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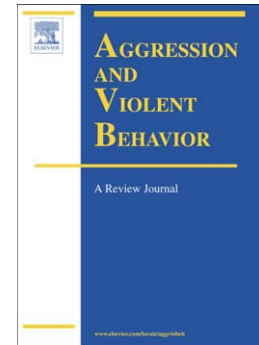
The implicit theories of child sexual exploitation materials users: An initial conceptualization

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RUNNING HEAD: Implicit Theories of Child Sexual Exploitation Materials Users

The Implicit Theories of Child Sexual Exploitation Materials Users:

An Initial Conceptualization

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**Abstract**

Contact sexual offenders have been proposed to hold a set of distorted core beliefs about themselves, others, and the world. These beliefs (or ‘implicit theories’) bias information in an offense-supportive manner, contributing to the etiology and maintenance of sexual offending. In recent years, there has been an increased research interest in online ‘child sexual exploitation material’ (CSEM) users, particularly since research has shown they are distinct from contact child abusers. In light of their distinction, it is hypothesized that CSEM users will possess their own set of implicit theories that guide their interpretation of intra/interpersonal information in a manner that influences the viewing and downloading of CSEM. Following a qualitative analysis of the existing empirical CSEM literature, an initial conceptualization of the implicit theories held by CSEM users is offered in the present paper. These include: ‘Unhappy World’, ‘Children as Sexual Objects’, ‘Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)’, ‘Self as Uncontrollable’, and ‘Self as Collector’, each of which is contextualized by a general assumption about the reinforcing nature of the Internet. The paper provides a detailed account of each implicit theory, including its content and function. Practical and research implications are also highlighted.

**Keywords:**

Child Sexual Exploitation Material; Child pornography offenders; Implicit theories;  
Cognitive distortions; Theory; Core beliefs

## 1. Introduction

One of the key premises of sex offender rehabilitation is a focus on changing their thinking towards cognitions supportive of a non-offending lifestyle (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Beech, Bartels & Dixon, 2013; Ward & Beech, 2006). The endorsement of antisocial and offense-supportive attitudes has been empirically established as a significant risk factor for reoffending, for both sexual and violent offending, while cognitive flexibility acts as a protective factor towards future offending (Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010). However, there is some controversy concerning the causality and temporal development of these offense-supportive cognitions for offending behavior (Maruna & Mann, 2006), and to date it is not established if they are attitudes developed during childhood and, thus, causal to offending (Ward & Keenan, 1999), or justifications developed during and/or after the offending behavior in order to reduce cognitive dissonance resulting from the behavior (Gannon & Polaschek, 2006; Maruna & Mann, 2006). However, it is most likely that offense-supportive cognitions occur at every stage of the offending process, fulfilling different functions for the offending behavior, either by *initiating* the behavior in reducing internal inhibitions towards first-time offending, or by *maintaining* the reinforcement experienced through the offending behavior in suppressing cognitive dissonance.

Ward and Keenan (1999) proposed that offense-supportive cognitions result from *Implicit Theories* (ITs), a set of interlocking core beliefs that act as a cognitive filter towards any new information presented. In reviewing the literature on child sex offenders, Ward and Keenan proposed five offense-specific ITs contact child abusers may hold about the nature of their victims, the world, and about themselves:

- *Children as Sexual Beings*. This IT describes the belief that people, including children, are sexual beings, motivated by a desire for pleasure. Children are, thus, believed to have the capacity to make informed decisions about engaging in sexual

activity with adults. Endorsement of this IT can lead to an interpretation of children's everyday behavior as revealing sexual intent.

- *Entitlement.* This IT describes the belief that some people are more important than others and therefore have a right to assert their needs. Offenders who endorse this IT may view themselves as of greater importance than children and therefore have a “right” to have sex with children, whenever they desire.
- *Dangerous World.* This IT describes the belief that the world is a dangerous place and it is, thus, necessary to achieve dominance. Individuals that endorse this IT may perceive adults as untrustworthy and refer to children as the only “safe” sexual partners.
- *Uncontrollability.* This IT describes the belief that there are factors beyond an offender's control that underlie their sexually abusive behavior. Individuals who endorse this IT may perceive they cannot be held responsible for their sexually abusive behavior due to external forces that cannot be controlled.
- *Nature of Harm.* This IT describes the belief that sexual activity in itself is beneficial and unlikely to cause harm. This belief can lead to a judgement that children are not harmed by sex with an adult, and that any distress a child experiences is a function of additional physical force or the way in which people respond to the abuse, not the act of sexual abuse itself.

Fifteen years after the publication of Ward and Keenan's seminal paper, the sex offender population has substantially changed with an increase in convictions for the possession, distribution, and production of online Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM). However, these offenders appear to have a different profile from contact child sex offenders; they are found to have higher sexual deviance but are less likely to have access to children and report greater barriers to offending behavior, evidenced in lower criminal history and reoffending

rates, lower endorsement on traditional offense-supportive assessment scales, less victims empathy deficits, and less emotional identification with children (Babchishin, Hanson, & Van Zuylen, 2015; Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). While the research to date has confirmed that CSEM users are less likely to endorse offense-supportive cognitions regarding children and sexual behavior when traditional scales are used (Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Elliot, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, 2013; Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, & Boer, 2014; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2012; Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007), it has been argued that due to the different nature of their offending behavior, CSEM users may endorse offense-supportive cognitions of a differing quality from contact sex offenders (Henshaw, Ogloff, & Clough, 2015). However, these conclusions are mostly drawn from retrospective, uncontrolled research designs such as the extraction of cognitions from pedophile-supportive websites (D'Ovidio, Mitman, El-Burki, & Shumar, 2009; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010) or from interview or survey transcripts (Seto, Reeves, & Jung, 2010; Merdian, Wilson, Thakker, Curtis, & Boer, 2013). Three measures have been developed specifically for CSEM offenders, including the Internet Behaviors and Attitudes Questionnaire (O'Brien & Webster, 2007), the Children and Sexual Activities Inventory (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007), and the Children, Internet, and Sex Cognitions Scale (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014), and while they still lack external construct validation (see Merdian et al., 2014, for a critical review), the findings provide initial support for the existence of CSEM-specific offense-supportive attitudes, resulting from CSEM-specific ITs that have not yet been conceptualized.

