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A Content Analysis of Posts to an Online Support Forum for “Girl Lovers”

Nicole Cantor^a, Ebru Yucel^a, Damon Mitchell^b, and DJ Angelone^a

^aRowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, USA; ^bCentral Connecticut State University New Britain, Connecticut, USA

ABSTRACT

The internet is an effective tool for studying the cognitive distortions among those with a sexual attraction to children. Identified through previous works, users of an online “boy love” forum were found to present a variety of justifications for adult-child sexual relations. The current study extends this line of inquiry, analyzing posts from an online “girl love” forum. We found that the most common justification to appear reflected a belief that societal attitudes and authority figures were to blame for the harms caused by adult-child sex. We also found that the forum provided users with support and reinforcement for such distorted beliefs. Overall, online forums provide a window into the cognitive life of individuals with a sexual attraction to children, and one that reflects beliefs that may be largely unexpressed in the confines of forensic treatment settings.

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Some adults have romantic feelings for, and are sexually attracted to, children. Using contemporary nomenclature, pedophilia is defined as adults with recurrent, intense, sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving sexual activity with prepubescent children typically 13 years or younger (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fifth Edition* description of pedophilia is the acknowledgment that such an attraction may result in sexual behaviors toward children but that some who have such an attraction may not act on their urges. Research on forensic samples of those who have acted on their sexual attraction to children have uncovered several cognitive distortions that may underlie the perpetration of child sexual abuse (Marziano et al., 2006). The current study seeks to assess how individuals outside of clinical or incarcerated samples justify their sexual attraction to children. We are specifically interested in understanding the justifications of individuals using an online support forum for self-described “girl lovers” (individuals sexually attracted to pubescent and/or prepubescent girls).

Justifications and other distortions identified in forensic samples

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been taken when attempting to understand commonly held cognitive distortions, such as justifications, among samples of men arrested for child sexual abuse (DeLong et al., 2010; Marziano et al., 2006; Ward & Keenan, 1999). An analysis of the police interrogations of men arrested in sting investigations for attempting to arrange sexual activity with a child found the arrestees would not acknowledge a sexual or romantic attraction to children (DeLong et al., 2010). Instead, the arrestees attempted to avoid further criminal responsibility through strategies such as denying an intent for sexual activity, denying knowledge of the victim's minor-status, and blaming the police. Such distortions are unsurprising for those facing prosecution, as attempts to acknowledge and explain their attraction could only increase their likelihood of criminal culpability.

Alternatively, studies of men who have already been convicted for sexual contact with children can provide a window into the beliefs that facilitated their sexual offending. Integrating the findings of a variety of assessment-related studies with pedophiles, Ward and Keenan (1999) suggested five overarching cognitive distortions or implicit theories used to justify sexual contact with children: 1) the belief that children want to have sexual activity with adults; 2) the belief that adult/child sexual activity is not harmful to the child; 3) the belief that adults may be entitled to act on their sexual attraction to children because of their superior position; 4) the belief that sometimes sexual activity with children cannot be avoided due to the adult's uncontrollable sex drive, the effects of substances, or stress; and 5) the belief that sexual activity with children provides a source of affection in an otherwise hostile world and/or a suitable punishment for a child's misbehavior and thereby helps the child behave more appropriately in the future. Unlike those of arrestees, the distortions found in forensic samples justify the adult-child sexual activity, provide rationales for such activity to continue, and avoid the acknowledgment of negative consequences to the child (Marziano et al., 2006; Ward & Keenan, 1999).

Given the likelihood that the majority of individuals sexually attracted to children are never convicted of a sex offense against a child, forensic samples may not be representative of the larger population of individuals sexually attracted to children in the community (Beier et al., 2009; Seto, 2004). For example, incarcerated samples may be more chronic and antisocial, have higher rates of additional psychopathology, and be more likely to have offended against girls (see, Seto, 2004, for a review). With respect to the study of cognitive distortions, it is possible that forensic clients may provide accounts of their sexuality to criminal justice professionals and therapists that are different from those they provide to peers in an environment free of legal

and social pressures. There is a need to supplement data from forensic samples with that of data from community-based samples.

