Implicit Theories of Child Sexual Exploitation Material offenders:

Cross-cultural validation of interview findings

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ABSTRACT

Offense-supportive cognitions are thought to result from underlying implicit theories (ITs). Since Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) users are a distinct type of sex offender, Bartels and Merdian (2016) proposed that CSEM offenders hold five different ITs from those endorsed by contact sex offenders (i.e., *Unhappy World, Self as Uncontrollable, Child as Sexual Object, Nature of Harm* [CSEM variant], and *Self as Collector*), linked by an assumption about the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet*. This paper reports a conceptual content analysis of 23 interviews conducted with CSEM offenders in the UK and Spain. Support for all CSEM-specific ITs was found across both samples, providing an empirical validation of this conceptualization. Finally, four ITs originally identified for contact sex offenders (Ward & Keenan, 1999) were also identified; namely, *Uncontrollability, Child as Sexual Being, Dangerous World* and *Nature of Harm*. Further validation of CSEM-related ITs are encouraged.

Keywords: implicit theory, child sexual exploitation material, online sex offenders, cognitive distortions, interview

Introduction

Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) portrays the sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation of children. Increasing empirical attention has been directed towards identifying the factors associated with CSEM offenders (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015; Seto, 2013). One such factor is cognitive distortions (Kettleborough & Merdian, 2017), which can be defined as surface-level cognitions and/or statements that are offense-supportive in nature (Ward, 2000). These surface-level cognitions are thought to be the product of deeper cognitive structures termed Implicit Theories (ITs) - core beliefs that bias the processing of social information (Ward, 2000). Due to their explanatory power, ITs have been incorporated and expanded upon in later cognitive distortion theories that account for the role of other processes and situational factors. Examples include the Judgment Model of Cognitive Distortions (Ward, Gannon, & Keown, 2006) and the Multi-Mechanism Theory of Cognitive Distortions (Szumski, Bartels, Beech, & Fisher, 2018), as well as multifactorial theories of sexual offending, such as the Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (Ward & Beech, 2006) and the Agency Model of Risk (Heffernan & Ward, 2015). In light of this, establishing the core beliefs (ITs) that underpin the cognitive distortions of CSEM offenders will provide a starting point for understanding the role of cognition in CSEM offending more deeply, as well as helping provide the foundation for developing an assessment measure.

Implicit Theories related to Child Sexual Abuse

Ward and Keenan (1999) proposed five ITs typically endorsed by individuals who have committed a contact sexual offense against a child (i.e., 'Children as Sexual Beings', 'Nature of Harm', 'Uncontrollability', 'Entitlement', 'Dangerous World'), which have been corroborated in subsequent research (e.g., Keown, Gannon, & Ward,

2010). However, Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, and Boer (2014) found that CSEM

offenders report comparatively fewer cognitive distortions linked to these ITs.

Consequently, they suggested that CSEM offenders may harbor a distinct set of ITs.

From a Grounded Theory analysis of the CSEM literature, Bartels and Merdian (2016)

proposed five CSEM-related ITs, linked to each other via a widespread assumption

about the Internet:

- *Child as Sex Object* – a belief that leads individuals to perceive children as sexual stimuli rather than people. This IT can lead individuals to filter out or ignore information that emphasizes a child as a human being, facilitating the viewing of online CSEM.

- *Unhappy World* - believing the world is dejected and filled with judgmental and uninterested individuals. It can elicit negative affect, facilitating the desire to seek an escape or more meaningful identity online (e.g., via CSEM-related behavior).

- *Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)* - believing that: (1) CSEM-related behavior is not harmful, or (2) that the behavior depicted in the material is not harmful.

- *Self as Uncontrollable* – the belief that one has no control over their actions due to it being internally generated and highly stable. This can create a view of oneself as being "addicted" (e.g., to viewing CSEM).

- *Self as Collector* - the belief that one's self-concept and social status is linked to collecting behavior, rather than the sexual content of CSEM.

- *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet* - a background assumption that the Internet provides infinite, immediate, anonymous, immersive, and social benefits.

Bartels and Merdian note that these ITs are not all exclusively linked to online CSEM-related behavior. However, when activated in conjunction with the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet* assumption, they become contextualized, increasing their likelihood of facilitating problematic online behavior, including CSEM use. According to Bartels and Merdian, these ITs are predominantly held by individuals who *exclusively* commit CSEM offending behavior (so called "fantasy-driven offenders"; see Merdian et al., 2018), while "contact-driven' CSEM users are thought to also hold some of the Contact ITs identified by Ward and Keenan (1999).

