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# Considering the Pedophile Subculture Online

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## Abstract

The development of the Internet and computer-mediated communications has fostered the growth of a wide range of deviant sexual behaviors along with deviant subcultures that support and approve of these behaviors. Some of these practices pose little risk to public safety, though acts such as pedophilia and the creation and distribution of child pornography have significant negative ramifications for victims. A growing literature has examined the function of the Internet for child pornography distribution, social networks of pedophiles, and tactics of child solicitation. Few, however, have explored the utility of the Internet to develop a subculture of pedophiles and its role in fostering attitudes and justifications for relationships with children. This study will explore the subcultural norms and enculturation of the pedophile community using a qualitative analysis of five Web forums run by and for pedophiles. The findings suggest that the values of the pedophile culture support and encourage emotional and, in some cases, sexual relationships with boys and girls in virtual and real settings. Implications for the study of pedophiles and the role of the Internet are explored.

## Keywords

pedophilia, subculture, enculturation, computer-mediated communications

The development of the Internet and computer-mediated communications has fostered the growth of a wide range of communities supportive of deviant sexual behaviors, such as bugchasing where HIV negative individuals seek HIV positive sex partners (Tewksbury, 2003), prostitution and sex tourism (Holt & Blevins, 2007; Hughes, 2003; O'Neill, 2001; Sharpe & Earle, 2003), as well as money slavery where individuals give money to individuals in the hopes of receiving sadistic treatment via e-mail or

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some other electronic medium (Durkin, 2007). Individuals with sexual interests that are considered outside of societal norms are often driven into the virtual world where they may operate in relative anonymity without fear of shame or stigma (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). Sexual minorities can identify a wide range of resources, such as news-groups, Web forums, and list serves, where individuals can exchange all sorts of information almost instantaneously (DiMarco & DiMarco, 2002). Online spaces also allow individuals to find others who share their interests, creating supportive communities where individuals feel "they are part of a group, from which validation can be drawn, and sexual scripts exchanged" (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006, p. 77).

As a consequence, subcultures have developed in cyberspace around myriad acts of sexual deviance and crime (DiMarco & DiMarco, 2002; Quinn & Forsyth, 2005). One of the most publicly recognized and feared form of Internet-based sex crimes is pedophilia, where individuals seek out sexual or emotional relationships with children (Jenkins, 2001). Recent media attention has focused on the behavior of pedophiles, creating a sort of panic around the number of sexual predators online (Berson, 2003; see also McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Despite this increased attention, criminological research has provided significant insight into the ways pedophiles use the Internet as a means to facilitate criminal behavior (Durkin, 1996, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). For example, the Internet is a vehicle for the identification, trade, and distribution of pornographic and sexual materials, including comic books, stories, pictures, and films (Durkin, 1997; Fontana-Rosa, 2001; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Taylor, Quayle, & Holland, 2001). In addition, computer-mediated communications provide a wealth of potential victims who can be groomed for sexual contact offline (see Buschman & Bogaerts, 2009; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003).

The Internet also provides a mechanism for pedophiles to identify and talk with others through user groups, Web forums, and chatrooms (Durkin, 1996, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Lanning, 1992). These sites provide a way for pedophiles to come together to validate their sexual interests, share information about their habits, and find support for their behaviors (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Jenkins, 2001). Exchanges between individuals provide information on the ways individuals become interested in relationships with children and how to justify these behaviors (Durkin & Bryant, 1999). For example, online communities often use the term *child love* to refer to their attractions rather than the term *pedophile*, which they perceive to be a derogatory and stigmatizing clinical term that does not adequately account for their behaviors (Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001).

An examination by Jenkins (2001) found a subculture of child pornography exists that expresses several beliefs and concepts to its members. Those involved in the exchange and consumption of child pornography communicated the dangers they face from a variety of law enforcement agencies and others along with the need for computerized tools to obfuscate and remove data from their computers (Jenkins, 2001). Justifications for "child love" were also provided as well as documents and traditional literature that can help individuals understand the pedophile culture (Jenkins, 2001).

Ethics and political statements were also commonly expressed, suggesting a desire to push a social movement for child love to make their behaviors accepted (Jenkins, 2001).

Few, however, have considered how the increased use of computer-mediated communications has led to the development of a larger pedophile subculture online and how enculturation into this subculture affects individual behavior (Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Such research can improve our knowledge of the ways that pedophiles' behavior may be refined and possibly increase their pursuit of sexual relationships with children as a consequence of use of the Internet (Durkin, 1997; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Thus, this study explores the subculture and enculturation process of pedophiles using a qualitative analysis of five Web forums run by and for pedophiles. The findings explore the norms and values of this subculture and the ways that it introduces individuals to the practices of pedophiles. In turn, this can inform our understanding of the role of the Internet as a conduit to increase offending behaviors.

## Data and Method

This study uses a series of 705 threads from five Web forums run by and for pedophiles to examine the subculture of pedophiles and its enculturation process. Web forums are online discussion groups where individuals can discuss a variety of problems or issues. They are composed of threads, which begin when an individual creates a post within a forum, asking a question or giving an opinion. Other people respond to the remarks with posts of their own that are connected together to create threads. Thus, threads are composed of posts that center on a specific topic under a forum's general heading. Because posters respond to the ideas of others, the exchanges present in the threads of a forum are similar to an ongoing discussion between peers (Mann & Sutton, 1998). As a result, Web forums demonstrate relationships between individuals and provide information on the quality and strength of ties between pedophiles. They also include a variety of users with different levels of experience and knowledge of pedophile subculture.