Justifications and other distortions identified in online support forums for “boy lovers”

The internet has emerged as a valuable tool in studying atypical subcultures, as online forums have provided spaces where atypical sexual preferences can be normalized (Quinn & Forsyth, 2013). In online support forums, individuals sexually attracted to children can communicate anonymously with similarly attracted peers without the legal and social pressures found in treatment and criminal justice settings (Durkin, 2006; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Holt et al., 2010; Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010). In a seminal paper, Durkin (1997) identified the internet as an environment that can serve four major functions for individuals sexually attracted to children: 1) trafficking child abuse images, 2) aiding in locating victims for abuse, 3) disguising oneself as an age-appropriate peer to communicate with children, and 4) communicating with similarly attracted peers for support and reinforcement. Material posted to online “boy love” or “girl love” support forums provide potentially valuable sources of data on cognitive distortions outside of what may be expressed in forensic settings. Unlike forensic settings, online support forums are environments that will likely include individuals who have not acted on their sexual attraction toward children as well as those who have.

Research analyzing cognitive distortions in the content of online forums dedicated to “boy lovers” has highlighted five types of justifications: 1) condemnation of condemners; 2) denial of injury; 3) claim of benefit; 4) appeal to higher loyalties; and 5) basking in reflective glory (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010). *Condemnation of condemners* refers to the tendency to blame law enforcement officials, social workers, children’s parent, therapists, etc. for the harms caused by adult-child sex: From the perspective of the “boy lover,” police and other sources of authority “brainwash” children to believe that their “consensual” sexual relationships with adults are a form of child abuse, thus traumatizing a child who was not otherwise harmed. *Denial of injury* reflects the belief that a sexual relationship between an adult and child does not cause harm to the child provided there is mutual love and respect. Taking this a step further, *claim of benefit* holds that sexual relationships between an adult and child can be beneficial for the child because of the mutual love and respect. *Appeal to higher loyalties* positions adult-child sexual relationships as part of a larger civil liberties movement for “children’s rights.” Finally, *basking in the reflective glory* (BIRGing) positions adult-child sex as part of a noble historical heritage that includes Ancient Greece and notable philosophers, scholars, and artists.

Online “boy love” forums provide a place where such justifications are not only expressed but are validated and positively reinforced by an online community (O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010). This is a distinct difference from how such justifications would be received in treatment or probation/parole settings, where they would be challenged and targeted for intervention. By providing a supportive community in which justifications are reinforced, the forums are in essence, providing an inverse image of what sex offender therapists and community corrections officers are attempting to accomplish in treatment and supervision. Thus, online support forums are not only potentially valuable sources of information on community samples but may also provide insight into the justifications or other distortions harbored (but unsaid) by those in forensic settings.

The present study

While some researchers have identified justifications used on “boy love” support forums and forums for those sexually attracted to children in general (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Holt et al., 2010; Hundesmarck et al., 2007; O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010), there is a paucity of research specific to forums for “girl lovers;” however, differences between individuals with preferences for boys vs. girls have been found in other areas: Preferred age ranges of boys are between ages 12 and 14, while preferred age ranges for girls are typically younger, between ages 8 and 10 (Seto, 2004). Individuals attracted to both boys and girls tend to report a preference for younger girls as compared to boys (Seto, 2004). In terms of childhood sexual abuse, girls tend to be victimized almost exclusively by male perpetrators, while boys are victimized by either male or female perpetrators (Grayston & De Luca, 1999). Of those perpetrators, acquaintances and strangers more commonly abuse girls, while family members more commonly abuse boys (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Earlier studies such as those noted above indicate that girls are more likely than boys to have been sexually abused by a family member. Given such differences exist between “boy lovers” and “girl lovers,” it is reasonable to hypothesize that other differences may include the justifications used in online forums.

The current study builds on the work of posts to “boy love” forums by determining the extent such patterns are present in posts on a “girl love” support forum. Given the exploratory nature of this study, this study aims to identify the type and frequency of justifications that were present. In addition, we assessed the presence of unique justifications or other themes that had not emerged in the research on “boy love” support forums.