To date, we are aware of only one attempt to empirically validate these specific ITs in CSEM offenders. In Howell's (2018) thesis, a group of convicted CSEM offenders (i.e., those with a CSEM offense but no history of child sexual contact offending) and mixed offenders (i.e., those with both a CSEM offense and child sexual contact offenses) recruited in New Zealand were rated using file-based data and compared on their endorsement of both Bartels and Merdian's CSEM ITs (2016), and Ward and Keenan's Contact ITs (1999). No significant differences were found in the endorsement of CSEM ITs between groups; however, mixed offenders were more likely to endorse Contact ITs than CSEM-exclusive offenders - specifically, *Entitlement* and *Children as Sexual Beings* were able to discriminate between the two groups. However, it is not clear how context-specific the endorsement of these ITs is. Literature reviewed predominantly focuses on cognitions communicated in English language; likewise, most of the studies focusing on sexual offending come from developed, English-speaking countries (Seto, 2019).

The aim of the current work was, thus, two-fold: (1) to validate the existence and content of Bartels and Merdian's CSEM-exclusive ITs, using a British sample of CSEM offenders; and (2) to cross-validate the generation of these ITs independent of

language/cultural context, using secondary qualitative data analyses on existing transcripts of interviews with men convicted of CSEM-related offenses in Spain. In both studies, the analytic procedure allowed for the possibility of identifying other ITs, including those linked to "contact-driven" CSEM use (i.e., Ward & Keenan's ITs).

Study 1: Content validation of the Implicit Theories (UK sample)

Method

Data source

Data-rich transcripts were derived from three to four hours of semi-structured interviews with individuals who were either in court-ordered or voluntary treatment for their sexual offending behavior at the time of data collection (or had just completed treatment). Each interview[1] was comprised of two parts: (1) details of childhood and adulthood life experiences, including demographic markers, sexual and relationship history, offending history, and psychological well-being and (2) details about CSEM-related offending behavior, including material characteristics, engagement activities, self-identified motivation and desistance behaviors. Anonymized transcripts were available for 10 White males, who were recruited from two community-based treatment providers for CSEM offenders (a description of the full sample is outlined in Merdian, Perkins, Dustagheer, & Glorney, 2018). None of the participants had a conviction for a contact sex offense against a child. As interview transcripts were fully anonymized, specific demographic and offending history data cannot be provided.

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[1] The interview guide can be provided on request.

Analytic procedure

Each transcript was coded by two raters using Conceptual Content Analysis (CCA; Carley, 1993), with *Implicit Theories* defined as the critical concept. Carley (1993) outlines a number of elements that should be considered when conducting a CCA. Table 1 lists each element and how they were addressed in the current study.

Insert Table 1 here

The second and third author independently read through each interview transcript, coding for surface-level statements implicative of an IT. Coding was based on the IT descriptions outlined in Bartels and Merdian (2016), with the addition of the "other" category. An IT was coded as 'present' if one or more phrases/statements reflecting the IT was identified (Keown et al., 2010). After coding each interview, the raters compared their initial results. Across all ITs, rater agreement was high (88%: $\kappa =$ .67, $T = 5.98$, $p < .001$). Kappas could not be computed for individual ITs due to a lack of variance. However, percent agreements were high: *Self as Collector* (100%); *Self as Uncontrollable* (100%); *Child as Sex Object* (90%); *Unhappy World* (90%); *Nature of Harm-CSEM variant* (90%); *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet* (90%); and "Other" (70%). Following this, the two raters met to discuss, until complete agreement was reached. Given that the analysis took an 'existence-focus', saturation was deemed to have been reached using the 10 available transcripts, as each of the CSEM-exclusive ITs had been identified. Thus, the richness (or depth) of the data proved to be highly valuable (over larger numbers) for reaching a justifiable saturation point.

Results

Evidence of all five ITs (including the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet*

assumption) were present in the sample. In addition, statements coded as "Other" were

found to be implicative of two ITs proposed by Ward and Keenan (1999); namely,

Uncontrollability (believing one's behavior is determined by external factors) and

Children as Sexual Beings (the belief that children want, and are capable of making

informed decisions about, sex with adults). As before, raters independently coded the

remaining statements (resulting in 80% agreement for *Uncontrollability* and 60%

agreement for *Children as Sexual Beings)*, before meeting to discuss and resolve the

disagreements. This lower agreement rate for *Children as Sexual Beings* was due to

coding content that was indicative of a different belief (e.g., '*Child as Sex Object*').

The distribution of each IT is presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

In the following subsections, we offer some interview excerpts for each IT. This

provides an insight into the data that were coded, as well as demonstrating what the

CSEM ITs may look (or sound) like when they are verbalized at the surface-level.

