

Exploring the Online Communicative Themes of Child Sex Offenders

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Abstract

This exploratory study aimed to examine online communications between contact reality and non-contact fantasy child sex offenders (CSOs). This research wanted to ascertain whether it was possible to differentiate between these offenders based on the content of their online communications, something which has not previously been examined. The sample consisted of five contact reality and seven non-contact fantasy offenders, all convicted of a Child Sex Offence. Content analysis revealed 26 them. Results showed that non-contact fantasy offenders discussed Adult sexual relationships significantly more than contact reality offenders. All other comparisons were non-significant. The themes were then grouped into five higher order themes: (i) Adult relationships, (ii) Child sexual interest, (iii) Media, (iv) Sexual self, and (v) Rapport. The average largest proportion of the online communication related to Child sexual interest (34%) followed by Rapport (28%). There were no significant differences between the two types of offenders in relation to these five higher order themes. Explanations for the findings are discussed with implications for police investigations. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: child sex offender; internet chat; fantasies

INTRODUCTION

The development of the internet has generated a ‘virtual’ variable in the domain of child sexual abuse (Chase & Statham, 2005, p. 11), thus creating more opportunities for committing a child sexual offence (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011). The internet has been described as having a triple A effect because of its ease of access, affordability, and anonymity (Cooper, 2002). It functions in such a way that it allows individuals to engage with others who share the same pro-offending attitudes (Renold, Creighton, Atkinson & Carr, 2003).

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The quantities and ease of access to sexually explicit material and other like-minded individual's may enable an offender to normalise any deviant sexual activities depicted (Beech, Elliott, Birgden & Findlater, 2008). It is important to note that the internet itself is not seen as the cause of sexual interest in children; however, some researchers have found that it may enable offenders to escalate their offending behaviours to more serious sexual crimes (Sheehan & Sullivan, 2010). Research has proposed that if this behaviour is coupled with masturbation the behaviour can become highly reinforcing (Gifford, 2002). Online, individuals are able to portray themselves as they wish and live out their fantasies via the medium of communication. These communications can provide social support, justifications, along with opportunities to share experiences, fantasies, and strategy (Cohen-Almagor, 2013; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010). As a result, an individual may further disengage in social interaction with the real-world (as opposed to an online 'virtual' world), thus increasing their risk of contact offending against a child. Further to this, it may allow those that are not currently engaging in any form of contact child sexual abuse to learn and listen to actual acts allowing them to develop into contact child sexual abuse.

It is well documented that there are two typologies of child sex offender (CSO): a contact child sexual offender and a non-contact child sexual offender (Briggs *et al.*, 2011; Seto, Hanson & Babchishin, 2011; Sheldon & Howitt, 2007; Sheldon & Howitt, 2008). For CSO offenders, most studies include those individuals with at least one conviction or allegation of a contact child sexual offence for CSOs (McManus, Long, Alison, & Almond, 2014). Non-contact offenders can commit these offences online, for example, indecent images of children, grooming, with others preferring offline methods of grooming and voyeurism offences that do not involve any touching (Canter, Hughes, and Kirby, 1998; Seto, Wood, Babchishin and Flynn, 2011). The development of the internet has allowed for a greater transmission between these two types of offenders in one place that had not previously existed (Jenkins, 2001). Contact CSOs have been defined as 'those who physically commit offences against a child victim' (Elliott, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2013, p.25). Typically a non-contact CSO is the opposite of this, delving into the deviant activities of voyeurism, indecent exposure (Briggs *et al.*, 2011) and viewing Indecent Images of Children (IIOC) (Elliott *et al.*, 2013). The non-contact CSO is not a new phenomenon; however, the internet has facilitated a new environment in which this offender type can operate (Briggs *et al.*, 2011; Jenkins, 2001). The internet is not mutually exclusive to the non-contact offender; with many studies reporting dual offender populations (Elliott *et al.*, 2013; Sheldon & Howitt, 2008). Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, (2011) found approximately one in eight online offenders committed a contact offence.