The forums identified for this data set were selected based on several criteria, including population size, traffic, and public accessibility. Forums with both large and small user populations were identified to represent the range of forums currently operating online. Additionally, high-traffic forums with a large number of existing posts were selected as frequent posts suggest high activity. Finally, public forums were selected because they do not require individuals to register with the site to examine previous posts. As a consequence, pedophiles and nonpedophiles could gain access to these forums, providing some insight into the enculturation process of pedophile subculture. Those who are just recognizing their attraction to children may be more likely to identify public, rather than private, forums to connect with others (see Frible, Blakestar and Scherbaum, 1990; Holt, 2007; Landreth, 1985, for similar evidence on

**Table 1.** Descriptive Data on Forums Used

Forum	User Population	Number of Threads	Time Frame Covered
1	198	150	10 days
2	40	150	15 months
3	224	105	23 months
4	123	150	9 days
5	418	150	36 months

cybercultures). In turn, these exchanges provide integral insight into the ways individuals are enculturated into pedophile subculture.

The five forums used in this research were identified through a snowball sampling procedure.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, a Web site with resources for pedophiles was identified through a search on google using the term *pedophile Web forum*. The “Links” section of this site was then examined for connections to public Web forums. Ten forums were identified through this source though only five met the sampling criteria. The forums that compose this data set include a total of 705 threads, providing copious amounts of data to analyze (see Table 1 for forum information breakdowns). These threads span various time periods, from a minimum of 10 days to a maximum of 36 months. Moreover, they represent a range of user populations from 40 to 418 users.

An important potential concern that must be addressed is that some users may have deliberately falsified their posts, limiting the accuracy of the data. Furthermore, law enforcement agents may have posted incorrect information in these forums to disrupt the flow of information or otherwise penetrate these sites. This is an important concern; however, the rules and structure of the forum reduce this likelihood of false posting. Individuals who visit the site to identify or otherwise obtain child pornography or other overtly illicit information were chastised and told to review the rules of the forum. In addition, users also quickly singled out and berated any person they thought to be connected with law enforcement. Thus, the likelihood of false posting was minimized significantly by the internal processes and relationships of the forum users (see Holt, 2007; Holt & Blevins, 2007; Mann & Sutton, 1998). In turn, the posts appear to be genuine and should provide significant insight into the pedophile subculture online.

A second concern lies in whether to consider these forum users as pedophiles. Given that pedophilia is a clinical diagnosis, it is critical to identify how forum users may fit within this diagnostic framework. Hall and Hall (2007) argue that

By diagnostic criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, a pedophile is an individual who fantasizes about, is sexual aroused by, or experiences sexual urges toward prepubescent children (general <13 years) for a period of at least six months. (p. 457)

With that in mind, these forums exist to facilitate discussion and to link those individuals with an interest in building romantic or emotional relationships with children. Furthermore, almost all forum users expressed having an interest in, fantasizing about, or discussed being aroused by children. This satisfies the primary diagnostic component of pedophilia though it is difficult to discern how long individuals had been interested in or attracted to children. Despite the lack of data on this point, many users either desired to create relationships with children or had already cultivated such relationships. Thus, it seems appropriate to consider the forum population to be composed of pedophiles, particularly those who discuss physical or emotional relationships with children. In turn, forum users will be referred to as pedophiles throughout this article.

### *Analysis Techniques*

Subcultural values and norms are measured using the concept of “normative order” (Herbert, 1998, p. 347). This is a “set of generalized rules and common practices oriented around a common value” (p. 347). An order “provide[s] guidelines and justifications” for behavior, demonstrating how subcultural membership affects actions (p. 347). This gives a dynamic view of culture, recognizing that individual behavior can stem from individual decisions as well as through adherence to subcultural values. Normative orders also provide for the identification of informal rules considered important by members of the subculture because of the values they uphold. Furthermore, this frame allows the researcher to recognize conflicts in the subculture based on the presence of contradicting orders (Herbert, 1998).

Herbert (1998) provides little guidance on how to actually measure or identify normative orders, but identifies them through qualitative examination and consideration of the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions individuals hold about their behaviors as demonstrated through verbal and nonverbal communication. Holt (2007) uses posts from Web forums and interviews with hackers to perform a similar ethnographic exploration of the normative orders of the hacker community using grounded theory analyses. This study proceeds in the same fashion as Herbert’s (1998) and Holt’s (2007) by saving and archiving the threads from each forum and then printing and analyzing them by hand using grounded theory methodology to identify normative orders (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Grounded theory analyses use a three-stage inductive methodology that is particularly useful as it permits the researcher to develop a thorough, well-integrated examination of any social phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Any concepts found within the data must be identified multiple times through comparisons to identify any similarities (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Specifically, grounded theory analyses begin with open coding where all data are placed in specific events or incidents, then labeled and grouped into categories and subcategories using a specific identifying tag (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For example, terms such as *boy lover*, *girl lover*, *pedophile*, and *anti* were identified as labels used to identify different entities within pedophile subculture.