Reinforcing Nature of the Internet

All participants showed evidence of the general assumption that the Internet is a

positive reinforcer. This typically referred to the availability and abundance of content

believed to be easily accessed online, including pornography.

> "I think I was just amazed at the amount of information you could find. You
>
> could look up anything and get information on anything" (P1UK).

"I think once you've found the Internet and found pornography, there's so much

of it that's so readily available that it was inevitable" (P6UK).

Some also commented on the immersive or absorptive nature of the Internet, with some

holding the view that they were in a "bubble"; a concept that has emerged previously

(Rimer, 2017).

"Kind of be a bit absorbed by it" (P5UK).

"I'd be losing myself in what I was looking at rather than thinking about what it

actually was" (P5UK).

"You end up sitting in your little bubble of, 'this is me with a computer', and

that sort of thing" (P4UK).

Child as Sex Object

All participants showed evidence for the belief that children are objects that can

be used as a sexual stimulus to meet one's sexual needs.

"There would be an element of appeal in it in terms of sexually and physically"

(P5UK).

"If you think 'oh right, I'm going to just masturbate now and get on with it',

sometimes to get a quick reaction you look at the explicit and it's done" (P8UK).

This was also evident in the neutral language used to describe CSEM ("it", "the

explicit"). Bartels and Merdian explained that this IT would lead to ignoring or filtering

out information that humanizes children. This was also evident, specifically in relation

to viewing CSEM online.

"They [children in online CSEM] might be living next door - it might have

happened next door but because I don't know that, it's just something that I

looked at" (P2UK).

"Kids are just - to me, they're kids but when I was on the Internet I never really

put the two and two together really" (P2UK).

Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)

This IT was present in nine of the transcripts. Evidence was found for the two

ways in which this IT can manifest, as proposed by Bartels and Merdian (2016). The

first is the belief that no harm is caused by viewing CSEM due to the absence of

physical contact.

"No one's getting hurt with what I'm doing. That's what I used to think"

(P2UK).

"I didn't see that I was hurting anybody because it was just me and a computer"

(P1UK).

The second refers to the belief that no harm is present in CSEM if the child appears to

be enjoying it, has a positive facial expression, and/or is of older age (Bartels &

Merdian, 2016).

"There was kind of an element of when you were looking at the pubescent boys

and, you know, they're enjoying themselves" (P6UK).

"When it was a child that was very young or even at any age where I could see

they were - in my mind I could see they were being abused, that really put me

off" (P2UK).

Self as Uncontrollable

All participants showed evidence for this IT; that is, the belief that their behavior

is internally governed and stable, leading to the view that they cannot control

themselves. In line with Bartels and Merdian (2016), surface-level statements relating to

this IT often referred to the idea of being addicted.

"Once they've seen that one image, that's it. They then will look for more. They can't help themselves" (P8UK).

"It's not quite the same as drugs or alcohol, but it is a kind of mental addiction" (P3UK).

"I was in that circle where if it was an alcohol problem, I would have probably said I'm alcoholic or I need to quit smoking, but because of what it was, I didn't think there was any way I could really get out of what I was doing" (P2UK). Interestingly, some surface-level statements for *Self as Uncontrollable* also reflected a desire to be caught, believing it was the only thing that would stop them from viewing CSEM.

"I knew I'd get caught eventually and, to be honest, it's what I needed. It was driving me insane because I shouldn't have been doing it but I was, and I wanted to get caught" (P10UK).

Unhappy World

Nine participants showed evidence of believing that the world is a negative and lonely place, populated by disapproving and rejecting individuals.

"When my days were empty, because I wasn't successful with work and that, [CSEM] was what I filled my days with" (P6UK).

"They [negative life experiences] were culminating in just an awful lifestyle and me feeling very sad and I have a way of behaving as a coping mechanism, which I still do now and always have done, and pornography became mine" (P5UK).

"My perception was that people were viewing me as a failure so, I mean, I isolated myself every minute that I could" (P7UK).

Self as Collector

The *Self as Collector* IT was present in only four of the transcripts. As was suggested by Bartels and Merdian (2016), the statements reflected the belief that possessing and collecting CSEM (particularly material that was more difficult to access) increases one's self-concept and social status.

"You're aware that this stuff is only going to be here for a short period because it's going to get taken down and it's like the last day at the sales" (P6UK).

"So then I'd get more contacts and more friends and I'd build a bigger collection. So the bigger my collection got, people then ask me 'Oh, have you got this file?'" (P8UK).

Ward and Keenan's Contact ITs

Interestingly, *Uncontrollability* was evident in all 10 transcripts. This IT is based on the belief that the world is inherently uncontrollable, leading one to view their behavior as being governed by external factors (Ward & Keenan, 1999). In this study, external forces were linked to the file sharing environments used by the participants:

"I'd have never gone looking for child abuse images... It only crossed my mind because it landed straight in front of my eyes" (P7UK).

