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The Role of Sexual Images in Online and Offline Sexual Behavior with Minors.

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The role of sexual images in online and offline sexual behavior with minors.

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Abstract

Sexual images have long been associated with sexual interest and behaviour with minors. The Internet has impacted access to existing content and the ability to create content which can be uploaded and distributed. These images can be used forensically to determine the legality of the behaviour but importantly for psychiatry they offer insight into motivation, sexual interest and deviance, the relationship between image content and offline sexual behaviour, and how they might be used in online solicitation and grooming with children and adolescents. Practitioners will need to consider the function that these images may serve, the motivation for their use and the challenges of assessment. This article provides an overview of the literature on the use of illegal images and the parallels with existing paraphilias, such as exhibitionism and voyeurism. The focus is on recent research on the Internet and sexual images of children, including the role that self-taken images by youth may play in the offending process.

Keywords

Introduction

Sexual materials related to minors, such as photographs, drawings and text, have long been associated with sexual behaviour by adults [1] becoming part of their collection of various artefacts (such as books, magazines, drawings, clothing and toys) which has been argued are used to define, fuel, and validate their most cherished sexual fantasies. Prior to the Internet, explicitly sexual magazines and photographs were difficult to access [2] outside of a few European countries. This changed when much of this content was moved online and Internet access increased and became less expensive [3]. The last twenty years has been marked by increasing concerns about the proliferation of indecent sexual images of children [4], the people who access, create and share them [5], and how they might be used in relation to *online* and *offline* sexual behaviour with minors [6]. It is also apparent that these images reflect all stages of sexual development, as international law defines the age of a child as up to 18 years for the purposes of child pornography [7]. This clearly raises issues as to the sexual preferences of those involved in the production, distribution and possession of such content and whether there are differences in both presentation and treatment needs between people who are sexually interested in pre-pubertal, as opposed to pubertal and post-pubertal minors [8-9]. The term pedophilia has been used to denote the erotic preference for prepubescent children while hebephilia denotes the erotic preference for pubescent children [10]. The Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) diagnostic criteria characterize pedophilia as recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving sexual activities with a prepubescent child or children persisting for a period of at least 6 months. Such fantasies or behaviors cause either clinically significant distress, interpersonal difficulties, or functional impairment (11).

The fears about the rate of technological change, and sexual risk to children, have tended to polarize debate within the academic and professional communities. Recent challenges have come from the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire suggesting alarmism reflected by scholarly and journalistic literature, founded on assumptions about deviance amplification, the role and dynamics of the digital environment, and remedies to the problems lying in specialized Internet education programs [12]. There is a growing body of research related to offending against children in the online environment [13-15] and the risks that young people are exposed to [16]. A recent systematic review [17] concluded that existing evidence would indicate that many of the online risks identified (cyberbullying, contact with strangers, sexual messaging and pornography) in fact affect fewer than 1 in 5 adolescents and that while these prevalence estimates vary, there does not seem to be any indication that these rates are increasing. However the review notes that while not all online risks taken by adolescents result in harm (largely self-reported), four longitudinal studies identified [18-21] did indicate a range of adverse emotional and psychological consequences. Importantly, the review highlighted that not all children are at risk of harm but that risk factors related to personality (sensation-seeking, low self-esteem, psychological difficulties), social (lack of parental support, peer norms) and digital environment (online practices, digital skills, use of specific online sites) are worthy of note [22].

Rapid technological change means that the infrastructure within people's homes is changing continuously and is becoming increasingly interconnected [23] enabling both flexible consumption and the sharing of media. The ability to access the Internet over multiple devices, many of which are portable, is relatively new, and this emerging pattern of access is thought to be re-shaping the way that we use the Internet

in our everyday lives [24]. This ability to create and share content is overwhelmingly seen as positive, except where it is used in coercive sexual relationships with minors and other adults. This article provides an overview of the literature on the role of sexual images in online sexual behavior with minors, focusing on recent research that may guide clinicians in their assessment and formulation of these problems. Within this article we discuss how sexual image use can be used to: determine the legality of the behavior; categorize it with regard to motivation and potential intervention needs; indicate the level of deviance and potential likelihood of offline offending, and aid understanding the role of image production and exchange through the sexual exploitation of adolescent minors. The emphasis is on images that would be classified within most jurisdictions as illegal.

Typologies of sexual image use.

Terms used to describe the producers and users of images depicting the sexual abuse or exploitation of children include: pedophiles [25], online sex offenders [26], Internet sexual offenders [27], and Internet based sexual offenders [28]. 'Internet offenders' is often used to describe people whose index crime is possession of child abuse images, also called indecent images of children (IIOC) or child pornography. However the range of online sexual crimes against children includes the production of abusive images, their distribution, online solicitation and grooming of children. Early work in this area described how images were used as a means of sexual gratification, to lower children's inhibitions, blackmail, a medium of exchange, and profit [1]. More recently, image use has been used to help us understand the motivations for the offence. Elliott and Beech's typology includes a four-level classification of offenders.

