

Technology-assisted child sexual abuse

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Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 12 november 2021, klockan 10:00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Dr Juliane Kloess, Centre for Applied Psychology, University of Birmingham, UK.

Föreliggande avhandling grundar sig på följande artiklar:

- I. Joleby, M., Lunde, C., Landström, S., & Jonsson, L. S. (2021). Offender strategies for engaging children in online sexual activity. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 120, 105214.
- II. Joleby, M., Landström, S., Lunde, C., & Jonsson, L. S. (2021). Experiences and psychological health among children exposed to online child sexual abuse: A mixed methods study of court verdicts. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 27 (2), 159-181.
- III. Joleby, M., Lunde, C., Landström, S., & Jonsson, L. S. (2020). "All of Me Is Completely Different": Experiences and Consequences Among Victims of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 3432.



Abstract

Joleby, M. (2021). *Technology-assisted child sexual abuse*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, PO Box 500, SE-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.

Internet communication technology has created new ways for adults to sexually abuse children, and as the world becomes more and more digitalized and children are increasingly connected, reports about online child sexual abuse are increasing. The aim of this thesis was to broaden the thus far limited knowledge about technology-assisted child sexual abuse (TA-CSA) and its consequences by using mixed methods to analyze cases (Study I: $N = 122$, Study II: $N = 98$) from Swedish courts (children aged 7–17, offenders aged 16–69), and by performing in-depth interviews with victims of TA-CSA (Study III: $N = 7$, aged 7–13 at the first occasion of TA-CSA, aged 17–24 at the time of the interview). **Study I** investigated which strategies online offenders used to incite children to engage in online sexual activity, identifying the use of (i) pressure and (ii) sweet talk. In contrast to previous research describing the use of pressure as an exception, the findings add support to the claim that there is substantially more pressure and coercion in online offenders' interactions with actual children (compared to decoys). **Study II** examined how the experiences and psychological health of the children were described in the court documents, and which kinds of sexual activities the children were incited to perform online. The results show that some children experienced the abuse as threatening and distressing, and felt that they had no choice but to perform the sexual acts demanded by the offender. The study further revealed a wide range of sexual acts that the children were incited to perform, some of which were of an extremely violating nature. The court documents described several potential vulnerability factors and psychological consequences among the children, which are similar to those shown in research investigating offline child sexual abuse. The aim of **Study III** was to gain a first-person perspective on the experiences of TA-CSA, and a deeper understanding of how it may affect its victims. The interviews revealed that the victimization had profoundly affected the individuals' lives, health, and self-concepts in the short term and the long term. The study highlighted the sometimes long and complex process of understanding the severity of one's experiences, the extensive self-blame, and the anxiety caused by living with the constant fear of pictures from the abuse resurfacing. In sum, this thesis emphasizes that TA-CSA can be a serious crime with potentially severe consequences for its victims. In light of this, it is suggested that TA-CSA should not be viewed as essentially different from, or less severe than, offline CSA.

Keywords: technology-assisted child sexual abuse, offender strategies, psychological health, online child sexual abuse, children's experiences