Development of a Case Formulation Model for Individuals who have Viewed, Distributed and/or Shared Child Sexual Exploitation Material

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**Abstract**

Increases in the number of arrests of individuals who download or distribute Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) have highlighted a need to further understand the offending pathways of this offender group. Based on a literature review on individuals who have acknowledged their CSEM offending behaviour, this paper describes the development of the first aetiological model specific to CSEM offending. Users of CSEM (*n* = 20) were interviewed regarding their life and sexual history, relationships, substance use, offending details, and circumstances leading to their CSEM offending, resulting in seven superordinate themes: Developmental Context, Individual Propensities (risk-related and risk-protective) and Psychological Vulnerabilities, Personal Circumstances, Permission Giving Thoughts, Internet Environment and Behaviour, Evaluation of Consequences for the Individual, and Desistance. The resulting model presents the first case formulation tool specific for individuals who have committed CSEM offending behaviour, with the aim of providing guidance for assessment and treatment providers.

**Keywords:** child sexual exploitation, child sexual exploitation material, child pornography, child sexual abuse, illegal images of children, offending pathways, risk assessment, risk management, treatment needs, case formulation

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Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) is the term used for any type of material depicting the sexual exploitation of children, including material covered in legal terminology such as *indecent photographs of children* (UK) or *child pornography* (Canada), but also material currently not included in the legal literature, such as abusive narratives, audio representations and use of exploitative chatroom conversations.

In the last decade there has been an increased number of arrests and convictions for online CSEM offences (Crown Prosecution Service, 2014), although it is unclear whether the increase is attributable to advances in detection in online offending behaviour or an increase in offending behaviour. The accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of the Internet (so-called Triple-A-engine; Cooper, 1998) attract Internet users to view pornography, and it is possible that for people who have a sexual interest in children, the Internet provides the opportunity (and lack of supervision) to commit (see also Routine Activity Theory, Cohen & Felson, 1979; and further Seto, 2013; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006).

In a meta-analysis comparing CSEM offenders and contact sex offenders, CSEM offenders appeared more sexually deviant but were less likely to have access to children (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015). The empirical evidence suggests that individuals who have committed CSEM offending behaviour may present with deviant sexual interests; however, they are likely to have lifestyle and psychological barriers (i.e., low victim access; greater victim empathy; or less antisociality) inhibiting them from acting on deviant interests (Babchishin et al., 2015; Seto, 2013; Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006; Webb, Craissati & Keen, 2007).

It has been established that whilst some individuals view CSEM in conjunction with contact offences against children (*contact-driven offenders*), there appears to be a distinct group who view CSEM without intent to commit a contact offence (*fantasy-driven offenders*; Merdian et al., 2016). CSEM offenders in general, but fantasy-driven offenders in particular, display characteristics distinguishing them from contact sex offenders (Babchishin et al., 2015), suggesting that they require distinct assessment and management strategies (Merdian et al., 2016; Seto, Reeves, & Jung, 2010).

The applicability of existing theoretical models of contact sexual offending to explain the aetiology and maintenance of CSEM offending is limited (e.g. Middleton, Elliot, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech, 2006). Therefore, there is a need to develop CSEM-specific aetiological models for the assessment of risk and need among CSEM offenders. Risk and need frameworks for contact sex offenders lack sensitivity for CSEM offenders (e.g., Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Wakeling, Howard, & Barnett, 2011). Even within the risk assessment research on CSEM offenders, there are challenges regarding the heterogeneity of this offender group. For example, Seto and Eke’s (2015) actuarial Child Pornography Offender Risk Tool (CPORT) significantly predicted reoffending for CSEM offenders with a previous offence history (both sexual and non-sexual), but did not do so for non-contact CSEM offenders without a criminal history. Structured professional judgement approaches that offer consideration of empirically derived risk factors in relation to the individual and situational interactive context are likely to more adequately address the dynamic nature of CSEM offending (e.g., Glasgow, 2010), variability in offending patterns (e.g. contact- or fantasy-driven), and offer scope for formulation of risk and protective factors and support risk management planning. Thus, in the absence of formal guidance on risk assessment, case formulation and treatment planning, the current study aimed to develop an aetiological model specific to CSEM offending. In addition, it was aimed to:: develop the conceptual understanding of CSEM offending and offer guidance to professionals working with CSEM offenders. While the resulting model would not be able to differentiate between CSEM offenders at high and low risk of reoffending or offence escalation, and would not able to differentiate between factors predictive of reoffending behaviour, we hope that a greater understanding of the offending behaviour through comprehensive case formulation would guide future research into risk and needs areas of CSEM users.

