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Hidden Worlds: How Child Sexual Abuse Offenders Portray Themselves in Clear-Web Paedophile Community Interactions and Dark-Web Survey Responses

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Abstract

The protection of children from sexual abuse is of paramount importance to society, and the threat of this abuse has only grown in recent years. Those who pose this threat, child sex offenders, have been found to congregate in online communities where they can trade abusive material and interact with each other. Despite concerns raised in research about the harmful influence of these communities on their members, they remain greatly understudied. The present article aims to bring to light a phenomenon taking place in these communities: how the offenders present their identities, behaviors, and motivations. Two complementary datasets were approached from a computer-mediated discourse and thematic analysis perspective, which were sourced from (1) clear-web offender-to-offender interactions in private social media chats, and (2) offenders responding to a survey on the dark-web. The results show that there was diversity in how offenders portrayed themselves to others, with predominantly positive self-presentations in the private chats and many negative self-presentations in the survey responses. Offenders rationalized and defended their criminal behaviors, dehumanizing victims and transferring blame away from themselves. They also disclosed primarily sexual motivations for offending, but a range of motivations were cited. Identity construction differed substantially between the two datasets, potentially indicating that offenders tailor how they present their paedophilia to their audience.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, online communities, motivations, social group identity construction, ideology

The present study investigates Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) offenders on the online platforms they populate. It uses data from both clear and dark-web sources to examine how these offenders present themselves and their actions. Interestingly, in this instance the clear-web data involves private chat interactions between like-minded paedophiles, while the dark-web data is the more public of the two, as it originated from a survey eliciting responses from offenders to an audience of researchers (with the results subsequently being published more widely). The two datasets are explored to provide a novel overview of how CSA-offenders present their identities in private and more public environments to their peers or outsiders, respectively.

In this digital age, the protection of children online from sexual abuse and exploitation is “one of the most urgent and defining issues of our generation” (WeProtect Global Alliance,

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2021, p. 8). However, child sexual abuse is often obscured from view (NSPCC, 2024). Furthermore, online platforms, where paedophiles can congregate and interact with one another, facilitate the rampant trading of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). This concern was raised, for instance, in a Europol (2024) report that highlighted the dangers posed by CSAM-trading communities. It is a growing problem, worsening as technological advancements have led to fresh challenges for parents, educators, law enforcement, and child-protection organizations alike. The lack of sufficient safety mechanisms online has dramatically increased the risks children are faced with when navigating the internet (Soloveva et al., 2023). More recently, generative AI and other technological advancements are further broadening the online landscape of possible harms (Insoll, Soloveva, et al., 2024; Europol, 2024).

It is practically impossible to accurately determine the true prevalence of CSA due to many factors including issues of underreporting, under-prosecution, and stigma. However, it is well established that this is a global issue, posing a significant threat of harm to children which necessitates addressing. In 2020 the UK National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 21 million reports of suspected online CSA and exploitation to their "CyberTipline" – a figure which rose to 36 million in 2023 (NCMEC, 2023).

Research into CSA thus far has predominantly studied online grooming (e.g. Chiang and Grant, 2018; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2016; 2023); examined offender typologies or characteristics (e.g. Merdian et al., 2018); made use of post-arrest offender interviews or case files (e.g. Wortley et al., 2024); and looked at the popularity of encryption technologies and anonymity tools (e.g. Chopin et al., 2022). Paedophile communities and the platforms they thrive on have remained comparatively understudied, leading to gaps in understanding how these offenders think and behave in their own private spaces when surrounded by like-minded individuals. Indeed, research has called for new studies using non-clinical and non-correctional CSAM-offender datasets (see Eke et al., 2011; Seto et al., 2011).

The Finnish child-protection NGO Suojellaan Lapsia [Protect Children], whom this research is a collaboration with, undertook a project called "ReDirection" studying anonymous CSAM-offenders active on the dark-web to develop perpetrator-prevention measures and reduce the threat of sexual violence towards children (see Insoll, Soloveva, et al., 2024). Analyzing these undetected offenders was innovative considering that most prior research has only approached detected offenders. This is significant because it is possible that undetected offenders differ in their behaviors from detected offenders (Neutze et al., 2012), and that law enforcement may only be detecting those who are the least dangerous (Martellozzo, 2015).

Overall, communities facilitating offender-to-offender interactions have been largely obscured from public focus and academic consideration, despite the threat they pose (Chiang, 2020). Due to their supportive (and even potentially radicalizing) environment, paedophile communities are central to understanding online CSA and offender pathways (Huikuri, 2022). Moreover, there is a notable dearth of studies analyzing the language these offenders use considering the written-word medium of this data type (Chiang, 2025). Most research into online paedophile communities has come from criminology and psychology disciplines, with some recent forays from a linguistic perspective (e.g. Luchjenbroers and Aldridge-Waddon,

2011; Chiang, 2018; Grant and MacLeod, 2020). One aspect that has been especially neglected in this field, likely due to difficulties in accessing datasets, is social media data. Clear-web paedophile communities have rarely been examined at all despite warnings from Europol (2016) that they are used nefariously by offenders and should not be disregarded.

The overarching aim of this research is to examine the ways in which suspected CSA/CSAM-offenders present themselves to others – whether to like-minded community members privately or more publicly to (potentially unsympathetic) outsiders. Additionally, it intends to examine the potential effects of the clear and dark-web contexts on this identity presentation. Thus, the following research questions (RQs) were devised to investigate the "who" (who they present themselves as), the "how" (how they portray and rationalize what they do), and the "why" (what motivations they present to justify what they do):

RQ 1.) How do suspected child sex offenders/CSAM-offenders construct their social group identities on the clear and dark-web?
RQ 2.) How do these offenders portray and rationalize their criminal behaviors?
RQ 3.) What motivations do these offenders present as driving their criminal behaviors?

Addressing these questions is important to break new ground in understanding CSA-offender identity construction and attitudes. By forming a better understanding of the rhetoric taking place in these communities and the behaviors of individuals seeking out CSAM, this article can contribute towards improvements in both prevention and rehabilitation efforts for offenders – thus, reducing potential harms to children and providing a novel insight into these hidden worlds.

