et al. (2007) did not compare the Internet child sexual offenders with contact child sexual offenders, the comparisons being based on normative data from the personality measure used. Therefore, whether the findings are specific to Internet child sexual offenders is difficult to determine. Three of the sample had contact child sexual offences and they were all involved at different stages in intervention programmes which may have changed their attitudes towards relationships and emotions (Harkins & Beech, 2007). It is also the case that the measure used to elicit these characteristics was based on researcher ratings and thus the method is open to bias.

Middleton et al. (2006) highlight that those fitting the emotional dysregulation pathway represented only 33% of their sample ($N = 15$) and that only 40% of the sample fitted any pathway at all. As stated above, this pathway is characterized by difficulties in dealing with negative emotion and stress, but the measures used did not directly address the concept of emotional avoidance. Thus the concepts have not been directly tested and the findings are not incontrovertible, but provide preliminary hypotheses to guide further research.

The conclusions drawn by Quayle and Taylor (2003) and Quayle et al. (2006a, b) are based mainly on qualitative interpretation of interviews with individuals or small groups of Internet offenders. Whilst this is valuable, it does not discern unique characteristics of this group as other groups are not included for comparison. Also, Internet offenders in these studies commonly have co-existing contact child sexual offences as well as Internet child sexual offences. This overlap proves a confound to delineating differences between offence types (Smallbone & Dadds, 1998). Finally, only one study where a therapy for emotional avoidance was used is cited as evidence of effectiveness of emotional avoidance interventions, and this was for exhibitionists.

Additionally, as alluded to above, the literature often rests on the assumption that these functions of the Internet are unique. Therefore, this would suggest that other child sexual offenders and indeed others more generally would not necessarily have similar difficulties. However, this is not automatically the case. Research with contact child sexual offenders considers the concept of emotional avoidance in relation to the suggestion that fantasy is used to avoid negative emotion (Gee, Ward, & Eccleston, 2003). Similarly, research in the general population suggests that negative emotional states trigger both deviant arousal and Internet use (Seay, Jerome, Lee, & Kraut, 2004).

As discussed above, the ITSO (Ward & Beech, 2006) is of relevance. It proposes that psychological vulnerabilities emerge from (amongst other factors) emotional regulation difficulties, including avoidance of emotion. This is thought to give rise to psychological dispositions that are routinely triggered by changes in negative emotional states (Beech & Ward, 2004). Despite this indirect evidence for emotional avoidance in contact child sexual offenders, to the authors' knowledge, no empirical work has been conducted directly on emotional avoidance in this group.

The current study was designed to address the question 'are Internet child sexual offenders emotionally avoidant?'. Given the critique above, this was done by comparing four groups to discover if Internet child sexual offenders are different from contact child sexual offenders; different from people with non-sexual offences; different from the non-offending population. The study was designed to contribute to the developing evidence base by more rigorously testing the hypotheses, derived from the most recent literature, that Internet child sexual offenders will show higher emotional avoidance than all other groups.

Method

Sample

The sample comprised four groups of men: Internet child sexual offenders (ICSO); contact child sexual offenders (CCSO); non-sexual offenders (NSO); and non-offenders (NO). Assignment was done on the basis of conviction. The number of

participants per group was determined by power analysis based on a medium effect size, a power of 91%, and an alpha of $p = 0.05$ resulting in the requirement of 25 participants per group (GPower: Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996). Table 1 shows the demographic features of the sample along with their convictions and amount of time spent online and Table 2 shows the offence types of the offender groups.

The 25 participants for each of the three offending groups were recruited through North West England Probation Services on a voluntary basis and were a community convenience sample. No offenders were in custody at the time of the research, but all were on community sentences involving contact with the Probation Service (monitoring or about to engage in intervention).

The following criteria were set for inclusion: a conviction for the relevant offence and no conviction for any other type of offence; 18 years old or above; no evidence of a learning disability, mental disorder diagnosis or brain injury; and minimal intervention (i.e. not completed any sex offender treatment programme within the last two years). Participants were offered a £10 incentive to participate. The 25 members of the NO group were recruited by email flyer from non-academic Liverpool University Departments, the criteria being as above expect that they should have no convictions of any kind. As for the three offender groups, NOs were paid £10. Attempts were made to match the NSO and NO groups with the two child sexual offending groups for age, education and employment level. However, this was not possible due to the characteristics of those volunteering. Therefore, these variables were controlled statistically in the analyses.