**Model Development**

**Design**

The model was developed in five stages: (1) Literature review, (2) Thematic deduction from 20 Case Interviews: Analysis of emerging themes in participants’ life stories that led to their CSEM offending behaviour, (3) Professional consultation on the emerging model, (4) Case analysis, and (5) Information synthesis and model development. The first three stages informed the development of a theoretical framework and interim model that formed the basis for the development of the subsequent stages. As the focus of this paper is the final case formulation model resulting from Stage 5, only a summary of the development stages will be presented here.

**Overview of Stages 1-3: Theoretical Framework and Interim Model**

A comprehensive literature review identified potential markers in the aetiology of CSEM offending, including early experiences, relationships and sexual histories, substance use, offending details (modus operandi), and the circumstances precipitating and maintaining CSEM offending. A series of consultations about the CSEM model development and selection of suitable assessment tools were conducted with professionals across forensic and clinical practice and academia. Forums included: a research steering group meeting at West Mercia Police (UK), June 2013; a workshop at the Conference of the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers, Cardiff (Wales), September 2013; a research seminar at the University of Lincoln (UK), November 2013; a presentation and discussion at the Conference of the European Association of Psychology and Law, St Petersburg (Russia), June 2014; and at the Sex Offending Research and Practice Conference at the University of Lincoln (UK), April 2015.

Emergent from the literature review and professional consultations were four theoretical approaches that provided guidance in the analysis and development process. The *Risk, Need, and Responsivity principles* (RNR; Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990) posit that treatment services should be matched to the risk level of the offender, should identify, assess and target criminogenic needs, and should be presented in a way that corresponds with the ability and learning style of the individual client. The RNR principles thus highlighted the need to develop a CSEM-specific case formulation tool that can be used in an individual’s assessment, that informs about idiosyncratic risks and needs, and that may aid the systematic exploration of group-based variables predictive of reoffending. The *Transtheoretical Model of Change* (TTM; Prochaska & DiClemente, 2003) predicts that behavioural change follows a process in which clients move from a motivational position (Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, and Preparation Stage) to a place of Action, towards Maintenance, Coping with Relapse and Termination Stages. Within a TTM framework, a CSEM-specific case formulation model may be of use in terms of psycho-education, by aiding the individual in their understanding of their offending behaviour, and in their perceived control over their behaviour, thus aiding the offender in his action planning and desistance from offending behaviour.

Although specific to contact sex offending, the *Four Pre-Conditions of Abuse* (Finkelhor, 1984) outlines the interplay of individual (motivation and internal inhibitions) and environmental variables (external inhibitions and victim factors), and emphasises the role of self-management of sexually deviant interest (see Babchishin et al., 2015). Consideration of the individual within the broader situational context is of relevance for development of frameworks for assessment of risk and need among CSEM offenders (e.g. Glasgow, 2010; Mann, Hanson & Thornton, 2010). Finally, Seto (2013) explored the cross-over behaviour from CSEM viewing to contact sex offending. The *Motivation-Facilitation Model (M-F Model;* Seto, 2013*)* postulates that a sexual interest in children (i.e., motivation), combined with offence-facilitative factors related to the individual (e.g., low psychological barriers to offending behaviour) and situational factors (e.g., access to children) will move a CSEM offender towards contact sex offending. Again, this model points to the interplay of individual and situational factors to offending behaviour as potential treatment target areas, such as a focus on self-control alongside situational interventions.

Based on the identified information, a semi-structured interview protocol was designed. The individual interview sessions were between three and four hours in duration. The study was ethically approved by the academic lead institution.

 The study drew on a development sample of *n* = 20 male participants, recruited through community-based service providers they accessed to address their CSEM offending behaviour. For all but one participant, this was their first arrest for a CSEM-related charge (legally defined as possession, distribution, and/or production of indecent image material of children). One participant had a previous conviction for CSEM offending behaviour. None of the participants had received a conviction for a contact sex offence against a child. All participants acknowledged their offending behaviour and were attending group treatment in the community within either a probation treatment service (PT) or a voluntary treatment service (VT) at the time of data collection, or had previously completed treatment in one of those two settings.

Participant ages ranged between 24 and 68 years (*M =* 44.8years*; SD =* 13.49). All were of White British ethnicity. Participants were interviewed individually, either by the second or first author (or both) or by another member of the research team, supervised by the first and/or second author. With the exception of one research team member who worked for the PT at the time of data collection, none of the interviewers were related to either service providers; all PT participants were briefed on this potential conflict of interest and were able to choose their interview team.