Thus, the application of treatment and rehabilitation programmes built upon the existing cognitive models of child sex offending will not be successful for this offender group. The identification of offense-specific ITs has the capacity to provide a top-down

model to inform the development of assessment tools specifically designed for this offender group, and to inform the focus of interventions aimed towards an offense-free lifestyle. The current study represents an attempt to develop such CSEM-specific ITs based on an analytic review of the existing research body, to draw out the possible content of those ITs, and to link it back to the risks and needs, and protective factors posed by CSEM users.

## 2. Method

The current study employed a Grounded Theory (GT; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to reviewing and systematically analyzing/coding the relevant CSEM literature (our “data”). Wolfswinkel, Furtmuller, and Wilderom (2013) recently provided a five-stage guide for using GT to conduct a rigorous literature review (i.e., Define; Search; Select; Analyze; and Presentation). Unlike the traditional GT approach, this process is not based on raw qualitative data derived from interviews but rather a mixture of excerpts relating to research findings and conceptual considerations. Thus, drawing upon Wolfswinkel et al.’s (2013) suggestions, our methodological process involved: Definition (defining the criteria for inclusion/exclusion, determining the appropriate sources, agreeing on specific search terms); Search (conducting a literature search); Select (data extraction, further exclusion); Analysis (data coding and theme development); and Presentation (i.e., a structured account of the final results). Given the research aim of this paper, the final step included the development of a theoretical model based upon the identified themes (i.e., conceptualizing CSEM-specific implicit theories).

### 2.1 Define and Search

A comprehensive literature search was conducted on both published and unpublished literature referring to the endorsement of offense-supportive cognitions in CSEM users, with

variations of search terms such as “cognitive distortions”, “endorsement”, “offense motivations”, “schema”, “implicit theories”, “assessment”, “measurement”, “child sexual exploitation”, “illegal images”, “child pornography”. In order to access unpublished literature, a network of CSEM researchers was contacted with requests to access unpublished material. Overall, 40 studies were identified (indicated with \* in the reference list).

## **2.2 Select (data extraction and exclusion)**

Each study was considered by extracting: author, year of publication, aim of study, population tested, sample sizes, method, analytic approach (e.g., qualitative or quantitative), and main findings. At this point, studies were excluded that did not fully respond to the research question. Excluded studies related to online grooming, analysis of online forum posts, analysis of conviction data, and conceptual papers. As suggested by Wolfswinkel et al., the second and first author independently decided on exclusion criteria, and discussed their choice until agreement was reached. Seventeen papers were retained following this process (see Table 1).

## **2.3 Analysis (data coding and theme development)**

Next, the data was analyzed using codes to identify categories related to offense-supportive cognition. Following Wolfswinkel et al., papers were picked randomly from the 17 selected papers. For each paper, the authors highlighted any content that was deemed relevant to the research question, with each highlighted aspect constituting an ‘excerpt’. The authors then engaged in the process of abstraction by using opening, axial, and selective coding (Wolfswinkel et al., 2015). ‘Open coding’ involved closely re-reading each excerpt until a number of higher-order conceptual categories (e.g., ‘Non-sexual’) and sub-categories (e.g., ‘CSEM is art’, ‘CSEM is exciting’) associated with the posed research question



emerged. Next, through the process of ‘axial coding’, interrelations between the higher-order categories and sub-categories were identified (e.g., the relation between ‘CSEM is art’ sub-category and ‘Not sexual’ category). Finally, ‘selective coding’ was used to assimilate and refine the identified categories into themes, and identify any relations between them. Throughout the analysis, both authors engaged in all three forms of coding in an interlaced manner, ensuring to maintain a continuous process of comparative analysis (i.e., returning to papers, excerpts, concepts, categories) until “theoretical saturation” (Wolfswinkel et al., 2015; p.7)<sup>1</sup> was achieved. Ultimately, the analysis resulted in seven main categories or themes (see Table 1).

#### **2.4 Presentation: Theory Development (conceptualizing the implicit theories)**

The last stage involved the conceptualization of the themes into implicit theories. This process involved referring back to the whole body of initially reviewed studies, as well as drawing upon empirical and theoretical literature related to the final seven themes (e.g., research on general collecting behavior, locus of control). Here, the first and second author jointly developed the conceptualizations through rigorous discussion and redrafting.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### **3. CSEM-specific Implicit Theories: An Initial Conceptualization**

In line with Ward’s (2000) conceptualization, the identified ITs contain a mix of general-level beliefs (e.g., about the online and offline world) and middle-level beliefs about specific entities (e.g., oneself and children). Overall, five core ITs are proposed for users of child sexual exploitation material: *Unhappy World*; *Self as Uncontrollable*; *Children as Sex*

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<sup>1</sup> Theoretical saturation occurs when no new interesting concepts or interrelations emerge during the development of categories (Wolfswinkel et al., 2015).

*Objects; Nature of Harm (CSEM variant); and Self as Collector.* In the following subsections, we will outline each proposed IT, describing their content, how they affect information processing, and how they may function in the etiology of CSEM offenses. We will explain the rationale underlying each IT by referring to the literature on CSEM users, offender cognition, and related literature outside of the forensic field.

In formulating these ITs, we noted how strongly they are embedded within the context in which they occur, which seems paramount for but not equivalent with their development and expression. Specifically, underlying all five ITs appeared to be a general assumption about the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet*, which influences one's perception of all online content, including CSEM. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Fox & Raine, 2014), 90% of 857 Americans considered the Internet to be a positive contribution to their personal life. These positive aspects include rapidly performing routine tasks and accessing information to enabling one to form and maintain social/personal relationships (Weiser, 2001). In the context of online offending, Quayle, Vaughan, and Taylor (2006) stated that the Internet has provided a number of beneficial functions for CSEM users that are related but distinct from their offending behavior. For example, Merdian et al. (2013) found that CSEM users reported overcoming social alienation and anonymous sexual exploration as a positive reinforcer of their Internet usage. Thus, CSEM users are likely to develop a general positive view of the Internet.