1) periodically prurient (access impulsively and sporadically as part of a larger interest in pornography), (2) fantasy-only (those who access/trade images to fuel a sexual interest in children and who have no known history of sexual offending, (3) direct victimization (who utilize online technologies as part of a larger pattern of contact and non-contact sexual offending), and (4) commercial exploitation, consisting of the criminally-minded who produce or trade images to make money [29]. A similar account presents a model, classifying offenders into subgroups, defined by the function of the images in the offending behavior, the underlying motivation and the level of social networking in the behavior [30]. Both typologies focus on whether the motivation is to enable fantasy or direct contact victimization. This distinction has also been noted in relation to offenders who attempt to entice an adolescent into a sexual relationship using an Internet chat room [31]. The results of this US study divided the sample of offenders into two subgroups: a group driven by the motivation to engage in an offline contact offense with an adolescent and a group driven by fantasy, who wish to engage in online cybersex with an adolescent, but without an express intent to meet them offline. However, what this study also highlighted was that image-related behavior was associated with the creation of content by offenders, not of their victims, but of themselves. Within their sample of 51 men, 68.6% sent sexual images of themselves to the person they were chatting to (who they believed to be a minor) and 31.3% created sexual content of themselves through the use of a webcam.

A further Canadian study compared 38 contact offenders, 38 child pornography offenders, and 70 online solicitation offenders. When compared to child pornography offenders, online solicitation offenders had lower capacity for relationship stability and lower levels of sex drive or preoccupation and deviant

sexual preference. Compared to contact offenders they were more likely to have viewed child pornography, to report hebephilic sexual interests (in pubescent young people), to have problems in their capacity for relationship stability, to be better educated, and to have unrelated and stranger victims [32]. This finding related to hebephilic interests highlights an important issue related to the age of the young people solicited. Sexual solicitations largely target adolescents, with more girls reporting both sexual solicitations and aggressive solicitations [33]. These data indicated that those soliciting young people (largely male, with nearly half other youth) sent a sexual picture in 12% of all, 24% of aggressive and 15% of distressing episodes. Many also requested sexual pictures of the young person (45% overall).

Images as evidence of deviance.

Meta-analyses would suggest that in comparison with offline offenders, online offenders had greater victim empathy, greater sexual deviancy and lower impression management [34]. Mixed offenders (those committing online and offline sexual offences) were most pedophilic [35], and there was some evidence that recidivism of online child pornography offenders was associated with the content of the images collected (specifically the ratio of boy to girl content) [36]. Others have suggested that online offenders lie on a 'deviance continuum' [5], which may relate to the importance of fantasy as the motivation for offending. Glasgow [37] has argued that digital evidence about the sexual images used, provides insights into the preferred material used to generate augmented sexual and interpersonal fantasies, which may evolve over time and change the types of images sought. The pattern of images accessed and viewed over time may reflect evolving sexual interests, an escalation of instrumental behavior and indications of growing compulsivity. They also provide an

accurate record of what the offender was accessing which can be compared with self-reports. However this issue is complex as sexual deviance may be implied by collecting any images of minors, or may relate to the content of the images, or the association with other 'extreme' sexual images. By definition, all Internet offenders have exhibited deviant sexual interest and it is no surprise that assessed by phallometry, many prove to be very responsive to images of children, and 'more pedophile' than contact sexual offenders [38].

The content of images as an indicator of both deviance and sexual interest is an important one, but has received comparatively little research interest. A modified version of the COPINE Scale [39] was used by the UK Sentencing Advisory Panel (SAP) to provide a 5-point scale giving an objective estimation of the level of victimization in the images collected. The original 10-point scale was developed to provide a typology of the sexual images of children that were available on the Internet and reflected the level of victimization seen in the images and has been assessed for its reliability and construct validity [40]. This scale has also been used to examine the relationship between image possession and contact offending [41]. Long et al.'s sample included 30 dual offenders (contact and image) and 30 non-contact offenders, examined in relation to the quantity and types of images collected and their relationship with offending behavior. It was possible to discriminate between groups by previous conviction, access to children and the number, proportion and type of images viewed. Within the dual offenders there was a close match between the type of offence (sexual touching, penetrative abuse and sadism) and the content of the images in their possession. The implications of this research are important in that they demonstrate a relationship between the online images viewed and sexual behavior offline. A Dutch study examining the association between possession of child

pornography and direct victimisation of children also used a modified version of the COPINE scale and found four early identifiable variables that were predictive of the outcome of direct victimization [42]. One of these related to extreme content, which was intrusive or violent, which the authors used as a measure of deviance.

Preferred sexual images as an indirect measure of deviance addresses some of the challenges associated with assessment of this offender group, particularly in relation to risk. Assessment of deviant sexual interest (DSI) has been noted to be problematic [43] due to the diagnostic validity of assessments, argued to be based on legally relevant offense behaviour, and/or clinical diagnoses such as pedophilia. These authors have suggested a multi-method approach to assessment, which combines self-report questionnaires with viewing-time measures and implicit association tests, to assess sexual gender and maturity preferences.