Past literature has illustrated differences in the demographic and historical variables between CSOs. Discriminative power has been found in an offender's previous convictions, housing status, relationship status, educational background, and employment status (Briggs *et al.*, 2011; Long, Alison, & McManus, 2012; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2011; Sheldon & Howitt, 2008). Two types of CSO have also been identified within the realm of chat rooms with children. By assessing the outcomes and behaviours within the chat room a contact-driven and fantasy-driven offender became apparent (Briggs *et al.*, 2011). Offence conviction and online behaviour were determinants of a contact driven or fantasy driven offender. Chat logs were assessed quantitatively for presence or absence of sexual behaviours, i.e. if an offender engaged in sexually explicit conversation or used a web cam. In addition, demographic data showed that high unemployment and low education characterised the contact-driven offenders when compared to the fantasy-driven,

supporting previously stated studies (Briggs *et al.*, 2011). However, the language used by offenders was not explored, resulting in a gap in the literature.

The online communications of paedophiles have been previously visited. Holt *et al.* (2010) extracted orders (themes) of the communications posted between paedophiles in a public online forum. Users of the forum would post communications to a vast range of audiences allowing any user to provide a response or comment. Themes extracted include: (i) Marginalisation, (ii) Sexuality, (iii) Security, and (iv) Law. Holt *et al.* (2010) illustrated how the subculture of paedophiles had very basic social needs, in which rapport and relationships were formed, but further to this it also demonstrated the overwhelming frequency of communication that was underlined by the sexual preference of the forum users, the awareness that sexual arousal was socially unacceptable and against the law.

Why portray a fantasy as a real offence?

The pathways model (Ward & Siegert, 2002) and The Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (Ward & Beech, 2006) both propose that CSOs will suffer from clinical symptoms of social difficulties in generating and maintaining relationships, therefore making the internet the obvious tool of choice to aid in filling the void left by the lack of adult relationships (Putnam, 2000). Within the paedophile online domain significant value is placed upon the communicative sharing of fantasies and experiences with children (Holt *et al.*, 2010), thus, creating and reinforcing strong social bonds that are absent from normal, non-virtual life. Sexual fantasies regulate and elevate mood by becoming a coping mechanism to either escape reality or create a sense of feeling in control (Gee, Ward, & Eccleston, 2003). It has been hypothesised that there is an innate preference for people to share fantasies, and that there exist different types of fantasy sharers (Bormann, Knutson, & Musolf, 1997). Within these types, there exists a category that has an inclination for sexually charged and motivated fantasies (Bormann *et al.*, 1997). Therefore, people are predisposed to share certain genre of fantasies; hence, a non-contact offender is likely to share a fantasy with a contact offender as they are willing and wanting to listen about a sexual act with a child. This creates complications in the investigation of communications between CSOs, as there is no certainty that what is being communicated is in fact a fantasy and not reality, or a mixture of the two.

Holt *et al.* (2010) examined the themes present in paedophiles online public forums, in which methods to disguise actual acts as fantasy were discussed and trialled as a way of protecting users from investigation, i.e. users would begin a thread with 'a dream I had last night' (Holt *et al.*, 2010., p.15.). However, this may not be prevalent in online communication within a private forum. The sharing of experiences has been touted as a possible form of material that can be exchanged for other experiences (Holt *et al.*, 2010; Jenkins, 2001).