Despite careful explanation of the exclusion criteria, some completed questionnaires indicated that some of the participants in the ICSO and CCSO groups had reported offences in more than one category; and some had received relevant intervention. As multiple offence type is a potential confound and it is thought that people may report changed attitudes following intervention (Harkins & Beech, 2007; Smallbone & Dadds, 1998), these participants were excluded from the subsequent analyses. This resulted in a final sample size of 83, comprising 15 ICSOs, 18 CCSOs, and 25 each of the NSOs and NOs. A revised power analysis based on this smaller sample showed a power of 83% (GPower: Erdfelder et al., 1996) which remains acceptable according to Cohen (1988).

Measures

Emotional avoidance measures

Emotional Avoidance Questionnaire (EAQ). Emotional avoidance was measured using the EAQ (Taylor et al., 2004), which is based on theories of avoidant personality disorder. The EAQ has 20 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ('not true of me' to 'very true of me') with higher scores representing greater emotional avoidance. This provides four, five-item sub-scales, namely: *Avoidance of Positive Emotions*; *Negative Beliefs About Emotions*; *Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions*; and *Avoidance of Negative Emotions.* Examples of items for each of these components, respectively are: 'I try to keep positive emotions hidden'; 'I cannot tolerate feeling sad'; 'When I find myself talking about sad things, I try to change the subject'; 'If I ignore negative emotions, they will go away'. The authors used principal components analysis to identify these four components and confirmed their findings in a replication study.

Table 1. Demographic features of the groups.

	ICSO ($N=15$)	CCSO ($N=18$)	NSO ($N=25$)	NO ($N=25$)
Age: range; mean in years (standard deviation, SD)	22–53; 40.80* (11.02)	20–70; 43.61 (14.61)	19–46; 29.00 (8.14)	18–62; 34.2 (13.22)
Percentage white	100.00	100.00	92.00	92.00
Percentage GCSEs or higher†	86.70	55.60	56.00	92.00
Percentage with intermediate or above occupations at the time of data collection‡	40.00	0.00	16.00	40.00
Percentage unemployed at the time of data collection	13.30	27.70	36.00	12.00
Relationship Status: Frequency and (percentage) in a relationship§	8 (53.30)	9 (50.00)	12 (48.00)	18 (72.00)
Time Spent on the Internet/day in minutes: Mean (SD)	96 (113.50)	1.94 (7.10)	21.6 (49.39)	95 (91.81)
Time online at time of accessing images of abuse. Mean and SD in minutes	157.33 (128)			

*All decimal points are to two places with the exception of near significant p values.
†*Education Level* recorded as: no qualifications; GCSE or equivalent (NVQ; YTS; City and Guilds); A level; Intermediate (Diploma; HNC; BTEC); Degree; and post Degree qualification. For the purposes of analysis these were collapsed into three levels: none; GCSE; higher than GCSE.
‡*Employment Level* determined using the Office of National Statistics: *National Statistics – Socioeconomic Classification* (2002; Appendix VIII). Two independent raters classified the reported occupations. A weighted Kappa revealed that the agreement was 'Good' ($\kappa = 0.76$) (Landis & Koch, 1977). For purposes of analysis these were collapsed into three categories: no employment; below the ONS 'Intermediate' category; ONS 'Intermediate' or above categories.
§For the three offending groups, *Relationship Status* was at the time of offending (as the literature recommends that these factors may precipitate offending for ICSOs: Middleton, 2004) for the NO group, this was current *Relationship Status*.
¶*Time Spent on the Internet* was current time spent online, ICSOs were asked separately about their time online whilst offending.

Table 2. Offence types.

Offence type	ICSO ($N=15$)	Offence type	CCSO ($N=18$)	Offence type	NSO ($N=25$)
Downloading	86.7% ($n=13$)	Sexual contact	5.6% ($n=1$)	Shoplifting	8% ($n=2$)
Collecting	46.7 ($n=7$)	Indecent/ sexual assault	61% ($n=11$)	Driving offence	44% ($n=11$)
Trade	6.7 ($n=1$)	Rape	22% ($n=4$)	Burglary/theft	12% ($n=3$)
Produce	6.7 ($n=1$)	Exposure	5.6% ($n=1$)	Assault	20% ($n=5$)
Visit chat rooms	6.7 ($n=1$)	Sexual abuse	5.6% ($n=1$)	Carrying a weapon	4% ($n=1$)
Contact other offenders	6.7 ($n=1$)			Drug offences	8% ($n=2$)
				Affray	4% ($n=1$)