Regarding terminology, the terms *paedophile* and (suspected) *child sex offender* are used interchangeably in this article. Many members of the online communities in this study referred to themselves as *paedophiles*, regardless of specific victim-age preferences. Furthermore, the term *offender* is adopted as it has been used in academic research on datasets like those in the present study to refer to these individuals in terms of their legal status (Chiang, 2018). The term *CSAM* is used here over alternatives like *child pornography* or *indecent images of children* because it more accurately refers to the abusive, non-consensual aspect of this media.

Offender Communities

Child sex offenders congregate in online communities where they can trade CSAM, share advice on offending, discuss security measures/technologies, support-one another, and espouse their beliefs on paedophilia. Research has examined where these communities crop up on the dark-web (e.g. Chiang, 2018; Owens et al., 2023) and on the clear-web via public websites/forums (e.g. Holt et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2022). In recent times, the connectivity features of many instant messaging social media sites have allowed them to become offending hubs (Insoll, Soloveva, et al., 2024).

The prevalence of these online communities is also difficult to measure, given that their illegality necessitates secrecy, but some studies have observed worryingly high participation rates amongst offenders. Seto et al. (2010) found that 79% of their offender

sample during police interviews claimed to have participated in online offender communities. Similarly, an FBI dataset revealed that 71% of their offender sample had been in contact with "likeminded individuals" (Shelton et al., 2016, p. 19). Protect Children themselves reported that 46% of respondents to a ReDirection survey on the dark-web claimed to be in contact with other offenders, as well as 19% asserting this contact was as often as weekly (Insoll et al., 2021). One possible reason for this prevalence is that many paedophiles may find the community environment and sense of belonging to be highly attractive (O'Halloran and Quayle, 2010), providing emotional support to likely already isolated individuals (Holt et al., 2020).

Huikuri and Insoll (2022) observed that community membership helped offenders accept their paedophilia – highlighting the dangers of offense-supportive beliefs and the changing self-perceptions of members. The rationalizations offenders discuss concerning CSA can allow them to assuage feelings of guilt through cognitive distortions (Whittle et al., 2015). Offenders themselves disclose this, with 35% of one survey sample reporting that they had been affected by the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors of other CSAM-offenders online (Insoll et al., 2021). Furthermore, research has examined the negative self-perceptions of paedophiles in online forums/message boards (see Jenkins, 2001; Stevens and Wood, 2019), revealing mixed attitudes: some criticized themselves and their actions, while others rushed to justify and defend.

Due to their societal ostracization, paedophiles may seek to present a flattering, cultivated image to wider audiences outside of their like-minded online communities. Public pro-paedophilia advocacy sites are a medium that facilitates this, enabling members on the clear-web to present themselves positively and convey arguments for paedophilia that center around personal bonds, emotions, or relationships, rather than abuse (Benneworth, 2006). In this effort, offenders may make justifications, proposing for example that CSA is actually beneficial to children, or take pains to distinguish between purportedly dangerous *child molesters* and self-identified *child-lovers* (Huikuri and Insoll, 2022). Nielsen et al. (2022), after studying one such advocacy site (the "Virtuous Paedophile" forum), claimed that there is a difference between the justifications for CSA used in this forum and those used in communities that encourage contact CSA. Other studies have also noted this apparent disparity (see Holt et al., 2020), with Luchjenbroers and Aldridge-Waddon (2011) finding evidence that such flattering descriptions of paedophilia were not used by offenders in unmonitored interactions where they felt less compelled to police their language or perform for wider society.

Furthermore, Grant and MacLeod (2020) noticed in some online paedophile communities that violence in CSA is condemned and separate from CSAM, where abuse is presented as consensual because offenders purport themselves as moral individuals. These types of offenders put substantial effort into identity work that crafts a presentation of themselves as caring and non-threatening – including othering abusers they see as worse than themselves. The results of these studies elicit questions this article aims to address about how offenders present themselves to different (favorable and unfavorable) audiences, how they view and portray their illegal behaviors, and how they rationalize CSA in these online communities.

Materials and Methods

Data

Two complementary datasets are utilized in this study: one consisting of private offender-to-offender chatlogs from the clear-web, and the other consisting of responses to a single question in a dark-web CSAM-offender survey. The former dataset was shared by UK-based law enforcement between 2020 and 2022 for the purposes of research, and the latter was derived from the results of a ReDirection survey titled "Help us to help you" by the Finnish NGO Protect Children carried out in 2021-2024. These two datasets were chosen for their ability to provide rare insights into under-researched and hard-to-access contexts, as well as because of their content regarding offender identity and beliefs.

Clear-Web Chatlog Data

The clear-web data comprises private communications between offenders in online paedophile communities, including 1-2-1 direct messaging chatlogs and multi-party group-chats. After redaction to anonymize the dataset, the 97 chatlogs totaled 103,850 words (or 18,329 messages) and 1,688 suspected offenders were recorded as participating. The majority of these chatlogs were 1-2-1 interactions (88 files and c. 15,000 messages), along with some group-chats (9 files and c. 3,000 messages), from social media messaging apps – many of which featured encryption, video-calling tools, and file-sharing functions. The largest proportion of the dataset (78% of the total word count) came from the encrypted, instant messaging social media app Kik Messenger, with the remainder sourced from GigaTribe, WhatsApp, Skype, and an undisclosed platform. These chats between offenders seeking out CSAM and engaging with the online paedophile community took place between 2013 and 2020.

Dark-Web Survey Data

The dark-web data was collected by Protect Children via a public anonymous survey consisting of 43 single-select, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions available in 21 languages that asked respondents about their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings related to their usage of CSAM. The survey was displayed on prominent dark-web search engines (Ahmia.fi, OnionLand, and Onion Search) when someone sought out CSAM using any of the 1,265 associated keywords that were devised considering information provided by Finnish and international law enforcement agencies, as well as the Ahmia.fi search engine itself. Participants were informed that by answering the survey they gave their consent to participate in the study and, after completion, they were directed to resources offering help to stop seeking out CSAM. In the present study, the survey question most relevant (and thus included here) was Question 40 which asked, "How would you describe yourself?", followed by the open-ended answer prompt "I am…". This elicited c. 2,100 written responses in English, which were then utilized as the dark-web dataset for this analysis.