Method

The online forum used for data analysis refers to itself as a “girl chat” community whose purpose is to foster a supportive community of self-identified “girl lovers.” This public online forum is moderated by a committee of members. Membership is available for those who are interested, otherwise individuals can navigate and post to the site as a user. There is a private chat feature which allows members to communicate privately with one another. On average, there were 13 posts to the forum per day in 2019, with a monthly average of 454. Users of the forum appeared consistent over time. As such, posts did not appear to be actively filtered by the moderators. Posts can be submitted uniquely, or in response to other posts. Most commonly, users post in response to other users, in addition to posting their own unique content. Users can search for specific posts through a search function. Users choose a nickname prior to posting and these monikers tend not to avoid inclusion of identifying information such as demographic characteristics. Users often include signatures in their posts, such as jpeg images or quotes. Finally, most posts are made after 10:00 pm, some as late as 4:00 or 5:00am EST. All posts were made in the English language.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the first author. There was no institutional funding provided for this study, and therefore no financial conflicts of interest. In order to assess the justifications employed by self-identified “girl lovers” and consistent with previous replications of Durkin and Bryant’s (1999) study, a directed approach to qualitative content analysis was utilized (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Directed content analysis derives its codes from existing themes or research. This approach also allows for the direct comparison of results from the present study to those conducted by prior researchers. Further, this approach is consistent with previous replications of Durkin and Bryant’s (1999) work (O’Halloran & Quayle, 2010). In addition to the directed approach, a conventional content analysis approach was subsequently used to identify any new justifications or themes that emerged from the evaluation of the “girl chat” forum.

In conducting the directed content analysis, a coding team of four independent judges and one auditor reviewed, discussed, and clarified the existing justifications identified by Durkin and Bryant (1999) and utilized in a subsequent replication by O’Halloran and Quayle (2010). The justifications were (1) condemnation of condemners, (2) claim of benefit, (3) denial of injury, (4) appeal to higher loyalties, and (5) BIRGing (Basking in Reflective Glory). The independent judges began with practice coding assignments using

older posts taken from the same forum used for formal data analysis. Formal coding, which was recorded in Microsoft Excel, started after the group's interrater reliability reached .83. This Cohen's kappa value is recommended by Neunendorf (2002); however, Cohen's kappa is a highly conservative measure of inter-rater reliability, and thus more liberal acceptance criteria can be applied (Lombard et al., 2002).

The judges coded all the posts included in the data analysis independently. Judges read the posts through before assigning the appropriate codes. Judges then met with the auditor to discuss each post and the codes assigned. If there were discrepancies between judges in the code(s) assigned to a post, the auditor facilitated a discussion between the judges until a consensus was reached.

The conventional content analysis was conducted on posts that did not contain one of the five justifications noted above. Judges reviewed the content of these posts to identify any emergent new justifications or themes. This dual process (directed/conventional) was consistent with that described by O'Halloran and Quayle (2010).

Data

The following description of our data is put forth to explain in detail how we determined our sample size and data exclusions: Posts were selected from a single month from 2019 that was randomly selected through a random number generator. In the month selected for analysis, there were a total of 406 posts to the forum, which is slightly below the monthly average of 454. Posts were excluded if they were unrelated to the "girl love" topic ($n = 119$); for example, some posts discussed gun laws, terrorist attacks, and other news items. In addition, 156 posts were excluded from analysis because they were either links to pornography websites or anti-pedophilia posts made by site visitors to insult the site users. The final sample consisted of 131 posts from 25 unique users. We do not know the percentage of users who had acted on their attractions and committed an act of child sexual abuse.

Results

Of those posts included in analysis ($n = 131$), 29.8% ($n = 39$) were coded as having one or more of the five justifications while 70.2% ($n = 92$) were deemed to have no justification present. Of the 39 posts containing a justification, 84.6% ($n = 33$) reflected condemnation of condemners, 35.9% ($n = 14$) contained a claim of benefit, 28.2% ($n = 11$) contained appeal to higher loyalties, 48.7% ($n = 19$) contained denial of injury, and 2.6% ($n = 1$) contained BIRGing. Percentage totals exceed 100% because 19 of the posts were polythematic (they contained more than one justification). A comparison of the

Table 1. Justifications across studies.

	Current Study	O'Halloran and Quayle	Durkin and Bryant
Condemnation of condemners	41%	57%	32%
Denial of injury	8.0%	13%	39%
BIRGing	3%	4%	15%
Claim of benefit	36%	17%	10%
Appeal to loyalties	28%	13%	5%
	Emergent Themes		
Expressed desire	29%		
Hypersexualization	21%		
Creating a sense of community	12%	7%	

Note. Numbers noted in bold were coded within a polythematic account, Numbers not noted in bold were coded alone. If numbers are only noted in bold, the code only ever appeared in a polythematic account.

current findings relative to those of Durkin and Bryant (1999) and O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) are presented in Table 1.

