Where is the harm?
Exploring online peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors as platforms to prevent child sexual abuse

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A significant number of people sexually attracted to minors manage to live without offending. Nevertheless they all face punitive and stigmatizing attitudes, causing detrimental effects to their psychological well-being and increasing the risk of offending. The stigma of pedophilia both necessitates and hinders help-seeking; thus, anonymous options to reach support are crucial. The chapter explores how online anonymous peer-support forums can help prevent child sexual abuse by helping people sexually attracted to minors combat identified risk factors of social isolation and loneliness. Based on an observational and explorative fieldwork on two peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors, it is argued that such forums, though they can work both as platforms to facilitate coping strategies and justifications of abuse, show preventive potential for their ability to promote pro-social factors when living with a stigmatized identity. An analytical framework to explore this further is suggested.

Keywords: peer support, critical learning, pro-social factors, pedophilia, online forums

Having sexual thoughts of minors is for many inevitably linked to the act of committing child sexual abuse (CSA) (Seto, 2009). Being attracted to minors is undeniably a prominent risk factor for committing CSA (Mann et al., 2010; McPhail et al., 2014; Theaker, 2015), but nascent research shows that a significant number of people sexually attracted to minors manage to live without committing CSA (Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Dombert et al., 2016; Seto, 2008; Theaker, 2015). Having sexual thoughts of minors has, however, proven to be rather immutable and permanent over time, making managing and coping with these thoughts a life-long process (Beier et al., 2009; Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Parr & Pearson, 2019). This does not only commend people managing to live without offending but also reveals the need for support to people sexually attracted to minors to manage living without abuse. For this reason, several scholars have argued that, as non-offending people with sexual attractions become increasingly visible, this group is imperative to reach early through support and help to prevent CSA (Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Houtepen et al., 2016; Levenson et al., 2017).

Research highlights how the stigma attached to pedophilia – i.e., common stereotypes of the pedophile man as dangerous, abnormal, and amoral (Imhoff, 2015; Imhoff & Jahnke, 2018) – has detrimental effects to the psychological well-being of people attracted to minors. Managing the stigma attached to pedophilia is therefore argued to be one of the most important risk factors to manage to prevent CSA (Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013; Lasher & Stinson, 2017; Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Specifically, finding ways to work through the social isolation and loneliness as derived consequences from the stigma is identified as key to aspects of preventive treatment (Cantor & McPhail, 2016).

However, the stigma not only has negative psychological effects increasing the *need* for support but also decreases the likelihood of help and support being pursued as well (Shechtman et al., 2010; Vogel et al., 2007). Due to the vastly documented and serious punitive attitudes towards people sexually attracted to minors (Jahnke, 2018), fear of exposure (Cacciatori, 2017), high levels of shame and guilt (Lievesley et al., 2020), mistrust in mental health practitioners (Kramer, 2011), or fear of being (wrongfully) reported (Beier et al., 2009), all work to prevent help being pursued. Barriers of help-seeking are thus a large cause for concern, as what is identified as a key risk factor to manage to prevent CSA – the stigma – simultaneously is the factor which prevents help-seeking to support this. Anonymous options to reach support without mistrust or fear of exposure could therefore be crucial to prevent CSA.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and discuss how online anonymous peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors could be potential platforms to combat CSA, as they could help combat social isolation and loneliness by providing support and information anonymously and empathetically. To explore this, the chapter will be comprised of two parts:

1. Discussing and introducing considerations and challenges in online anonymous peer support in general and for people sexually attracted to minors.
2. Presentation and discussion of the findings from a qualitative, observational, and explorative fieldwork on two separate online forums for people sexually attracted to minors.

Finally the chapter will discuss how the results can help guide future research and preventive efforts to navigate both challenges and potentials of online peer support to prevent CSA.

Approaching peer support

"Peer support has been defined by the fact that people who have like experiences can better relate and can consequently offer more authentic empathy and validation." (Mead & MacNeil, 2006)

For above reason, peer support is an exciting mode of intervention for hard-to-reach groups. Research shows peer support – as defined in the quote – to be effective in establishing therapeutic bonds in those most alienated from healthcare systems (Sells et al., 2006), helping increase hope, control, and ability to effect change in one's life (Davidson et al., 2012), while also building a sense of community for those who have had disconnecting kinds of experiences (Mead & MacNeil, 2006).[1] Mental health services has thus increasingly come to use – and with good results – peer support as formalized treatment programs with employed peer-support workers, who use their experiences of having recovered from mental illness to help others (Davidson et al., 2012; Repper & Carter, 2011).