Based on the first three stages of the model development, an interim aetiological model of pathways to CSEM offending (Figure 1) was developed. This model proposed how offenders' offence-related vulnerabilities (stemming from childhood and adolescent experiences, including offence-related paraphilias, maladaptive coping styles and social-emotional loneliness) interacted with their immediate circumstances in the lead up to offending. The model also proposed how these offence-related vulnerabilities and personal circumstances interacted with the Internet environment (accessibility, affordability, and anonymity; Cooper, 1998), resulting in their access to CSEM. Furthermore, this model included consideration of the longer term consequences of CSEM offending for the individual which, in turn, was proposed to exacerbate offence-related vulnerabilities (e.g., reinforced sexual fantasies or amplified sense of emotional loneliness) and negatively impact upon personal circumstances (e.g., impaired relationship or loss of employment), providing positive or negative reinforcement for future offending behaviour.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

**Case Analysis (Stage 4)**

The initially identified themes were internally validated on the development sample, in that cases for detailed theme analysis were randomly selected from the sample until data saturation was reached. This process resulted in the inclusion of interview protocols of 12 participants (age range: 29 – 68 years; *N* = 6 from the voluntary treatment programme, VT; and *N* = 6 from the community probation treatment programme, PT), which were analysed using the six steps for Thematic Analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). An essentialist/realist approach was employed, whereby language articulated the individual’s meaning and experience. Accordingly, a semantic approach to coding/theme development was adopted where themes would be identified through the surface meaning of the data. This inductive analysis involved the interpretation and attempt to theorise the patterns demonstrated across the data, considering their broader meanings and implications for the aetiological model of CSEM offending. Transcripts were analysed by the third author and reviewed by the fourth author. Codes and themes were generated by the third author and cross-validated by the first and fourth author; any disagreement was discussed until agreement was reached.

The thematic analysis identified seven superordinate themes that are, in combination, proposed to shape an individual’s offending pathway; namely, Developmental Context, Individual Propensities (risk-related and risk-protective) and Psychological Vulnerabilities, Personal Circumstances, Permission Giving Thoughts, Internet Environment and Behaviour, Evaluation of Consequences for the Individual, and Desistance. Themes are discussed in turn briefly, with reference to illustrative quotes.

**The Developmental Context.** This themecaptures key learning experiences from childhood and adolescence that participants considered as distal factors leading to offending behaviour. Two main subthemes underpinned the participants’ life stories. The first, a ***lack of connection with others and a vulnerability to socio-emotional breakdown***, represented emotional relationships and adverse events experienced with family and peers. For example, “*My connection with my family has never been… was never great”* (PT2), and *“I was not a particularly social person and I found it difficult to make friends”* (VT6). As a result of not feeling close to others, or being rejected or overlooked by others, participants often reported spending a lot of time on their own: *“I had a lot of free time… I was just kind of sitting around watching TV or playing computer games”* (VT2). It emerged that these participants experienced loneliness (physical and emotional) throughout their childhood and adolescence. Moreover, the inability to connect with others has remained with them throughout their lifespan, *“Even now I don’t have a close community of friends”* (VT1), and impacted also on their intimate and sexual relationships.

The second sub-theme ***the role of sexual needs within and separate from (and sometimes antithetical to) intimate relationships***represented early meanings and experiences of sex and relationships. Emotional closeness and connections to others were often sought through intimate relationships as adults but were influenced by earlier sexual abuse victimization and coercive relationships with adults during mid-adolescence: “*This bloke started talking to me… we ended up in the same bed that night… he hadn’t sought my consent”* (VT6). There were some reports of early exposure to, and regular use of, (legal) adult pornography: *“*[aged 11-16] *just pictures of sex… I would say an hour and a half for sex every day… it got more graphic”* (PT2). Continued use of pornography was influenced by circumstances, such as experiencing loneliness (e.g., *“It* *became a bad habit really, just having time on my own really”;* VT2) or when feeling low (e.g., *“I started to develop from quite an early age* [aged 14-15] *in terms of masturbation and the way it made me feel and if I’m feeling flat, that’s an immediate okay quick-fix”;* VT2). This introduces the notion that pornography can be used as a coping mechanism, particularly if there is a *lack of connection to others*. It also emerged that early exposure to pornography may have desensitised the individual to sexualised imagery. Overall, the participants reported a lack of connectedness, both emotionally and physically, resulting in prolonged unmet sexual and emotional needs.

**Individual Propensities and Psychological Vulnerabilities.** This second superordinate theme refers to the main motivational and facilitative psychological vulnerabilities that the participants thought were directly linked to them committing a CSEM offence. This superordinate theme is intrinsically linked to *The* *Developmental Context*: *“I behave [this way] because of the way I was brought up”* (VT5). Three main constructs underpin this theme – negative internal states, dysfunctional coping strategies, and a sexual interest in children.