Current study

Child sex abuse of any form is a 'disturbing phenomenon' (Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, & Rogers, 2007, p 232); nonetheless it is sensible to prioritise the investigation of contact sexual offenders as arguably they present the most serious risk to children (CEOP, 2013). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the communicative themes of CSOs in text-based synchronous computer mediated communication (TS-CMC). It will examine whether these themes can differentiate between contact and non-contact CSOs, therefore,

identifying those most likely to be engaging in contact sexual abuse of a child. The findings aim to provide insight into the relationship between CSOs online, and how a contact and non-contact CSO interact with each other.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 (five contact and seven non-contact) convicted adult male CSOs from Hampshire Constabulary, from hence these individuals will be referred to as participants. Participants were selected as they had used a TS-CMC to communicate with other CSOs with full transcripts available. These transcripts were selected as they were all conversing with the same recipient within a chat log. The recipient was an individual who had also been convicted for child sex offences, and therefore was used as a control within each conversation. Only the 12 participants were analysed and a consistent recipient was used to minimise the difference in situation and personnel in which chat was conceived. Demographic data for the sample was not available.

Those categorised as contact offenders had been convicted of physically touching a child (under the age of 18) sexually and had detailed their offending behaviour within their chat logs (also known as a reality author). Whereas non-contact offenders had no evidence of contact child sexual offences, but had detailed contact sexual acts against a child within their chats (also known as a fantasy author). Although the sample was small, there was a large volume of data; the transcripts ranged from 345 lines to 2,355 lines long (this includes both participant and recipient communications).

Design

A mixed methods approach was employed to analyse the data and answer the research questions. Content analysis was used to analyse the chat logs and detect themes that were consistent within the chat. Content analysis is 'indigenous to communication research' (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 403), and more recently it has become the most popular method for researching online communications (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2010). Krippendorff (2004) comments that content analysis is one of the most important research techniques within the field of social sciences, which aims to analyse data within an explicit environment in view of the meanings an entity attributes to it. Therefore, it is best suited for this piece of research as it allows for flexibility when dealing with and interpreting the different aspects of the communicative relationships between CSOs. A further advantage of content analysis is that it lends itself to be adaptable to either a qualitative and/or quantitative methods. Therefore, after a qualitative content analysis has been conducted and relevant themes and quotes identified it will then be quantitatively tested. Quantitatively, the research was a one way design with two conditions present (Reality-Contact versus Fantasy-Non-Contact). The independent variable was the type of offender. The dependent variables were the presence of themes (derived from content analysis). Caution should be noted regarding interpretation of any statistical testing because of the very small sample size.

Procedure

The data was provided by Hampshire Constabulary, and they provided the TS-CMC transcripts. The data was cleaned, names and email addresses were deleted and replaced with a

first name initial to represent the participants in order to protect the anonymity of the sample. In addition, any other names within the text were also anonymised and replaced with codes to represent the relationship they represented.

The researcher was blind to the participant's condition until after coding of the transcripts was completed. Six of the transcripts (50%) were randomly selected by the researcher to be coded via an inductive category development content analysis approach (Mayring, 2000) to extract themes that could be tested. Transcripts were highlighted and codes extracted by assessing each line as an individual theme at an objective level. As is common in TS-CMC chat is presented in a similar fashion to a face-to-face communication, with short responses and statements provided, new lines are created for further chat or a different/change of topic. The remaining six transcripts were then coded via a deductive category application content analysis (Mayring, 2000) in line with the themes developed from the first six transcripts. Transcripts were coded line by line, with each line being assigned to a theme; this provided each participant with a frequency for each of the themes. As the chat logs varied in length, the theme frequencies were transformed into percentages for each chat, to control for this variability in length (see Table 1).

Statistical analyses

A large proportion of the thematic framework created via content analysis violated the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance, therefore a non-parametric test, Mann–Whitney, was conducted. A Mann–Whitney test resolves the violations of normality and homogeneity of variance by ranking the data then testing the difference between the ranks within the independent variables (Fields, 2009). A Mann–Whitney is suitable as the group sizes are close to equal and will test the differences in the dependent variables (themes) between the independent variables (Offender type). However, it will not allow this research to test for a relationship between the dependent variables (themes) as a Multiple Analysis of Variance would. In further analysis, themes were grouped together which controlled for, and satisfied, normality and homogeneity of variance. A MANOVA was then carried out on these grouped themes to test if there was any difference between contact and non-contact offenders.