Condemnation of condemners

Condemnation of condemners was the sole justification in 16 posts and present in another 17 that also contained another justification. It is utilized to shift attention from the relationship between adult and child and cite the ignorance of societal mores and authority figures for any wrongdoings directly related to the relationship or desire for one. As such, these posts often reference external forces as causing harm to the child (rather than the adult-child sexual relationship). Parents are frequent targets of condemnation, as demonstrated below with the following excerpt: "I believe they're probably going to try and indoctrinate her and enforce our separation. They won't understand – it's just wrong. It's just inappropriate." Other targets include law enforcement, religious entities, or greater society. In some instances, users condemn a lack of societal hate or stigma toward other atypical groups: "I never recall the ex-gay ministry 'Exodus' being protested by those who hated gays. But the pedophile equivalent is being attacked by those who hate pedos (sic), and from all sides." Overall, the behaviors of those who castigate pedophiles—rather the behaviors of those involved in an adult/child sexual relationship—are depicted as more detrimental to the wellbeing of children (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010).

Claim of benefit

Claim of benefit never appeared as the sole justification in a post. It only appeared in a polythematic context with the presence of *denial of injury*. The two justifications are inherently related, with *denial of injury* asserting that no harm can come from an adult-child sexual relationship and *claim of benefit* extending that line of argument to suggest that a relationship between an adult and a minor is of benefit to the child, as it provides them with

a caregiver who is invested in their happiness. Posts that contained this justification mentioned that “girl lovers” treatment of girls is marked by respect and an appreciation for their opinions. Despite Durkin and Bryant’s (1999) extension that *claim of benefit* is an independent category, our analyses indicated that *claim of benefit* always occurred synonymously with *denial of injury* as seen below:

What was and is important is to show her she can tell me I’m wrong; that I will consider and respect her opinion; that I’m strong enough to admit to be corrected if I’m wrong . . . I will respect her and I will uphold her right to be right . . . Things like those are why girls like me . . . Things like those are why girls I’ve known the same day take to me like I’ve known them since forever.

Appeal to higher loyalties

Appeal to higher loyalties never appeared as the sole justification in a post. It only appeared in a polythematic context (10 times with *condemnation of condemners* and one time with *denial of injury* and *claim of benefit*). Appealing to a higher loyalty is an attempt to advocate for “children’s rights,” and propose that “girl lovers” are working toward providing girls with freedom concerning their sexuality and from unfair rules imposed by society. Posts containing this justification often referenced “children’s liberation,” and respect toward girls’ bodies, arguing that girls should have the power to make their own decisions regarding their bodies.

If by “patriarchy” you mean domineering over girls, then I’m against it. If by “patriarchy” you mean, as current feminists do, that anything cis males do is wrong even when it means to liberate girls through their body autonomy, then I’m the most anti-feminist you can find.

Denial of injury

Denial of injury was the sole justification in three posts and present in another 16 that also contained another justification. Posts that reflect *denial of injury* acknowledge that parents, law enforcement, and other relevant individuals view sexual relationships between adults and children as inherently harmful, but maintain that these concerns are baseless, and that romantic or sexual relationships with between men and girls is not detrimental:

It can remain a social taboo, but an active effort must be made to recognize mutual relationships that are truly consensual and allow them to continue . . . It is time for us as a community to unite in rooting out REAL child abuse (which is statistically more likely to have been an opportunistic offense - i.e., not someone who has some true romantic access to the child).

Basking in Reflective glory (BIRGing)

BIRGing was only present in one post. Analyses of “boy love” forums have found posts referencing the pedophilic behavior of individuals such as Socrates, Plato, and Oscar Wilde, amongst others (Durkin & Bryant, 1999), in an attempt to cast adult-child sex in a positive light. The lone post in the present study, entitled “I love Freud,” expressed admiration for Freud for his writing on childhood sexuality: “He made the first direct connection between children/babies and sexual desire on their part.”

Emergent themes

As noted earlier, of the 131 posts coded, 70.2% ($N = 92$) were deemed to have no justification present. However, utilizing a conventional content analysis approach, these posts were re-reviewed to identify additional justifications or themes. Within those 92 posts, three recurring themes emerged. Although these themes cannot be described as cognitive distortions, they aid us in better understanding the function of online forums and in how “girl lovers” describe their sexual interests to peers.