As the goal for this chapter is to explore online forums, peer support here does not refer to an institutionalized and therapeutic system set in place to combat severe psychiatric disorders (Solomon, 2004) but simply to a process of engaging in discussions and support between like-minded individuals. Despite no formalized structure, studies of mental health concerns and online peer-support forums have found these to be powerful platforms for self-disclosure and social support seeking (De Choudhury and De, 2014; Manikonda & De Choudhury, 2017) and that self-expression through these is beneficial in improving the individual's state of mind (Yates et al., 2017). On a theoretical level, peer support thus show very interesting prospects to combat or manage the loneliness and social isolation in people attracted to minors, which Cantor and McPhail (2016) argued to be key to prevent CSA.

As peer support move to online anonymous platforms and away from professional treatment, the ability to build community and change attitudes in individuals may, however, not always result in a desired effect. Discussing mental health concerns on anonymous online peer-support forums are consequently not only a chance to increase hope and control but also a risk to promote radicalized behavior. This risk/chance or dou-

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1 Peer-support is typically studied in groups with severe mental illnesses. It is not the intention here to implicitly compare having sexual thoughts of minors to a severe mental illness but to draw comparisons between being stigmatized and alienated instead.

ble-edged sword of online peer support has been the focus for several studies of online forums, particularly on suicide prevention forums. Here, the ability to provide immediate support to individuals in moments of crisis are essential to prevent suicide, but among the thousands of posts on such forums users can also come to normalize harmful behavior, discourage professional treatment, and instigate suicidal ideation (Soldaini et al., 2018). Using social media for peer support can thus have the opposite effect to a desired sense of recovery, largely because of the potential risk of "contagion" – in the case of suicide prevention forums this means enhancing the risk of people copying acts of suicide (Robinson et al., 2015).

In comparison, the double-edged sword of online anonymous peer support for people sexually attracted to minors would then be the risk/chance to promote a sense of community supporting managing a life without committing abuse or to create a "contagious" community supporting justification for the opposite. The following will consider this more closely.

The double-edged sword

Eleanor Stevens and Jane Wood (2019) argue that, due to lack of support in society, people sexually attracted to minors are increasingly turning to online communities for support. When people attracted to minors go online, the anonymous affordances of the internet have, however, primarily been viewed for its potential to "support" criminal practices (Durkin, 1997), rather than for its potential to pursue help anonymously to reduce the risk of offending. Or as Emily D. Gottfried et al. writes: "The Internet has not just made life more convenient and made it easier to keep in touch with others, it has also made accessing potential victims much easier for individuals who commit sexual offenses" (Gottfried et al., 2020, p. 1).

Though only few people have explored the internet's potential to pursue help and reduce the risk of offending, literature on people with sexual attractions to children not offending and pursuing help online is nascent (Stevens & Wood, 2019; Levenson et al., 2017). As the stigma of pedophilia contribute to an isolation of individuals experiencing sexual attractions to minors, Levenson et al. (2017, p. 114–115) argues that peer-support forums could be "helpful in de-isolating those who experience these attractions and might help them find role models who have successfully navigated the complexities of minor-attraction and found ways to lead satisfying and healthy lives." Holt et al. (2020, p. 309) contributes to this point, arguing that: "For many, these forums may provide a safe space to talk about their sexual interests and to receive support from a network of

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likeminded individuals who share common interests." Online anonymous peer support may therefore have the potential to play an essential role in combatting CSA by providing a safe space and a community to combat the social isolation and to discuss ways to lead satisfying and healthy lives.