The second phase of axial coding involves testing the relationships between categories, subcategories, and the data to further develop the identified concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Each tag file was printed out, reread, and recoded to identify unique elements or subcategories in the tags. For example, the repeated appearances of terms such as *anti* or *boy lover* across the forums were examined further and the negative or positive context of these terms examined to discern their value, particularly the perceived negative connotations of “pedophile” for forum users. Also, certain passages were removed or placed under new headings during this phase because they were not relevant to their initial category.

Then the final selective coding phase began to determine how any categories or subcategories from previous stages could be linked to a “core category” of the phenomenon under study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). All axial-coded tag files from each forum were combined into single file for each tag. This allowed the relevance of subcategories to be identified across the forums and establish the key orders of the subculture. For instance, the terms identified in previous coding demonstrated tension and conflict between pedophiles and the larger society, suggesting the importance of this issue in structuring forum users’ attitudes and actions. Thus, this method engenders the inductive identification of norms and values in this various forms of qualitative data.

## Findings

These methods are used to critically explore the normative orders of pedophile subculture online. From this analysis, the social world of pedophiles is shaped by four interrelated normative orders including marginalization, sexuality, law, and security. The orders are used to generate justifications for behavior, affect attitudes toward sexual relationships with children, and structure identity. The contours and connections of these four normative orders are explored in the following analysis using quotes from the data when appropriate.

### *Marginalization*

One of the most significant normative orders in the pedophile subculture is the relationship between pedophiles and the larger society. Forum users clearly recognized that their sexual orientations were different, causing them to face extreme social stigma in the real world because of their sexual preferences (see Durkin, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Jenkins, 2001). Throughout all the forums, user comments conveyed the sense that pedophiles had been pushed to the margins, or fringe of society, and had to constantly defend themselves against those who did not share their sexual orientations. For example, *theWall* asked his fellow forum users:

How often do you hear or read about a non MAA [minor-attracted adult or pedophile] coming to the defense of any person who is publically known to have an erotic interest in children? Blacks, gays, women, etc. all had their defenders . . .

since MAAs seem to have no other defenders except other MAAs is the comparison . . . a valid one?

Across the forums, posters regularly commented that their sexual interests led them to be viewed as “subhuman,” “outcasts,” or “monsters” by the larger society. For example, the poster *Weeeman* wrote, “I get more and more sick of that term ‘predator.’ Good grief, the brainwashing will never end.”

The palpable sense of marginalization shared by forum users led them to clearly delineate the boundaries of pedophile subculture. Forum posters regularly used the terms *antis* (anyone who does not believe in child love), *anti-child sex Nazis*, and *anti-pedophile haters* to refer to those individuals who did not support their views on sexual relationships with children. These individuals exist outside of pedophile subculture and hold negative stereotypes about the beliefs and practices of pedophiles (see Jenkins, 2001). This was demonstrated in a comment from *nihilist* who wrote the following: “One of the major arguments of ‘antis’ is that children are incapable of understanding the complexity of romantic and thus sexual relationships.” In addition, those against relationships with children were not open to understanding the opposing point of view. The poster *moonboi* succinctly described this perception, stating,

We’ve been shut out of the discourse by those with an active bias against us . . . whenever we attempt to speak and clear our names the first thought popping into the minds of those we are trying to discuss the issues with is *They’re just lying again!* or *Of course they’d say that but who knows what really goes on?*

Some users went so far as to suggest that nonpedophiles represented the real problem in society. This was demonstrated in a post by *farkle*, who suggested, “people who think children should not be loved are lost . . . WE are the ones looking out for the best interest of these boys while the parents are to [sic] busy to look after them.”

In addition, forum users noted that they were different from pedophiles who harmed children as a consequence of their actions (Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Truly dangerous pedophiles were thought to injure children physically or psychologically. As an example, several threads discussed the JonBenet Ramsey case and similar cases of murdered children. In these threads, comments such as “WE were made out to be responsible” were common. Hence, they clearly differentiated themselves from the “. . . rapists or molesters [sic] who seek only to abuse and exploit the children of the world” as well as society at large, whose view of pedophiles is skewed because of “. . . media lies and demagoguery that plagues this world on so many levels.”

In addition to defining the boundaries of pedophile subculture, the forum users expressed their own perceptions and definitions for their sexual proclivities, often using the terms *boy love*, *girl love*, or *child love* rather than *pedophilia* (see Durkin, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Jenkins, 2001). In fact, this term was viewed by posters as a negative and pejorative term that unfairly tainted their behaviors. Instead, the forum posters separated themselves from those they perceived as dangerous harmful



predators through the use of terms like *boy love* (see Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001). This was illustrated by *zongo*, who wrote,

With childlove, it is different. Rather than an object to be taken, sexual expression is an experience to be shared. Mutuality, openness, and understanding are the “needfuls” of the concept. The adult and child are equal in a mental/spiritual sense, not only sharing power, but making up for one or the other’s shortcomings.

Forum users regularly stated that “loving” a child is not wrong or immoral and certainly should not be illegal, as in this post from *tedbear*: “BoyLove is a natural thing, like being born gay or even straight. It’s something you can’t control or choose. Only thing you can control is your actions.” Similar posts were common across the forums, as noted by *Franiel*, stating “only in fantasy is a child harmed by handling sex parts,” and *symon*, who suggested, “you cannot control who you fall in love with.”