RESULTS

Content analysis thematic framework

Table 1 provides the themes developed by the content analysis along with their definitions and mean values. The most commonly occurring theme within the sample was 'Friendly non-sexual rapport', accounting for on average 22% of the communication, another commonly occurring theme was 'Media' which involved sharing videos, pictures, and sounds (14%).

Table 2 provides the medians for the occurrences in each chat, in percentages, for the themes by offender type. As this table shows the non-contact Fantasy offenders had greater averages of talk than contact reality offenders around the sexual themes including Adult sexual talk ($Mdn = 1$; $Mdn = 0$), Sexual preferences ($Mdn = 1.77$; $Mdn = 0$), and Sexually motivated chats about adults ($Mdn = 7.74$; $Mdn = 2.94$), they also showed greater Friendly non-sexual rapport ($Mdn = 22.64$; $Mdn = 14.71$) and Awareness justification ($Mdn = 3.94$;

Table 1. Themes developed from content analysis along with definitions, total means, and standard deviations for how often they emerged in each chat

Theme	Definition	Mean (S.D.)
Adult relationship	Detailed experiences within adult relationships, questions about an adult relationship, questions/details about interactions between significant adult partner and the lifestyle of child sex offences.	2.74 (3.22)
Adult sexual	Detailed sexual acts with another adult, comments on the sexual look of another adult, asks a question about having sex with an adult.	1.09 (1.69)
Awareness justification	Reasoning for committing child sex offences or when the author shows understanding at committing something non-normal or protecting themselves from outside intrusion.	4.03 (3.38)
Body hair	Status of body hair (not facial hair) either preference for status, actual status, or question of body hair.	1.33 (2.14)
Friendly non-sexual rapport	Deemed normal not referring to any sexual context. Includes questions about personnel, family, and recent activities. It is replies to questions of the same nature that are undetailed, agreement words, conversation building words (ok, cool, lol), greetings, and goodbyes.	21.60 (9.02)
Grooming	Method of desensitisation of sex with child, physical, or psychological. Stating teaching methods of sex with a child. Stating methods of soliciting children via the internet in well-known grooming patterns	1.09 (1.81)
Group dynamics	Joining a chat room group of child sex offenders, reason for wanting to join groups, and enquiring about such groups. This code also encompasses chat of creating and running child sex offender groups.	3.54 (4.68)
Historical sex	Any sexual act that is evident has happened in the past, the past being a year ago or more.	1.27 (2.57)
In-depth descriptive	Non-sexual motivated, but provided detail of what the author is doing, thinking, whereabouts, these can be responses to questions, or just a general explanations of what the author is doing, etc. These are not questions, or short non-meaningful responses to a point made from the recipient.	5.99 (3.78)
Media	Media is used (picture, sound, video sent), video call initiated, asking for a form of media, commenting on a form of media, discussion of how to fix uses of media when it is not working.	13.99 (7.70)
Non-sexual acts with child	Perceived normal 'socially acceptable' touching of children is detailed, i.e. hugging a child, also coded when non-sexually explicit preference is detailed, i.e. thinking babies are cute	.56 (1.00)
Non-sexually worded sexually motivated chat towards a child	Related to, in response to or associated with a sexual activity with a child.	12.51 (5.23)
Not committing sexual act with child	Coded when chat explicitly states that a sexual act between an adult and child has not taken place.	0.26 (.50)
Nudity	Being naked is expressed or a question on the topic of nudity is asked.	1.78 (2.25)
Proxy chat, child talking	What a child has said or when the original author has not created the chat but a child has created the chat.	3.78 (12.47)

(Continues)

Table 1. (Continued)