The majority of literature on peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors is, however, not on the chance to prevent CSA but on the risk of doing the opposite. Just as the internet with its anonymous affordances primarily have been seen as a catalyst of crime, so peer-support forums mostly have been considered as an ability to support justifications of abuse and cognitive distortions to avoid responsibility (D'Ovidio et al., 2009; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010; Holt et al., 2010; Johnson, 2013; Malesky & Ennis, 2004). Online forums and communities have thus been showed as to provide individuals access to ready and available validation of attitudes and behaviors supporting CSA (Lasher & Stinson, 2017). Though understanding the risk of the forums is important, Holt et al. (2020, p. 311) have also argued that it is "imperative that we continue to examine online communities to understand the potential risks as well as discover the possible measures of prevention".

The critical question – and the point of departure for this chapter as well – is then how to approach online anonymous peer support for people sexually attracted to minors to combat CSA if the very ability to be anonymous, share information, and provide validation may simultaneously have the potential to help manage these attractions safely *and* to support offending behavior?

Exploring online anonymous peer support for people sexually attracted to minors as platforms to enhance prevention of CSA, we need to find a way to engage this doubled-edged sword. After the following short introduction to the methodology and context of the empirical data for this chapter, I will introduce the results of the observational and explorative data from two online anonymous peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors to argue for a potential framework to do so.

Methods

The data for this chapter is based on explorative observations on two forums, Virtuous Pedophiles (VP) and Visions of Alice (VoA), in the period from August 1, 2019 to December 1, 2019. To protect the pseudonymity of the users, all following quotes are paraphrased, and the only identity marker left is the forum from which the quote was observed. The paraphrased quotes have tried to stay as close to the original tone and language of the

user to contain personality and context without compromising searchability. The level of textual complexity and general readability have thus been edited as little as possible. All quotes were in English and no quotes have been translated.

To provide adequate context for the analytical aspects of the data, I will shortly introduce the observational and explorative methods of the fieldwork separately.

Observational

The data comprises almost exclusively on textual quotes observed and screenshotted without any interaction from my part as a researcher. Neither of the forums in question have been observed in an entirety, as the sheer number of categories, topics, and posts in both forums are far too numerous to be explored through qualitative methods. As a result, the categories with the highest number of topics and posts[2] on each forum were selected to be observed initially and ongoing through the period of the fieldwork. Approximately 75 topics – containing as little as five posts and up to 500 posts and more – were included in the analysis during the period and were bookmarked[3] for continuous observation through the remaining time.

Explorative

"Explorative" refers to the absence of any predefined inclusion criteria before observational activities on the forums began. Instead, the methodological choice relied on building a "grounded theory" of the forums to accommodate openness to unknown ways in which the users of the forums managed and coped with their attractions (Clarke, 2003). The explorative tasks in the data-collecting thus consisted of "mapping" the most prominent actors – i.e., noting down and describing the most prominent individuals, groups, political discussions, discursive constructions, symbol-

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2 Categories contains topics, topics contains posts. Each category has a description of the types of topics included and each topic consists of individual textual posts prompted by an initial question or statement from the author of the topic.
3 Prompted to give a notification every time new posts were added to the topic between log-ins.

ic elements, etc. – to continuously develop and evaluate analytical perspectives throughout the fieldwork. Across both forums observed, one – if not the most – frequent theme discussed in relation to have to manage sexual attractions to minors was negotiating and discussing the legal and moral boundaries of using (il)legal digital content of children sexually. Though being a prominent theme across both forums, discussing the harmfulness of using (il)legal digital content of children for sexual purposes was just one theme out of many. Both forums include a large variety of topics ranging from trivial matters of everyday life such as good TV shows to discussing the latest results of neurological research on pedophilia. The following results should thus rather be seen as emerging topics and cases for analysis than representations of an exclusive focus on the forums.

Results

The most prominent concept that emerged in the discussions of using (il)legal digital content of children for sexual purposes was *harm*. In the following parts I will present three different cases – one from each forum and one including both –, all involving different ways of managing pedophilic attractions to minors through negotiation and discussion of the "harmfulness" of using (il)legal digital content of children:

1. Using social media – Virtuous Pedophiles
2. Using sexualized signature pictures – Visions of Alice
3. Using candid photography – both forums

The following results thus come to show specific practices discussed on the forums while simultaneously exemplifying the explorative processes of how *harm* came to be mapped as a prominent element on the forums as well. It is important to note that, due to the methodological choices, the data represent points in discussion rather than fixed attitudes. Furthermore, though *harm* is argued to be one of the most prominent actors, the different attitudes represented in the discussion to reach this conclusion is not sorted in prevalence, and some of the attitudes depicted may even be subject to contradiction from other users. The results should thus be interpreted as explorative cases to understand dynamics of peer support and themes on the forums, not as a sorted content analysis.