However, it should be noted that this is not unique to the CSEM experience. Most (if not all) online users may arguably share this view. For example, Cooper's (1998) Triple-A-Engine (which refers to the perceived Affordability, Accessibility, and Anonymity of the Internet) was one of the first models to describe these reinforcing qualities of the Internet and support for the reinforcing perception of online environments can be found in the empirical literature on online gamblers (Griffiths, 2001), online shoppers (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008),

or online gamers (Allison, Von Walde, Shockley, & Gabbard, 2006; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). Quayle and Taylor (2002) found that CSEM users explicitly talked about the nature of the Internet when discussing their offending. For example, CSEM users referred to contextual aspects of the Internet environment that impacted on their offending behavior, such as the normalized status of CSEM online, the rapid and easy manner in which material (including CSEM) can be accessed (whether accidental or purposeful), the vast amount of material that is freely available, the anonymity it affords, its immersive properties, and the limited skill required to use it. More recently, in their conceptualization of the 'Internet as Uncontrollable' IT, Paquette and Cortoni (2014) reported one CSEM user as stating that "*With Internet, it's easy to access to child pornography*". Thus, CSEM users evidently hold general assumptions about the nature of the Internet, which may act as a situational reinforcer for their CSEM offending (Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Seto, 2013). Moreover, this suggests that attending to such assumptions can be moderated to prevent offending behavior (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Indeed, Quayle et al. (2005) proposed that, in addition to the deviant content that is downloaded, the functions that the Internet plays for CSEM users should also be addressed in both research and treatment.

Polaschek, Calvert, and Gannon, (2009) proposed that violent offenders hold a general assumption regarding the Normalization of Violence, which serves as a background assumption for other implicit theories, such as 'Beat or be Beaten' and 'I am the Law'. In a similar vein, we propose that CSEM users hold strong beliefs about the reinforcing functions of the Internet, which serve as a background assumption for other (CSEM-related) ITs (see below). By themselves, some the CSEM-specific ITs are not necessarily associated with online behavior, whether problematic or otherwise. Thus, the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet* assumption serves to contextualize the beliefs CSEM users hold about themselves, the world, and children by influencing how they manifest online. More specifically, we

postulate that CSEM users hold a general assumption that the Internet offers infinite, immediate, anonymous, immersive, and social benefits. As a result, the Internet becomes viewed as an efficient means of finding and collecting materials they are interested in (including CSEM); that it provides a more satisfying alternative to their unhappy offline world; that they cannot control *themselves* when online; and that what they do and view online is not harmful.

### 3.1 Unhappy World

The concept of the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet* is closely linked to the first IT. In previous work, a 'Dangerous World' IT has been proposed for a range of offender types, including contact child abusers, rapists, sexual murderers, violent offenders, and firesetters (Beech et al., 2005; Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2012; Polaschek & Ward, 2002; Polaschek et al., 2009; Ward & Keenan, 1999). This is the view that the world and the people in it are hostile and untrustworthy. As a result, one must fight back in order to acquire a sense of control and dominance over others. Alternatively, perceiving other adults as threatening may lead to a perception of children as safer and more trustworthy (sexual) partners.

From our analysis of the literature, CSEM users do not perceive the world (i.e., their offline environment) as hostile or threatening, but rather as a limiting and unsatisfying place. Thus, we propose that CSEM users hold an *Unhappy World* IT. Individuals with this IT are hypothesized to view the world as negative and dejected, with individuals in it perceived as being uninterested and rejecting. In its most severe form, the individual will feel alone in the world, incapable of forming close and meaningful relationships with others. A consequence of this IT is that one may feel the need to seek a more fulfilling identity online, for example, through online CSEM communities, CSEM collecting behavior, and/or other immersive online activities that distract them from their real-life.

Numerous studies have found that emotional problems are an important factor for some CSEM users. For example, in their sample of 72 CSEM offenders, Middleton et al. (2006) found that 35% evidenced intimacy deficits and 33% evidenced emotional dysregulation problems. Similarly, using a battery of psychometric measures, Henry, Mandeville-Norden, Hayes, and Egan (2010) found that 108 CSEM users (of 422) could be classified as 'emotionally inadequate'. Moreover, CSEM users often report greater levels of emotional loneliness than contact abusers (Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Marshall et al., 2012; Neutze et al., 2012) and less secure attachment styles than offender and non-offender controls (Armstrong & Mellor, 2013). Armstrong and Mellor also found that CSEM users had greater levels of social avoidance and distress, as well as a more fearful attachment style than non-offenders. Jung, Ennis, Stein, Choy, and Hook (2013) observed that, relative to contact abusers, CSEM users were less likely to have biological children and tended to be single at the time of their offending. They argue that this finding supports research showing CSEM users are emotionally lonely individuals. We argue that these observed socio-affective problems are underpinned by the *Unhappy World IT*.

This IT is unlikely to produce a direct causal pathway to CSEM offending. Rather, when activated alongside the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet*, it will influence people to use the Internet as an alternative to their unhappy life (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). Crucially, for individuals with certain risk factors (e.g., sexual interest in children) and other CSEM-related ITs (e.g., *Children as Sex Objects*), the *Unhappy World IT* will influence offending behavior (i.e., downloading CSEM) in order to avoid real-life and regulate negative affect (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014; Middleton et al., 2006; Quayle et al., 2005; Surjadi, Bullens, Horn, & Bogaerts, 2010). Indeed, CSEM users have reported using the Internet and the viewing of CSEM as a means of emotion regulation, coping, or avoiding their stressful and unhappy lives (Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Surjadi et al., 2010; Winder et al.,

2015). For example, in Surjadi et al.'s (2010) study of 43 CSEM users, avoiding real-life was the most important function for downloading CSEM. In Quayle and Taylor (2003), one CSEM user reported that viewing CSEM "*shut out the... part of my life that I was finding difficult to deal with...*" (p. 89), while another stated "*I was just desperate to find some way of getting out of the shit life that I was in*" (p. 90). Some CSEM users also report using CSEM to deal with their own sexual abuse (Median et al., 2013; Winder & Gough, 2010). Thus, for individuals who hold this IT, the use of CSEM becomes a learned response through both negative reinforcement (e.g., escape from the real world) and positive reinforcement (e.g., positive emotion, excitement, sexual arousal, increased social status).