There was very little variation or debate across the forums as to the belief that pedophilia was not wrong. In fact, individuals agreed with one another and offered a great deal of support, reinforcement, and encouragement (see Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). As a result, the forums provided an important resource for pedophiles to share aspects of their lives that were otherwise not possible in the real world. The value of this virtual community was exemplified in the following exchange between three forum users:

*Grimly*: I am sooo glad I came across this board. I want to talk about so many things with others like me, but I have never known anyone else like me as far as I know. Even if you think someone is a BL [boy lover], you don’t want to say anything in case he isn’t. I have felt so alone until now.

*Smiles*: I know what you mean. I never imagined we would have a place where we could come together [sic] like this. I love it. We just need to raise the funds to keep it going!

*Boyfan*: Remember to tell everyone to donate to the cause! I don’t know what I will do if this site goes down! I love being able to talk about things here because I can’t do it anywehre [sic] else.

Similar comments were found across the forums, indicating that though pedophiles are looked down on and feared by society, they could safely commune with one another online. In fact, the forums provided a means of simple connection and support for their users (see Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). In some cases, threads simply contained messages about the day to day lives of posters, including birthday and holiday wishes. Thus, the forums provide a social and emotional outlet for users to connect and engage in “virtual self-disclosure” (see Rosenmann & Safir, 2006; see also McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Palandri & Green, 2000). This experience enables



individuals to gain a sense of belonging and connection with other forum users, enabling their entrance into pedophile subculture. Thus, the forum provides a sense of belonging that may not otherwise be possible in the real world because of the perception of pedophiles by the larger society.

## Sexuality

The role of marginalization in structuring pedophile subculture is also directly tied to the normative order sexuality. Forum users acknowledged that their sexual interests were not accepted by society and their attraction to children is a defining characteristic of pedophile identity. Thus, they used Web forums as a means to safely discuss their attractions and desires within an online community of like-minded individuals. Threads across the forums contained conversations on fetishes, likes and dislikes, and experiences with children (see Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Though a few wrote about their own childhood sexual experiences with adults, the discussions focused primarily on their adult relationships with children. For example, users regularly discussed their age of attraction (AoA) for boys or girls. This was demonstrated in the following exchange:

*Bernaizze*: My AoA is no younger than 5 for boys but 12 to 16 for girls.

*Steamy*: My AoA can be wide, but it does start with boys about age 1 and a half. After that it really doesn't stop because I like men as well as boys, but my prime ages are probably 2-12.

Others noted that the physical changes that occur because of puberty made it difficult to maintain a relationship with one child for long periods of time. This was exemplified by a post from *cheeky*, who wrote,

Little girlfriends are hopeless causes because they grow into big girls in short order and then are unattractive. That is why it is rare I know a girl for more than a few months or years. Once they grow into puberty, we slide apart and go our separate ways.

Users also discussed the types of clothing and settings where they preferred to view children. For example, one user started a thread with the post "Do you just like clean diaper on a boy or do you like one that is messy?" Posters responded with their own personal preferences regarding little boys in diapers. Another user claimed that "there is nothing cuter than a little boy in a kilt" and went on to tell a story about his "young friend Timmy wearing his kilt." Other users have other preferences, such as socks, underwear, or undershirts. One thread was devoted specifically to the color of socks the users preferred to see boys in. The thread started by asking other users "Anyone else into little boys socks? Myself, I prefer colored socks, something about them,

mmmmm. I really love to see a cute little guy in red or green socks.” Users responded to the question by saying whether or not they had a preference in sock color and what their preferences were. A similar thread was devoted to little girls in men’s boxers or panties, to which one user wrote, “I prefer they wear nothing but if I have to choose . . . then panties win hands-down.” A common attraction for several users was a little boy in athletic apparel, especially baseball players. They talked in detail about various players in the Little League World Series and even provided links to videos and pictures of the athletes. One user wrote that it was “hard to hide my excitement” when he would watch little league games at the public park.

Some individuals also provided links to streaming video sites such as YouTube featuring videos of children engaging in normal activities such as singing or playing sports. Though the videos contained no overtly sexual material, it was evident that several of the users in these forums found them to be gratifying in some way. For example, the user *carljunior* posted a link to an online video showing a little boy playing with something he got for Christmas. Most users responded to this post by saying how cute they thought the boy was, and the member *johnj* responded by writing “He certainly has our attention.”

Forum users also described watching children in public settings or making eye contact with them to facilitate a connection. Such encounters were a source of joy for pedophiles and went by the term *girl moment* or *boy moment*. This was exemplified in a post by *fumi*, titled “nice BL [boy love] moment,” where he described seeing a young boy at a mall and “he obviously noticed that I was watching him . . . he walked directly towards me and lifted up his shirt briefly then turned around and twitched his butt.” This description led several posters to write “beautiful bm [boy moment]” and give very positive feedback for *fumi*. Thus, boy or girl moments emphasized that some pedophiles need not have sexual contact with children but simply connect with them in some fashion.