"People weren't interested in chatting about adult pornography, so that's when the indecent images came along which people would chat about" (P8UK).

Only one participant showed evidence of *Child as Sexual Being* (i.e., the belief that children seek and enjoy sex with adults).

"From like 11 [years] upwards, you know that they can be sexually active. You know, it's always in the newspapers but people just don't like to admit it" (P10UK).

Study 2: Cross-cultural validation of the implicit theories (Spain sample)

Method

Data source

The data-rich transcripts were derived from three to four hours of semi-structured interviews with individuals who were in court-ordered treatment for their sexual offending behavior in a community program at the time of data collection. The interviews were conducted during the assessment and motivational phase, prior to the intervention sessions of the treatment program. The interview guide was extracted from the treatment program manual (Herrero et al., 2015, pp. 158-171). Each interview was comprised of two parts: (1) psychosocial and clinical variables –family situation, work history, intimate relationships, substance use, psychopathological issues, parental neglect, child victimization, social competence, ability to establish intimate relationships, online relationships' function, self-esteem, ability for emotional expression and reception, Internet use in leisure time, sexuality, use of legal pornography, sexual interest in minors–, and (2) criminological variables –criminal behavior history, CSEM use pattern, motivations for CSEM use, collecting behavior, virtual community, empathy towards victims, criminal assumption. Anonymized transcripts were available for 13 White males, who were recruited from a community-based treatment provider for CSEM offenders. Participant ages ranged from 28 to 61 years ($M = 42.77$ years; $SD = 12.33$). All of them had been convicted for downloading CSEM on the Internet, some of them ($n = 11$) had also been sentenced for distributing the material on peer to peer (P2P) platforms, but none had a conviction for a contact sex offense against a child. Three of them had previous criminal records, although only one had a prior conviction for CSEM offenses.

Analytic procedure

As above, CCA was used to code the interview transcripts. To pilot the coding approach, the first author translated two of the interviews into English language; these interviews were rated by the first and second authors as described above. Following the pilot coding, the second author independently coded the remaining interviews and met with the first author to discuss the summary findings. The first author then translated agreed data excerpts, which were interpreted and summarized by the fourth author.

Results

Evidence of all five ITs were present. Further, analyses of the statements coded as "Other" were found to be indicative of ITs suggested by Ward and Keenan (1999); specifically, *Children as Sexual Beings, Dangerous World, Uncontrollability,* and *Nature of Harm* The findings for each IT are submitted below. The distribution of each IT is presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 here

Similar to Study 1, we will now discuss the IT content that was uncovered from the interview data each IT, and provide some excerpts to demonstrate this content.

Reinforcing Nature of the Internet

As found in the UK sample, all participants referred to the vast array of information and networks the Internet enabled them access to. This fostered, in some cases, a form of dependence, especially after a crisis (e.g., unemployment).

"If I get home and there is no connection I do get angry. Or when there is a

blackout [you feel] that you do not know what to do" (P9SP).

"[I was] on the Internet all day, just watching movies, series, Facebook, ... There

were days that [I was feeling] very bad and I was racking my mind, I did not

want to go out... and I found [on the Internet] a very useful way to spend [so

many hours] … let's say I found an ally in the computer" (P3SP).

With regards to CSEM specifically, participants referred to the reinforcing nature of the

Internet, with all three aspects of Cooper's (1998) Triple-A-Engine as a relevant driver

of the behavior.

Affordability: "With drugs you [have to] pay for it... But [anyone can get CSEM]

without spending money" (P7SP).

Accessibility - often linked to an initial, unexpected access that sparked some

attraction: "Things started to come out and I said ... why is this here, that is at

everyone's reach? And then it started to be something curious, something

forbidden ..." (P7SP).

Anonymity - related to the "bubble" perception described above: "I was alone at

home and I was not hurting anyone" (P10SP).

Child as Sex Object

This IT was present in 10 transcripts, with participants, much like in the UK

sample, showing evidence for the belief that children are seen as objects used to meet

their sexual fantasies.

"I might have imagined [children as] adults" (P4SP).

"I did not see anything wrong. It was something that satisfied me" (P9SP).

"[The girl in the CSEM] reminded me of girlfriends I had when I was younger"

(P11SP).

Desensitization to the continuous exposure of sexualized content was also seen, with feelings of excitement and curiosity leading to an immersion in CSEM.

"There came a time when normal and regular porn didn't [excite me]" (P8SP).