### 3.2 Self as Uncontrollable

While individuals holding the *Unhappy World* IT may perceive the reinforcing nature of the Internet as predominantly positive, especially in terms of enhancing their emotional state, the downside of the Triple-A-Engine is the lack of (emotional or situational) control provided online. ITs revolving around the theme of uncontrollability have been proposed for male and female contact child abusers (Ward & Keenan, 1999; Gannon, Hoare, Rose, & Parrett, 2012), rapists (Polaschek & Ward, 2002), sexual murderers (Beech et al., 2005), violent offenders (Polaschek et al., 2009), and intimate partner abusers (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). For male contact child abusers, the core belief underlying the 'Uncontrollability' IT is that the world is inherently uncontrollable. This leads to the view that one's behavior is governed by external factors outside of their control (e.g., drugs, alcohol, life events). In addition, Ward and Keenan (1999) argued that biological factors in terms of strong impulses, emotions, and sexual desires are also perceived to impose an external influence (p. 830). Similarly, in relation to CSEM users, some researchers have found that they attribute their offending to external forces, such as Internet 'pop-ups' (Paquette & Cortoni, 2014; Winder et

al., 2015). While such statements may simply reflect normative excuse-making (Maruna & Mann, 2006), they may also indicate that the ‘Uncontrollability’ IT is shared by some CSEM users, or alternatively reflect a CSEM-specific IT that the ‘Internet is Uncontrollable’ (Paquette & Cortoni, 2014).

In a study of 177 CSEM users who had completed the Internet Behaviour & Attitude Questionnaire (IBAQ: O’Brien & Webster, 2007), Elliot (2012) reported that Item 23, “I feel that my use of Internet child pornography encourages me to act in ways that I would not normally act”, was the second-most endorsed item. In further analysis, Elliot identified a ‘Compulsivity’ factor amongst the items that included statements relating to being addicted to CSEM, experiencing negative affect when not accessing CSEM, and sexual preoccupation; again, these were the most strongly endorsed items overall. Elliot argued that Item 23 and those related to compulsivity may reflect an overarching belief that accessing CSEM is not a consequence of one’s own actions, but rather occurs due to some external influence.

However, a number of studies have pointed to higher self-control and greater internal locus of control amongst CSEM users, relative to their contact-only counterparts. In a study comparing 459 CSEM users, 526 contact child abusers, and 143 individuals with both offense types, Elliott et al. (2013) found that contact abusers were significantly more likely to have an external locus of control, were more prone to overassertive reactions, and more likely to make quick decisions (i.e., more impulsive). Bates and Metcalf (2007) also reported a higher external locus of control amongst contact abusers in comparison to CSEM users. In addition, Marshall, O’Brien, Marshall, Booth, and Davis (2012) found that CSEM users have greater obsessive-compulsive tendencies than contact child abusers. Thus, in line with these findings, it appears more likely that the strong endorsement of Item 23 in Elliott et al.’s (2012) study is based on the respondent’s actions (i.e., “*my use of Internet child pornography*”, italics added),

rather than the material itself. This view would reinforce an internal-based attribution for the user's behavior.

Within the attribution literature, Peterson and Seligman (1984) coined the term "pessimistic explanatory style" to describe an attribution style that refers to internal explanations for behaviors (i.e., an internal locus of control) in conjunction with stable (i.e., "This will never end") and global (i.e., "This will affect everything") attributions. On examination of how CSEM users talk about their offenses, a pessimistic explanatory style is evident. For example, many CSEM users state they are "obsessed", "fixated", or "addicted" (Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Winder & Gough, 2010; Winder et al., 2015), communicating a perception of their offending behavior as being internally driven, stable over time, and affecting all areas of their life. For example, in Quayle and Taylor (2003), CSEM users stated that "*I ended up, you know, falling back into old habits*" and "*I couldn't stop looking at these pictures*" (p. 352). Also, in Winder et al.'s (2015) study, one CSEM user stated that viewing CSEM was "*my whole focus, my whole life, everything else was second nature*" (p. 176).

Knitting together these findings from the existing literature, we propose that, in comparison to contact sex offenders, most CSEM users will have a greater internal locus of control, which they believe is stable, unchangeable, and uncontrollable. In other words, rather than believing external forces are responsible for their viewing of CSEM, they believe their uncontrollable behavior is generated 'from within'. Here, the emphasis is on the perceived *stability* of one's own behavior, leading to the distorted view that one is 'addicted', 'obsessed', and unable to stop or regulate their behavior. This is not a claim that CSEM users are (or are not) clinically addicted to viewing CSEM, but that they form a surface-level view of themselves as being addicted, underpinned by an "entity implicit theory" (i.e., a belief that one's own character or traits are fixed and unchanging; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995).



Accordingly, we have termed this entity belief the *Self as Uncontrollable* IT to express the subtle difference to Ward and Keenan's 'Uncontrollability' IT.

### 3.3 Children as Sex Objects

Ward and Keenan (1999) originally proposed the term *Children as Sex Objects* to refer to contact child abusers' belief that children are willing sexual agents who enjoy and actively seek sexual relations with adults. However, this belief has since been referred to as 'Children as Sexual Beings' (e.g., Marziano et al., 2006; Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013) as contact "offenders do not necessarily see children as objects but as sexual agents" (Ward, Personal communication, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2013). In contrast, we propose that some CSEM users *do* see children as sex objects. Sexual objectification can be defined as occurring when a person is reduced to their sexual appeal in terms of their outward appearance and a focus on their body or body parts (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Similarly, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) defined sexualization as occurring when: (1) a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; (2) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; (3) a person is sexually objectified - that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or (4) sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

Integrating this with our analysis of the literature, we propose the *Children as Sex Objects* IT for CSEM users. This refers to the belief that children are objects that can be used to meet one's sexual needs. Individuals holding this IT perceive children's body or body parts (and their sexual function) as being separated out from their person. Thus, unlike with Ward and Keenan's 'Children as Sexual Beings' IT, children's capacity for independent action or

decision-making (agency) is not considered. Instead, children are reduced to their (perceived) sexual appeal, leading them to be seen as mere instruments for sexual gratification. Arguably, therefore, *Children as Sex Objects* is closely related to (or may underpin) a sexual interest in children (see Ó Ciardha, 2011 for a discussion on this topic). As a result, this IT may elicit an approach goal to physically abuse a child if the individual also harbors facilitatory factors to do so (e.g., antisociality; Seto, 2013).