Discussions within the forums also included the sexual and physical encounters that posters had with young friends (see Quayle & Taylor, 2002). When posters described real sexual experiences with children, they did not go into graphic detail concerning the actual sexual acts they performed. For example, one user, claiming to be a coach of a sports team for young boys, described his “summerlong relationship with a 10 year old boy” and included details such as the “gentleness of his lips on mine” and the “soft skin on his back.” The poster said the “relationship has ended for now, but I hope it will resume again next summer.” Another person posted several stories about his relations with his “10 year old neighbor who has been my yf [young friend] since he was 8.” This user mentioned “cuddling and making out all day” and alluded to oral sex in his posts.

Though some described physical relationships with children, a number of forum users stated that they restrained themselves from sexual relations by choice (see Quayle & Taylor, 2002). These individuals describe themselves as “noncontact” because of the legal and moral issues related to sex with children. This was demonstrated by *slipnot*, who wrote,

[I am] non-contact in practice. I will not touch a child in a sexual way, even if they want me to. I do so by CHOICE. Not because I think such contact is wrong. It's simply illegal and selfish of me to risk exposing that child to the aftermath that society would inflict.

Another user had a noncontact stance and became fascinated with child dolls because of their “perfection and an idealized beauty.” Noncontact child lovers stated that they would watch videos or look at pictures of children but try not to develop a relationship with a child even though the sexual desire is there (see Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Thus, sexuality plays an important role in further defining pedophile identity within this subculture.

## Law

Another important order identified in the pedophile subculture is the law. This was reflected in discussions of legislation, court cases, and law enforcement initiatives concerning pedophilia as well as legal definitions of pedophilia and child pornography. This order emphasizes the influence of law in structuring the ways that pedophiles relate to children and others in and out of pedophile subculture (see Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001). For example, users appeared to be well-versed in the laws that prohibit the behaviors they claim to have engaged in. Posters warned each other about certain acts that may put them at risk of arrest or detection (see Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). For example, when the user *spiltmilk* wrote about finding nude and masturbatory pictures on his digital camera after baby sitting, another user warned, “In the U.S., at least, it is a crime to knowingly possess the masturbation pictures, and possibly also some of the other pictures (depending on exactly what was in them).”

Threads across the forums also contained real excerpts from state or federal law, usually with comments or some type of analysis from the poster. For example, the user *orangeblooded* provided a discussion of the laws pertaining to child sex in Tennessee, stating,

I was flipping through TN law for the fuck of it, right . . . I looked up “mitigating factors” and considered what might be applied to the “rape” of a child . . .

1. The defnedant's [sic] criminal conduct neither caused nor threatened serious bodily injury; I should hope not . . .
2. The defendant acted under strong provocation; “She was that damned hot” is actually a sentence reduction. Says so at law.
3. The defendant played a minor role in the commission of the offense; “She just climbed on top of me and” . . . check.

There were also several discussions centering on child pornography laws and user comments on definitions of child porn (see Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

The consensus seemed to be that “child rape [not consensual child love] is bad, but possessing child porn is not bad.” A number of threads contained conversations about how child abductions and murders would decrease if child pornography was legalized. Some posters even used statistics to show how abductions, rapes, and murders increased in some other countries (e.g., Japan) after child pornography was banned.

The users in these forums also regularly discussed recent arrests and prosecutions of pedophiles and child pornography creators (see Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Posters provided links to media coverage and then discussed the cases. In one case, the suspect was arrested after a hacker gained illegal access to a pedophile’s computer and turned evidence of child pornography over to police. Forum users felt that punishments given to pedophiles were unjust and largely because of unfounded concerns over the harm they may cause. Forum users were disgusted that the pedophile was facing serious prison time whereas the hacker was not charged with any illegal act. One user wrote, “I guess the Feds ignore lawbreaking if it leads to catching pedophiles.” The unfair prosecution of pedophiles was echoed by many other users, including *turks*, who wrote, “doesn’t surprise me . . . it’s not only illegal but unethical. Noone [SIC] cares about your rights if you are a pedophile.”

The length and type of sentences given to prosecuted pedophiles and child pornographers were also regularly discussed. For example, *magilla* described how he was upset that “England is giving longer prison sentences for any suspected pedophile who will not decode encrypted images for the court.” In another thread, users discussed a case where a photographer received a 100-year sentence in federal prison for making and distributing child pornography. Some individuals responded to this article with extreme disdain, with one user saying,

A 100 years? You can mass murder people and get only 20 or 30 years. And probably get out in less. Yet your rape someone and you get a 100 years? That makes no sense. It’s basically a life sentence being he is already 57 years old.

Thus, the criminal justice system unfairly sanctioned some pedophiles as a consequence of their marginalized status within the larger society.

At the same time, the forum users argued that individuals who caused serious harm to children should receive harsh punishments. For instance, an individual posted an article about the police searching for two men who lured an 11-year-old boy away from his sister and raped him. Multiple posters commented on this story, with comments such as the following:

*Smultan*: I couldn’t be more disgusted and sad at what happened.

*Fernand*: Despectable [sic] Disturbing Disgusting Deviant . . . Pray the culprits are caught and given their just treatment in the penal system. Thank God there is Jailhouse Justice.