No biographical metadata about the offenders was available for either dataset as the dark-web survey was anonymous and no metadata was supplied by law enforcement providing the clear-web chatlogs.

Framework and Procedure

These two datasets were examined with respect to the three research questions of this study, evaluating how offenders presented themselves, their actions, and their motivations. A qualitative discourse analysis approach was taken employing Herring's (2004; 2013) Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). This methodological toolkit also acts as a set of theoretical lenses to interpret and comment on the results of empirical analysis alongside one or more language domains (in the present study: the Social Behavior and Meaning domains). Social Behavior relates to social dynamics, power, influence, and identity; while the Meaning domain concerns what is intended by a speaker and what is accomplished through language (Herring, 2004). Additionally, language-based thematic analysis was drawn upon when no discourse analytic frameworks were readily available, i.e., for capturing motivations in the chatlog data (RQ3).

As regards RQ1, the analysis of identity (presentation of self and other) is premised on an understanding of it being a socially and interactionally constructed, fluid practice (see Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Identity construction is context shaping and context shaped. It is "a phenomenon best classified at the level of social behavior, but it must be kept in mind that the identities projected by individuals are produced with the resources available to them" (Grant and McLeod, 2020, p. 37). Moreover, identity construction is always relational – it is influenced by those we construct it for or with (see De Fina et al., 2011). For instance, relevant to the present study, offenders' self-presentation work is likely to vary according to whether it takes place in clear or dark-web platforms, in large or small groups with varying social ties and perceived levels of affinity, etc. In approaching this social group identity, propaganda techniques were operationalized into a coding book in the qualitative analysis software NVivo using Da San Martino et al's. (2019) list of propaganda techniques (see Appendix A).

As for RQ2, rationalizations were examined via the underpinning concept of ideology. This article draws on Van Dijk's (2006) work, specifically the differentiation between the ideologies a group can possess, that is, "social representations that define the social identity of a group" or its "shared beliefs about its fundamental conditions and ways of existence" (2006:116), and the attitudes of a group towards things, which are "controlled and organized" (2006, p.123) by underlying ideologies. Crucially, as Van Dijk (2006, p. 115) argues, these attitudes and ideologies are acquired, expressed, and reproduced "largely by text or talk". These textual practices often entail the use of legitimation techniques. In this study, these were operationalized using van Leeuwen's (2007; 2008) legitimation framework (see Appendix B).

Prior to commencement of the data analysis, ethical approval was obtained from the Swansea University Research and Integrity Board to analyze the clear-web dataset and The Board of Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children (ry.) for the dark-web dataset (in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects). Furthermore, considerations were made to store and handle these sensitive datasets securely, while researcher wellbeing was supported by following recommendations proposed in prior research (e.g. Coles and Mudaly, 2010; Duran and Woodhams, 2022; Lorenzo-Dus, 2023). All identifying information was manually redacted from the data (e.g., locations, names, usernames), as were any media file names and search terms (square-brackets are used to

indicate redaction in data examples, e.g. "[…]"). Data analysis then began, investigating areas identified by the research questions in the offenders' survey answers and private chats. The clear-web data was examined by two of the study's authors and the dark-web data was examined by four of the study's authors (the first author was involved in coding of both datasets). Differences in coding were resolved through discussion by the research team to ensure consistency.

Results

This section begins by investigating the first research question of how offenders present themselves – discussing social group identity construction practices across the two datasets. The next sub-section broaches the second research question and examines how offenders portrayed their criminal behaviors, providing rationalizations for their actions. Finally, the last sub-section focuses on the third research question concerning how the offenders presented their motivations for their paedophilia, sometimes to justify it.

Social Group Identity Construction: Presenting Themselves

Offenders in these different online contexts constructed the following identity claims that will be explored in this section to address RQ1: claims to paedophilia, normalizing the paedophile group identity, presenting themselves as superior, presenting themselves negatively, and denials of paedophilia.

Claims to Paedophilia

In their response to Question 40 of the dark-web survey, beginning with the answer prompt "I am…", an offender asked, "Is this to describe myself to someone else or to myself?" – demonstrating an awareness that they would tailor their description of themselves dependent on their target audience. This is the case in all identity performance from a relational perspective, as discussed earlier. The offenders in these datasets were overall presenting themselves as belonging to a social group: paedophiles (despite some denials that will be discussed shortly). Within the dark-web survey answers this often entailed explicitly calling themselves this identifier: e.g. "a very active padophile", "a gay pedophile", or "a raging paedophile". Implicit identifiers were also used, such as claiming sexually activity with children (e.g. "[I am] a father of 3 children (2 boys 1 girl) aged 5, 8 and 12. Who I am sexually active with").

In the clear-web chatlogs, offenders also explicitly adopted the paedophile identifier, asserting their sexual interests in children (n=2,080 instances, containing 1,988 sexual likes and 92 sexual dislikes). In fact, the most common sexual preference asserted (n=333 out of the 2,080 total) was getting sexual gratification from using/seeing/reading/being called the term *paedophile* and variations upon this (e.g. "pedo"). They employed the term (or abbreviations and slang for it) as a qualifying adjective (e.g. "ped arse", "pdo mind", and "Sweet Pedo dreams"), claiming to become aroused "every time u tell or write The Word". They were purportedly gaining sexual gratification from asserting their social identity as paedophiles amongst other like-minded offenders in the community. Other sexual interests expressed involved offenders fetishizing children's bodies (n=299) and children's innocence (n=12), as

well as expressing preferences concerning the age (*n*=240) and gender (*n*=97) of child-victims. Even when expressing their sexual dislikes (*n*=92 instances), offenders made claims to the social identity of being a paedophile by suggesting they were unable to get sexual gratification from non-abusive (*n*=20) or non-violent (*n*=16) sexual acts/media – that paedophilia was their only preference.