Images and online sexual behavior.

In the United States, number of arrests for the production of child pornography more than doubled between 2006 and 2009 [44]. This rise was largely associated with a substantial increase in cases involving "youth-produced" sexual images. These were defined as pictures that had been taken by minors, usually of themselves, and which met the legal definitions for child pornography. In most of these cases, the images were solicited from their adolescent victims by adult offenders, and these were the people most likely to be arrested. By 2009, the majority of victims of child pornography production were teenagers.

This self-production of sexual images by young people is often referred to as 'sexting', particularly when it takes place through the use of mobile phone technology or web cameras. The ability to self-produce sexual content is clearly not confined to

adolescents and a recent systematic review [45] indicated that sexting was more prevalent in adults than young people. One of the limitations of the review was the challenge posed by the diversity of definitions of sexting. Inconsistencies exist in relation to the content of the messages, the medium used to send them and the context of the relationship in which the image was created and sent [46]. These images have also been described as 'self-produced child pornography' [47], which possess the following criteria: they meet the legal definition of child pornography and were originally produced by a minor with no coercion, grooming or adult participation whatsoever. The definition does not focus exclusively on the young person who makes the image but also those, 'juveniles in the distribution chain who may coerce production, or later possess, distribute, or utilize such images' (p. 492).

Estimates of the prevalence of sexting vary [48]. Studies that specifically measured sexting with photo content (49 – 50] indicated a mean prevalence of 11.96%. The variation and complexity related to sexting prevalence may be due to surveys based on different age groups, types of samples, data collection methods, and single-term sexting measures [51]. Motivations for sexting include: a form of flirting and/or to gain romantic attention; as part of a sexual relationship; an experimental adolescent phase, and pressure from partner/friend(s) [45]. The research evidence suggests that in the vast majority of cases sexting is a process which takes place within either a (desired) romantic relationship or as a means of adolescent explorations of sexuality and identity creation. These findings correspond to the 'experimental' episodes of sexting identified in a typology of US law enforcement cases [52]. This typology suggested a division into two categories, which were termed 'Aggravated' and 'Experimental'. The aggravated incidents involved criminal or abusive elements which included: adult involvement; criminal or abusive behavior by

other minors such as harmful sexual behavior, extortion, or threats; malicious conduct that arose from interpersonal conflict, or the creation, sending or showing of images without the knowledge, or against the will of a minor who was pictured. The consequences of these self-produced sexual images for adolescents have largely been seen as negative [53 – 54].

The US cases described the involvement of adults involved in criminal relationships with young people, where sexual images were generally, but not always, solicited by adults, to whom many of these young people developed romantic or sexual attachments. The cases involving only young people were further divided into two groups: 'reckless misuse' and 'intent to harm', with the intention behind the activity being seen as critical. The misuse category largely referred to the distribution of images by another young person without the explicit permission of the young person in the image.

What has been noted [6] is the increase in the number of adults using the Internet to befriend and exploit children for sexual gratification, the production and distribution of sexually explicit images, and contact that may lead to, or facilitate, a sexual offence. A qualitative study of offenders who had committed an online grooming offence [55] concluded that technology afforded the opportunity to simultaneously contact and communicate with multiple victims within a discrete period of time, dropping the ones who did not respond and engaging with others thought to be easier targets. The sexual behavior that did take place was often prompted by the easy exchange of images, text or the presence of web cams, without any physical contact, or the risks that would be associated. While there was no evidence within this sample that young people were sent images to lower their inhibitions [1], there was ample evidence of requests for images, and the use of

images and web cams to enable sexual fantasy. What was important for some offenders was an exchange of images, which included having young people as an audience to the respondents' own sexual performances, similar to that reported elsewhere [31].

It has been noted that there may be a variety of differential diagnoses for Internet offenders, which includes voyeurism [56] and that it is plausible that some of the social and relational deficits observed in Internet offenders may have an influence on the indirect way in which they offend, similar to what is observed in voyeurs and exhibitionists [57]. Internet offenders may be sexually excited by the voyeuristic nature of viewing pornography and masturbating to fantasies while at home, and engaging in maladaptive beliefs that they are not physically hurting a child. This may also be the case for engagement with minors using webcams for live streaming, or still sexual images taken using smart phones offering opportunity not only to see sexual images but to exhibit images of themselves, sometimes to an unsuspecting audience.

Conclusion

Within this paper we have discussed the role of images in understanding typologies of sex offenders, levels of sexual deviance and the use of self-taken images of adults and minors in online and offline sexual behavior. While the use of sexual images of children pre-dates the Internet, the capacity to create digital content, including sexual images and text, potentially affords different opportunities to engage in sexual behavior with minors. While it is important not to exaggerate the danger that this poses to children and adolescents, the technological landscape is constantly changing, and is important for clinicians, and future research, to consider the role of sexual

images in their assessment of adults and youth with sexually problematic or compulsive behavior.

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