***Negative internal states***represented intrinsic motivations of the participants and related identity. Many participants reported negative childhood experiences (explored in *The Developmental Context)* that left participants with low self-esteem (“*I kind of always thought that when people get to know me they won’t like me”,* VT2), a sense of the self as failure (“*I thought I was a failure… I’d got a family of my own but for some reason I thought I had made it go wrong because she* [wife] *was abusive”,* PT6) and feelings of perceived worthlessness*“(I was treated like scum* [by father]*. I just felt I wasn’t worth anything”,* PT1). These experiences contributed to increased reclusiveness, *lack of connection to others*, and offence-related coping strategies. A negative self-bias will influence the interpretation of life events, subsequently heightening and reinforcing such views. For example, from the ages of 16-22 years, VT2 reported “*literally had no friends… that’s when the offending started… I was so ashamed of being lonely and isolated”*.Participants spoke of feelings of emotional loneliness prior to Internet use and subsequent CSEM offending: *“I had no one to connect with… my Internet use tripled… to begin with it was gay dating sites, so making connections… then it would be pornography”* (PT2). Some participants also experienced a heightened need for sex before they began offending, *“We used to have sex once or twice a week, me and my wife, but you still feel sexed [sic] up where your libido wants to do something”* (VT4).

***Dysfunctional coping*** referred to strategies employed by participants when faced with negative circumstances and subsequent negative feelings. It is likely that the minimal connections during childhood and their social avoidanceinfluenced participants’ inability to talk to others about their experiences. Participants felt that their problems *“were mine and solely mine… I wouldn’t communicate with people”* (VT5). Consideration of these distal factors allows for the examination of how participants learnt to cope and deal with their experiences, and their likely influence on behaviour proximal to their offending:“*All I can remember at the time is just discomfort and the need to isolate as a solution to it rather than talk to people”* (VT5). Participants – particularly those who were exposed to pornography at an early age - spoke of using sex to cope with life stressors such as increased work pressure and relationship difficulties. Continued use of adult pornography caused some participants to feel that they had become desensitized and they experienced a sense of “*fatigue”* (VT6)whenever they were exposed to adult pornography. CSEM was experienced as “*a bit different”* (VT2). One participant reported using CSEM as a “distraction technique” in order to avoid negative feelings: *“My quick-fix around things that are generally making me feel sad or the life events that have happened is to absorb myself in something… I’m not worrying about other stuff”* (VT5). There were also reports of oppositional thinking and behaviour as a coping mechanism: *“Part of it is me being a good boy, so to speak, when I was younger… if you can do something wrong by yourself, ‘ooooh yeah, I’m doing it”* (VT4). For some participants, dysfunctional coping represented an offence-related vulnerability.

A notable feature of the participants in this study was that they were either at the end of treatment or had voluntarily opted into treatment. Perhaps linked to this, they were very open about their ***sexual interest in children***; “*I was still attracted to teenage boys”* (PT6). For some participants, the positive meanings attached to sexual experiences during childhood perpetuated the interest: “*I think it’s the psychological connection of looking at the images that I looked at to a happy time… 11-15 is the sort of age I would be interested in*” (PT2).

**The Internet Environment and Behaviour.** This themeexplores the role of the individual’s online environment as a situational facilitator to offending behaviour. Two constructs underpin this theme. ***The nature of the Internet*** rendered participants to experience a*“…whole new world”* (VT1) that seemed separate from reality and allowed some to become a different person when online: “*I feel like I’m looking at someone else talking about this”* (VT5) and “*it’s not until you come out and look back that you start realising, ‘oh my god’”* (VT1). There was reference to the Internet-world being like a *“bubble”* (VT1; VT4) and the perception that, whilst in this bubble, the external world did not exist: *“It sort of blocks out your feeling for actual living individuals… it’s a kind of reality-free zone”* (VT3). There were reports of detachment from the real-world whilst inside this bubble and that behaviour exhibited online would not be transferred to the real-world;

*In the real world… if I saw a girl on the street and I can see the way they act and I can see they are children and they’re a bit annoying… on the Internet and they’re posing and stuff then in my mind… that’s something I like looking at.* (VT2)

Two types of online behaviours held ***psychological meanings*** for participants; searching for CSEM material and chatting and sharing with other CSEM offenders. Some participants with pre-existing sexual interests in children described actively seeking CSEM. Others described being drawn accidentally into different areas of sexual interest (including CSEM) from initial Internet sexual content searches and experiences: *“I never at one point went online specifically to look at underage images”* (VT1). Nevertheless, following initial exposure to CSEM, participants reported engaging in the continuous viewing and downloading of material; *“When my days were empty, because I wasn’t successful with work and that, it was what I filled my days with, like trawling”* (VT6). In the same way that the participants reported they had become desensitized to adult pornography, this desensitization was also reported following exposure to CSEM because *“I wasn’t as repulsed… I became acclimatised”* (PT3). This is also reflected in their downloading behaviour, “*My downloading habits were getting more and more dangerous…as I downloaded more and more stuff it was—it became less of a shock”* (PT3). Some participants did not save images, for fear of being caught, but participants who saved images did so to contribute to their fantasies, “*I built up this fantasy world and these were—the ones that I would save contributed towards that”* (VT1)**.**

Some participants usedadult and CSEM chatrooms as a means of acquiring social connections, *“… a very key element of my offending… is not so much or not primarily or not exclusively the viewing of images, but the whole activity known as chat”* (VT3), whereby, “*I’d get what they* [other CSEM offenders] *recommended because the more you have, the more people—the more connections you get and the more chats you can have”* (PT2).This indicates that the psychological function of the Internet environment and behaviour online are crucial in the contextualisation of CSEM offending behaviour.