Normalization of the Paedophile Group Identity

Offenders in both datasets engaged in positive presentations of self, whereby they normalized their paedophile identity through destigmatization. One common means to do so in the clear-web chatlogs was through assertions like "We are proud peds, bro . Always". This aligned with the survey respondents who demonstrated a lack of remorse for their paedophilia (e.g. "i like watching iligal stuff and i dont fell bad about it" and "[I am] a good person who just likes watching kid pornography"). Offenders used propaganda techniques (Da San Martino et al., 2019), predominantly *repetition* (37% of all propaganda techniques used) and *flag-waving* (16%), when conveying these sentiments. In the clear-web chats, one individual exclaims that "we are of a rare breed" to another – employing the propaganda technique of *flag waving*, where a person plays on a strong sense of community/loyalty to a group to justify or promote an action (in this case, CSA).

Another propaganda technique used was *thought-terminating/cliché* (4%), where words/phrases are used to discourage critical thought, e.g. "It feels so natural". Similarly, in the dark-web data, offenders made claims to normalcy to terminate critical debate about themselves: e.g. saying they are a "normal human being", and paedophilia is "more common than you'd think". The latter of these examples also exemplifies the *bandwagon* (3%) propaganda technique (seeking to persuade others to take an action/join in because others/the majority are), which appeared occasionally in the clear-web chatlogs (e.g. "There's more people at it than people realize"). Grant and MacLeod (2020, p. 136) noted that "normalization of the abusive relationship is very common" in these types of communities. Furthermore, in the clear-web communities some portrayed themselves as persecuted or wrongly vilified, claiming that the community offered a life "free of confrontations" unlike wider society. This exemplifies the propaganda technique of *appealing to existing fears or prejudices* to persuade others (9%).

Presenting Superiority

Many offenders in these datasets bragged about their criminality, claiming superiority over others (whether over non-paedophiles or other offenders they viewed as worse/lesser). In their survey answers, some bragged about their prolificacy (e.g. "[I am] A happily married, successful pedophile"), while some openly boasted about their superiority in other aspects: claiming to be "an individual with officially recorded IQ of above 155, upper middle class, educated, athletic and healthy" or "A charming fellow who is just a bit perverted but hey aren't we all yeah I'm a total narcissist but hey at least I'm self-aware of it and my awesomeness god I'm cool". In the private clear-web chatlogs, offenders asserted their superiority over non-offenders (e.g. "Best way to be") and idolized famous or expert offenders (e.g. "[name of an offender] was a hero"). They also presented themselves as superior through claiming expertise,

bragging, sharing extensive CSA experiences, and demonstrating community-specific knowledge (e.g. slang). These behaviors have been found in prior online paedophile community research (see Chiang, 2018).

A few offenders objected to the sexual preferences of others in the clear-web chatlogs (*n*=53 instances), sometimes promoting themselves as superior by preferring simulated "consensual" CSAM (e.g. "I like when they're both into it") or sometimes positioning themselves as more extreme than other offenders they looked down upon for being less so. The former of these often involved use of the discourse strategy known as selective disassociation, or "the selective distancing of themselves away from the sectors of the community that they see as to blame" (Bedolla, 2003, p. 266) for them being viewed negatively by society – in this case, paedophiles who claimed to not harm children wished to "distance themselves" from those "acting on the attraction" (Nielsen et al., 2022, p. 606). Conversely, in the latter style of comparison, offenders mocked or critiqued those who were not as perverse as themselves: such as an instance where an offender called another group "vanilla idiots" because they had imposed restrictions on the ages of victims in CSAM being shared, calling CSAM of very young victims "forbidden". The "vanilla" (less extreme) group positioned themselves as morally superior to the offender, whilst he (a self-described "nepiophile" who targeted very young victims) negatively evaluated them as inferior due to their lesser deviancy. This offender's brazen pride in his paedophilia and his willingness to portray himself as a villainous abuser was concerningly common in the clear-web chatlogs. The dark-web respondents predominantly adopted the prior tactic of presenting themselves more positively by contrasting themselves with purportedly worse offenders (e.g. saying pro-offending comments by other users are "inhumane"), denying they were a threat: e.g. "Just a watcher not a maker nor will i ever really act on a child". This divergence could be because those answering the survey were constructing their identities for consumption by non-offender researchers in a child-protection organization and thus were attempting to portray themselves in a positive way, more easily consumable by wider society.

Negative Self-Perceptions

There were those in these datasets who, conversely, presented themselves as inferior to non-paedophiles and ashamed of their identities, constructing their paedophilia as a negative attribute. These negative presentations of self were prevalent in the dark-web survey responses, but rare in the unmonitored clear-web chatlogs: with only three instances of offenders criticizing the pro-paedophilia ideology (e.g. "I just don't think this kind of porn is good for me anymore") and four instances of offenders being self-deprecating (e.g. "I think sometimes I am too sikk"). The dark-web survey responses contained many such self-presentations, with offenders detailing their fragile emotional states, suicidal ideation, shame, and self-loathing. The following examples (1-8) in response to the "I am…" prompt illustrate typical feelings expressed in these self-presentation acts.

1. *an idiot. Depressed and sad idiot*
2. *lost and hopeless, threw my life away*
3. *disgusting, stupid, depressed, suicidal*
4. *I hate myself, I wish I never existed, and I am always on the verge of tears*

5. *full of self hatred*
6. *wanting to die*
7. *a stupid kid that stumbled upon CP out of awful curiosity. i am ashamed of myself*
8. *a monster*

It is notable that these examples were written to be seen by outsiders in wider society that the offenders likely viewed as unsympathetic – potentially resulting in them expressing attitudes critical of CSAM-consumption, as well as strongly critical of themselves. However, these may also be genuine acknowledgements of fault or implicit cries for help in dealing with their behaviors.