Expressed desire

Expressing a desire for romantic relationships or interactions with girls was frequently discussed in the forum amongst users (29.4%, $n = 27$). Posters would often describe their desire to be with girls romantically as their partner. “Once I have money to actually do stuff, girl time may be easier to come by . . . Still holding out hope to see my Girl again. Someday.” Sometimes combined with hyper-sexualization (see below), users expressed a desire to be in a relationship with a girl or simply a desire to interact with girls and their specific preferences (i.e., types of girls they prefer).

Hypersexualization. With more explicit references, hypersexualization in posts focuses on describing sexual acts with girls. This occurred in 20.7% ($n = 19$) of the 71 posts originally coded as no justification. Users referenced their own sexual encounters with girls or fantasized about girls in a sexual context. In doing so, users sexualized mundane interactions. “Does she call a roller coaster a classic boardwalk woodie, and then discuss the importance of friction during the up and down motion, with an overly excited nerdy 50-year-old man sitting next to her? I’m willing to check:).”

Recent findings suggest that mentioning sexual fantasies of children and of relationships with children in online forums is predictive of physical contact with a child (Holt et al., 2019). As such, special attention should be paid to expressed desire and similar emergent themes.

Creating a sense of community

A total of 13.0% ($n = 12$) of posts explicitly commented on the support received within the environment of the forum. This is consistent with one of Durkin's and Bryant (1999) four major functions of the internet: to communicate with one another for support and also identified as an emergent theme in O'Halloran and Quayle (2010). For example, one user commented:

My first post was in June of that year, as an unregistered nic (allowed in those fairly pre-troll days), and my first post was either in June or July. I was a sprightly lad with a spring in my step, despite the name I chose. A few names which I still see here pre-date me (no pun intended) . . .

Overall, users will promote the existence of the forum and offer emotional support related to adult-child relationships, or other unrelated daily struggles and experiences.

Discussion

Given societal stigma, individuals with a sexual attraction to children may feel the need to protect themselves in various ways from condemnation. Durkin and Bryant (1999) suggest that the use of certain semantics, including use of terms such as "boy lover" can serve to help frame a positive self-concept around a stigmatized sexual attraction. Certainly, the posts analyzed in the present study reflected an attempt to frame sexual attraction to girls in a positive manner which is consistent with observations across studies of online support forums specific to "boy lovers" and to support forums geared toward those with a sexual interest in children in general (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Malesky & Ennis, 2004; O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010).

The current study included 131 posts from 25 unique users. This is fewer than the 41 unique users identified by Durkin and Bryant (1999). The current research team coded almost double the number of posts at 131 compared to Durkin and Bryant's 73. In the current study, the most common justification was condemnation of condemners, with 41% of coded posts providing this justification. This differed from Durkin and Bryant (1999), as they found denial of injury was utilized more frequently among users. However, the overall frequency of condemnation of condemners is largely consistent across studies. Similar to the current study, O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) found condemnation of condemners to be the most common justification (57%). This justification has been well-documented in the literature, as the purpose of this justification is to preserve a positive self-concept. Through condemning condemners, parental and other authority figures in a child's life are portrayed as problematic and those with a sexual attraction to children can view themselves as advocates of children's rights.

Durkin and Bryant (1999) found denial of injury to be the most common justification in their study (39%), and O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) found denial of injury justifications at a similar rate (35%), though this was the third most common justification in their study. This is inconsistent with the current findings. Varying from both studies, this justification helps to preserve the self-concept by rejecting the negative implications of one's actions. Almost half of posts including denial of injury were coded with other justifications. Among "girl lovers," denial of injury may typically contribute to one's argument rather than be used to fully substantiate it.

Durkin and Bryant (1999) reported BIRGing as a novel finding in their study, as it had not been reported in previous studies that had been conducted with clinical and incarcerated populations. They found that about 15% of their posts were coded as BIRGing. We found BIRGing to be the least frequent justification type, making up only 3% of the coded posts. Similarly, O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) found that 4% of posts included BIRGing. Justifications involving the use of BIRGing may increase the self-esteem of users utilizing this technique. While it may normalize the behaviors of these individuals and give them confidence to maintain their behavior, it is not frequently used.

Although results from this study presented some similarities with previous research, many novel results have surfaced. For example, claim of benefit and appeal to higher loyalties often occurred within the same post in the current study, which differs from previous reports when claim of benefit occurred exclusively from appeal to higher loyalties. In fact, Durkin and Bryant (1999) previously proposed that claims of benefit may serve as a means to decrease the guilt about engaging in sexual acts with children. In addition, claims that adult-child sexual relationships benefit the child may be made in an attempt to persuade other parties that their acts are not harmful, though it is unlikely that this will be successful.