Theme	Definition	Mean (S.D.)
Question of sexual development	Question is posted about the sexual development of a child.	0.70 (.87)
Question of sexual act with child	Questions are posted by the author as to ascertain details of the recipient's sexual acts with a child.	5.80 (5.07)
Sexual act with child	Sexual act with a child is detailed.	2.67 (4.27)
Sexual arousal	Questions of a recipients own sexual arousal, or own status of sexual arousal	1.71 (2.27)
Sexual fantasy adults only	Sexual act towards/from an adult is detailed that has not happened but is expressed the author wishes for it to happen.	1.47 (4.19)
Sexual fantasy involving a child	Sexual act towards/from/involving a child is detailed that has not happened but is expressed the author wishes for it to happen	2.46 (3.33)
Sexual preferences	Preferences and behaviours in sex are detailed, e.g. orientation, person, etc.	1.62 (2.10)
Sexually motivated chat about adults	Either a response or question, is conversed that is orientated towards the topic of sexual activities involving adult(s) only.	4.93 (4.13)
Solo sexual	Solo sexual act is detailed, either carried out by author or of another person. Question of solo sexual act as well	0.53 (.78)
Talking proxy	Not directed at the primary recipient	1.20 (2.14)
Tasting	Any adjective related to tasting is present, i.e. yummy/mmmmm	1.36 (2.11)

Mdn = 1.47). The contact reality offenders interestingly showed greater averages than non-contact Fantasy Offenders of Sexual fantasy involving a child (Mdn = 2.76; Mdn = 0.25). The other theme averages were similar across the two types of offenders. Statistical analyses were conducted to examine whether these differences were statistically significant.

A Mann–Whitney *U* test demonstrated that the occurrence of the theme 'Adult sexual' in contact Reality offender (Mdn = .00) was significantly lower to the occurrence of the 'Adult sexual' theme in non-contact fantasy offenders (Mdn = 1.00), $U = 5.00, z = -2.1, p < .05$. The Mann–Whitney *U* test did not demonstrate any other significant differences between offender types among the remaining 25 themes tested. However, the theme 'Sexual preferences' almost reached significance, with occurrence in the non-contact fantasy (Mdn = 1.77) being higher than occurrence in contact Reality (Mdn = 0), $U = 6, z = -1.90, p = .06$.

In total 26 themes occurred within the online communication transcripts. These were then further grouped together to create 5 higher order thematic categories: (i) Adult relationships, (ii) Child sexual interest, (iii) Media, (iv) Sexual self, and (v) Rapport. Table 3 details these higher order groups and the themes which are contained within them, along with the average proportion for contact Reality and non-contact fantasy offenders as well as the total sample.

Child sexual interest

This category embodied any communication that discussed a child in a sexual manner, stated awareness, or reasoning that child sex offending was deviant, or conversed in the mechanics of joining other CSOs in a virtual or real setting. As may be expected, this was the most common thematic category that occurred. Communication along this

Table 2. Median occurrence of the themes within each chat, by offender type

Themes	Contact reality offender (<i>n</i> = 5)	Non-contact fantasy offender (<i>n</i> = 7)	<i>p</i> Value
Adult sexual	.00	1.00	.042
Sexual preferences	.00	1.77	.06
Sexually motivated chat about adults	2.94	7.74	.16
Sexual fantasy involving a child	2.76	.25	.18
Awareness justification	1.47	3.94	.19
Nudity	.00	1.29	.24
Friendly non sexual rapport	14.71	22.64	.34
Question of sexual development	.65	.50	.36
Sexual act with child	1.23	1.00	.36
Not committing sexual act with child	.00	.00	.40
Body hair	.00	1.01	.41
In-depth descriptive	3.54	5.16	.43
Historical sex	.31	.00	.47
Sexual fantasy adults only	.00	.25	.51
Grooming	.88	.00	.58
Non sexual acts with child	.00	.00	.58
Question of sexual act with child	8.82	3.98	.64
Adult relationship	.00	2.43	.76
Solo sexual	.00	.00	.82
Tasting	.43	.00	.84
Non sexually worded sexually motivated chat towards a child	11.76	9.95	.85
Group dynamic	.88	2.58	.92
Media	8.82	13.94	1.00
Proxy chat, child talking	.00	.00	1.00
Sexual arousal	.73	.65	1.00
Talking proxy	.00	.00	1.00

category generally centred around the discussions of sexual acts with children, by either detailing what one had done