However, a more predominant function of this IT, especially for those lacking such facilitatory factors, is that it will lead to the view that CSEM is an appropriate outlet for their sexual desires (Houtepen, Sijtsema, & Bogaerts, 2015; Surjadi et al., 2010). Thus, we hypothesize that this IT will be held by most fantasy-driven CSEM users who are devoid of an intention to physically offend (see Merdian et al., 2011). Indeed, Long, Alison, and McManus (2013) found that CSEM-only offenders ‘anchored’ on Level 1 and 2<sup>2</sup> images, which they argue may reflect an interest for visualizing children in a sexual manner but not for (sexually) interacting with them. Thus, we argue that any individual holding this IT will perceive CSEM solely in terms of its utility for sexual arousal (Elliott & Beech, 2009) and, as such, is likely to seek out CSEM.

This proposition is indirectly supported by the empirical literature on (legal) pornography use. For example, Peter and Valkenburg (2009) found that amongst adolescent males, stronger beliefs that women are sex objects was causally linked to the selective viewing of sexually explicit Internet material involving adult women, and vice versa. Thus, seeing children portrayed as sexual objects in legal and non-pornographic contexts may act as a contributing factor in normalizing and legitimizing the sexual objectification of children. Indeed, O'Donohue, Gold, and McKay (1997) found that advertisements within magazines

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<sup>2</sup> Level 1 (“Images depicting erotic posing with no sexual activity”) and Level 2 (“Non-penetrative sexual activity between children, or solo masturbation by a child”) refer to the image classifications in the UK Sentencing Guidelines of the Sentencing Advisory Panel (2007).

aimed at women (e.g., Cosmopolitan) and men (e.g., Playboy) showed an increase in portraying children as sexual objects over a 40 year period. Moreover, Machia and Lamb (2009) found male and female participants reported greater levels of cognitive distortions concerning child sexual abuse after viewing sexualized ads of women dressed as “sexy young girls” as well as “sexy adults”, relative to those who viewed nature-based images.

Further support comes from a number of studies showing an increase in negative sexual attitudes and behaviors following exposure to sexually aggressive pornography (e.g., Lyons, Anderson, & Larson, 1994; Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000; Seto et al., 2001). With regards to CSEM, authors such as Kuhnen (2007) and Ost (2002) supported the reinforcement thesis, proposing that by viewing CSEM, existing proclivities to view children as sexual objects are reinforced and integrated in one’s sexual scripts, based on both the viewer’s personal inclinations as well as desensitization following continued exposure to the sexualized content. Others have pointed to the normalizing and validating nature of CSEM exposure and online pedophile communities on an individual’s beliefs and values, and consequently offending behavior (Calder, 2004; Quayle & Taylor, 2001). Also, in the development sample of the IBAQ (O’Brien & Webster, 2007), it was found that the more behavioral items an individual endorsed (i.e., those related to different online behaviors, such as which online facilities were visited by the offender or which methods were used to obtain CSEM from the Internet), the higher the attitudinal score obtained (i.e., those concerning the reinforcing nature of the Internet, or a portrayal of children as sexual objects).

We argue that the *Children as Sex Objects* IT will facilitate cognitive processing akin to depersonalization, which will influence how CSEM is perceived and handled. For example, an individual’s attention will be guided almost exclusively towards the objectified (sexual) elements of CSEM (i.e., the body or attractiveness of the child). This is exemplified by CSEM users’ verbal statements, such as “*It was purely a visual image to allow me to*

*achieve an erection*” and *“It wasn’t a person at all it was... it was just a flat image... it was a nothing”* (Quayle & Taylor, 2003; p. 99). Furthermore, *Children as Sex Objects* will lead individuals to modify CSEM for purely sexual purposes, thus, reinforcing the IT (e.g., *“I don’t mean to be denigrating but some of the people were ugly...so I would actually sort of chop their head off”*; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; p. 344). This IT will also cause individuals to ‘filter out’ or ignore evidence that humanizes a child within CSEM (e.g., signs of distress). This may further explain why CSEM users are empirically found to have lower cognitive distortions concerning children and sex, lower victim empathy deficits, and lower emotional identification with children in comparison to contact sex offenders (Babchishin et al., 2015).

CSEM users who endorse the *Children as Sex Object* IT may have appropriate victim empathy towards children who have been sexually abused, but fail to draw the analogy to their own offending behavior. This will lead to the view that CSEM does not depict sexual abuse, or that the child is ‘not real’ and simply a fantasy (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). For example, in Quayle and Taylor’s (2002) study, one CSEM user stated that *“because they were photographs...that kind of material...was in no way really connected with the original act”* (p. 344). CSEM, thus, becomes an abstract medium, similar to how one may watch a thriller movie without experiencing empathy for the murder victim. Thus, this IT has a close link to the belief that viewing CSEM is not harmful (see below) based on the perception that CSEM is detached from genuine human experience.

### **3.4 Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)**

As discussed earlier, Ward and Keenan (1999) first proposed this IT in relation to contact child abusers. It is based on: 1) the general belief that “harm” spans a dimension, from little or no damage to extreme harm; and 2) the specific belief that sexual activity is generally beneficial rather than harmful. We hypothesize that the *Nature of Harm* IT will also

be present in CSEM users. However, based on the available literature, we argue that it will manifest differently to that of contact abusers. As such we refer to this IT as the *Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)*. The first difference relates to how CSEM users perceive their own offending behavior (i.e., the viewing of CSEM), while the second refers to how they perceive the degree of harm represented in the abusive images they view.