The offenders responding to the dark-web survey expressed their wishes to change their behaviors and demonstrated an awareness of potential harms, presenting themselves as remorseful and cognizant. This often involved denouncing CSAM (e.g. "I don't know why I search for it, I know it is wrong") and directly or indirectly asking for help: e.g. one saying they were "in need of help" and another calling themselves a "shameful pedophile whom would never hurt another soul […] I want to [stop] more than anything in the entire world". There were instances of offenders detailing their coping mechanisms and attempts to stop searching for CSAM to demonstrate their sincerity, or, cynically, to present themselves more positively to others. One such offender called themselves "a good kind person 99.9 percent of my life", claiming to "hate people who are like me" and calling paedophilia a "disease". They asserted that maintaining new hobbies distracted them from searching for CSAM and enabled them to cease those behaviors for weeks on end – before admitting that they had returned to searching for CSAM (as was evident from them encountering the dark-web survey).

Denial

Alongside those offenders willing to acknowledge their behaviors and present themselves as culpable but seeking to change so as not to cause harm, there were those in the dark-web data who denied any sexual interest in children and refuted their classification as paedophiles. The defense of curiosity was frequently deployed to deny wrongdoing or paedophilic intent (e.g. "I am just curious don't take me wrong I am not criminal"), as well as shifting the parameters of what constitutes paedophilia to avoid the label (e.g. "[I am] more aroused by pedos than the children. it's the whole context of doing something they're not supposed to do that turns me on"). As has been seen in other studies (Spriggs et al., 2018; Stevens and Wood, 2019), some self-identified as "MAP[s]" (Minor Attracted Persons), a term used by (often non-contact) CSA-offenders to label themselves separately from paedophiles and present their sexual interests more akin to a sexual orientation than a sexual disorder (again exemplifying selective disassociation).

Beyond this, there were those who entirely denied any paedophilic interest in children (e.g. "not a pedo"), for instance, by stating they were (paradoxically) "against any sort of child abuse" and asserting they were "also underage" or "looking for people my own age". There is no way to verify the claim by some respondents that they were underage themselves, but it is notable that pretending to be underage is also a tactic employed by offenders when grooming children online (see Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2023). Offenders "may superficially endorse some

cognitive distortions as a way of feeling more comfortable with this [offending] behavior, while still maintaining an awareness of the inappropriateness of his actions" (Merdian et al., 2014, p. 991). It is possible that some of these survey respondents do not self-identify as paedophiles or potentially even do not have a sexual interest in children because the survey appeared to those searching for CSAM on the dark-web and some may seek out this material for reasons entirely unrelated to any sexual motivation. This would be the small minority, however, and the act of seeking out CSAM on the dark-web is illegal in itself so these individuals would still be classed as offenders regardless of this denial.

Rationalizations: Portraying Offending

In investigating RQ2, the offenders' presentation of their criminal behaviors (such as contact CSA, online grooming, viewing CSAM, producing CSAM, joining illegal online communities, etc.) were examined. Offenders predominantly portrayed their criminal behaviors in positive ways, expressing supportive attitudes about offending and negatively presenting victims to rationalize their actions – as this section details.

Offense-Supportive Attitudes

Evidence indicates there may be a pro-offending ideology present in online paedophile communities (Marsh-Rossney, 2024), and the attitudes expressed by offenders here concerning their criminal behaviors support the notion that this environment may provide an echo-chamber for this ideology to influence community members (O'Halloran and Quayle, 2010). Within the clear and dark-web datasets, offenders sought to rationalize their behaviors – often becoming defensive, hostile to outsiders, or obtuse, as well as sometimes glorifying offending. In the clear-web community chatlogs this manifested through offense-supportive attitudes like seeking to legitimize abuse and disavowing the alternative to paedophilia. Chiang (2020) similarly found that legitimizing CSA was a common move performed by offenders in these types of communities, which here involved such arguments as victims being deserving of CSA (e.g. "How it should be, all of them abused. Our right"). Statements disavowing the alternative contained offenders claiming they could not get sexual gratification any other way.

The most common overarching legitimation strategy used was *moral legitimation* (56% of all legitimation, *n*=82), within which the majority of uses were of the *moral evaluation* technique (*n*=77 out of 82). When adopting this in the clear-web communities, offenders often expressed affection or encouragement towards one another for their social group identity and criminal behaviors (e.g. "Bro you getting better by the day"); while in the dark-web survey answers, this manifested in a few offenders' positive descriptions of themselves as "happy and healthy". The next most common overarching strategy was *rationalization legitimation* (32%, *n*=47). Subsumed within this, offenders used the technique of *theoretical rationalizations* to legitimize CSA (*n*=10 out of 47). Theoretical rationalizations are arguments purportedly "founded on some kind of truth" about "the way things are" (van Leeuwen, 2007 p. 103), such as an offender claiming that paedophilia "feels so natural" and is thus correct in their view. More often, however, they used *instrumental rationalizations* (*n*=37 out of 47) when disavowing the alternative by arguing that their abusive behaviors were justified because of the outcome they produced (usually sexual gratification), and that it was a means to an end.

Conversely, the overarching legitimation strategies of *authority legitimation* and *mythopoesis* were employed less (11%, *n*=17, and 1%, *n*=2, respectively). Within the former, offenders cited *personal authority* to support their arguments (*n*=13) in rationalizing abuse. They described their own personal experience as a victim – making the claim that because they enjoyed or were purportedly unharmed by the abuse, then it must be a positive thing for their victims as well (e.g. "I was started at 9 . So lucky and never regrets").

Elsewhere, offenders responding to the survey on the dark-web expressed a similar defensiveness of their behaviors. Some saw nothing wrong with offending and displayed hostility towards the survey collectors, calling themselves "a normal human and stop using your moral higher hand to use your power and project virtues you deem as good onto other humans". Insoll et al. (2021) similarly found that 38% of their sample said that they had never tried to stop searching for CSAM, implying that many of them saw no reason to cease their criminal activities. Others in the dark-web data who took a less hostile attitude sought to portray themselves positively whilst seeking out CSAM, suggesting that their actions had no consequences: "I do what I do and I don't hurt anybody" and "[I am] Harmless".