Differences between the results of our study and those conducted previously may be attributable to advancements in media and technology. Since Durkin and Bryant's (1999) study a little more than 20 years ago, technology has become more accessible. The internet is now available to a large majority of individuals via computers, smartphones, and tablets in addition to wireless networks. As such, the rate of posts that now occur on online forums differs from that of 1999. Previously, these forums may have been more populated with individuals of a higher socioeconomic status (and therefore more likely to own a computer with internet access), while users of forums in the present day may represent a more diverse array of socioeconomic backgrounds. Various technological advances, such as "incognito mode" on certain internet browsers have increased anonymity online, which may prompt greater use of these forums. This privacy may have also altered the content that posters feel comfortable sharing on these forums, leading to reduced social desirability in postings.

While the previously discussed themes are prominent in the literature and the current study, additional themes emerged throughout the coding process. One of the emergent themes included *creating a sense of community*. As explained by O'Halloran and Quayle (2010), these individuals feel ostracized by the larger community due to their sexual attraction toward children. The internet therefore acts as a solace, as it is an anonymous space to connect with likeminded individuals. Further, users who engage with the forums typically post frequently and have used the forum for years, leading them to become familiar with one another through this online medium and appreciate its function. As such, users strive for the success of the forums and reference past interactions and discuss the benefits of the longevity of the forum and its user's involvement.

Another emergent theme included *expressed desire*, whereby posters alluded to their desire to be with a specific girl, or girls in general. In some cases, this emergent theme occurred in combination with another emergent theme, *hypersexualization*, in which posters discussed girls in a sexual context. Individuals sexually attracted to girls are unlikely to have environments in which they can communicate with others about their sexual interests, and must, therefore keep their desires a secret from others. Participating in a forum alongside individuals with similar attractions provides them with the opportunity to freely express their desires and make sexual comments about girls while avoiding condemnation from others. The emergence of expressed desire and hypersexualization as themes is concerning as it has been found that posts expressing a direct desire for sexual contact with a child are predictive of also posting about having a history of sexual contact with a child (Holt et al., 2019).

Taken together, our findings suggest a number of similarities and differences between individuals who are attracted to boys versus girls that can be explored in future studies with larger samples. While there was significant overlap between this study and its models, there were themes that appeared among "girl lovers" that had not been previously found in studies of "boy lovers." These themes provide insight into the nature of communication among individuals that express sexual interest in girls. For example, members of this community express their desires surrounding specific individuals, which are much more intimate than providing justifications or general statements. This level of comfort provides insight into the strength of trust among community members and adds value to understanding the importance of creating a sense of community (an emerging theme).

While we found justifications, we did not find *excuses* (which are different from justifications, in that excuses involve an admission that an act is wrong while simultaneously denying complete responsibility for the act) in any of the posts selected for this study. While this may be a difference that occurs because of gender preferences, O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) found only one of the posts in their analyses to include an excuse. Similarly, we did not find

admittance of harm in any of the coded posts. Due to the rareness of excuses or admittance of harm appearing in these posts, it is difficult to form any conclusion about whether these themes occur on the website utilized in this study. This information may be relevant in the treatment of individuals sexually attracted to children. In order to address a maladaptive behavior in treatment, that behavior must be recognized as negative or causing harm. The treatment of individuals sexually attracted to children may benefit from including psychoeducation on the harm inflicted on children through romantic adult and child relationships.

Limitations

One limitation concerns the number of users making posts on the forum that was utilized for this study. Durkin and Bryant (1999) reported 41 individual users, while O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) reported 23 users. Within our data collection, there were 25 individual users. As such, data collected does not represent as wide a variety of perspectives as Durkin and Bryant (1999) and may not be generalizable. Future researchers should aim to identify forums with a variety of users or utilize posts from various forums dedicated to "girl lovers." In addition, only 39 out of 131 posts included justifications. As such, our sample size could be considered small, especially in comparison to the 93 postings coded by Durkin and Bryant (1999).

Another limitation includes the heterogeneity of our online sample. Posts were pulled from one website dedicated to "girl lovers." These posts do not provide a diverse representation of the online forums available to individuals sexually attracted to children. Future studies should aim to include posts from a diverse array of websites, such as those dedicated to "virtuous pedophiles" who take an anti-offending stance. In doing so, researchers can expand upon our findings and identify differences in the justifications utilized by specific forum users.