"I was looking [in adult pornography] for a woman to my liking, [and I was thinking] 'not this one' … at the end I came to a page and I said 'wow, I like this girl', and I went from picture to video" (P11SP).

Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)

This IT was evidenced in 11 transcripts. First, participants evidenced the belief that not all children within CSEM are being harmed, namely due to the absence of physical contact.

"I did not think I hurt anyone" (P10SP).

"I have not touched anyone in my life. I would be completely incapable" (P8SP) Second, much like the UK sample, participants evidenced the belief that no harm is present in CSEM if the child appears to be enjoying it, was physically unharmed in the CSEM itself, and/or is of an older age, as proposed by Bartels and Merdian (2016).

"There is something in [the children] that is going wrong, because I have seen minors touching up other minors who are younger than them. There were no signs of crying or resisting" (P12SP).

"Sometimes I had to leave [the forum] because I did not like [the images I were seeing]. Touching up yes, but not penetration or violence" (P4SP).

"I did not look for a profile of neither baby, small child, six years, eight years, ten years. All that disgusts me, it is barbaric" (P3SP).

However, participants demonstrated a significantly different attitude towards the children in their everyday lives, evidencing appropriate victim empathy towards the notion that their relatives could potentially be minors in CSEM, but demonstrating an

inability to draw the analogy to their own offending behavior, as proposed by Bartels and Merdian (2016). Interestingly, this notion did not spontaneously emerge in the UK data.

"The [children in online CSEM] all seemed quite old, I have not hurt anymore – [but] I would feel terrible if it [was ever] my daughter" (P8SP).

"He asked me if I had some [CSEM] with my cousins, and I said 'hey, not with my family, no, no fucking way'" (P7SP).

Furthermore, a new theme emerged, whereby participants acknowledged they knew at time of offending the impact of their actions. However, according to the Multi-Mechanism Theory of Cognitive Distortions (Szumski, Bartels, Beech, & Fisher, 2018), this new theme may actually be reflecting a proximal cognitive distortion or a temporary belief that could be mistakenly interpreted as an IT.

"At that moment, I did not think [about the consequences], but the next day I [would] say 'what a bastard'" (P11SP).

"I have always tried, with my problem, to be a little more in the part that is not so harmful, let's say. So, something that has helped me a lot on this topic is the Manga stuff" (P9SP).

"I realized how bad I was doing; [it is] why the police were there" (P5SP).

Self as Uncontrollable

This IT was present in six of the transcripts. As seen in the UK sample, and in line with Bartels and Merdian (2016), participants evidenced the belief that accessing CSEM was "fixed", in which they were unable to stop or regulate their behavior.

"I could not have stopped [watching CSEM], and I deleted it, I always deleted it. But I would always fall back again; [the fact that] they have caught me is positive, because I could not have stopped by myself" (P12SP).

"[It was] a mental decline, total and absolute that I could not control. It was like

an obsession, it started as sporadic and ended being sickly" (P13SP)

"They say it is not going to go but [that I] can control it. Now I'm avoiding it,

well, I've been avoiding it for some time, but sometimes I was anxious [when I

didn't see] those pictures" (P4SP).

"You're all mad about it and you keep downloading it" (P13SP).

Unhappy World

Twelve participants showed evidence of the *Unhappy World* IT. Evidence was

found for the three ways in which this IT can manifest, as proposed by Bartels and

Merdian (2016). The first, participants described personal circumstances, such as

deficits in intimate partner relationships, unhealthy familial relationships, early

victimization, and unemployment, as preceding their offending behavior.

"[My wife] was cheating on me with several men – because of how bad it was

during the marriage, maybe [it's why] this whole problem came to me …

everything has been a millpond and from there I started to change a lot" (P5SP).

"The burns [I experienced as a child], it's as if I sensed that, like fear, and grief,

and disgust [from other people]" (P12SP).

"When I was unemployed for the second time, I would just stay home in front of

the computer, on the Internet all day. When I was feeling bad [my time on the

computer] increased" (P3SP).

"I had a very strange group of friends. I remember once, they put me in a sack

and they [beat] me" (P10SP).

Bartels and Merdian (2016) also theorize emotional dysregulation problems as being

linked to the *Unhappy World* IT. This is also evident, with participants describing

psychological problems, suicidal ideation, and feelings of negative affect, such as

failure, low self-esteem, and social isolation/withdrawal/deficits.

"I had anxiety, there was a time when I did not want to see anyone – I vented

with the computer" (P4SP).

"I took a medical leave for depression because I was going to throw myself from

the roof where I worked" (P13SP).

"Many times I say, or [make] a comment, and then I notice that it doesn't go

down well, but it is like its [too] late" (P9SP).

"I would like to have children, I would like to have a job, like everyone else"

(P12SP).

