

## MOTIVATIONS FOR VIEWING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL

Submitted by the Child Witness Institute

KEY CONCEPTS	
Child pornography	Sexual exploitation of children
Child sexual exploitation material	Sex offending
Offence motivations	Offender typology
Cognitive distortions	

This is a summary of research conducted with offenders to identify their motivations for viewing child sexual exploitation materials based on the following article:

Hannah L. Merdian, Nick Wilson, Jo Thakker, Cate Curtis, Doug P. Boer. 2013. "So why did you do it?": Explanations provided by Child Pornography Offenders. **Sexual Offender Treatment**. 8:1.

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is on men who have engaged in the viewing, possession, distribution or trading of online child sexual exploitation material (CSAM), also known as child pornography. Based on existing child pornography offenders, Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, and Boer (2011) developed a conceptual classification model for the assessment of child protection offenders in which they identified offence motivation as a distinguishing factor in the assessment process. Understanding an offender's motive can provide insight into the needs that they intend to meet with their behaviour and what child pornography means to them.

In interviews conducted with convicted child pornography offenders, Taylor and Quayle (2003) identified 6 principal functions of child pornographic material:

- sexual arousal
- satisfaction from the actual collection process rather than the content
- to foster online social contacts with other adults interested in CSAM
- to escape real life problems
- saw it as a form of "therapy" that allowed them to explore their sexual preferences but prevented them from progressing to contact child abuse
- the internet facilitated access to children and made endless links available for a wide variety of material.

Subsequently additional motivations have been identified: accidental access, curiosity, addiction to pornographic material, indiscriminate sexual interests, internet addiction, interest in collecting activities. Based on the studies, child pornography offenders display a wide variety of motivations and some may have more than one explanation for their behaviour. The following summary of functions have been highlighted in literature:

- functions as online currency (for credibility as well as trading material)
- facilitates social relationships is a means of escaping from the real world
- is expression of a risk-taking lifestyle
- is expression of a general criminal lifestyle
- desensitises society in general
- serves sexual gratification
- serves sexual exploration and experimentation
- serves as therapy

- is an interactive tool in the victim grooming process
- serves as a template for real-life sexual abuse
- functions as means for blackmailing a victim to keep as trophy/momentum of the abuse.

A shortcoming of this research is that the information is drawn from interviews with offenders themselves. This is problematic because the offenders' responses may be biased and, secondly, an interview is an interactive exchange between the offender and interviewer and the outcomes are dependent on the interviewer's prompting and note-taking, as well as the interviewee's openness and verbal fluency.

The current research project was aimed at addressing these limitations and deducing offenders' potential motives from anonymous accounts. The central research question of this study was "Why do you think you started viewing child pornography?". Data for the study was collected via an anonymous computer survey.

The main aim of the study was to deduce the various motivations for child pornography offending based on short narratives provided by the offenders. Three research hypotheses were identified from the earlier literature:

- As a group, offenders present a range of reasons for their child pornography offending, with at least one of whom being related to sexual satisfaction.
- As individuals, at least some of the offenders present more than one explanation for their offending.
- Systematic relationships between offence motivation and risk-related constructs can be identified.

Participants in the study were over the age of 18, were male and were recruited from both community sex offender treatment centres and prison settings throughout New Zealand.

## RESULTS

Three main themes emerged during the analysis of the offenders' responses:

- Emotional explanations
- Sexual explanations
- Explanations referring to initial triggers of the behaviour.

### *Initial trigger*

Within this category, participants explained why they had initially viewed CP but failed to report what motivated them to continue:

- accidental exposure ("found it by accident when looking for other porn", "by pure chance accessed a site which contain [sic] it")
- curiosity ("I was curious and just wanted to have a look").

### *Sexual explanation*

Two subthemes were identified:

- Sexual identity
  - Child pornography seemed to be a replacement for an adequate sexual object, not limited to the depicted content ("Being sexually impotent lead me to search out new means of attaining an erection, like most visual subjects I viewed this did not help me at all")
  - For some, child pornography was based specifically on the lack of an appropriate adult sex partner: "Lack of sexual experience and the belief that children because of their own lack of experience wouldn't reject me."

- For the majority of offenders child pornography consumption was based on their sexual attraction to minors: "my sexual attraction was only towards children at the time."
- Progression from legal material
  - For some, their child pornography offending appeared to be the result of prolonged exposure and potential desensitisation to legal pornography. Some participants provided fairly detailed responses of their journey: "the gradual escalation from normal adult material to more extreme material(dehumanising) after first accessing the internet, that I used it to cope with emotional and stressful situations. Followed by viewing younger and younger woman, girls and preteen, i.e. child modeling [sic] and cartoons showing extreme adult and other abusive subject matter."

*Emotional explanation*

- Detached/ passive emotions
  - One participant described how his financial need to support his drug usage overpowered any reflective thoughts on the material he was dealing with.
- Positive emotions
  - Viewing child pornography was seen as a source of relief and a means to escape negativity, resulting from depression, anxiety or stress, sexual frustration and emotional drought ("loneliness, wish to be loved.").
  - For others, the positive side of child pornography was in the shock-value of the depicted material ("long story but i needed a distraction and nothing else worked cos I was not too bothered about it i.e. booze. CP was, in my view, very disturbing and it acted as the best distraction [sic]").
  - For others, the viewing process went beyond the relief aspect, triggering feelings of "being in control" (" Shocked initially but then was intrigued enough to go back. I think I carried on as a way to control some positive/ exciting feelings in a world that I felt I was drowning in due to stress from relationships, work, parenting [sic] etc. essentially I wasnt [sic] coping and this was a means to receive a positive feeling I could control.")
  - The feeling of being in control or being powerful was crucial to the experience of many offenders. Some offenders explicitly referred to their own sexual abuse story ("it made me feel good to see it happen to someone else it reminded me on how it felt when it was hapaning to me" [sic]).
  - For others, the control-aspect seemed to refer to their perceived superiority towards censorship online ("Because I'd always had an interest and because it was forbidden, yet easy to find;" "Confusion around my sexuality and feelings of hate."

Offenders provided a variety of motivations for their child pornography offending, only one of whom explicitly referred to sexual attraction to minors.