Discriminant validity has been demonstrated by comparisons between clinical groups (people with avoidant personality disorder and social phobia diagnoses). The scales were found to have good internal reliability, yielding Cronbach's alphas of 0.83, 0.80, 0.77 and 0.74, respectively (Taylor et al., 2004). In the current study the five items representing each scale were summed to give a total scale score for each participant for each sub-scale. Nonetheless, since this a relatively new measure, Taylor et al. (2004) observe that there needs to be further validation before it can be regarded as established. In the present study, therefore, although the EAQ is used to capture the range of avoidance of emotional experiences (e.g. of positive as well as negative) the most recent version of a more established measure (the *Acceptance and Action Questionnaire* (*AAQ2*, Bond, Hayes, Baer, Orcutt, & Zettle, 2007) was also deployed.

The Acceptance & Action Questionnaire 2: AAQ2. This is a 10-item measure of emotional avoidance with responses provided on a seven-point Likert scale running from 'never true' to 'always true'. Items include 'it is normal to sometimes feel unhappy' and 'I try hard not to have bad feelings'. Higher scores represent lower emotional avoidance. The measure provides an AAQ Total score, the sum of all items. The data on psychometric properties are currently being finalized, but initial findings show: internal consistency reliability of 0.81 or above; a single factor solution; and good convergent validity as demonstrated by expected negative correlations with depression, anxiety, stress and suppression (Bond et al., 2007). Despite these correlations, the measure accounts for unique aspects of difficulties exhibited by people (Hayes et al., 2004).

In the present study scale reliabilities were mostly satisfactory (Cronbach's alphas: 0.62–0.98).

Covariates

There are a number of other variables that may affect emotional avoidance or differ across groups. For example: age; socioeconomic status (SES) (Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Laulik et al., 2007); psychological status (anxiety, depression) (Bond et al., 2007); time spent online (more is reciprocally associated with more avoidance) (Middleton et al., 2006); and socially desirable responding (Bates & Metcalf, 2007). Therefore, the study includes covariates based on these factors to reduce the possibility of obtaining spurious findings.

A combination of questionnaires was used to elicit this information to then include as covariates in the analyses.

Demographic questionnaire (DQ)

First, the demographic section of the questionnaire (*DQ*) collected information on the participants. This served the purpose of checking for confounds of an offence in more than one category and having received intervention. It also provided information on which variables were to be examined and controlled in the analyses. The questionnaire asked questions about: age, relationship status, satisfaction with sex life, convictions, ethnic origins, attendance in treatment groups, educational and occupational background; number of children; risk-taking; and time spent online.

Psychological distress (anxiety and depression)

Second, in addition to the demographics, anxiety and depression were included as covariates using the *Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale* (*HADS*, Snaith & Zigmond, 1994). This is a self-assessment measure in which both the *Anxiety* and *Depression* sub-scales comprise seven items each with a four-point response scale 0–3. Thus total scores for each sub-scale range from 0 to 21. A total of 11 or more indicates probable psychological morbidity (Llewellyn, McGurk, & Weinman, 2006).

The *HADS* has been found to reliably detect anxiety and depression in hospital outpatient settings and is widely used in clinical practice and research (Llewellyn et al., 2006). The sub-scales are correlated at 0.53, and for this reason Crawford, Henry, Crombie, and Taylor (2001) recommend combining them into a measure of *Overall Distress.*

Due to difficulties with non-normal distributions, the Overall Distress scale was used to determine caseness, defined as a score of 22 or above.

Social desirability

Socially desirable responding is recognized as a potential difficulty in most offender research (Baker & Beech, 2004; Fisher, Beech, & Browne, 1999). It was measured here with the *Paulhus Deception Scale* (*PDS*, Version 7, Paulhus, 1998). This has previously been deployed with both ICSOs and CCSOs (Baker & Beech, 2004; Middleton, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2005).

The *PDS* is a 40-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure the tendency to give socially desirable responses on self-report instruments. It has robust psychometric properties and is appropriate for use in offender samples (Kroner & Weekes, 1996). It contains two sub-scales of 20 items each: *Self-deception Enhancement* (*SDE*): deceiving yourself about the true nature of your characteristics; and *Impression Management* (*IM*): deliberately creating an impression for the benefit of others. Responses are given on a five point Likert scale ('not true' to 'very true'). However, each is assigned a score of either zero or one and all items are then summed to create a total score of between 0 and 20 for each sub-scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of SDE and IM.