**Personal Circumstances.** This theme referred to the individual’s circumstances directly preceding their initial CSEM offending behaviour. It is evident that an individual’s interpretation and response to these proximalfactors will be influenced by their distalfactors (*The Developmental Context* and subsequent *Individual Propensities and Psychological Vulnerabilities)*, as well as being facilitated through the specific situational factors within their life at that time.For example, reference was made to a *lack of connection with others,* (“*I had no one to connect with… 8 miles in the middle of nowhere with no one to talk to and nothing to do”*, PT2), lack of sex (sex had *“been on a decreasing curve”,* VT3), which was sometimes part of a vicious circle of relationship detachment *(“It was like treading on eggshells… big arguments and misunderstanding… I’d stopped caring. My empathy was bugger all”,* PT3) which fed into increased CSEM offending behaviour, again leading to reduced sexual activity. Some participants perceived their lives to be “*going downhill*”(PT6) as it was often the case that their circumstances negatively affected their *internal states*; “*I felt like I had failed and there was no light for me ever* [following loss of employment]*”* (PT1);“*It became less intimate… made me feel physically unattractive”* (PT3). *Dysfunctional coping strategies* were employed by participants due to their learned avoidance of talking about problems. For example, “*I turned to drink. That was a way to cope with the pressure”* (PT2), “e*very night before I went to sleep I would be using pornography on the Internet. That started as a result of being less sexual within that relationship”* (VT5).Other sub-themes also emerged.

***Permission-Giving Thoughts***, “*things I was doing to convince myself”* (VT1), reduced inhibitions towards CSEM offending (e.g., as offence justification), and reinforced the participants to engage in continued CSEM offending behaviour. The perception of ***not doing any harm*** helped participants to convince themselves that their behaviour was no cause for concern. There were clear references to minimisation, denial and cognitive dissonance; *“It’s not really hurting anyone… I’ve come across them on a file sharing website where someone has just uploaded them for free, I’m not causing supply or demand”* (PT3); *“I couldn’t see what I was doing [was] wrong… I didn’t see that I was hurting anybody as it was just me and a computer… I was convincing myself it was okay”* (PT6); “*I’m not as bad as [people who share images] because I’m not part of the property as it’s already there… no one is getting hurt with what I’m doing”* (VT2). These ideas were reinforced by beliefs that the images of children were fabricated and contributed to continued offending behaviour, ***the images/children are not real***: *“The ones on the screen weren’t real people”* (PT2);“*The image had been created. It’s not a photographer taking a picture of a child”* (VT5).Furthermore, it was also the case that some of these cognitions were a consequence of *the Internet environment*,*“They’re kids* [in real life] *but when I was on the Internet I never really put the two and two together… it just felt like an image”* (VT2).This demonstrates the “bubble” nature of the Internet when distinguishing what is real and what is (perceived as) unreal, and how such perceptions can influence CSEM offending behaviour.

These offence-supportive attitudes were supported by participants’ belief that their behaviour online was anonymous and that they would not get caught, ***perceived anonymity***; *“I felt that I was sort of involved in a secret world”* (VT3). This links directly to the maintenance function of *The Nature of the Internet*, how a world separated from reality is created which facilitates the social and psychological processes associated with repetitive CSEMoffending behaviour.

**The Consequences for the Individual.** This theme represented what the participants experienced following their offending in response to their (negative) perception of and inability to cope with their *personal circumstances.* CSEM offending was identified as a ***Negative reinforcer* (***“I felt better within myself because I managed to calm myself down a little bit with the stress of work and family”* (PT6);*“it is an escape from everyday reality”* (VT3);*“because I became so numb and everything, it was the only way of getting a response out of myself”* (PT3))and as a ***positive reinforcer*** (*“it was the act of doing something illegal that was most exciting, I think”*(PT2); *“it was just there and use it for sexual gratification and masturbating”* (PT2); *“the more* [images] *you have… the more connections you get and the more chat you can have… it was a feeling of importance on my part”* (PT2)) in the offence cycle.