Finally, personal situations directly preceding the offending behavior were identified,

with a lack of intimacy and feelings of negative affect described, as reported previously

by Putnam (2000).

"I do not know if maybe, I had a relationship, that would have changed

something – I really do not know if I like [accessing CSEM] or not" (P9SP).

"I never got 100% excited watching minors … [I downloaded the CSEM mostly

on] the days I was bored and nervous and uneasy" (P3SP).

Participants also described their experiences, both positive and negative, following

CSEM use, which may have been used to reinforce consequent CSEM use.

"It became a way of satisfying myself, of feeling happiness" (P7SP).

"It was an escape" (P5SP).

"It made me feel good – it gave me things I could not find" (P4SP).

"[I started drinking] after I realized what I had done, what I downloaded"

(P13SP).

Self as Collector

Six participants demonstrated experiencing this IT. As proposed by Bartels and Merdian (2016), participants described collecting CSEM without a primary sexual motivation, with the process of searching, finding, and collecting CSEM perceived as rewarding, rather than the instrumental function of the CSEM itself.

"I was so shocked [by the material] that I tried to find more, and I kept downloading it. I did not watch CSEM much, it was more to find it and download it and accumulate it" (P13SP).

"I downloaded them, and actually, I could either watch them or not watch them" (P2SP).

"It was about taking it, even when you do not have time to process everything" (P12SP).

"Sometimes I've had that thought that some [CSEM] were missing [from my collection]" (P4SP).

Ward and Keenan's Contact ITs

Interestingly, four of Ward and Keenan's (1999) ITs were identified, although some ITs were more evidenced than others. *Children as Sexual Beings* was evident in 9 transcripts. This IT posits the belief that children are willing sexual agents with the capacity to make informed decisions about engaging in, and actively seeking and enjoying, sexual activities with adults.

"Want it or not there are young girls who are very curious … they know how to say yes or not, if they like it or do not – I think, if you have touched a minor girl, [and she] is young, and she likes it, why not?" (P4SP).

The *Dangerous World* IT was also present in 9 transcripts, that being the belief that the world, particularly its adults, is hostile and untrustworthy.

"You cannot show the kindness of your heart to people because they step on it –
if you take off those masks you stay unprotected and if you put on armor, you
will resist the blows" (P13SP).

"[A person] holds you in contempt in the sense that he looks at you with disgust
and then [another person] tells you that you are useless - it leaves a mark"
(P1SP).

Uncontrollability was evident in six transcripts. Individuals who endorse this IT believe
they due to factors beyond their control, they cannot be held responsible for their
sexually abusive behaviors.

"I'm in the street and I see [children] and they attract me and I do not want them
to attract me - forgive me, [if only] there was a pill or something to make it go
away. I do not want to be attracted to them but I cannot help it" (P4SP).

The *Nature of Harm* (i.e., the belief that children are not harmed by sexual behaviors
with adults) was present in six transcripts.

"If there's touching and if the girl is comfortable and allows it and he does not
make her suffer, I think 'why not?'" (P4SP).

General Discussion

Both studies offer preliminary empirical evidence for the validation of the
thinking patterns and underlying ITs conceptualized for individuals who have viewed,
distributed, and/or shared CSEM, as theorized by Bartels and Merdian (2016) and
previously supported by Howell (2018). Overall, it was evident that the *Reinforcing
Nature of the Internet* background assumption was endorsed by all 23 participants,
perceiving the virtual world as an accessible, anonymous, and accessible environment
(Cooper, 1998), where it is possible to engage in immersive and rewarding activities
with no need of social relations (such as CSEM collection; Soldino & Guardiola-García,

2017). As a result, Internet use is seen as an efficient and safe coping strategy to evade

their *Unhappy World* offline (Elliott, Beech, & Mandeville-Norden, 2013;

Kettleborough & Merdian, 2017; Rimer, 2017; Seto et al., 2010; Taylor & Quayle,

2003).

This study is limited in its scope and generalizability due to a number of

limitations. Semi-structured interviews were used with both samples. However, both the

interview content, interview context, and the interviewers differed across the studies. In

addition, some of the participants in the UK sample had already completed a treatment

program at the time the interview was conducted, which might have influenced the level

of disclosure and social desirability of the participants (Kokish, 2003; Rogers & Dickey,

1991). The sample size of the current study was limited. While the richness of the data

allowed for greater depth in the level of analysis, we acknowledge the limited

generalizability of small scale research. Within this context, however, Study 1 raised

two noteworthy issues. First, *Self as Collector* appears to define a specific subgroup of

CSEM offenders, as not all participants spontaneously expressed this IT. Second, two

ITs associated with individuals with contact sex offenses were also present in the

sample (i.e., *Uncontrollability* and, to a far lesser degree, *Children as Sexual Beings*).