Social media – Virtuous Pedophiles

A theme that emerged on both forums was the question of the extent to which it was okay to use content of children on social media such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. sexually. In the following, quotes of different points of view in a discussion[4] of using YouTube are mapped, prompted with the first quote:

Initial question: *"I know I can't be the only one here using YouTube. What's your personal set of rules? Do you think it's OK to use everything that's on YouTube? Or do you stick to specific types of videos? Is it better to just stop looking at all? I'm in a moral conflict about it."* (VP)

Responses:

1. "I stay stick to the videos that are not intentionally sexual. I have seen many kids on YouTube who are being manipulated to do videos in sexual ways. While I did enjoy those videos, they are immoral, as the child has been taken advantage of." (VP)
2. "I don't see anything to feel guilty about. No kid was hurt making it and you aren't hurting anyone by watching. I don't see a problem unless you use so much time at it that it interferes with the rest of your life." (VP)
3. "When girls with online videos realize that much of their popularity is due to sexual attraction, some will obviously react differently than others. I worry about the sensitive ones […] I would imagine that it might be difficult to handle the realization that many people get turned on by your younger videos." (VP)
4. "If you look at some children's YouTube channels, you will see 4–50 views for videos where they're wearing a shirt, but 400–400,000 views of videos where they aren't wearing a shirt or they're doing something erotic. I see this as a problem. Naturally, children want views. So they do what it takes to get them." (VP)

The following table shows the different points in discussion of how YouTube can or should/should not be used as a platform to explore content for sexual purposes in relation to the harm caused:

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4 All the quotes are from the same "thread" on the forum.

Table 1

Social media use in forum discussions and perceived harm

Use of social media	VP response no.[a]	= / ≠[b]	Harm to self/to children
Videos without sexual intention	1	≠	Harm to children
Manipulated intention	1	=	Harm to children
No harm in production	2	≠	Harm to children (in use)
Excessive use	2	=	Harm to self
"Normal" use	2	≠	Harm to children/to self
Disproportional views	3	=	Harm to children
Popularity from sexualization	4	=	Harm to children

Note. [a] Refers to quotes in the text above. [b] Usage is largely perceived as being harmful (=) or not harmful (≠) by forum users.

Sexualized signature pictures – Visions of Alice

This section presents a discussion on Visions of Alice of the use of sexualized signature pictures[5]. As with the previous case, all following quotes are from the same discussion, and the discussion was prompted with the first quote here as well:

Initial question: *"I do like the pictures, I must admit. But, is it hurtful to our cause if we use them? I'm conflicted. I can see it both ways."* (VoA)

Responses:

1. "If I believed the pictures were wrong, I would also say my attractions are wrong. It is not wrong and I even think it can even be a positive thing. That's what I believe and support. I will never apologize for my existence to the general public." (VoA)
2. "You can find most of the pictures in a Google search for clothing stores, so I don't see the harm. As long as it doesn't cross any legal boundaries." (VoA)
3. "Law enforcement could use these sexy pictures as a way to shut this site down. If this wasn't an issue, then I would be all for using sexy

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5 Using sexualized signature pictures is not allowed on Virtuous Pedophiles and is thus a unique feature of the Visions-of-Alice forum.

avatars, and I would have one myself. But for this site to shut down is the last thing we want. I prefer to play it safe and don't use the pictures." (VoA)

4. "I consider nothing wrong in sexy pictures of little girls, but I do question where they come from, as they are a little too sexy for Google Images. Either way, VoA is not here to cater to those that oppose us, but to be a place for pedophiles." (VoA)

5. "We're in a forum where we can speak openly about our love for little girls. Of course, we think it's sexually stimulating, and a sexy signature pic is just as harmless as a pinup. We don't have anything to be ashamed about." (VoA)

The following table shows the different points in discussion of how sexualized signature pictures can or should/should not be used in relation to the harm caused:

Table 2

Use of sexualized signature pictures in forum discussions and perceived harm

Use of sexualized signature pictures	VoA response no.[a]	= / ≠[b]	Harm to self/to children
Digital avatars	1	≠	Harm to self (benefit)
Access through Google	2	≠	Harm to self/to children
Excessive sexualization	3	=	Harm to self (site)
Unwanted exposure	3	=	Harm to self (site)
"Place for pedophiles"	4	≠	Harm to self/to children (?)
"Just like a pinup"	5	≠	Harm to children

Note. [a] Refers to quotes in the text above. [b] Usage is largely perceived as being harmful (=) or not harmful (≠) by forum users.