*Cheever:* I couldn't agree more, . . . for scum like these, they deserve what they get. I don't like to think like that, but crimes like this are so horrible that I loose [sic] all rationality and compassion. Child rapists, abusers, killers, they don't deserve any compassion!

Similarly, a user posted an article about two men in Australia who had been arrested and charged for luring little boys to their home over a period of 9 years and sexually abusing them. When the other users responded to this thread, some responded by saying,

*Mr.Teeny:* Not a nice experience for those boys and not a good advertisement for us.

*Codee:* Boylovers do not "use" boys!

*Spliner:* These two men deserve to be castrated and then tossed into prison with the real he-men. See how they like being used and abused.

Thus, individuals who treat children in a way that shows no love or care deserve to be harshly punished. Those who act within the acceptable normative boundaries of pedophile subculture do not, however, merit cruel or harsh punishments.

## Security

The elements that compose the normative order law are also closely tied to the order security. The threat of legal sanctions led pedophiles to regularly discuss how to structure individual behavior on- and offline through careful management of personal information and activities (see Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Tate, 1990). Users commonly discussed what types of things were tolerable to write about in the forums as they had no doubts that police personnel monitor the forums and might even pose as a member of the pedophile subculture to obtain information. Consequently, users were very careful concerning what they wrote, and they advised each other about what to say, what not to say, and where to safely post their comments (see Holt, 2007; Mann & Sutton, 1998). For example, they advised each other: "Don't say anything incriminating" and to "change some of the details so that the story cannot be verified" when discussing details of real-world experiences. Because the posters realize the forums are "public domain," some of them continue to tell their stories but do so in the form of "a dream I had last night" rather than saying the act really happened.

Participants in the forums would also discuss privacy and computer use, informing one another how to protect their true identities and keep their computers secure (see Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Tate, 1990). For example, *joey-pants* wrote that he avoids being detected by others because "I have my computer locked when I am not using it, my monitor is away from sight of any doors or windows, and I keep files encrypted on my computer." In a different thread welcoming a

new member, one user posted his personal Yahoo ID so other users could contact him. Another user responded with the warning: “Hey buddy I’ve been chatting with you and you are cool. But you shouldn’t put youre [sic] address out there for everyone. Just some advise [sic]” Other advice included,

make sure that you have nothing on your computer or copies of stuff on any cds or anything else . . . if for any reason you do or ever had any illegal items on your hard drive, well then I would pull the drive and bust it up with a hammer . . . then drive it to the dump along with other items that the police might find.

Just make sure your computer has no indecent images on it. Make sure you wipe the drive, clear the caches, etc.

Always use one laptop that you can get rid of in a hurry if nesessary [sic].

Security was also an important concern within the forums, as noted by rules and guidelines about the types of material that could be posted. For example, two of the forums in this sample had clearly posted rules prohibiting links to certain types of Web sites, such as YouTube. This was demonstrated when an individual posted a link to a YouTube video featuring “a preteen group from Korea and are so cute!” One of the forum moderators removed the link and posted the following message:

Our policy on this is clear and we specifically stated that links to YouTube are not allowed. One of the goals of this new rule is to help prevent [the forum] from becoming a vid trading site. Our FAQ already states that [the forum] is not a pic trading site and that applies to “moving pictures” as well.

Restrictive guidelines such as this help minimize negative attention for the forums and reduce the likelihood that members will use the site to exchange illegal materials. Two of the forums also required that five proxy service links be provided below any link to an external Web site. Web proxies anonymize the location and source information of the requesting computer and provide a modicum of security. Thus, these measures protect the forum users and moderators alike (see Jenkins, 2001).

Though online and general computer security was a priority, users also discussed how to stay safe and undetected offline. Because several users appeared to travel abroad to engage in acts of pedophilia, they offered advice to others to avoid getting schemed by locals or apprehended by U.S. authorities. For example, Thailand was a common destination for some of these posters. It was recommended that anyone planning a trip to Thailand for “child love” should try to

Connect with someone who has been there. That way, you know exactly where to go so that you won’t lose a ton of money to some guy who says he can hook you up and then takes off with your money.

Users also recommend “buying a property or investing in a business” if someone is going to be making several trips to Thailand because “that is an automatic red flag for the feds.”

At the local level, users gave advice about contacting and developing “friendships” with boys and girls both on- and offline (see Quayle & Taylor, 2001). Overall, users seemed to recommend developing relationships with children offline rather than online because of the high likelihood of detection online. For instance, the user *pedron* described meeting and chatting with a young man online, stating, “He’s told me everything about himself . . . to his real home address . . . I want to move to Virginia so I can be real friends with him! Help!!!” In response, members posted both congratulatory messages and significant concern. In a thread concerning talking to boys online, a user told another:

*Joisa*: Just be careful not to get too involved or to let his parents find out. “Some pedophile has been webcamming and discussing penis sizes with my 12-year-old son!!” wouldn’t go over too well with a law official. But it’s good you’ve found a boy that cool.

*Boymagnet*: I don’t try to actively build relationships with boys online because of the “creepiness factor” . . . and the knowledge that it’s difficult to impossible for these relationships to ever bear any real life fruit. There are also the poser and/or LEO [Law Enforcement Officer] problems to deal with. I see nothing but bad things coming out of online relationships with “boys.” Anyhow, it sounds like a tough spot for you to be in. I mean, you can’t just walk up to the parents and introduce yourself: “Hi, I met your son on the Internet.” . . . On the other hand you can’t really consider a RL meet without the knowledge of his parents. He’s still a boy and this can get the both of you in a lot of hot water.