Concerning the first way in which *Nature of Harm* will manifest, the reviewed literature indicated that some CSEM users view their behavior as being on the extreme lower end of the harm dimension (i.e., not harmful), based on the claim that their engagement with CSEM does not involve any physical contact with a child (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Winder & Gough, 2010; Winder, Gough, & Seymour-Smith, 2015). This is exemplified from the discourse of CSEM users in Quayle and Taylor's (2003) study. For example, one offender stated; "*The way I looked at it I'm doing no harm because at the end of the day I'm not taking the pictures I'm not setting 'em up... I'm not distributing them... all I'm doing at the end of the day is just looking at 'em*" (p. 93). Similarly, another stated; "*The big thing that I kept saying and I believed it...with every inch of my body...was that it was OK because I'm not touching...I'm not touching anybody*" (p. 183). Furthermore, this view will also lead CSEM users to believe that, although they engaged in an illegal behavior, they are not a *sexual* offender, and thus reject the label "sex offender" (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014; Merdian et al., 2014; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Winder & Gough, 2010). For example, Quayle and Taylor (2002) reported that one offender stated; "*I don't like the idea of being a sex offender 'cause to me.... a sex offender is somebody who... somebody who goes raping people... who's harmed somebody in a sexual manner... not looking at images*" (p. 352-353). Rather, CSEM use is often viewed as a behavior that facilitates sexual arousal and sexual fantasy (Surjadi et al., 2010; Quayle & Taylor, 2003). The escalatory function that sexual fantasizing can have on sexual offending (Gee, Ward, & Eccleston, 2003) and the further use

of CSEM (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007) is not considered by those holding the *Nature of Harm IT*. From this, it can be seen that *Nature of Harm* is used in close association with the *Children as Sex Object IT*.

However, it should be noted that in most Western legislation, the downloading, trading, and possession of CSEM is considered of lower severity than CSEM production or the direct engagement in the sexual abuse of a child, resulting, for example, in lower penalties for this offending behavior. We like to clarify that the *Nature of Harm IT* is not meant to refer to this (appropriate) understanding of the law (i.e., perceiving CSEM as a less severe offense than contact sexual abuse) but refers to an ignorance of the possibility that one's behavior contributes to the sexual objectification of children and to further incidences of child abuse, for example, by supporting the continued production of abusive images (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014; Ost, 2002; Winder & Gough, 2010).

The second way in which *Nature of Harm* may manifest in CSEM users is in relation to how they perceive the degree of harm represented in the abusive images they download, and as such can be considered as an extension to the original definition proposed by Ward and Keenan (1999). As discussed earlier, some contact offenders believe that sexual activity with a child is not harmful, particularly if the act is seen as less extreme (i.e., "*At least I didn't sodomize them*"; Paquette et al., 2013, p. 8) or the child shows no signs of distress. Thus, we hypothesize that CSEM users holding *Nature of Harm* will similarly believe that not all children are being harmed within CSEM and, thus, will seek out and attend to material reinforcing this belief (Elliott & Beech, 2009). For example, in Winder and Gough's (2010) study, one CSEM user stated that "*They're enjoying it, they're having fun, nobody's getting harmed*", while another stated that "*It was almost like the children in the photos were, were very often...smiling as well so again from that point of view I didn't think that I physically was doing anything wrong*" (p. 130). Similarly, in Quayle and Taylor's (2002) study, one

CSEM user stated that only images he sought out were of “*Girls actually having sex. And they had to look happy*” (p. 340).

Related to this harm conceptualization is the perception that sexual offenses against younger children are more harmful than against older children. For example, an offender in Quayle and Taylor (2002) stated that; “*Well there was definitely never any baby pictures believe you me... I would have said there’s definitely nothing below ten on what I have on my system*”. In addition, CSEM users will infer an absence of harm if the images portray sexual activities that do not cause any physical harm. Again, findings from Quayle and Taylor’s (2002) study support this hypothesis, as one offender stated “*Oh, no S&M pictures, no pictures of kids being hurt, no pictures of kids being killed*”, while another claimed that “*I wasn’t looking for rape or anything*” (p. 340). This view will also be articulated by offenders who claim that they only viewed *nudist* images of children, rather than children engaged in sexual activity. For example, one CSEM user in Quayle and Taylor’s (2002) study stated that; “*Nudist pictures I was interested in. These were the only pictures where I was sure that the kids weren’t being hurt or coerced or anything*” (p. 341), while another stated that the images “*...were of children, but not of child pornography... It was done in a tasteful... there was no sexual overtones or anything*” (p. 352). Here, *Nature of Harm* distorts CSEM users’ judgements about this form of CSEM, as it reduces harm perception to an exclusive physical experience and ignores the possibility of the child being forced to pose, for example, and the emotional impact for the child resulting from this.

### **3.5 Self as Collector**

In their series of interviews with convicted consumers of online CSEM, Taylor and Quayle (2001) aimed to identify the principal functions of CSEM use. Whereas the majority of offenders had consumed these images for sexual arousal, some users had gained satisfaction from the collection process alongside the actual content of the images. More

recently, Long et al. (2013) found that CSEM-only offenders possessed the largest CSEM collections relative to offenders who had engaged in both CSEM and contact sex offending. While most studies have focused on the sexual relationship that the offender has with the material - that is, its depiction and/or reinforcement of a sexual fantasy or preference (Glasgow, 2010; Long et al., 2013; Seto, Maric, & Barbaree, 2001) - our analysis of the literature identified the act of collecting itself as being a distinct function for some CSEM users (Aiken, Moran, & Berry, 2011; Carr, 2006; Houtepen et al., 2015; Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014; McManus, Long, Alison, Almond, 2014; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Seto, Reeves, & Jung, 2010). For example, Surjadi et al. (2010) identified this function amongst users both with and without a sexual motivation to access CSEM.

Indeed, Lanning (2010) argued that collecting and saving CSEM signifies the importance of the relationship that an individual has to the material. Some individuals have reported collecting CSEM to complete a picture set or because the process of searching and finding CSEM was rewarding (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). For example, one CSEM user stated that *"It gets to a stage also where you're just collecting to see how many different ones you can get and this sort of thing and you're not... necessarily aroused or turned on by all the pictures"*, p. 341), while another stated that *"And there was also the thrill in collecting them. You wanted to get complete sets so it...was a bit like stamp collecting as well"* (p. 342). In their qualitative study of 15 community pedophiles, Houtepen et al. (2015) reported that one participant *"got more excited from searching and collecting the material than from actually watching it"* (p. 21).