'she doesn't masturbate me or anything, but occasionally she gets touchy [...] I would be lying if I said she has never managed to take me all the way', (J3).

questions regarding others experiences of sex and children

'what would you be doing now if you could?', (B1);

'what's the youngest you've had or touched?' (PA1)

or was a response in a non-sexually explicit line, but was perceived to be a positive response,

'cool' (J1),

'that's great' (T1)

In addition to this grouping, chat would centre on the joining of an online group of CSOs in order to further share and create interpersonal relationships over the shared interest in children, or to solicit plans in which to meet up and meet

'like minded' (M1) people.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the thematic categories, within each chat, by offender type

Underlying theme groupings	Themes included in groups	Contact reality offender (<i>n</i> = 5)	Non-contact fantasy offender (<i>n</i> = 7)	Total (<i>N</i> = 12)
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Child sexual interest	Awareness justification	37.05 (13.35)	31.16 (13.87)	33.62 (13.38)
	Grooming			
	Group dynamics			
	Non sexual acts with child			
	Non sexually worded			
	sexually motivated chat towards a child			
	Not committing sexual act with child			
	Question of sexual development			
	Question of sexual act with child			
	Sexual act with child			
Rapport	Friendly non sexual rapport	22.89 (8.21)	30.95 (9.84)	27.59 (9.72)
Media	In-depth descriptive	14.14 (9.56)	13.88 (6.91)	13.99 (7.70)
Adult relationships	Adult relationship	8.80 (7.08)	11.26 (7.12)	10.23 (6.89)
	Adult sexual			
Sexual self	Sexual fantasy adults only			
	Sexually motivated chat about adults			
	Historical sex	5.41 (5.64)	7.99 (5.81)	6.92 (5.63)
	Nudity			
	Sexual arousal			
	Sexual preferences			
	Solo sexual			

The final component of this category was the awareness that a sexual interest was not normal

'I'm even afraid to speak to my own mates about my mind [...] omg I'm sooo bad', (E1);

'they have to suppress these feelings because of society', (J4),

or would provide a justification as to why one should not be ashamed of a sexual interest in children

'children just happen to look better naked than most of us [...] touching is not naughty, as long as nobody is being forced to do anything or forced to be touched', (J3);

'I think it's natural for us to have these feelings', (J4).

Rapport

The second most frequently occurring thematic category was one that would be generally expected in normal human communication; rapport building. Rapport includes the social norm of friendly chat

'Hello...How are you?' (T1),

along with more in detail questions of what one has been up to or will be doing with themselves over the ensuing period. Further to this, it also included normal responses as seen above in child sex motivated chats, but in response to a socially normal communication

'I've been to the beach', response: 'that sounds good' (JI).

In addition, the rapport category included communications that were more in detail than usual friendly lines that would be expected in established friendships; these chats would be descriptive of what one is doing or feeling, etc. but would be deemed socially normal.

Media

Media was an original theme from the 26 individual themes, and because of its large occurrence within the communication and its broad definition it became a higher order thematic category. Enclosed within the category of media was any evidence of media being shared via the chat log, either being provided or received, the use of a voice clip, initiation, or acceptance of a web cam conversation. Furthermore, this category includes chat that provided a comment or question about a seen image or video that was sexually suggestive towards children

'wow [...] wish I was filming it [...] it's an excellent pic if ever I seen one', (B1);

and any request for child sexually influenced media

'all online pics look fake [...] can you point me to genuine pics?' (M1);

'would love to see pics (specific detail of sexual behaviour)', (P1).