However, there were also ***negative consequences***. Some participants experienced a loss of control as a consequence of their offending behaviour, *“I was becoming more disorganised… I’d become dishevelled… I started losing time”* (PT3);*“It caused me to be late for work… you’d go into this oblivion where time just disappeared”* (VT1); or *“It’s a kind of mental addiction”* (VT3). Some participants continued with their behaviour even though they acknowledged that what they were doing was wrong, *“I deleted the whole collection, I changed my passwords… but then I went and registered another account”* (PT2); *“I always felt guilty afterwards… I did feel quite low a lot of the time… using indecent images definitely contributed to the way I felt when I didn’t actually blank it out”* (VT2). However, continued usage had a detrimental impact on *personal circumstances,* such as damaging relationships, *“My sole purpose was just going online… I had no interest in interaction with my wife or my kids”* (VT1). It also resulted in isolation, *“I started retreating… into my PC”* (PT3). Nevertheless, initially, the offending behaviour often improved *internal states* and participants’ perceptions of effectively dealing with their *personal circumstances*, and this over-shadowed the fact that their Internet use was becoming out of control and that their *personal circumstances* were not improving; *“I felt bad from what I was doing but then I did get some kind of pleasure out of it, and normally the good side of things would rule over the bad side of things”* (VT2). These experiences then created or reinforced existing *permission-giving thoughts* as a way that justified continued offending behaviour. Others avoided thinking about it to prevent *negative* *internal states*, *“I didn’t think about it because I knew it was wrong… I’d dwell on it too much and then I’d start sinking down”* (PT6); *“I think that’s how I kind of dealt with my offending over the years… just kind of blanked it out”* (VT2).

**Desistance.** This final theme related to factors that did or could have stopped, or temporarily interrupted, the offending behaviour prior to the participants’ arrest. Two subthemes emerged. Participants thought that having social contacts and ***increased social engagement*** would have improved *personal circumstances*;*“If I’d have moved home to my parents, the social aspect would have changed… I have school friends there, I had friends, my brother, my older brother”* (PT2). One participant reported that his offending behaviour stopped because; *“I started going out more and socialising more… having a bit more confidence in myself… I became more social and I was rarely doing things at home”* (VT2). Participants here described a relationship between social connections, *personal circumstances* and *individual propensities*, whereby lifestyle and *internal states* improve, thus preventing a retreat to the online world (and CSEM) as a means of coping. As P3 stated, “*if you’ve got more of a distraction then you’re not as focussed on them* [CSEM images]*”*, highlighting the importance of meaningful activities in improving *personal circumstances*.

Participants also spoke about their concern about seeking support to desist in the offending behaviour, such as ***confidential help and education***; “*If there was some sort of support that you could speak to confidentially then yeah, I’d have probably gone down that path”* (PT6).There was mention that ‘pop up’ warning messages (online windows that appear in response to previously-identified illegal content, sometimes generated by the police) were not necessarily helpful, *“I always used to think that pop ups on screen were viruses so I used to click out of them and just not go to that thing”* (PT2). Nevertheless, there was the suggestion of using link-pages on the Internet to advertise confidential help and to educate individuals that the images are abuse, not pornography, “*A link which would bring you through to the testimony of someone who was a victim”* (VT6) and *“Re-labelling everything as child abuse images makes me feel like you’ve done wrong and it makes me think about, ‘they are child abuse images, not child porn”* (VT4). This theme supports the notion that (at least this group of) CSEM offenders had engaged in self-management behaviour, but mainly focused on increasing external inhibitions rather than internal inhibitions to offending behaviour.

**Thematic Synthesis and Model Development (Stage 5)**

Based on the theoretical framework and detailed analysis of these data, the emergent themes were integrated into a conceptual model of the aetiology of CSEM offending (Figure 2). The resulting model proposed key areas contributing to an individual’s pathway to CSEM offending: (a) offence-related vulnerabilities (including developmentally determined factors, such as paraphilic disorders or socio-emotional dysfunctionality), (b) the individual’s personal and environmental offence context (e.g. marriage breaking down and access to specific types of Internet applications and access), and (c) the immediate and longer term consequences. The initial stage (offence-related vulnerabilities) consists of both ***motivational*** factors (resulting from the developmental context, such as a sexual interest in children) and ***facilitative*** internal states (e.g., permission-giving thoughts), and the model thus mirrors Seto’s (2013) distinction of facilitative and motivational variables, but additionally separates the facilitative factors into internal propensities (e.g., emotional detachment) and situational factors (e.g. the offense-enabling Internet environment), to reflect Finkelhor’s (1984) distinction of internal and external inhibitors. It is further conceptualised that the overcoming of external inhibitions is assisted through the facilitative nature of the online environment (e.g. ease of access to CSEM material and perceived anonymity and invulnerability to detection and sanction; e.g. Cooper, 1998) but may also refer to an individual’s purposeful manipulation of the offending context, such as the use of encryption software.

The Case Formulation Model of Pathways to CSEM Offending is the first model specifically proposed for individuals who have committed non-contact CSEM offending behaviour, with the aim being to assist professionals in their initial assessment, contributing - along with other information - to the treatment planning process in the absence of more fully-developed risk assessment tools. Themes identified in the proposed pathways model resonate with the existing literature; for example, identified CSEM offenders were more likely to report: physical and sexual abuse during childhood than a control population (Webb et al., 2007; Babchishin, Hanson & Herrmann, 2011); accounts of being bullied or prolonged difficulties with peer relationships (Craissati, Webb, & Keen, 2008); and difficult relationships with caregivers (Caple, 2008; Hanson & Harris, 2000).