Candid photographs

The term "candid photographs" describes photos taken of one person or more without their knowledge (or consent). As in the other cases, I will consider quotes and then arrange their content in a table. This time, however, I will include observations from both forums. All posts within the same forum are from the same discussion, and the initial quotes from both forums are the initial posts for the discussions as in previous cases.

Visions of Alice

Initial question: *"How do you feel about candid photography of little girls and sharing these with other? I feel fine about having candid photography, but I don't know if it's ethical to share it with other online."* (VoA)
  Responses:

1. "Personally, I don't agree with sharing it, because even though the person who took it had no bad intension and only have it for personal use, when he shares it with others, they can have bad intentions and perhaps hurt the child." (VoA)
2. "If I see a little girl that I like I take a picture with my phone, using an app so no one can tell. I don't usually share them; I just keep them in a secured folder. I only take picture in public places, no up skirt or bathroom stuff." (VoA)
3. "I like seeing candid pictures of little girls on the internet. I do feel a little guilty sometimes, as if I'm invading their privacy. But everyone posts pics of others and themselves all the time, so it shouldn't come as a surprise when they end up all over the Internet." (VoA)
4. "I believe candid photography can be okay as long as the pictures aren't taken anywhere where the person on it thought they were private. So in the water park in a swimming suit: yes. In the changing room of that water park: no." (VoA)

The following table shows the different points in discussion of how candid photography can or should/should not be used in relation to the harm caused on Visions of Alice:

Table 3

Use of candid photography in forum discussions and perceived harm (Visions of Alice)

Using candid photography (VoA)	VoA response no.[a]	= / ≠[b]	Harm to self / Harm to children
Use for own purpose	1	≠	Harm to children
Loss of control through sharing	1	=	Harm to children
Decent and public images	2	≠	Harm to children
Condition in a digital age	3	≠	Harm to self/children
Indecent and private images	4	=	Harm to children

Note. [a] Refers to quotes in the text above. [b] Usage is largely perceived as being harmful (=) or not harmful (≠) by forum users.

Virtuous Pedophiles

Initial question: *"I was looking around on the Internet and came across a nudist beach website with pictures of children. I know that these images are not illegal where I live – but are they morally acceptable? […] I really want to make sure that what I do doesn't harm children, and I've felt guilty since finding the pictures"* (VP)

Responses:

1. "I guess you have to decide if it's okay yourself. They chose to go to a nudist beach, so I don't have a problem with it. Also, the pictures were probably put on the website with either the children's or the parents' knowledge" (VP)
2. "This shows the difference between a human and a monster. We can choose if we want to cause another person harm. All humans have temptations, but we can decide whether a temptation is safe or not." (VP)
3. "You decide your own morality, so you are the only one who can answer if what you are doing is okay." (VP)
4. "My perspective is on harm prevention both for you and the children. I think many will agree that viewing those pictures do not hurt the children. But does using those pictures help you manage your attractions and increase your general happiness? That is for yourself to decide." (VP)

The following table shows the different points in discussion of how candid photography can or should/should not be used in relation to the harm caused on Virtuous Pedophiles:

Table 4
Use of candid photography in forum discussions and perceived harm (Virtuous Pedophiles)

Using candid photography (VP)	VP response no.[a]	= / ≠[b]	Harm to self / Harm to children
Public place / implicit consent	1	≠	Harm to children
Morally safe / not safe temptation	2	≠ / =	Harm to children
Subject to own morality	3	≠ / =	Harm to self
Increase / decrease in happiness	4	≠ / =	Harm to self

Note. [a] Refers to quotes in the text above. [b] Usage is largely perceived as being harmful (=) or not harmful (≠) by forum users.