Adult relationships

This thematic category was derived from communication that noted an interpersonal or sexual relationship with a consenting adult. Some sexual acts with adults may have been considered deviant from a social norm perspective; however, no sexual offences against adults were detailed. Communication along this category generally centred on the discussions of sexual acts with adults

'been ages since I had 2 blokes', (E1);

or relational experience and troubles

'wife's not happy', (SM1),

by either detailing what one had done, would want to do: a fantasy

'I would love to be tied up in a public toilet of a gay club or pub and used as a urinal', (P1)

question of others experiences of sex and adults

'your gf like it?', (J4).

Sexual self

The smallest of the higher order groupings focused on the sexual chat, either sexually worded or non-sexually worded, that centred on the self. Common themes that occurred with this group include the details of masturbation

'I did play with myself when I saw the ... pic', (E1)

providing detail of current, past, or future sexual arousal

'I am so hard now', (P1);

and what one preferred sexually

'I'm an exhibitionist', (B1);

'I'm bi, just so you know', (E1);

and sexual positioning.

Finally, in further exploring the above higher order thematic categories derived from the content analysis, a one-way MANOVA demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the offender types (Reality/Contact and Fantasy/Non-contact) and the higher order thematic categories, $F(5, 6)=2.08, p > .05$. This finding further demonstrates that there are no significant differences between the type of offender and the themes communicated online. The themes Body Hair, Proxy Chat, Talking Proxy, and Tasting were omitted from this analysis as they did not conform to a new grouping and they violated parametric assumptions.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to explore the communicative themes existent in TS-CMC between CSOs via a method of content analysis. Chat lines were objectively coded for what they presented within a communication. In total 26 common themes were extracted. Furthermore, it was the aim of this study to investigate whether a communication authored by a contact child sexual offender differed from that of a communication authored by a non-contact offender on any of the themes extracted by content analysis. Results indicated that non-contact CSOs significantly conversed about sexual relations with another adult more than contact CSOs. However, the two groupings of CSOs did not differ significantly on any of the remaining 25 themes.

The themes extracted from the communications provide an insight into a previously unexamined domain. The magnitude of 26 themes illustrates the broad variety of what is conversed between CSOs in private communications. The themes presented demonstrate a degree of normality in the communications between CSOs, but in addition they also exhibit as expected, a high degree of sexual motivation to their conversation. The thematic framework presented within this research is similar to that elicited by Holt *et al.* (2010) from the public forums of paedophiles. Holt *et al.* (2010) expressed these orders as marginalisation, sexuality, security, and law, which have all been evident in the common themes extracted in the current study, albeit at different frequencies.

The largest thematic category that occurred within the investigated chat logs were sexually motivated chat towards the topic of children. In the public domain, threads of this nature were constrained and discrete (Holt *et al.*, 2010). However, within private communications, child sex was explicitly conversed through the themes of detailing sexual acts, questioning others of their sexual behaviours with children, and expressing fantasy and plans for future child sexual behaviour. Within the theme of sex, adult consensual sexual relations were conversed; this was not evident in the public forums (Holt *et al.*, 2010). Within the current study, non-contact CSOs conversed about adult sexual relations more frequently than did the contact CSOs, potentially indicating that non-contact CSOs are more sexually active with adults than contact CSOs. Long *et al.* (2012) differentiated

contact and non-contact offenders by their anchors within severity of IIOC held. Contact offenders were more likely to possess a larger quantity of severe images than non-contact offenders; this illustrated that contact offenders were more interested in the physical sexual act with children than non-contact offenders. Relating back to the current study, this finding may potentially demonstrate that contact offenders are less likely to converse about adult sexual relations as this is not as sexually arousing as sexual acts with children. Furthermore, as non-contact offenders have not committed a known sexual act with a child, their sexual experiences are limited to adults, and therefore are likely to discuss adult sexual relations more frequently. This finding may further support for the need of interpersonal relationships, with non-contact offenders detailing adult sexual acts as a form of self-disclosure to engage an interpersonal relationship (Elliott *et al.*, 2013).