The cross-cultural study offers further empirical validation for the ITs theorized

by Bartels and Merdian (2016), supporting, to an extent, the endorsement of these ITs

independently of the culture or language considered. Interestingly, *Self as Collector* and

Self as Uncontrollable were less evident in the transcripts than other ITs, identifying,

potentially, specific subtypes of CSEM offending behavior. Further, an apparent overlap

between the two ITs, with some participants demonstrating an "addiction" to the

process of *collecting* CSEM, suggests the two ITs, whilst theorized as being distinct,

might be closely related. Finally, four ITs associated with individuals with contact

offenses were also present in the sample; namely, *Uncontrollability, Child as Sexual Being*, *Dangerous World* and *Nature of Harm.*

While the literature suggests that most CSEM users are motivated by pedophilic/hebephilic sexual interests (Henshaw, Ogloff, & Clough, 2017; Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson, & Boer, 2013; Seto, 2019; Seto et al., 2010), some studies point towards a subgroup of CSEM users motivated by the collection process itself (Merdian et al., 2013; Seto et al., 2010; Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Collecting behavior, defined as "the tendency to acquire and retain objects" (Anderson, Damasio, & Damasio, 2005, p. 201), can sometimes acquire a pathological dimension in some individuals whose persisting collecting activities interfere with their normal functioning. Compulsive collecting behavior, along with the pursuit of increasingly deviant materials, have been described as part of the problematic use of online pornography among some individuals (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; Delmonico & Griffin, 2011; Southern, 2008). In addition, CSEM, as a novel and illicit stimuli, has been considered as an appealing material for some collectors (Southern, 2008). In this regard, there is evidence of some CSEM users involved in CSEM collection activities for 25 years or longer (Seto & Eke, 2017); likewise, in terms of collection size, studies (Osborn, Elliott, Middleton, & Beech, 2010; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011) have reported between 3 and 7% of CSEM possessors had collections of more than 10,000 CSEM images (with some individuals accumulating more than 100,000 images). Overall, this warrants further examination of the collecting process and resulting collection of CSEM.

Self as Uncontrollable IT was also found to be related to a specific subgroup of CSEM users in Study 2. Individuals convicted for these offenses can present different degrees of involvement in CSEM activities (e.g., in terms of duration or intensity; Seto

& Eke, 2017) and, thus, perceive their behavior as more or less controllable. Pedophilia

disorder has been considered as a persistent or dominating sexual preference

(Fromberger, Jordan, & Müller, 2013; Grundmann, Krupp, Scherner, Amelung, &

Beier, 2016). Therefore, those CSEM users motivated by persistent pedophilic sexual

interests might be likely to perceive their urge to consume CSEM as uncontrollable,

which may reinforce the *Self as Uncontrollable* IT. But again, given the limited scope

and size of this sample, this is something that needs investigating in future research.

The presence of several Ward and Keenan's contact ITs in both samples was

also noteworthy. It has previously been hypothesized that there are at least two types of

CSEM offenders; namely, *fantasy-drive*n and *contact-driven* offenders, with the latter

showing higher motivation to engage in contact sex offending (Briggs, Simon, &

Simonson, 2011; Merdian et al., 2016). Arguably, the endorsement of Ward and

Keenan's (1999) original ITs could be an indicator of a contact-driven CSEM offender

(Howell, 2018), while the endorsement of *Self as Collector* could highlight a specific

manifestation of the fantasy-driven subgroup. We would have liked to have tested these

hypotheses using the participants' individual profiles (see Table 2). However, given the

limitations raised above about the elicited content of the interviews, and the limited

access to additional case information, we were unable to conduct this analysis.

Interestingly, no evidence of the *Entitlement* IT (i.e., the belief that one has the

right to have sex with children at his own convenience; Ward & Keenan, 1999) was

found in either sample. Likewise, Howell (2018) found *Entitlement* (also identified as a

predictor of contact sexual offending) to be the least prevalent IT in his CSEM offender

sample. This was probably due to the lower presence of antisociality features

(Babchishin et al., 2015; Babchishin, Merdian, Bartels, & Perkins, 2018; Magaletta,

Faust, Bickart, & Mclearen, 2014) and narcissistic traits (Suen, 2013) among CSEM

offenders and other types of Internet sex offenders, relative to contact offenders. Additionally, the higher prevalence of individuals with a pedophilic interest among CSEM users (Babchishin et al., 2015; Seto, Wood, Babchishin, & Flynn, 2012) has previously been linked with defectiveness/subjugation tendencies among these individuals (Sigre-Leirós, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2015), which would, theoretically, contrast the *Entitlement* IT.