*Brosef*: Man, this is dangerous, dangerous, dangerous territory. I hate to burst your bubble, but you should realize that the probability is VERY high that you’re talking to the police. Police, by the way, who have no compunction about using real live boys to entrap guys . . . Maybe I sound harsh here, and I don’t mean to be. But people have had their lives ruined, gone to prison forever, starting in just the way you describe here. I wish [poster means wish] you the best, but I think you’re in an extremely bad and dangerous situation.

Noting that children were available in the community, another user wrote, “Why go to all the trouble (and risk) of trying to find someone on the Internet when you don’t have to?” Still, some users said it was easier for them to initiate a relationship online, so warnings for this practice included, “have more than one ID for instant messaging,” “don’t say anything that can get u in trouble,” and “don’t put any real personal stuff in your online profile.” Once an online relationship has been developed, one user gave the following tips when taking the relationship offline:



1. do not meet until you've had a chance to get to know each other a bit via instant messaging.
2. meet in a neutral place, such as a mall or a restaurant (besides that way there are boys around and you can compare notes)
3. do not surrender phone numbers or addresses until you have already met face to face and get along with this BL.
4. exercize [sic] common sense

In the same regard, posters gave suggestions on ways to approach and/or develop an offline relationship with a child. When one user asked how to look at boys in public without being noticed, another told him to "look at the boys with their mothers next to them. If a friend notices that your attention is else where, just comment on the mother." Posters seemed to agree that they risk less likelihood of detection if a friendship is initiated in front of the parents. Individuals were careful to note, however, that child lovers should carefully manage their behavior in front of parents. Should a person appear too interested in physical contact with a child, they may draw suspicion. This was demonstrated in a post where an individual suggested that:

I have played with strangers kids at the park before as the parents looked on. As long as you don't act nervous or creepy and start by addressing the parents first you can often get away with it, although I won't recommend touching the hot zones.

Furthermore, a user asked if it was right that he not let his 14-year-old "young friend" sit in his lap. Several posters made comments stressing the importance of minimizing risk of detection, stating,

*Jingo*: Good decision in not letting him. Plus, the sister saw you deny the opportunity to have him sit on your lap which should sit really well with her. If she had previously thought that your relationship with her brother was "special," seeing you turn that down would probably make her think that it's just a friendship . . . which can turn out to be a really good thing if the parents ever wonder.

Thus, security is a critical norm within pedophile subculture, as their discussions provide important insights on ways to limit exposure to formal and informal risks on- and offline.

## Discussion

This analysis sought to explore the presence and structure of a pedophile subculture online. The findings suggest that the four normative orders of marginalization, sexuality, law, and security shape relationships between pedophiles in these forums and larger society. These orders define pedophile identity as well as the boundaries of their subculture. They also affect the attitudes and beliefs of pedophiles and justify involvement in deviance through a rejection of larger social norms (see Becker, 1963).

Specifically, these findings support the notion that pedophile subculture places significant value on sexuality through the lens of love and care of children (see Durkin, 1997; Jenkins, 2001). The ability to recognize and understand the value of child love clearly delineates the boundaries of this subculture. Specifically, law enforcement and antis exist outside of the subculture because they fail to understand or accept the capacity for children and adults to engage in emotional and/or sexual relationships (see Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). Similarly, predators that harm children in some fashion do not show any respect for their young friends. Thus, the formation of pedophile identity depends in part on sexuality and the recognition that children are not objects but beings capable of love.

At the same time, the stigma and illegal nature of pedophile sexual interests place them at significant risk of detection and arrest. As a result, they frequently discussed laws and definitions of pedophilia and child pornography as well as prosecutions of other child lovers. They also shared information on ways to conceal and reduce their exposure through the use of proxies, encryption, and other technology to hide their online activities (see Durkin, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Jenkins, 2001; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Tate, 1990). In addition, forum users gave their opinion on techniques to minimize suspicious activity in the real world, such as meeting or watching children in public settings to diffuse detection. Thus, legal risks play a key role in structuring pedophile behavior on- and offline much like the subcultures of computer hackers (Holt, 2007) and digital pirates (Cooper & Harrison, 2001). Few studies have, however, considered the relationship between virtual and real methods to limit exposure to social control agents (Holt, 2007). Future research is needed to expand our understanding of the ways subcultures adapt to the consequences of deviant behavior on- and offline.

In addition, the findings emphasize the significant value pedophiles place on users sharing their personal beliefs, fantasies, and experiences with children and the larger world they interact within. This sort of "virtual self-disclosure" engenders forum participants to be emotionally received by others in pedophile subculture and gain a sense of belonging that is not otherwise possible for sexual deviants offline (see McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Palandri & Green, 2000; Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). Immersion in such a strong social support network often reinforces the acceptance of norms that support and justify involvement in deviant behavior (see Peters, 1997; Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). In turn, these forums can play a role in the enculturation of pedophiles into a subculture that justifies their sexual proclivities as normal and perceives its members as victims of oppression from the larger society (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006).