The Pathways model (Ward & Siegert, 2002) and the Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (Ward & Beech, 2006) suggest that CSOs suffer from difficulties in creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Putnam (2000) argued that CSOs will use the internet in an attempt to solve this difficulty. A large magnitude of the communications coded within this research present evidence of the establishment and maintenance of a normal interpersonal relationship. These communications are common with the intimacy model of friendship (Reis & Shaver, 1988) where one participating communicator would disclose information of the self and the listener would respond to acknowledge understanding. Rapport building and interpersonal relationship maintenance were also common themes in the public forums between paedophiles (Holt *et al.*, 2010).

Limitations and future research

A number of limitations of the current study must be noted. Content analysis was deployed in extracting the themes of communication; however, content analysis is a descriptive tool. It allows research to identify themes, but it cannot infer why these themes are present.

By visually analysing the central tendencies of the themes, one could suggest variables of the thematic framework that would be more present within a certain type of offenders' conversational structure. However, the sample size ($n=12$) used could be a contributory factor for the lack of statistical difference between the two populations. Conducting the research on a larger sample would allow for a more informed thematic framework, but also give opportunity for statistical differences to be observed. Another possible research avenue is to investigate those portraying a false identity online, for example posing as a child, to ascertain whether key factors can differentiate them from real children.

The data used within the research is defined as secondary data. There are limitations in using secondary data in that it has not been generated and collected for the purposes of this research. Therefore, biases within the data could exist without the knowledge of the researcher, thus, not allowing the opportunity for the appropriate control to be deployed. Furthermore, because of the sensitive nature of the data used within this study resulted in legal restrictions accompanying it. This developed its own limitations as not all the demographic data on all participants could be provided, thus restricting the analytic power of the research.

Contact CSOs within the study were defined if they had been found guilty of a contact offence that they had conversed about within the communications analysed; whereas non-contact offenders were defined if they had not been found guilty of a contact offence. However, the knowledge of participants past offence behaviours did not expand on this as they were not collected for the purpose of this study. In many cases that involve online

offenders interacting about the abuse of children, being able to determine truth from fantasy requires a close working relationship with many organisations internationally as often the individuals partaking in the chat are from various countries. A problem often incurred by UK Forces is determining who these individuals are when they are deemed to be outside the UK. Within the current study, Hampshire Constabulary was able to establish the identities and final outcome (contact or fantasy offender) from the international force also involved. Thus the ability to increase the sample is likely to incur these challenges.

Conclusions

The need to manage risk is at the forefront of policing agendas, with more law enforcement agencies now engaging in empirically driven research. With increasing numbers of individuals engaging in contact child sexual offences and internet-related child sexual offences (McManus & Almond, 2014), the need to identify and prioritise those that pose the most risk is at its highest (Long *et al.*, 2012). The current study explored online communications of CSOs, with the aim of extracting key themes that could assist in the identification of contact CSOs. However, only one of the 26 themes extracted could differentiate the two offender groups, with communication of adult sexual relations more likely to be present in non-contact CSOs communications. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that when exploring the communicative themes of CSOs in TS-CMC, both contact and non-contact CSOs communicate in similar ways. This has implications for law enforcement agencies, as the results highlight the difficulties investigators face when trying to differentiate those fantasy communications from those discussing actual abuse of children. Currently, the ability to identify contact CSOs through their online communications is proving to be a challenging task. Further research should aim to expand the current research in terms of sample size and mixture of online and offline contact CSOs and non-contact offenders to explore the possibility of discriminatory factors in online conversations. Any intelligence that will enable law enforcement agencies to prioritise and target those most likely to be engaging in contact sexual offences against a child will allow the safeguarding of those most at risk.

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