McIntosh and Schmeichel (2004) define a collector as *"a person who is motivated to accumulate a series of similar objects where the instrumental function of the objects is of secondary (or no) concern and the person does not plan to immediately dispose of the objects"* (p. 86). Their psychological model of collecting behavior states that individuals are



drawn to collecting objects because it: (1) boosts their sense of self, as the behavior involves setting up tangible and attainable goals; (2) compensates for a perceived inadequacy in other areas of life; and (3) facilitates positive feedback from, and an increased sense of community with, other collectors. Thus, pursuing a finite collection enables individuals to bring their ‘actual collector self’ closer to their ‘ideal collector self’, and as a result, collectors come to value certain objects in terms of their ‘social value’ rather than their ‘ordinary value’. For example, for a CSEM offender, the ‘ordinary value’ of CSEM (e.g., sexual arousal) may eventually become less important as the ‘social value’ increases. This value includes bringing oneself close to completing a collection; its value as a commodity; and/or increasing one’s social status amongst an online CSEM community (Carr, 2006; Hesselbarth & Haag, 2004; Taylor & Quayle, 2003).

Based on this model, collecting behavior is likely to be underpinned by certain core beliefs, particularly when one considers that normative collecting begins in childhood (Nordsletten & Mataix-Cols, 2012). According to Furby (1978), people collect possessions because they believe they need to control how they are used, thereby, controlling their environment. Arguably, this suggests that collectors have a higher internal locus of control as they see themselves as governing their own (collecting) behavior. In support of Furby’s hypothesis, Steketee, Frost, and Kyrio (2003) found that “collecting beliefs” related to control over possessions and responsibility toward possessions, and were more strongly endorsed by hoarders, relative to controls. They concluded that beliefs about possessions are important in determining one’s acquiring and saving behavior.

Knitting this work on collecting behavior with the CSEM literature, we propose that some CSEM users will hold a *Self as Collector* IT. The core belief underpinning this IT is that one’s self-concept and social status is dependent on the possession of certain objects or collectibles. Thus, this proposition may suggest that some CSEM users also collect other

objects. Indeed, in Winder et al.'s (2015) study, one CSEM user stated that "*I've always been a bit of a hoarder and I collect and I'm actually a professional archivist on the outside of electronic images*" (p. 175). More crucially, this IT will influence how some individuals come to perceive CSEM; that is, in terms of its 'social value' (i.e., a collectible or commodity), rather than (or second to) its 'ordinary' value (i.e., sexual arousal). Consequently, many individuals may use CSEM in a way that does not directly meet their own interests, for example, in terms of trading with other collectors (Kuhnen, 2007). This seemingly altruistic behavior ensures their continued membership to the group, as well as access to more desired material from other users (Carr, 2006; O'Connell, 2001). Also, CSEM can become viewed as currency to "buy" social relationships online, thus, providing a commodity for social exchange (Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

We propose that downloading from and trading with other CSEM collectors will reinforce the *Self as Collector* IT, as the presence of a collector community raises the social value of a collectible/collection (Carey, 2008). Indeed, Carr (2006) explained that one's status within an online group is defined according to the rarity of their material. Quayle and Taylor (2002) noted one CSEM user who described completing a CSEM set through trading as being "*like an art collector who finds a lost Picasso*" (p. 346). This particular function of CSEM echoes McIntosh and Schmeichel's (2004) argument that group membership and the camaraderie of other collectors is a rewarding component of collecting, while at the same time, providing a sense of uniqueness and self-sufficiency. For CSEM users, these experiences are likely to both reinforce and be produced by the *Self as Collector* IT. Finally, this IT will underpin surface-level cognitions related to distancing oneself from the illegality and/or sexual nature of their CSEM use (Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Thus, for some CSEM users, this IT is also likely to contribute to the non-sexual objectification of children and CSEM. Given the limited literature in this specific area, further research is needed to unpack

the nature and function of collecting behavior in CSEM users (Seto et al., 2010). This will aid in refining the concept of the *Self as Collector* IT.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

This paper aimed to provide a first attempt at formulating the potential ITs held by CSEM users. In a recent paper, Merdian et al. (2013) proposed two sub-groups of CSEM users; those motivated by a desire for or behavioural link with contact sex offending (contact-driven) and those whose offending is confined to the online environment (fantasy-driven). Regarding the former, Seto (2013) postulated in his Motivation-Facilitation Model that escalation from viewing indecent images to contact sex offending requires both motivation (primarily a sexual interest in children) and facilitation (primarily antisocial traits), which finds initial support in the empirical literature (Babchishin et al., 2015). Thus, this offender subtype shows a similar risks-needs profile to contact sex offenders, and it is arguably likely that Ward and Keenan's (1999) ITs apply to this group. Indeed, in their analysis of the endorsement of cognitive distortions concerning children and sex on 22 CSEM offenders in comparison to 20 contact sex offenders and 17 with both offense types, Merdian et al. (2014) identified cognitions concerning *Justification* (e.g., "A man is justified in having sex with his children or stepchildren, if his wife does not like sex."), *Children as Sexual Agents* ("A child will never have sex with an adult unless the child really wants to."), and *Power and Entitlement* ("A person should have sex whenever it is needed.") as potential facilitators of contact sex offending. This is in line with Ward and Keenan's (1999) 'Entitlement' and 'Children as Sexual Beings' ITs. Thus, contact-driven offenders may form a potential joint

group between contact sex offenders and fantasy-driven CSEM users, and may endorse ITs linked to either group.