Early exposure to pornography has been shown as a potential link to inappropriate sexual interests, sometimes including deviance-supportive attitudes that might include a primary sexual interest in children (Sheehan & Sullivan, 2010). In addition, a sexual interest in children has been identified as a major motivator for child sex offending (Mann et al., 2010), and is thus an offence-related risk factor and reinforcer of the offending behaviour. Early sexualisation (possibly through use of pornography that becomes integrated into a coping repertoire, e.g. Webb et al., 2007) is considered a trigger for later sexual interest in children (Babchishin et al., 2011;Sheehan & Sullivan, 2010) and this might warrant further exploration for the relevance of CSEM offenders specifically. Themes around adverse sexual experiences in adolescence and pornography in the current research reflected desensitisation to adult pornography (Quayle, Holland, Linehan, & Taylor, 2000), but also potential psychosocial consequences of disrupted relationships (Wollert, Waggoner, & Smith, 2009)leading to a decrease in self-esteem and low mood (Sheldon & Howitt, 2007). Furthermore, participants suggested that improvements in *personal circumstances* (such as increased social connections, meaningful activities, being away from the computer) decreased CSEM offending behaviour,highlighting the potential importance of targeting personal circumstances in terms of treatment needs of CSEM offenders and how offending might be prevented. Finally, the use of CSEM (and other forms of sexual offending) to address negative internal states (such as low self-esteem; McCarthy, 2010; a need for emotional closeness; Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009) as a dysfunctional coping strategy in response to negative life events (Quayle, Erooga, Wright, Taylor, & Harbinson, 2006), including social withdrawal (Wollert et al., 2009) and substance use (Sheldon & Howitt, 2007), is also well-established in the literature.

CSEM offenders’ cognitive conceptualisation of the offending context seems to play a critical role in the reported inhibitions towards offending behaviour. These cognitions can be both initiating and maintaining factors of the offending behaviour, and thus are developed and reinforced as a consequence of the offending behaviour*.* The accounts from *Permission Giving Thoughts* reveal that CSEM offenders’ offense-supportive attitudes might be different to those of child sex offenders (e.g., Henry, Mandeville-Norden, Hayes, & Egan, 2010; Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, & Boer, 2014). For example, it might be that CSEM offenders justify the behaviour following initial (accidental) access to the material (such as, “Images are not harmful to children and are a commodity of the Internet.”). It might be that justification for the offending behaviour developed in response to perceived gratification following CSEM offending and to the perceived absence of surveillance/perceived anonymity of the Internet (Taylor & Quayle, 2008).Continued online engagement further conditioned gratification and continued to trigger offence-supportive cognitions, subsequently intensifying behaviour (Taylor & Quayle, 2003) and resulting in a sense that the individual had lost control of their Internet (and CSEM) use (Davis, 2001). In reviewing the literature, the significant impact of sexual arousal on permission-giving thoughts became evident. Sexual arousal had been identified earlier in this paper as a precipitating factor to the offending behaviour (*Personal Situation)*. Pullman, Stephens, and Seto (2016) had also referred to sexual arousal as a state facilitator of sex offending behaviour. Although there is limited research on the arousal profiles of CSEM offenders, there is a body of research emerging on the impact of sexual arousal on decision-making in non-offending participants, which thus may interact with the prevalence of permission-giving thoughts (see Bartels, 2015). Research has shown sexually aroused males and females to be more likely to report an interest in unusual sexual behaviours (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Loewenstein, Nagin, & Paternoster, 1997; Imhoff & Schmidt, 2014) and for sexually aroused males and females to show greater willingness to engage in other types of risky behaviours (e.g., gambling; Skakoon-Sparling & Cramer, 2014; Skakoon-Sparling, Cramer, & Shuper, 2016) and to make worse decisions during cybersex (Laier, Pawlikowski, & Brand, 2014). Bouffard and Miller (2014) found that sexually aroused males were more likely to self-report sexually coercive behaviours and to overestimate a female’s sexual interest. It is thus important to acknowledge the impact of sexual arousal on offence-related decision-making. Finally, findings emerging in the theme of *The Consequences for the Individual* are reflected in other CSEM research, the themes of sexual gratification and escaping reality (Caple, 2008; Quayle & Taylor, 2005).This may enhance the repeated CSEM engagement by participants if the consequence(s) were perceived as gratifying (in terms of positive or negative reinforcement; Wetterneck, Burgess, Short, Smith, & Cervantes, 2012), regardless of whether the individual acknowledged that their behaviour was wrong (Taylor & Quayle, 2006). Furthermore, previous research suggesting an element of a loss of control from continued Internet use is supported (Davis, 2001):participants continued their behaviour without thought for future consequences (Middleton et al., 2006) or the (negative) effects it had on their actual reality (such as decreases in social engagement; Taylor & Quayle, 2003).