Discussion

Online peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors could show promise to help prevent CSA by circumventing barriers of help seeking to manage the stigma attached to the attraction. However, the double-edged sword of anonymous online engagements provides no immediate distinction of whether peer support helps cope with pedophilic attractions or justify them in potentially harmful ways. The results here show case-specific examples of how users on two different forums themselves discuss how to manage their attractions and to avoid harm.

In the results, we saw that for several users it was okay to use YouTube as sexual outlet, but only if they consider the ways in which these actions could cause unwanted sexualization or if they are sure not to "support" content exploiting the child in production. For several users, it was okay to have a place made for *them*, to feel positive about themselves, and to mark that by using sexualized pictures. For several users it was okay to use candid photography if they made sure not to disclose the sexual use by sharing the pictures and if they made sure it would not lead them into unwanted temptation.

For people who are not sexually attracted to minors, it would be fair to assume that the idea of even connecting YouTube videos to a sexualized context – as in the first case – is surprising at best. To use signature pictures of children as digital avatars in a sexually explicit context or take candid photography of children in public places for sexual purposes would also for many immediately be seen as very wrong and harmful. Indeed, these practices are dangerous and harmful and could have serious consequences for the children depicted in the pictures or videos if they would become aware of the sexualization. Other practices, however, such as considering potential exploitation in production of legal videos or making sure to avoid exposing a sexualized context from the digital "footprints" left from watching YouTube videos seem to reveal a genuine effort and concern to keep children safe.

When trying to explore online anonymous forum's ability to help prevent CSA, the results do not immediately reveal such a potential, and one could even suggest dismissing online forums altogether for the purpose based on some of the results. As discussed earlier, the double-edged sword of online peer-support makes evaluating the forums in terms of potential to prevent CSA a challenging task – and thus a pressing concern. In their thematic analysis of different coping mechanisms on the Virtuous Pedophiles forum, Stevens and Wood (2019) point out that, when some users report using indecent fantasies of children to stay "offence free", it's uncertain whether such explanation functions more as a rationalization and justification than coping. The difficulty in assessing the preventive potential of online peer support is thus not only to classify the forum's potential support as either coping or justification but to sort through the ambiguity of the interactions on the forums as well.

Perhaps, the method to understand the potential of peer support to prevent CSA is not to differentiate between coping and justifications or to categorize ways of attraction management as harmful or not. We might, in fact, need to be careful not to misattribute professional labels such as "coping" or "justifications" to observations on peer-support forums prematurely. Instead, as Maruna and Mann (2006) argue when researching offenders, we should maintain a more nuanced understanding of their motives through their own explanations. Building on the need to understand people's own motives in peer support, Mead and MacNeil (2006, p. 6–7) also argue that, if we want to be able to answer the question of "what is really needed to help people see things in new ways", we should be careful not to judge these questions through predefined criteria.

I argue that in the context of understanding the potential double-edged sword of peer support we should, too, be mindful of this consideration,

and we might therefore see the results in this chapter not immediately for their potential to cope or justify but as 'critical learning' instead: "Critical learning doesn't assume a medical definition of the problem and opens us to exploring other ways of thinking about the experience rather than trying to deal with the 'it.'" (Ibid, p. 10)

Considering a perspective of critical learning, the value of the results is not whether the practices they discuss are relevant goals specifically to prevent abuse from a professional point of view; the value is, rather, that these discussions are *other ways* of thinking about the experiences of being sexually attracted to minors. Specifically, I argue, we should pay attention to how the practices discussed are created and negotiated from the user's own experiences and in the absence of professional or medical perspectives. Discussions of how to use or not to use (il)legal digital content of children for sexual purposes are thus not only discussions of exactly that but examples of how the users *learn* from their own and other's explanations and experiences in the absence of professional or public intervention. The results, then, do not reveal practices that are likely to be set as treatment goals. Instead, they reveal intentions to find moral and legal ways to manage the complexities of living with one of the most stigmatized attractions without harming children or oneself.