Covariates were only included in the analysis if they were related to both the independent variable (IV: Group) and the dependent variable in question (DV: emotional avoidance measures). This was done by identifying which covariates showed significant group differences and were significantly related to the DVs. Tables 3 and 4 show those variables that were significantly related to the emotional avoidance variables. Table 5 shows a summary of the covariates used in each analysis.

Design

The study was a self-report, between-participants quantitative comparison of the four groups described. Potential confounds were controlled for either statistically, including covariates, or by *a priori* screening. The independent variable was *Group.* The dependent variables were those derived from the emotional avoidance measures and the covariates were derived from demographic questions asked (*DQ*), and measures of anxiety, depression and social desirability. Data were analysed using

Table 3. Correlation matrix for the significance of the continuous covariates.

	Avoidance of Positive Emotions	Negative Beliefs About Emotions	Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions	Avoidance of Negative Emotions	AAQ Total
Age	−0.10*	−0.10	−0.03	−0.09	0.01
Satisfaction with Sex Life	−0.14	−0.20	−0.21	−0.10	0.38**
Self-deception Enhancement	−0.15	−0.18	−0.14	−0.11	0.22*
Impression Management	−0.11	−0.10	−0.05	−0.17	0.17
Time on Internet (transf)	−0.14	0.05	−0.04	−0.25*	0.00

*Values are *r* values (correlations).
Notes: Time Spent on the Internet was not normally distributed for any group and showed non-homogeneity of variance. The ICSOs had a particularly large variance; and the CCSOs a particularly low one. A cube transformation reduced the variance problem but did not remove it completely. Thus, analyses using this variable should be interpreted with caution. Normally, square root transformations are deployed where the problem is large non-negative scores in one group. Cube transformation increase the effectiveness of this when scores are very high and was thus used here.

Table 4. ANOVA/*t*-tests for the significance of the categorical covariates.

	Avoidance of Positive Emotions	Negative Beliefs About Emotions	Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions	Avoidance of Negative Emotions	AAQ Total
Education Level	0.01**	0.09	0.35	0.33	0.02*
Employment Level	0.01**	0.11	0.03*	0.74	0.02*
Overall Distress	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.03*	0.00**
Faking Good	0.02*	0.62	0.81	0.68	0.02*

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.
Note: The impression management new score from the PDS can be used as a check for Faking Good or Faking Bad, identified as scores over 12 or less than 1 respectively.

analysis of co-variance (ANCOVA). Given the relatively untested nature of the hypotheses, *post hoc* and two-tailed tests were used to ensure counter-hypothesized effects were not missed.

Procedure

Full ethical approval was sought and granted through the University ethics committee and also the Head of Probation of each service approached. With regard to those in the offender groups, all were in contact with a Probation Officer (PO) and this was a safeguarding procedure for monitoring risk and a helpline number was included. Confidentiality was ensured by using only participant numbers with any

Table 5. Summary of covariates used for each dependent variable (DV).

	Covariate						
DV	Overall Distress	Satisfaction with Sex Life	SDE	Education Level	Employment Level	Faking Good	Internet Time
Avoidance of Positive Emotions	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Negative Beliefs	✓						
Social Concerns	✓				✓		
Avoidance of Negative Emotions	✓						✓
AAQ Total	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

identifying participant information kept separately. Written informed consent was required from all participants who were given an information sheet. Flesch (1948) readability scores were calculated for those parts of the questionnaire developed specifically for the study and all were above the required score of 60.

The procedure was as follows: information was provided; written consent taken; questionnaires presented. Two different orders were used to minimize fatigue effects, however no serial position effects were found. All measures had instructions which were clarified prior to completion by the researcher. Finally, debriefing was given and the participants were paid.

Results

Hypothesis

The hypothesis stated that emotional avoidance would be higher in the ICSO group than any other group. This was tested using each of the five measures for emotional avoidance, with the covariates as specified in Table 5 in an ANCOVA across the four groups. The results of the ANCOVA are shown in Table 6 (covariates shown in Table 5).

The results do not show any significant effects. Although the ICSO group scores the highest for Social Concerns About Displaying Emotion, the nearest result to significance is Avoidance of Negative Emotion but accounted for by the NSO group.