Victim Blaming and Dehumanization

In the clear-web chatlogs, offenders rationalized abuse through their pejorative portrayal of victims. One such method was through blaming victims for the abuse, e.g. "It deserve it, bro. His fault", shifting the responsibility of the action onto the victim and enabling offenders to remove their agency from the situation. This cognitive distortion was also performed when offenders sexualized children and constructed perceived sexual interests for victims. To clarify, no child-victims' voices were present in the data and so the sexual interests the offenders attributed to children were entirely created by the offenders themselves – they made arguments for the sexual agency of children through these purported sexual preferences. Within the chatlogs this manifested through offenders discussing evidence of victim sexual dislikes (such as signs in CSAM or abuse stories of victims not consenting or experiencing pain) and through their claims of sexual likes, such as implying promiscuity (e.g. "slut" and "whore") or signs of physical arousal. Offenders employed cognitive distortions surrounding the sexual agency of children to suggest they were consenting (e.g. "He really likes it") and to argue against age of consent laws (e.g. "we start developing our sexuality at Age 4/5!"). Research has suggested that offline contact offenders (which some of these community members purported to be) may "hold maladaptive beliefs relating to the sexual sophistication of children that diminish their ability to display empathy" (Elliott et al., 2009, p. 87).

Another way in which these offenders sought to rationalize their behavior in the clear-web chatlogs was by dehumanizing victims. As Huikuri and Insoll (2022, p. 6) assert, offenders "perceive children as sexual objects, intended to satisfy the offenders' sexual needs", so they "depersonalize children and detach victims from their bodies". Woodhams et al. (2021) similarly observed rampant victim objectification in dark-web CSA forums in their own research. This dehumanization was evident in the present clear-web chatlogs through the prevalence of victim objectification and referring to them by reductive generalizations. Regarding the former, victims were called "something" – referring to them explicitly as a

"thing" over the human alternative "someone" – and described as objects like a "piece of meat". This depersonalization facilitates offenders committing harm against children because they have abstracted them from living, feeling people into just objects for their own use, which aligns with the commonality of offenders sexualizing violence towards children in these chatlogs.

As for reductive generalizations, these entailed offenders referring to victims by non-specific terms like "a few" or "one of those"; by elided references to their age or gender (e.g. using "b n g" for *boy and girl* or "a 5" for a *five-year-old*); and by abbreviated descriptors of age categories like "nb" for *newborn* or "y" for *young*. This talking in code also provided ambiguity about who the offenders were referring to, potentially facilitating deniability if these messages were ever to fall into the hands of law enforcement. In fact, there were over 400 synonyms for child-victims used in the chatlogs, illustrating the lengths they went to when dehumanizing victims. These child-victim synonyms were categorized according to what language features they contained (with some containing more than one feature). Table 1 shows the most common features which appeared twenty or more times.

Table 1

The most common features of child-victim synonyms used in the clear-web chats.

Top Features in Synonyms	Data Examples	No. of Uses	% of All Synonyms Containing Feature
Reference to small size	"little"	79	19%
Age categories	"toddler"	77	19%
Numbered ages	"a 7"	75	18%
Reduced to gender	"B"	68	16%
Dehumanization/objectification	"things"	64	15%
Called countable noun "one"	"one of those"	47	11%
Called young	"yung"	38	9%
Insult/profanity	"whore"	38	9%
Impersonalization through generic third person pronoun	"it"	31	8%
Called a "bald"	"something bald"	20	5%

Although the most salient individual terms used to refer to victims were the impersonal pronoun "it" and countable noun "one", the most common features in synonyms (where there could be variation in the specific term used, the spelling, and the conjugation) related to victim ages and the immaturity of children: referencing their small size (n=79), age categories (n=77), and numbered ages (n=75). These reductive and degrading ways of talking about the victims they were sexualizing in CSAM or committing contact CSA against fed into the normalization of paedophilia in the online community, providing an alarmingly supportive space for their rationalizations.

Justifications: Explaining Motivations

Both the clear-web, private community interactions and the dark-web survey answers (to the question of how offenders would describe themselves) contain instances of individuals

disclosing their own perceived motivations. This section outlines the motivations present to explore RQ3.

Self-Reported Motivations

In a prior thematic study on CSA-offender community interactions, Woodhams et al. (2021) noticed that sharing self-reported *motivations* for engaging with other offenders in paedophile communities was a prevalent behavior. These motivations could concern what they believed led to their paedophilic interests, or what led them to offend and commit criminal acts. The most commonly cited motivations within the clear-web chatlogs are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Motivations for paedophilia or criminal behavior disclosed by offenders in clear-web chats.

Motivations	No. of Uses	Percentage of All Motivations
Sexual gratification	60	33%
An addiction or compulsion	31	17%
Believing there is no alternative	24	13%
Possessing a pro-paedophilia ideology	19	10%
A history of childhood sexual abuse	12	7%
To build relationships with other offenders	12	7%
To create their own CSAM	9	5%
For fame, popularity, or boasting	6	3%
Misc. other motivations	10	5%

Sexual Motivations

In the chatlog dataset, sexual gratification was the most common motivation mentioned, taking up 33% (n=60) of all motivations shared. This motivation appeared in the dark-web survey responses, where one offender for example explained that they were “Just horny”. It is possibly most notable that this motivation was not more widely cited in the chatlogs, but this may be because members interacting in a like-minded community did not feel the need to explain their sexual motivations for committing CSA – perhaps assuming that this was already shared knowledge. However, as Insoll, Díaz Bethencourt, et al’s (2024) study found, not all individuals who search for and view CSAM are sexually interested in children; different reasons and motivations may underpin their behavior.

