

2022

## The Perspectives of Former CSEC on the Recruitment Process through Online Platforms

Shawnte Beacham-Houston  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Shawnté Beacham-Houston

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

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by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2020

MA, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2008

BA, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human and Social Services

Walden University

September 2022

## Abstract

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is the sexual exploitation of children for financial gain and is a billion-dollar industry. The sexual exploitation of children is a serious form of sexual abuse and a violation of their human rights. Previous research has explored sex trafficking victimization but not pathways to sexual exploitation. Current research does not explain how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. In this study, the way in which social media platforms are used to recruit children into the sex trade industry was addressed. The pathways model is the conceptual basis of this generic, qualitative study. The sample size included eight participants with a history of previous CSEC involvement using social media platforms and participated in some form of mental health services to address trauma. One-on-one, semistructured interviews with former CSEC victims and survivors were conducted to collect data. Data were transcribed and manually coded to identify themes and patterns. The findings in this study indicated the participants were sexually exploited via the internet at very young ages. According to the participants of this research study, their exposure to online sexual exploitation may have stemmed from the lack of the parental supervision and controls as well as manipulation and coercion from perpetrators on the internet and social media platforms. The findings of the study may create positive social change by increasing knowledge of the dynamics of CSEC recruitment and activity, informing best practices for parents and human services professionals working with this vulnerable population, and improving societal awareness of this phenomenon.

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## Dedication

This is dedicated to my mother, Helen “Sue” Hubbard-Davis, who passed away in my last quarter of doctoral coursework, June 23, 2020, one month before her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. She spoke this into existence. She was with me in body the majority of this journey and has been with me in spirit every step of the way. I dedicate all the hard work I put forth to her.

## Acknowledgments

I grew up as a little black girl in Compton, California, reading books on my front porch. Reading books was an escape from the troubles associated with living in “the hood”. I went from being from “the hood” to earning several hoods. For that, I am grateful.

First, I thank God for planting the seed and for giving me the strength to make it through; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. To my father, James, you are my biggest supporter and my foundation. A very special thanks to my daughter, Simone Nicole. Simone Nicole, you have been with me through every struggle and success. I hope that I have planted seeds and have also shown you what faith, persistence and trusting the process looks like.

To my significant other Nathan, I thank God for sending me a man with the patience of Job. I wanted to quit every quarter! You wiped away every tear, remained positive, continuously reeled me back in when I went off the deep end and prayed without ceasing. Thanks for running this race with me. The marathon continues.

Next, I want to say how much I appreciate Dr. Kecia Freeman for being supportive, encouraging, and creating a judgement free zone. You have been an awesome chairperson. Dr. Kristen Ballard and Dr. Tina Jaeckle, thank you for your guidance. I am very grateful for my Los Angeles County DCFS colleagues, and the SEIU 721 (2018 and 2022) Social Worker Bargaining Unit 723 fighting for equitable wages, a fair work contract and our rights as social workers. Continue to be the light!

To the little girls whose voices did not or will not make it beyond the front porch:

I dedicate this dissertation to you! This is for all of us!



## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	1
Problem Statement.....	2
Purpose.....	4
Conceptual Framework.....	5
Research Question .....	5
Nature of the Study.....	5
Definitions.....	6
Assumptions.....	9
Scope and Delimitations .....	10
Limitations .....	11
Significance.....	12
Summary.....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	14
Introduction.....	14
Literature Search Strategy.....	15
Conceptual Foundation .....	17
Literature Review.....	20
Characteristics, Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of CSEC.....	21
Interpersonal Relationships and the Pathways.....	22

Sexual Grooming .....	24
Online Victimization.....	27
Social Media .....	29
Summary and Conclusions .....	31
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	34
Introduction.....	34
Research Design and Rationale .....	34
Role of the Researcher .....	35
Methodology.....	37
Target Population and Sample Size .....	37
Sampling Procedures .....	37
Participants Selection.....	37
Data Analysis Plan.....	38
Trustworthiness.....	39
Transferability and Dependability .....	40
Ethical Procedures .....	41
Summary.....	42
Chapter 4: Research Findings .....	43
<b>Introduction</b> .....	43
<b>Settings</b> .....	43
<b>Demographics</b> .....	45
<b>Data Collection</b> .....	47

<b>Research Question</b> .....	50
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	50
<b>Evidence of Trustworthiness</b> .....	53
<b>Results</b> .....	55
<b>Theme 1: Accessibility</b> .....	55
<b>Theme 2: Secrecy</b> .....	59
<b>Theme 3: Manipulation</b> .....	61
<b>Theme 4: Coercion</b> .....	64
<b>Theme 5: Technology</b> .....	65
<b>Discrepant Cases</b> .....	68
<b>Summary</b> .....	69
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	70
Introduction.....	70
Interpretation of the Findings.....	72
Limitations of the Study.....	75
Recommendations.....	77
Implications.....	80
Conclusion .....	81
References.....	84
Appendix A: Interview Questions .....	96
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter.....	97
Appendix C: Consent Form .....	99

List of Tables

**Table 1** *Demographics of Former CSEC Participants* ..... 46

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Background**

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) or human trafficking involves the sexual abuse of a child for financial gain (Hampton & Lieggi, 2020). Human trafficking is a high demand illegal operation with a huge profit margin in the United States (United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF, 2017). CSEC, also known as *the life*, as it is referred to within this subculture, can have long-term consequences related exploitation (O'Brien, 2018). The number of people using the internet for online sexual activity has increased dramatically (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019). Many children report engaging in solicitation and exploitation online after using the internet and being approached by individuals seeking to initiate contact with children for sexual purposes. This phenomenon is concerning and requires immediate attention (Hampton & Lieggi, 2020).