In relation to the covariates (see Tables 7–10), being anxious and depressed was related to reporting emotional avoidance (except for the Avoidance of Negative Emotion sub-scale). Being less socially desirable in responding was also related to reporting more emotional avoidance (although only for Avoidance of Positive Emotion and AAQ Total). Lower SES was related to reporting more emotional avoidance (but only for Avoidance of Positive Emotion). Finally, being dissatisfied with ones sex life was related to reporting more emotional avoidance (but only for AAQ Total).

There was one significant violation of the assumption of homogeneity in the regression slopes: for Avoidance of Positive Emotion, the NO group showed higher avoidance with higher education and the ICSO group showed that those who were unemployed had lower emotional avoidance. All other regression slopes were in the same direction for each group.

Table 6. Means, standard errors and ANCOVAs for emotional avoidance by group.

	Group				
	ICSO *N* = 15	CCSO *N* = 18	NSO *N* = 25	NO *N* = 25	ANCOVA *F* (d.f.)
Avoidance of Positive Emotions Score (SE)	9.65 (0.95)	10.70 (0.92)	9.95 (0.76)	9.76 (0.80)	$F(3,75) = 0.24$ ($p = 0.87$)
Negative Beliefs Score (SE)	11.92 (0.96)	10.80 (0.90)	12.01 (0.74)	11.22 (0.75)	$F(3,78) = 0.48$ ($p = 0.70$)
Social Concerns Score (SE)	15.53 (1.13)	13.84 (1.05)	14.73 (0.87)	14.31 (0.88)	$F(3,77) = 0.45$ ($p = 0.72$)
Avoidance of Negative Emotions Score (SE)	14.58 (1.14)	13.28 (1.06)	16.21 (0.88)	13.24 (0.88)	$F(3,77) = 2.47$ ($p = 0.07$)
AAQ Total Score (lower scores = higher emotional avoidance) (SE)	46.41 (2.75)	46.37 (2.91)	46.01 (2.22)	47.64 (2.35)	$F(3,73) = 0.09$ ($p = 0.97$) Kruskal–Wallis remained non-significant

Given the negative findings, an additional analysis was conducted, comparing the ICSO group against the other three groups combined. All results were non-significant. Interestingly perhaps, when all the offending groups were compared to the controls, a significant result was found for AAQ Total score ($F(1,73) = 5.191$, ($p = 0.025$)), the offenders being more emotionally avoidant than controls.

Discussion

Main findings

The hypothesis stated that ICSOs would demonstrate higher emotional avoidance than the other three groups. There was no support for this. Although the ICSOs scored the highest on Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions, this was not significant (mean = 15.53, $F(3,77) = 0.45$, $p = 0.72$). The main findings of this study are contrary to the literature that discusses the Internet as an avoidant coping strategy (Laulik et al., 2007; Middleton et al., 2006; Quayle et al., 2006b). Laulik et al. (2007) report Rooney's (2003) findings that suggest that in fact ICSOs are more emotionally focused due to their greater involvement in fantasy. This is supported by the finding that, for some, problematic Internet use more generally, may be associated with emotion-focused coping strategies (Quayle et al., 2006b). The absence of high emotional avoidance in the ICSO group here suggests other hypotheses may need to be considered for at least some Internet child sexual offenders.

The lack of emotional avoidance in CCSOs is also against indirect indications that this may be relevant for this group, for example through fantasy or offending (Gee et al., 2003).

Table 7. Covariates significantly related to avoidance of positive emotion.

Avoidance of Positive Emotion				
Covariate	$F(1,75)$	p	Direction of relationship	Effect size
Overall Distress	12.48	<0.01	Positive: Higher Distress = higher Avoidance of Positive Emotions	Medium, $r = 0.37$
Faking Good	5.73	<0.05	Negative: higher Faking Good = lower Avoidance of Positive Emotions	Small/medium, $r = 0.26$
Education Level	5.51	<0.05	Negative: higher Education Level = lower Avoidance of Positive Emotions	Medium, $r = 0.33$
Employment Level	5.67	<0.05	Negative: higher Employment Level = lower Avoidance of Positive Emotions	Medium, $r = 0.35$

Table 8. Covariates significantly related to Negative Beliefs About Emotions.

Negative Beliefs About Emotions				
Covariate	$F(1,78)$	p	Direction of relationship	Effect size
Overall Distress	46.56	<0.01	Positive: higher Overall Distress = higher Negative Beliefs	Large, $r = 0.60$

Table 9. Covariates significantly related to Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions.

Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions				
Covariate	$F(1,77)$	p	Direction of relationship	Effect size
Overall Distress	13.87	<0.01	Positive: higher Overall Distress = higher Social Concerns	Medium, $r = 0.38$

Table 10. Covariates significantly related to AAQ Total.

AAQ Total				
Covariate	$F(1,73)$	p	Direction of relationship	Effect size
Overall Distress	23.43	<0.01	Negative: higher Overall Distress = higher emotional avoidance (AAQ is reverse scored)	Medium/large, $r = 0.47$
Self-deception Enhancement (SDE)	4.70	<0.05	Positive: higher SDE = lower avoidance	Small, $r = 0.23$
Sex Life Satisfaction	8.23	<0.01	Positive: higher Satisfaction = lower emotional avoidance	Medium, $r = 0.30$

The covariates showed in general that the more emotional avoidance reported, the higher the psychological distress ($p < 0.01$ for Avoidance of Positive Emotions, Negative Beliefs About Emotions, Social Concerns About Displaying Emotions, and AAQ Total) and the lower the socially desirable responding ($p < 0.05$ for AAQ Total and Avoidance of Positive Emotions), sex life satisfaction ($p < 0.01$ for AAQ Total) and SES ($p < 0.05$ for Avoidance of Positive Emotions). These findings are commensurate with the suggestion that anxiety and depression are related to emotional avoidance (Bond et al., 2007).

There is little support for the hypothesis concerning emotional avoidance. ICSOs were not the most emotionally avoidant. Therefore, against the literature, it appears from these results that other hypotheses need to be considered.

However, there may be other explanations for these results, particularly given the indirect evidence for emotional avoidance in the existing literature. The possibilities include the following. One is that the effects are small and that with a larger sample size high emotional avoidance in the Internet child sexual offending group would be seen. A second is that the small differences seen here would be magnified to statistical significance and Internet child sexual offenders would be shown to be lower on emotional avoidance than NSOs. Third, it may be that the effects are individual and emotional avoidance remains a significant issue for some offenders, regardless of type of offence. Fourth, that potentially, the particular measure, or the particular definition of emotional avoidance used here does not capture the type of avoidance used by Internet child sexual offenders. Fifth, that Internet child sexual offenders are particularly good at self- or other-deception on self report measures. Sixth, that emotional avoidance is dynamic and occurs at some points but not others and represents more of a state than a trait characteristic, particularly just before offending. Finally, that differences do not exist and thus emotional avoidance may not be a helpful framework for understanding child sexual offending, in particular of the Internet type.

It is difficult to conclude the reasons for the two violations of assumption of homogeneity in regression slopes. Given it is only two and for one sub-scale this may represent an anomaly in the data set. Alternatively, it may be that avoiding positive emotions does not occur in the same way as avoiding negative emotions. Finally, for the ICSO group it may be that they are unemployed as a result of their offending and thus this is reducing how well this intimates SES.

Limitations and future research directions

A larger sample would have been preferable to ensure small effects were captured. The strict experimental design may have reduced the external validity where clinically people do present with previous treatment experiences and cross-category offences. With regard to research design, participants could be more rigorously matched on the covariates shown to differ across groups in the current study and to account for some of the variance in the dependent variables.

One area in the literature that may be worth further research is the idea that Internet offenders who are in a relationship and dissatisfied with their sex lives may be more prone to emotional avoidance (Middleton, 2004; D. Middleton, personal communication, 26–27 April 2005; Middleton et al., 2006). There was insufficient data in the current study to examine this possibility, although the trends in the data

indicated that the non-sexual offending and non-offending groups were most likely to show this pattern.

Another possible limitation concerns the fact that assignment to group was made on the basis of reported convictions. This method of assignment takes no account of behaviour that did not result in conviction and also, not all (potential) convictions may have been reported.

Also, grouping participants in this way assumes a uniformity of characteristic in offence type which may well be unjustified. For example, Lyn and Burton (2005) suggest that it is offence behaviours (e.g. violence, grooming) that define personality characteristics, not offence type.

A further difficulty arose from the voluntary nature of the study. Those who volunteer may differ from those who do not. Moreover, the initial invitation to all three offender groups was largely through POs. This could affect the results, as this group of offenders may have been the most passive (unable to refuse participation), those with less serious crimes, or those with fewest psychological difficulties. Quayle (2005) proposes that those who are avoidant may not engage generally.