Critical thinking and the ability to explore new perspectives outside normative ways of understanding a problem have been identified by several other researchers as being the key elements to the success of peer support (Kingod et al., 2017). On the two online forums explored for this chapter, a "new" perspective that emerges is that the harm of certain practices does not only pertain to children but to the practitioners as well. Almost all examples are interesting in the way they include the value and quality of their own life into the ways they make sense of their attractions. This result, of course, is not unique to an analysis rather looking for practices of critical learning than differentiating between coping and justifications. Nevertheless, it might be a new perspective for the way in which it does not immediately assume an indifference to the welfare of children or as a justification of harmful practices. Considering this more closely, a user on Virtuous Pedophiles wrote:

> "We each have to find that line that causes the least harm and most full life." – Anonymous user, Virtuous Pedophiles

This quote highlights the value found in this new perspective excellently. In absence of the actual or perceived condemnation of the rest of society, critical elements such as the need to manage one's own happiness emerge, and experiences and accounts that would otherwise be dismissed by non-

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peers gain value as a perspective to teach and learn how to navigate the balance between one's own life satisfaction and the goal of not harming children. When classifying into coping or justifications, we evaluate the interactions as whether they could harm children or not. Here, the results make visible the need for users to balance efforts to manage their attractions without harming children up against practices that do not harm themselves as well. *This*, I argue, could still help guide preventive efforts, as it could show a dynamic of the users exercising pro-social behavior. Pro-social behavior, such as helping yourself and others do the "right" thing or finding credible ways of identifying yourself as a moral human being rather than a monster, is a way to learn and teach how to live happy and satisfying lives. Indeed, if social isolation and loneliness are prominent risk factors of CSA, then pro-social factors are of analytical importance even while being inconsistent with formalized and professional treatment goals.

Lasher and Stinson (2017) argue in their suggestion for future policy and research for adults with pedophilic interests that people who have a pro-social identity and pro-social influences show greater rates of desistance in sexually abusive behaviors. Though the results of this chapter do not reveal how to absolve the double-edged sort of peer-support, it still shows that – if we engage online peer support as critical learning – we come to see the practices discussed not as immediately preventive or escalating but as negotiations and discussions of pro-social practices to lead happy lives in balance. Peer-support forums give users access to trustworthy interaction to provide empathy and validation in themselves and others. The understanding and acknowledgment that these interactions function both as a receiving and giving role to develop and cultivate pro-social identities and practices is important to understand the value of peer support. However, this understanding may be lost if we only evaluate these interactions as a risk of harming children or not. Developing healthy ways to live good, non-offending lives when being sexually attracted to minors could be key to combat the risk factor of loneliness and isolation associated with the stigma of pedophilia. Online peer-support forums could be valuable platforms to do so for their pro-social interactions.

Importantly, making visible negotiations and discussions through "critical learning" could also help both practitioners and researchers gain important insight into specific issues and practices to engage when developing or exploring preventive efforts. Peer-support forums can thus give both users and people working to develop preventive programs important knowledge to facilitate a "Good Lives Model" that "focuses on pro-socially obtaining primary human goods, such as a healthy life, knowledge, occu-

pational excellence, independence, relationships, community, happiness, and creativity" (Ward & Gannon, 2006, as cited in Lasher & Stinson, 2017).

Holt et al. (2020) wrote, as quoted earlier, that it is "imperative that we continue to examine online communities to understand the potential risks as well as discover the possible measures of prevention". In their article, the authors themselves speculate that the pro-social influence on individuals from peer-support forums could serve as protective factors that prevent contact with minors (Holt et al., 2020). Here, through an explorative and observational fieldwork on two forums, this chapter has sought to contribute to a further examination of the risk and possible measures of prevention of online peer support. As both Holt et al. (2020) and Lasher and Stinson (2017) raised, pro-social factors could be the important preventive potential of peer support.