I began working with victims and survivors of CSEC in 2007 while working at the largest child welfare agency in the nation (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, n.d.). Many children are recruited into sexual exploitation due to their vulnerability. This experience led to me to further explore the phenomenon, participate in work related trainings, and networking with providers working closely with this population. While working at this child welfare agency, the children would often share their experiences of being recruited, disclosing the tactics and techniques being used by exploiters. After hearing those disclosures, I was inspired to learn more about the

pathways to exploitation by abusers and explore how social media is used in the recruitment process.

### **Problem Statement**

CSEC is a global problem. CSEC is defined as minor children under the age of 18 who perform sexual acts in exchange for money, food, clothing, shelter, or drugs (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.). The sexual exploitation of children/youth occurs in all regions of the United States. CSEC consists of children engaging in acts such as pornography, street prostitution, stripping, gang-based prostitution, online exploitation, blackmail, erotic massage, phone sex operators, being solicited by a relative, social media soliciting, or survival sex (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.). These vulnerable children are most often held against their own will and forced into the sex industry by their exploiters. The United States is both a recruitment and destination country for sex trafficking of children (United States Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2020).

CSEC is a billion-dollar industry (Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, n.d.; Nhan & Bowen, 2020; Reed et al., 2019). It is difficult to accurately report the exact number of sexually exploited children because many are fearful of reporting, and there is also a stigma attached to sexual exploitation (Barnert et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2019). Estimates of the true prevalence of CSEC and child sex trafficking are difficult to achieve and no accurate estimates are available due to its criminal nature, lack of a national database, inconsistencies in definitions, inability of victims to reveal their status, and lack of identification by authorities and service providers (Barnert et al., 2017). It is

difficult to collect information about CSEC and child sex trafficking despite the efforts to measure the prevalence of CSEC due to complicating factors such as homelessness and vulnerability (Barnert et al., 2017). The average age of entry in the commercial sex industry is age 12 in the United States (Cecka, n.d.; Franchino-Olsen, 2021).

Interpersonal relationships with individuals, other than caregivers, may facilitate sexual exploitation. After developing a relationship with the child and creating a false sense of trust, the trafficker will begin introducing the child to sexual exploitation and use physical, emotional, and psychological abuse to keep the child trapped in a life of solicitation (Klimley et al., 2018). Familial relationships play a role in the sexual exploitation of children, and unhealthy relationships with friends, family, and partners/significant others (particularly boyfriends) can lead to commercial sexual exploitation (Reed et al., 2019). Reed et al. (2019) concluded that CSEC survivors often engage in solicitation or the selling of sex unwillingly and also indicated that CSEC involvement is initiated when the victims are attempting to escape familial abuse in their home. O'Brien (2018) indicated that interpersonal relationships are a risk factor that leads youth toward sexual victimization.

Friendships developed on the internet are distinct avenues toward the facilitation of sexual exploitation (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Bouché (2015) explored whether or not the internet is being used by exploiters for the purpose of CSEC and found that CSEC victims initially became acquainted with individuals who would become their traffickers online. Another study displayed service providers' perceptions on the role of the internet in CSEC victimization (O'Brien & Li, 2020). However, there is little research on how

specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment (O'Brien & Li, 2020).

In this study, I explored the perceptions of CSEC and how social media platforms are used to recruit them into the sex trade industry. The purpose of my study as it relates to social change was to bring awareness to the social phenomena of CSEC recruitment and activity. According to Battilana and Kimsey (2017), to become a scholar of change, one must effectively communicate to establish a shared sense of the phenomenon, understand the difference between the current reality and the desired goal, and a shared vision of how to implement a solution. Human services professionals can ensure that the human rights of children are not being violated by becoming aware of the paths of CSEC recruitment such as social media platforms. This may lead to fewer vulnerable children being recruited into the sex industry by way of social media. Lastly, changing how society views child sex trafficking survivors will aid in creating more societal awareness and appropriate identification.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this generic, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. The results of this study support the need to track new technology including websites, new keywords, and new methods of recruitment of CSEC victims.



### **Conceptual Framework**

I used the pathways model as the conceptual basis for this study. The pathways model was developed by Ward and Siegert (2002). According to the pathways model, there are five pathways to sexual offending against children (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Ward and Siegert's five pathways are: dysfunction of deviant sexual scripts, emotional regulation, intimacy and social deficits, cognitive distortions, and/or sexual arousal. Dysfunctions are present in offenders and will affect others in ways such as child abuse (Ward & Siegert, 2002) and intentional internet grooming via the internet. I used this model to explore how sex offenders and exploiters use grooming tactics to recruit vulnerable children into CSEC activities.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study was: What are the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry?