A problem for research in this field generally concerns the adequacy of the measures. The measures of emotional avoidance are still in the early stages of development. The EAQ in particular requires further validation before it is an established measure (Taylor et al., 2004). The population on which it was designed were North American students, community members and those with social phobia and personality disorder diagnoses. As such, it has demonstrated utility in a clinical population but not an offending population. Indeed, to the author's knowledge it is not a measure that has been used with people with sexual offences.

In the light of its uncertain properties, the EAQ was supplemented by the AAQ, which is better validated (Bond et al., 2007). However, again it has not been widely used in offending populations, and no studies have been found that use this measure with sexual offenders. Both the above measures have good face validity and seem likely to be useful in capturing the construct of emotional avoidance. However, it is possible that emotional avoidance may be automatic and so inaccurately reported (Tull & Roemer, 2003). The concept itself suggests that people will avoid reporting difficult issues (Tull, Gratz, Salters, & Roemer, 2004), making a questionnaire (and possibly interview) a contradiction in terms. In particular, a lack of self-awareness of difficulties in combination with a knowledge of which answers are socially desirable may produce inaccurate low reporting of emotional avoidance. This may mean that Internet child sexual offenders are able, given their higher level of education and employment, to be emotionally avoidant but able, consciously or otherwise, to disguise this. Indeed, a recent study by Bates and Metcalf (2007) showed that Internet child sexual offenders were significantly more socially desirable in their responding. Finally, the instrument does not measure behavioural avoidance (Tull et al., 2004). This may be relevant to using the Internet to manage negative affect. A more valid measure may be required. Indeed, recent research calls for the need to better operationalize the definitions and different aspects of emotional avoidance (Chawla & Ostafin, 2007) and provide measures that are validated for Internet child sexual offenders (Sullivan & Beech, 2002).

In relation to future research, the measures could be improved in a number of ways. Covert measures could be used to avoid the difficulty of conscious or subconscious dissembling (social desirability). Emotional Stroop and a relational

frame approach are two such examples that have been used with sex offenders (Roche, Ruiz, O'Riordan & Hand, 2005; Smith & Waterman, 2004).

Implications

Emotional avoidance components are included in interventions for sexual offenders generally (Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007) and also specifically for Internet child sexual offenders (e.g. National Probation Service, 2006). However, the findings of the current study did not support that this was a difficulty for Internet child sexual offenders. Such a perspective might appear to negate the expectation of designing structured treatment interventions, based on dynamic-risk-factor models. On the contrary, it argues instead for the importance of functional analysis and case formulation as core elements of assessment and allocation to treatments; and potentially for treatment delivery to be conducted on an individual or small-group basis rather than in the relatively large group sizes typical of some current widely disseminated programmes. That most study samples contain diversity not in the conventional demographically defined sense, but with respect to the varieties of psychological processes operating, might supply an explanation for the rather weak treatment effects seen in numerous studies and in meta-analytic reviews. Thus, there may be different patterns of emotional dysregulation, with poor impulse control potentially being one, emotional avoidance another, and further variants in addition. Indeed, Middleton et al. (2006) and Middleton (2004; D. Middleton, personal communication, 26–27 April 2005) suggest that emotional avoidance may be relevant only for a subset of Internet child sexual offenders.

Thus the findings of this study underpin the importance of regarding a problem as complex as that of sexual offending as having multiple determinants, interplaying in elaborate ways. Hence to the extent that significant trends may emerge from some studies or data sets, but not others, which may be a function of the presence of sub-groups within offender samples for whom discrete factors are operating. This is not to endorse the idea of a typology, but to suggest that the likely direction of research on sexual offending is for there to emerge some clear trends at an aggregate level, which are less likely to be reproduced as samples reduce in size, or specific offence types become the focus of study.

Therefore, despite the absence of clear evidence of emotional avoidance amongst Internet-using offenders in the present study, further research is recommended to examine differential patterns of emotional responding and the roles they each might have in the channelling of erotic interest.

Conclusion

Given the limitations of the current study, it is hoped that more rigorous work will continue to inform the most effective ways to address all types of sexual offending, including Internet child sexual offending, to contribute to the ever-growing, but as yet limited evidence base for this group. This will ultimately contribute to the wider aims of protecting children and increasing quality of life for the society as a whole. This requires that research that informs intervention is firmly grounded in evidence.

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