Literature suggests legal, cultural, and environmental factors could be influencing criminal behavior across countries (Akdeniz, 2008; D'Alessio, Čeč, & Karge, 2017; Pascual, Giménez-Salinas, & Igual, 2017; Sea, Beauregard, & Martineau, 2019). Overall, however, our study supports the specific thinking patterns and underlying ITs that are common in CSEM users both in the UK and in Spain (i.e., *Unhappy World*, *Self as Uncontrollable*, *Child as Sexual Object*, *Nature of Harm [CSEM variant]*, and *Self as Collector*, linked by an assumption about the *Reinforcing Nature of the Internet*), along with two ITs previously associated with individuals with contact sexual offenses (i.e., *Uncontrollability* and *Child as Sexual Beings*).

The current study was a pilot aimed to validate the existence and content of Bartels and Merdian's CSEM-exclusive ITs. Following this first step, we now encourage other researchers to engage in further validation (and possible refinement) of these ITs in different cultural settings, which could be useful for assessment (e.g., distinguish between subgroups of CSEM offenders) and treatment purposes (e.g., change these ITs over the course of treatment; Merdian, Kettleborough, McCartan, & Perkins, 2017). Specifically, Self as Collector IT appears to highlight an important area for future research, as the collecting aspect of CSEM offending is limited in the literature. Furthermore, the use of comparison groups, such as mixed offenders or offline contact offenders, would be of interest in forthcoming validation studies.

Nevertheless, the current research has provided some initial support for CSEM-related

ITs. Future research should focus on corroborating the findings, as well as examining

how these beliefs are linked to offending behavior and other risk-related factors.

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Table 1. Conceptual content analysis approach

Element	Decision for Current Study
Level of Implication (i.e., coding text in terms of explicitly stated concepts or implied concepts).	Since surface-level statements are thought to reflect underlying implicit theories, an implied level of coding was adopted.
Level of Analysis (i.e., either coding single words or phrases/series of words).	As coding was undertaken at an implied level, phrases/series of words was deemed the most fitting level of analysis. This also aligned with prior research (e.g., Keown et al., 2010).
Predefined or Interactive Concept Choice (i.e., whether a predefined set of concepts will be coded for, or whether a list of concepts will be developed during the coding process).	In this study, a predefined set of concepts were of interest; namely, CSEM-related ITs. For inclusivity, an open concept defined as "other" was added.
Number of Concepts	Six concepts (ITs) were directly coded.
Existence or Frequency (i.e., whether concepts should be coded as present/absent, or in terms of how often they occur).	Frequency-based coding can enable discussions about saliency and emphasis (Carley, 1993), which could be useful for inferring whether certain ITs were more activated than others. However, given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, some extemporal lines of questioning led to more incidences of certain ITs. Also, some participants spoke in more detail than others, which sometimes led to an increase in the frequency of an expressed IT. Since both aspects would affect the validity of a frequency-based analysis, existence-based coding was chosen as the focus of analysis. This allowed for a direct examination of the ITs, as well as their co-occurrence within and across participants.

Table 2. Presence/Absence of each Implicit Theories (ITs) for all 10 CSEM Offenders from Study 1.

Participant	Bartels & Merdian (2016) ITs						Ward & Keenan (1999) ITs	
	Reinforcing Nature of Internet	Child as Sex Object	Self as Uncontrollable	Nature of Harm (CSEM)	Unhappy World	Self as Collector	Uncontrollability	Child as Sexual Being
1UK	X	X	X	X	X		X	
2UK	X	X	X	X	X		X	
3UK	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
4UK	X	X	X	X			X	
5UK	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
6UK	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
7UK	X	X	X		X		X	
8UK	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
9UK	X	X	X	X	X		X	
10UK	X	X	X	X	X		X	X

Table 3. Presence/Absence of each Implicit Theories (ITs) for all 13 CSEM Offenders from Study 2.

Participant	Bartels & Merdian (2016) ITs						Ward & Keenan (1999) ITs			
	Reinforcing Nature of Internet	Child as Sex Object	Self as Uncontrollable	Nature of Harm (CSEM)	Unhappy World	Self as Collector	Uncontrollability	Child as Sexual Being	Dangerous World	Nature of Harm
1SP	X				X		X		X	
2SP	X	X		X		X		X		
3SP	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		
4SP	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5SP	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	
6SP	X				X					
7SP	X	X		X	X			X	X	X
8SP	X	X		X	X			X	X	
9SP	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
10SP	X	X		X	X			X	X	X
11SP	X	X		X	X		X	X		X
12SP	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
13SP	X		X	X	X	X			X	