Addiction and Compulsion

The second most cited motivation in Table 2, which also frequently featured in the dark-web survey responses, was offenders calling CSAM-use or CSA an addiction. They used language from the semantic field of addiction to describe their behaviors in terms of uncontrollability, strong urges, or needs. There were 31 instances of this in the clear-web chatlogs, including an offender who described going online to interact with paedophile communities and trade CSAM as being “like my morning coffee” – emphasizing how they could not function without their fix of this activity. Prior studies have also observed offenders citing internet/sex addiction and compulsions as motivations for seeking out CSAM (see Quayle et al., 2006; Seto et al., 2010;

Insoll, Soloveva, et al., 2024). In the dark-web survey, respondents claimed that they "can't really help myself: it's a mental issue", have "little self-control", and want "to stop with a lack of willpower". These types of statements in both datasets may demonstrate a prominent issue that should be addressed in offender rehabilitation programs (of targeting these addictive cycles and dependencies on CSAM). However, they may also indicate an abdication of responsibility by these offenders – shifting the blame for their illegal activities away from themselves by claiming a lack of agency.

This addiction-centered language also overlapped with other motivations cited by offenders, such as those claiming they had no alternative in Table 2. This belief, which was stated 24 times in the clear-web chatlogs, was reiterated in the dark-web survey responses by offenders who claimed that viewing CSAM and other extreme material led them onto an escalating pathway online or that they had no control over their sexual attraction: "i feel trapped unfairly in my body. cursed with sexual desire from children". Other less common but still widely cited motivations in the clear-web chatlogs included those expressing a pro-abuse ideology (n=19, e.g. "That's what it [a victim] deserves.. What it was made for"); reporting a history of childhood sexual abuse themselves (n=12); claiming to want to build relationships with other offenders (n=12), create their own CSAM (n=9), or gain popularity in the community (n=6); and some miscellaneous motivations (n=10). Within these miscellaneous motivations were instances of offenders claiming they viewed CSAM due to boredom or stress (e.g. "need to shoot to relax a bit"), which also appeared commonly in the dark-web data (e.g. saying that they sought out CSAM because they were "bored and willing to explore" or "frustrated with work").

Adverse Childhood Experiences

A history of childhood sexual abuse, claimed by offenders in both datasets, is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). In the clear-web chatlogs there were 22 instances of offenders disclosing this experience and in 55% (n=12) of these disclosures the offender directly cited this ACE as a motivation for their current offending. Offenders making this causal link suggests a level of awareness of the pathway from abuse-victim to subsequent perpetrator (see Briggs, 1995). Notably, having a history of childhood sexual abuse was portrayed very differently in the two datasets. Dark-web survey respondents disclosing their ACEs described themselves as "a survivor", "destroyed by my family", and "Someone who was exposed to CP [CSAM] at a very young age and is now addicted to it". These depictions all presented the ACEs as negatively influential events which the offender endured, instigating their later paedophilia and causing them harm.

In the private contexts of the clear-web chatlogs, these ACEs were overwhelmingly presented as positive whenever they were mentioned – 74% of all disclosures were portrayed positively, 22% were treated in a neutral sense, and only one instance (4%) was portrayed negatively. This singular negative portrayal (where one offender offered sympathy to another for their abuse) was also immediately countered in the interaction by the offender who had disclosed the ACE, asserting that they saw themselves as "lucky". The private, supportive

nature of the discourse context where these sentiments were expressed contrasts with that of the survey responses given to an outside, non-offender research organization.

Discussion

This study examined how CSA offenders presented themselves (RQ1), their behaviors (RQ2), and their motivations (RQ3) to different audiences in private and public contexts on the clear and dark-web. Exploring the first research question revealed that there was diversity in how offenders constructed their social group identity: with some expressing pride in their paedophilia and claiming superiority; some acknowledging their faults to present themselves as remorseful; some entirely denying responsibility or paedophilic interests; and some expressing negative identities through self-deprecation. The analysis clearly showed that these datasets presented distinctive as well as overlapping features. Overall, offenders operating in clear-web paedophile communities, where they were interacting with like-minded individuals, were likely to glorify paedophilia and advocate for CSA – even embracing negative perceptions of themselves as deviant and readily adopting the *paedophile* label. On the other hand, in the survey responses from the dark-web, offenders were constructing their identities to outsiders they likely knew would contrast ideologically with the pro-offending online communities. These offenders expressed guilt, shame, and self-loathing when confronted with having to self-analyze their CSAM-offending in the survey responses. Some also tried to separate themselves from the label of *paedophile* and expressed wishes to change their behaviors. However, there was still some overlap with the cognitive distortions and defensiveness of the clear-web community sentiments. Interestingly, this overlap was not necessarily mutual: the dark-web dataset contained some features from the clear-web chats, but many of those remorseful and self-deprecating sentiments from the dark-web survey responses were rarely or never found in the clear-web, private chatlogs. These findings support the relational tenets of identity construction as regards the strategic crafting of one's self-presentation according to one's goals and audience type.

Broaching the second research question determined that offenders portrayed their criminal activity and ideology positively, rationalizing their offending. This rationalization often involved dehumanizing, objectifying, or degrading victims (sometimes through the terms they used to refer to them) to transfer the blame for the abuse to them or make the argument that they were undeserving of humane treatment. Both of the dark-web and clear-web datasets contained defensive rationalizations, however, child victims were rarely mentioned or commented on in the dark-web survey as the survey question asked how the offenders would describe themselves. Thus, the rationalization method of constructing negative presentations of victims was only found in the clear-web offender-to-offender chatlogs, where objectification and reductive generalizations were rife.

In answering the third research question, it was discovered that offenders primarily cited sexual motivations for their offending, but there were many additional motives presented to justify their paedophilia. These included discussing their offending in terms of an addiction (specifically using addiction-related language) and tracing back to ACEs of being sexually abused themselves. Here the differences between the datasets stemmed from their portrayals of these ACEs – cited in the dark-web survey responses as harmful and/or causational, unlike

the portrayals in the clear-web chatlogs where these experiences were lauded as positively influential. Despite there being overlap between the two datasets in offender motivations and some of the ways they presented their behaviors, the distinction was most pronounced in how they portrayed themselves.