However, though pro-social factors could be the important preventive potential of peer support, this should not be mistaken as *the* important preventive factor of pedophilia and CSA. Despite having avoided discussing harm from a professional point of view so far, some critical reflections on the differentiation between what the chapter identifies as a preventive potential and the actual risk of harming children are needed. As mentioned in the very introduction of this chapter, having sexual attractions to minors cannot be dismissed as harmless and poses a considerable risk factor in itself. When the results here highlight preventive aspects of pro-social behaviors, this is to consider *a* preventive potential that is prone to being lost in translation, but pro-social factors are in themselves not a safeguarding of children. Using (il)legal digital content of children for sexual purpose can be harmful to children regardless of intention. Becoming part of sexualized context as a child gives rise to feelings of anxiety, loss of control, and powerlessness, thus affecting children's ability to form trust-based social relations (Stevnhøj & Strange, 2016). Even more so, children can experience high senses of guilt and shame when being exposed to a sexualized context if they have produced or shared the material in question themselves (Jansen, 2015). As mentioned, some of the practices discussed are therefore potentially harmful, and the results of this chapter do not mean to contradict the troublesome aspect of peer-support forums to provide validation and justifications for such behaviors. In fact, the results show also how potentially harmful practices are justified, which could even mislead new users to engage in such practices in good faith. A topic for future research should therefore be to explore how moderation on online forums for people sexually attracted to minors could minimize such cases without compromising the incitement of the forums to engage

and discuss controversial matters in new ways. Additionally, though peer support show promise to circumvent barriers of help seeking, developing pro-social factors as a preventive factor does not absolve the potential need and value for therapeutic help and interventions. It is impossible – and, importantly, not the scope – of peer-support forums to provide any meaningful form of risk-assessment, and the ease of access to the forums supposedly results in a large difference in actual risk of committing abuse among the users. Peer support on online forums is thus not a therapeutic intervention in itself or a replacement of such, but it could be a means, or a tool, to facilitate it. In fact, combatting social isolation and loneliness through pro-social factors could be a first step to encourage professional help seeking, which was frequently observed on the Virtuous Pedophile's forum as well. With these considerations in mind, the pro-social factors emerging from the analysis in this chapter thus point to a preventive potential of peer-support forums but not to a therapeutic intervention or preventive effect in itself.

This chapter has then sought to contribute that – when exploring peer support in practice on these forums – we should not try to immediately assess whether the interactions help cope safely with abusive behavior or justify it. Instead, we may adapt an openness to view their interactions as learning, teaching, and developing pro-social factors and practices, and, importantly, we may learn from their own accounts the challenges at stake to which they seek support, thus being able to help direct preventive efforts more effectively.

Limitations

The unsystematic ways in which peer support is used in the forums and the explorative method employed to observe this make it unfeasible to use the results to conclude any *effect* of how peer support affects the user's ability to desist from crime. Additionally, the practices discussed on the forums should only be seen as pertaining to the users of the forums and not be mistaken as showing the general practices of people sexually attracted to minors. Though the results may coincidentally come to depict general practices, the absence of information available of the background of the users of the forum should afford critical considerations as to the possibility that the people observed on such forums represent rather a quite specific niche group than a general group. Neither this nor the other limitations disqualify the data, but it does entail specific consideration to its generalizability and applicability outside of the specific online digital

communities. Importantly, the results still reveal valuable perspectives to show how users navigate the complexity of living with one of the most stigmatized attractions in Western societies.

I will proceed to discuss how specific findings from these perspectives may still help develop a further understanding of online peer support's potential to combat CSA.

Conclusion

Online peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors are potential platforms to prevent CSA, as they provide anonymous access to like-minded communities to combat the risk factor of social isolation and loneliness. However, online forums and subcultures have also been discovered to be effective in supporting rationalizations and justifications of abuse. This chapter has shown how the users of two peer-support forums for people sexually attracted to minors discuss moral and legal practices of using (il)legal digital content of children sexually. In the results, the practices discussed did not immediately seem to facilitate coping mechanisms beneficial to protect children, and some practices could even be considered as abusive. Despite not showing immediate potential to combat CSA, the chapter discussed that, to explore the potential of online peer support for people sexually attracted to minors to prevent CSA, we should not immediately try to decide whether these forums escalate or reduce offending; instead we should see it as platforms for "critical learning". The chapter discussed how the results highlight ways of balancing harm between children and themselves and considered these interactions as pro-social factors to combat the stigma of pedophilia. For this, peer support was argued to have a potential to combat CSA by providing both forums users and people working to prevent CSA knowledge to develop specific models that support ways to lead healthy, satisfying, and pro-social lives without abuse. Finally, the chapter argued that online peer support should not be seen as a therapeutic intervention in itself but as a tool to facilitate such processes.

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