The open nature of the discussions found in these forums also suggests that individuals may be more tolerant of diverse sexual interests and attractions in online settings. Few, if any, objections were identified to the open discussions present in the forums detailing a range of frank and explicit sexual fantasies and information concerning children whose ages ranged from infancy through the early teens. The only discussions and behaviors that were perceived to be out of bounds were instances where children were injured emotionally or physically because of unwanted contact or instances that attempted to identify child pornography.

This inclusivity mirrors some of the behaviors and disclosure management styles of sex offenders in group therapy (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Frost, 2004; Levenson & Macgowan, 2004; Rennie, 1992) particularly during out-group interactions (Frost & Connolly, 2004). By sharing information with others in an environment where feedback, reciprocity, and a congruence of opinion can be found, the forum users are able to connect in ways that validate and support their actions. The presence of negative or adversarial interactions may, however, reduce the use of forums by pedophiles in much the same way as confrontational therapies may be less effective for some offenders (Frost, 2004; Frost & Connolly, 2004). In light of the potential intersections between therapeutic and online interactions, further research is needed to understand how pedophile communities online form and persist and how this information may be used to improve the treatment of sex offenders generally and pedophiles specifically.

There are, however, several limitations that must be addressed in this study. Specifically, this study is based on an examination of a series of threads from publicly accessible Web forums used by pedophiles. The findings may not be generalizable to private forums and chatrooms where individuals engage in illegal acts, such as the distribution and exchange of child pornography (see Jenkins, 2001). Thus, further research is needed examining the similarities and convergences of these communities to gain insight into the larger contours and values of pedophile subculture and pedophilia generally. In addition, the individuals participating in these forums appear to have a rapport with and seek guidance from other users. It is not known, however, if or to what extent participants in pedophile subculture online modify their behavior as a result of the opinions and advice to which they are exposed. Further research is needed to consider the impact that forums have on accelerating or aggravating pedophile activities on- and offline. The findings could provide significant insight into the ways that pedophiles manage their behavior as a consequence of experiences on- and offline.

### *Implications for Clinicians and the Justice System*

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study have implications for the treatment and management of pedophiles. First, research has indicated that treating pedophiles is difficult, in part, because of offenders' attitudes and cognitions (see Kear-Collwell & Boer, 2000, for a discussion). Many pedophiles tend to rationalize their thoughts and acts and sometimes even view their victim as consenting (Langevin & Lang, 1985). Consequently, cognitive and cognitive-behavioral therapies used to treat pedophiles depend on attempts to reduce the cognitions that support or promote deviance, especially in regard to distortions, rationalizations, and denial (Hall & Hall, 2007; Lurigio, Jones, & Smith, 1995; Middleton, 2004). Participation in the kinds of Web forums identified in this study, however, pose a clear challenge to such treatment protocols as the discussions provide users with social support as well as justifications for behavior that can remove a sense of guilt or responsibility (Durkin & Bryant, 1999). As a result, individuals using these forums either during or after treatment may diminish the influence of protocols designed to affect cognitive distortions.

There may also be utility in considering the role of normative orders espoused by pedophile subculture in individual behavioral chain analyses of sexual offenses against children (Buschman & van Beek, 2003; Hudson & Ward, 2000; Ward, Loudon, Hudson, & Marshall, 1995). In particular, the prominence placed on marginalization may act as a primer in individuals' behavioral chain, freeing them to offend as they are already social outcasts. The information provided in forums on legal issues and security practices may also affect an individual's behavioral chain by identifying less risky methods of offending that make action more likely. It is unknown, however, how perception and acceptance of the norms of pedophile subculture appear in behavioral chain analyses in treatment settings. Greater research is needed to identify the frequency with which these norms appear in individual assessments of behavior. In turn, this can improve our knowledge of the ways that pedophile subculture structures action and develops preventative cognitions that minimize future relapses.

In addition, there is a need to consider the introduction of parole and community supervision guidelines that limit pedophiles' access to computers and the Internet (see Durkin, 1997). Recent research suggests that individuals who use the Internet as a means of soliciting children or obtaining child pornography primarily use home Internet connections to offend (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2005). Restricting access to computer technology in the home during community release could reduce the likelihood of participation in online communities that provide support for sexual relationships with children. Similar sentencing guidelines are used for computer criminals and hackers (see Painter, 2001) and may prove useful in reducing recidivism among pedophiles when coupled with clinical treatment protocols.

The presence of a pedophile subculture in Web forums also provides a unique opportunity for law enforcement. Police agencies recognize the importance of the Internet, chatrooms, and instant messaging systems for sex offenders and have developed undercover operations to target those who solicit children or trade child pornography online with some degree of success (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2005). The normative orders identified in this study can be used as a roadmap for law enforcement to improve the authenticity of their posts when interacting with other pedophiles in chatrooms or other online environments. Undercover agents who can communicate in ways that conform to the beliefs, values, and linguistic patterns of the larger pedophile subculture may improve their success in developing investigative leads and penetrating pedophile networks. In turn, this tactic may improve the success of law enforcement actions to reduce participation in the pedophile subculture.

## Note

1. The Web addresses and names of the groups and users of all sites and forums used are not provided in this analysis in an effort to maintain some confidentiality for the sample.

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