**Limitations**

 There are some limitations concerning the heterogeneity of participants’ point within judicial process and variability in the interviewing situation. Participants were at different stages within the criminal justice system (the PT sample had received their conviction whereas the VT sample had not), and interview situations varied between participants, in terms of length, content, and interviewer. In Seto et al.’s (2010)study, the offenders’ situations and the experience of the interviewers were found to be potential biases to the findings, which is likely to also be reflected in the current study, especially with regards to the member of the interviewing team who worked for one of the recruitment locations at the time of data collection.

A second issue is the length of the assessment, which may have caused a self-selection effect in the research (e.g., being prepared to take part in a lengthy process may be associated with factors such remorse and pro-social beliefs). Thus, it is vital for this study to be developed further and validated on samples with wider representation, such as part of a group treatment trials.

Nevertheless, the study was intended to be wide-ranging in the information it elicited (from childhood through to current personal circumstances and offending behaviour) and multi-faceted in the themes it explored (attachments and relationships, sexual and social issues functioning) and was in many respects led by the narratives of participants’ pathways to offending that the participants were encouraged to share. Several participants commented that they had not previously made connections between some of these interacting influences on their lives and on their pathways to offending.

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

The current study has attempted to make sense of a comprehensive set of interviews with acknowledged CSEM offenders by utilising existing theory and empirical knowledge of CSEM offending. A potential preliminary model of pathways to specifically CSEM offending is proposed and might provide a useful framework for future research as well as providing an aid to practice-based case formulation including treatment planning and risk management in conjunction with other sources of information, such as the CPORT for CSEM offenders with a criminal history. The resulting model provides a CSEM-specific application of the existing theoretical and empirical work on sex-offending pathways, in an attempt to integrate this offending population within the theoretical context.

The proposed CSEM Pathways Model may be potentially helpful for assessing CSEM offenders: (a) in developing their own understanding of their risks and treatment needs, and (b) as a useful framework to help them develop their own solutions to desistance, relapse prevention, and social reintegration. Furthermore, the CSEM Pathways Model might also be a useful pre-assessment tool for standardised group intervention programmes, in order to focus group members differentially to the content of the programme.

The model, it is suggested, is a step towards the empirical exploration of exclusive CSEM offenders (fantasy-driven offenders) and to aligning them within the existing theoretical context. Participants’ narratives, and consideration of the aetiological theories of contact sex offending applied to CSEM offenders, suggest that individual psychopathology alone does not account for the commission of CSEM offending. Instead, there is interaction between the individual’s psychopathology (*Individual Propensities and Psychological Vulnerabilities,* resulting from their *developmental context)* and their proximal environment (*Personal Circumstances)* which, when coupled with *the Internet Environment*, increases the risk of CSEM commission and in some cases decreases engagement with the real world. The participants’ narratives demonstrated the importance of considering these situational factors (i.e., the unique environment the Internet creates; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006) within the aetiology of CSEM offending, providing individuals presenting with offence-related vulnerabilities the opportunity to commit an online offence (Babchishin et al., 2015; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Seto, 2013). However, at this point, the model cannot be used as a risk-assessment tool. Rather, it is aimed at increasing understanding of an individual’s unique pathway to their offending behaviour. Further research is needed to validate the identified themes and potentially link them with reoffending behaviour.

The value of a structured approach to clinical case formulations for CSEM offenders is evident given that (a) no explicit risk factors have yet been empirically identified and (b) CSEM offending arises at the intersection of developmentally acquired offence-related propensities (as well as personal strengths / risk protective factors) and complex situational factors (both personal and Internet-related). In summary, we hope that the proposed pathways model offers an approach to CSEM formulation and case management that is:

***Comprehensive*** in covering (a) developmental / aetiological issues, (b) the emergence of offence-related propensities (such as sexual deviance, antisociality and socio-emotional dysfunctionality), (c) the emergence of protective or desistence-enhancing propensities (such as social responsibility, empathy for others, good problem solving abilities), (d) personal situational factors (such as relationships, family, friends, work changes) and (e) wider (Internet-related) systemic factors, and

***Collaborative*** in that it enables working with the CSEM offender in a process of shared enquiry and analysis, in which their own goals and ideas are given prominence. The model focuses on the establishment of functional links between the *past* (e.g., attachment and early sexual experiences), *present* (including offending circumstances and modus operandi) and *future* (aspirations and plans), and is therefore in line with models related to contact sex offending.

**Figures**



Figure 1: Interim Aetiological Model of Pathways to CSEM Offending

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Figure 2: Case Formulation Model of Pathways to CSEM Offending

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