Implications and future directions

The results from this study provide potentially valuable information for those involved in the treatment or community supervision of offenders sexually attracted to children. Namely, clinicians should be aware that justifications could potentially vary by gender preference. These results can provide clinicians with insight into treatment mechanisms or approaches that may be more effective. Clinicians may want to consider the possibility that targeted cognitive distortions may vary among offenders with different gender preferences, and refrain from generalizing their experiences with offenders. Rather, it is important that clinicians explore individual differences, and utilize the results from this study as a guide for exploring justifications with offenders who may be reluctant

to be forthcoming. In addition, offenders receive constant reinforcement and normalization of their preferences and justifications within the forums. This could be a major barrier, and an important target for clinicians, as it may solidify the belief that their sexual attraction is not harmful. The results from this study also indicate an important ethical and legal obligation for clinicians.

Our findings indicated a theme of hypersexualization among “girl lovers,” a characteristic which has previously found to be predictive of sexual contact with a child (Holt et al., 2019). In addition, it is important to consider that “girl lovers” express their desires to engage in sexual contact with specific girls. Clinicians should be mindful of the potential harm that could occur to those specific girls and utilize preventative measures within the boundaries of their ethical guidelines. While refraining from accessing pornography is a common probation condition for child sexual abusers, community corrections officers should be mindful of such clients also accessing online support forums where cognitive distortions that may facilitate offending are reinforced. This reinforcement also warrants changes in policy for offenders, as it may solidify the belief that their sexual attraction is not harmful. Legislators should consider the option to categorize engagement with such forums as a restricted activity.

Given the nature in which data was collected in this study, and the anonymity of the individuals posting on the forums, demographic information of the users was not available, nor were we able to discern the percentage of those who had a history of acting on their sexual attraction versus those who had not. As such, we are unable to provide conclusions about subgroups of users. Utilizing the ADDRESSING framework (Hays, 2008), future studies should include attempts to identify demographic information from their samples in an effort to identify if there are differences between various subgroups.

Researchers should also attempt to utilize coding strategies that are more exploratory. The intention of this study was to replicate previous work with a different gender preference; thus, identification of different justifications was not a goal. Yet, we found several emergent themes utilizing a conventional content analysis approach that could be identified as new justifications for future evaluation. As such, future studies should utilize exploratory strategies to identify if there are other justifications that have not been previously established.

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Notes on contributors

Nicole Cantor, Psychology Department, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ; Ebru Yucel, Psychology Department, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ; Damon Mitchell, Departments of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT; D.J. Angelone, Psychology Department, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ. Nicole Cantor is now at the Center for Psychology, Naples, FL. Nicole Cantor, Ph.D, is a recent graduate of Rowan University's Clinical Psychology PhD program. Her research has focused on intervention development for unique populations at risk of dating violence or sexual assault. Currently, Nicole practices as a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Psychology, a private practice in Naples, Florida. Her current clinical and research focus is on using and successfully adapting evidence-based psychotherapies for unique populations.

Ebru Yucel, MA, is a doctoral candidate in Rowan University's Clinical Psychology PhD program. Her research focuses on understanding the mechanisms behind the act of sexual aggression, through the use of laboratory paradigms, and exploring potential approaches for prevention interventions. She is also interested in investigating the negative consequences associated with victimization, in addition to interventions for treating trauma.

Damon Mitchell, PhD, received his doctorate degree in clinical psychology from Kent State University. He is a professor of criminology and criminal justice at Central Connecticut State University. His primary teaching and research interests are in the assessment and treatment of antisociality, person and situational characteristics associated with perpetrating sexual aggression, and the factors involved in sexual assault victim blaming.

DJ Angelone, PhD, is a professor of psychology at Rowan University and a licensed clinical psychologist. He is the codirector of the Aggression, Substance, and Sexuality Research Team (ASSeRT) maintaining primary research interests in sexually violent behaviors and sexual risk. He has developed several laboratory analogs of sexual aggression and has used these paradigms to examine a variety of factors related to perpetration and victimization. His research also focuses on understanding the factors that can influence observer perceptions of sexually assaultive behaviors.

Ethical Standards and Informed Consent

This study accesses publicly available information. As a result, informed consent was not obtained. No identifiers were used in the reporting of this information.

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