However, very little is known about the subtype of fantasy-driven CSEM users, whose CSEM use does not show any crossover (self-report or actual; see Seto et al., 2011) into offline offending behaviour. This paper was aimed to go beyond the existing literature on cognitive distortions (Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Kettleborough & Merdian, 2014; O'Brien & Webster, 2007) to explore their underlying ITs. Five potential ITs were identified; *Unhappy World* (linked to the self-regulatory aspects of CSEM use), *Self as Uncontrollable* (perception of oneself as “addicted” to the online behavior), *Children as Sex Objects* (dehumanizing view of children as sexual objects), *Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)* (denial of one’s role in the abuse cycle and minimization of harm in the portrayed activities); and *Self as Collector* (detached perception of CSEM as collectibles). These specific ITs are contextualized by an underlying assumption of the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet* that portrays the online environment as an accessible, anonymous, and available means for CSEM use.

At this stage, little is known about the development of these specific ITs. In their Pathways Model to CSEM Offending (Anonymous, *in prep*), offense-related vulnerabilities (including developmental factors, such as socio-emotional dysfunctionality) are integrated with the situational offending context. In their analysis of CSEM users’ life stories and psychometric profile, a number of themes emerged, such as a lack of positive connection to others, dysfunctional coping, or fear of stigmatization. This provides some support for *Unhappy World*, as this IT is likely to develop from repeated experiences of negative affect and emotions (e.g., rejection, neglect, social exclusion), particularly when experienced early in life. It is hoped that further research will help unpack the developmental antecedents for the other ITs. Also, the model points to the role of “permission-giving thoughts” (e.g., Lack

of Harm; Children not Real; Perceived Anonymity) as internal facilitators for CSEM use, again reinforcing the need to explore the underlying ITs in more detail.

It should be emphasized that the ITs proposed here represent an initial conceptualization. As a result, future empirical research, as well as critical and constructive debate, is required to validate and further explore these CSEM-specific ITs. It is also recommended that the interrelation between problematic cognitions and other factors (e.g., affect, sexual arousal, self-regulation) be examined, as cognition represents only one etiological factor related to sexual offending (Ward & Beech, 2006). In time, this body of work could become a significant contribution to understanding CSEM offending, and for the assessment, intervention, and prevention targeted at CSEM users.

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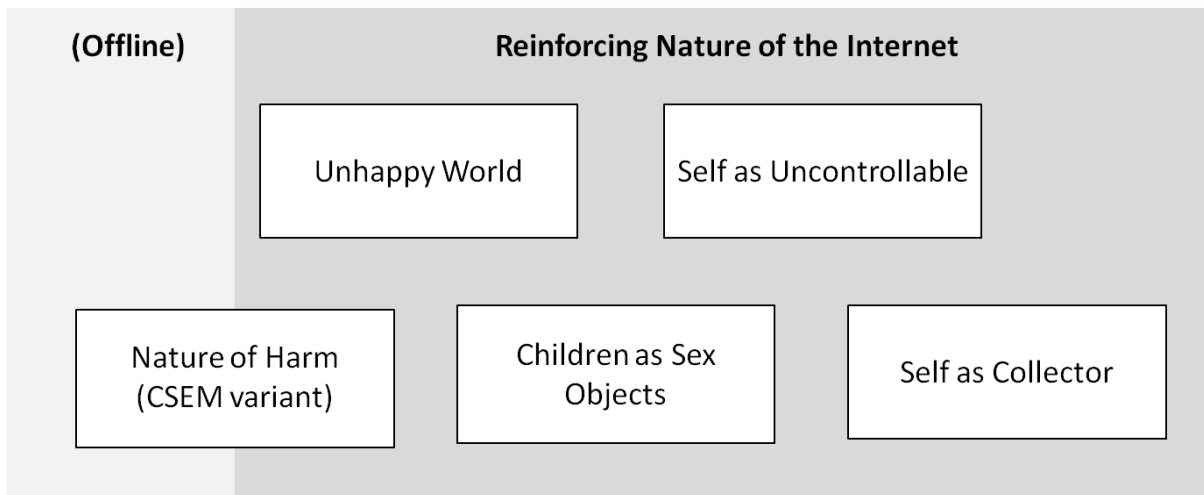
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**Figure 1:** Hypothesized implicit theories held by CSEM users

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**Table 1:** Studies coded into themes that reflect possible underlying implicit theories

	<b>Themes</b>						
	Child as sexual object	CSEM is not sexual	Denial of sex offender status	Non-Harm	Lack Control	Internet function & normalization	Socio-affective issues
<b>Studies</b>	<i>1, 4, 17, 18, 26; 27, 31, 39</i>	<i>1, 2, 18, 27, 39, 40</i>	<i>1, 18, 27, 39, 40</i>	<i>1, 4, 17, 18, 27, 28, 39,</i>	<i>1, 18, 22, 27, 28, 39, 40</i>	<i>1, 2, 18, 22, 39, 40</i>	<i>1, 3, 18, 22, 27, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 39</i>

Note: 1: Qualye & Taylor (2003); 2: Malesky & Ennis (2004); 3: Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech (2005/06); 4: Howitt & Sheldon (2007); 17: O'Halloran & Quayle (2010); 18: Winder & Gough (2010); 22: Median, Wilson, Thakker, Curtis, & Boer (2013); 26: Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, & Boer (2014); 27: Kettleborough & Merdian (2014); 28: Winder, Gough, & Seymour-Smith (2015); 31: Henry, Mandeville-Norden, Hayes, & Egan (2010); 32: Neutze, Grundmann, Scherner, & Beier (2012); 33: Jung, Ennis, Stein, Choy & Hook (2013); 34: Marshall, O'Brien, Marshall, Booth, & Davis (2012); 35: Armstrong & Mellor (2013); 39: Quayle & Taylor (2002); 40: Aslan, Edelmann, Bray, & Worrell (2014)

**Highlights:**

- Previous research indicates users of Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) are distinct from contact child abusers.
- This suggests they have their own set of core beliefs (implicit theories) that underlie their offense-supportive cognitions.
- Using a Grounded Theory-based approach, the existing literature on CSEM users was analyzed to identify themes that could be used to conceptualize a set of CSEM-related implicit theories.
- From the analysis, five core implicit theories are proposed: *Unhappy World*; *Children as Sexual Objects*; *Self as Uncontrollable*; *Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)*; and *Self as Collector*.
- The proposed content and function of each implicit theory is offered, along with some research and practice implications.