There were, however, some limitations to this study as it examined two complementary datasets collected using different methods in different contexts, thus precluding a directly comparative analysis. Future research could expand upon these findings by directly comparing clear-web private chats between offenders and public offender interactions on clear-web forums. Furthermore, while sizeable in comparative research terms, these specific datasets cannot be treated as being representative of all CSA-offenders. An increase of research into online offender-to-offender interactions in a variety of contexts (as well as on a larger scale) would combat this issue. Additionally, due to the nature of the anonymous dark-web survey and the lack of metadata provided with the clear-web chatlogs, it was impossible to independently verify claims made by offenders in the datasets about their actions or identities. Useful further research could compare the identity claims made by offenders, and their portrayal of their criminal activities, with police case files to determine the similarities or differences between them.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results of this study offer rich and novel insights. For law enforcement and those working in CSA prevention, knowledge of the motivations offenders self-report can aid in combatting these causational elements (such as the addictive nature of CSAM-viewing and pathways from ACEs). The findings also highlight the importance of offender treatment programs focusing on the dangers of the online community echo-chamber and how it may influence the ways offenders see themselves or their behaviors. The radicalizing potential of these criminal communities remains underexplored, and more studies should be carried out on the pro-paedophilia messaging present in these online chats – particularly if it could track the progression of individual users in the community (as has been piloted in Marsh-Rossney, 2024).

Clinicians should aim to have an awareness of the identity performance and identity-tailoring offenders may be employing during rehabilitation efforts. An understanding of the attitudes and ideologies circulating in these communities may aid those working with offenders to reduce the risks they pose to children by countering any cognitive distortions or rationalizations present. For instance, treatment efforts should seek to combat objectifying, dehumanizing, and degrading perceptions of children which may enable offenders to overcome moral barriers to offending. It has been shown that a statistically significant predictor of favorable sex offender treatment program outcomes is an absence of denial or an acceptance of responsibility, e.g. “acknowledging that he committed an offense; defining himself, not the child, as the aggressor; believing that sex with a child is wrong; and feeling remorse or regret” (Levenson and Macgowan, 2004, p. 50). Since lowering recidivism and halting criminal behaviors decreases the threat of harm to children, it would be greatly beneficial for more research and practical work to be undertaken in this area – like that of Protect Children’s “Self-Help Program” for offenders.

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the highly sensitive nature of the research and restrictions on access from the data providers, supporting data is not available.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Da San Martino et al.'s (2019) List of Propaganda Techniques

Propaganda Technique	Definition
Loaded Language	Using words or phrases with strong emotional implications to influence an audience.
Name Calling or Labelling	Labelling the object of the propaganda as either something the target audience fears, hates, does not desire, or loves/praises.
Repetition	Repeating the same message over and over.
Exaggeration or Minimization	Either exaggerating something to be larger, worse, better, or making something seem less important, or smaller than it is.
Doubt	Questioning someone's credibility.
Appeal to Fear or Prejudice	Seeking to build support for an idea by instilling anxiety and/or panic in the audience towards an alternative, possibly based on preconceived judgments.
Flag-Waving	Playing on strong national feeling, or another group etc, to promote or justify an action or idea.
Casual Oversimplification	Assuming one cause when there are multiple causes behind an issue (also scapegoating).
Slogans	A brief striking phrase that may include labelling or stereotyping.
Appeal to Authority	Stating a claim is true simply because a valid authority or expert supports it, without any other evidence.
Black-and-White Fallacy/Dictatorship	Presenting two alternative options as the only possibilities, sometimes dictating the action to take to the listener.
Thought-Terminating/Cliché	Words or phrases that discourage critical thought, often done via cliché.
Whataboutism	To discredit an opponent's position by accusing them of hypocrisy without directly challenging their argument.
Reductio ad Hitlerum	Persuading an audience to disapprove an action or idea by suggesting that the idea is popular with groups hated by the target audience.
Red Herring	Introducing irrelevant material to what is being discussed to distract.
Bandwagon	Attempting to persuade the target audience to join in and take a course of action because others or a majority are.
Obfuscation/Intentional Vagueness/Confusion	Using deliberately unclear words.
Straw Man	When an opponent's position is substituted with a similar one that is then refuted in the original's place.

Appendix B: Van Leeuwen's (2008) Legitimation Framework

Legitimation Type	Definition
Authority Legitimation –	Authorization is legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of people in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested.
Custom:	
Conformity	The implicit message is, 'Everybody else is doing it, and so should you' or 'Most people are doing it, and so should you'. No further argument.
Tradition	Invoking traditions, customs, habits etc.
Authority:	
Personal	Authority of the individual person because of their status or role in a particular institution, or from citing related personal experience.
Impersonal	The impersonal authority of laws, rules, regulations, or guidelines.
Commendation:	
Expert	In expert authority, legitimacy is provided by expertise. This expertise may be stated explicitly, for instance by mentioning credentials, but if the expert is well-known in the given context, it may be taken for granted.
Role Model	People follow the examples of role models and leaders. The mere fact that a role model adopts a certain behavior legitimatizes it to their followers.
Moral Legitimation –	Moral evaluation is legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems.
Evaluation	Using evaluative adjectives.
Abstraction	Referring to practices in abstract ways that 'moralize' them by distilling from them a quality that links them to discourses of moral values. Instead of 'the child goes to school for the first time', we might say 'the child takes up independence'.
Comparison:	
Positive	Comparison that casts the subject in a positive light, by saying it is like something else good or saying it contrasts with something bad.
Negative	A negative comparison makes the subject appear negative, by comparing it akin to something negative or contrasting something positive.
Rationalization Legitimation –	Rationalization is legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity.
Instrumental:	
Goal Orientation	Justification by the ultimate goal you achieve.
Means Orientation	A means to an end.
Effect Orientation	Legitimized by the effect being had on something/others/oneself.

Theoretical	Justification by giving a definition/ redefinition, idioms, or referring to the way thing are/some kind of truth.
Mythopoesis –	Mythopoesis is legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions.
Moral Tale	In moral tales, protagonists are rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices, or restoring the legitimate order.
Cautionary Tale	Cautionary tales, on the other hand, convey what will happen if you do not conform to the norms of social practices.