### **Nature of the Study**

I conducted a generic qualitative study to address the research question. Qualitative research is an exploratory design used primarily in sociology and the social sciences (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to further understand experiences and phenomena. The generic, qualitative approach is used in the event that more focused approaches (e.g., ethnography, case study, grounded theory, or phenomenology) are not

appropriate for a study. Generic, qualitative scholars investigate the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of people (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Generic qualitative studies are among the most common forms of qualitative research because they generally draw from theories in education, developmental or cognitive psychology, or from sociology (Merriam, 1998). I used the generic, qualitative inquiry to explore the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of former CSEC. The generic qualitative approach gave former CSEC victims and survivors the ability to be subjective in their experiences and thoughts concerning sexual exploitation and the online recruitment process.

### **Definitions**

Throughout this study, I use several terms related to commercial sexual exploitation to help explain the vocabulary and terminology used in this study, and are used to assist in distinguishing the difference among those terms. The definitions are provided below.

*Child prostitution:* Children engaging in acts such as pornography, street prostitution, stripping, gang-based prostitution, online exploitation, blackmail, erotic massage, phone sex operators, being solicited by a relative, social media soliciting, or survival sex (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.).

*Coercion:* The use of threats to gain control of an individual (Gonsalves et al., 2015; Wolak et al., 2018). Threats can include manipulation, emotional and physical abuse, isolation, intimidation, restraint, and creating a climate of fear.

*Child cyberexploitation*: A term describing the different degrees of online sexual exploitation of children and online grooming (Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003).

*Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)*: Materials or content, including visual representations like photos, videos, live streaming, and digital or computer-generated pictures, utilized in the exploitation of children. Instead of using the legal phrase "child pornography," CSAM describes the reality of this crime and illustrates its effects (Thorn, 2020).

*Child sexual abuse imagery (CSAI)*: CSAI is used interchangeably with CSAM, but refers specifically to images (still images, video, or live stream content) (Thorn, 2020).

*Child sexual exploitation imagery (CSEI)*: A term used instead of child pornography (Thorn, 2020).

*Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)*: Commercial transaction of a sex act involving a minor in exchange for something of value (Klimley et al., 2018; The United States Department of Justice, n.d.). It is also referred to as *Commercial Sexual Exploitation* (CSE). CSEC, CSE, and DMST are used interchangeably.

*Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST)*: Commercial sexual exploitation of an American minor within the United States for profit (Fedina et al., 2019; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000).

*Exploitation*: Used interchangeably with sexual exploitation (Kenny et al., 2019).

*Fraud*: The use of false promises to lure persons into the human trafficking industry (Litam, 2017).

*Interpersonal relationship:* Close association or acquaintance between two or more people (O'Brien, 2018). Interpersonal relationships include primary caregiver relationships, familial relationships (e.g., a parent, aunt, uncle, or grandparent), or extrafamilial relationships (e.g., a coach, teacher, or spiritual advisor).

*Internet grooming:* The use of the internet to coerce a child into performing sexual acts (de Santisteban et al., 2018). It is also referred to as *online grooming*, *online luring*, or *cybersexploitation* (Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003).

*Grooming:* The process whereby an offender prepares a child for sexual abuse (Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003).

*Recruiting/ Recruitment:* The act of persuading or enticing a person to engage in sexual activities (Thorburn, 2018).

*Sexual exploitation:* The act of using a person, without free will, to achieve sexual gratification and the exploiter gains financially (Kenny et al., 2019).

*Sexual Grooming:* The process whereby an offender prepares a child for sexual abuse (Craven et al., 2006; Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019). Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure (Craven et al., 2006, p. 297)

*Sextortion:* Threats made by an exploiter to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favors (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016; Wolak et al., 2018).

*Sex trafficking:* The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a minor for the purpose of a commercial sex act (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.).

*Sexual victimization:* Unwanted sexual contact or sexual coercion (Montiel et al., 2016). Forms of victimizations include unwanted exposure to sexual content, online/internet grooming by an adult, violation of privacy, sexual pressure and sexual coercion (Kloess et al., 2019; Montiel et al., 2016).

*The life:* The subculture of sex trafficking that includes its own rules, class structure, and language (O'Brien, 2018).

*Traffickers:* Offenders (also referred to as “pimps”, abusers, perpetrators, predators, sex offender, and solicitors) who target vulnerable children and gain control over them using a variety of manipulative methods (Baird & Connolly, 2021; The United States Department of Justice, n.d.).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that participants would be forthcoming and share their experiences for this qualitative generic research study. Due to the nature of the topic of CSEC, I anticipated that some CSEC survivors would be reluctant to candidly share details about their experiences of being sex trafficked as a minor. I also assumed that some participants would be apprehensive about disclosing details about the CSEC operation and their exploiters. I understood that stigmatized populations may not be inclined to provide information about their peers, exploiters and experiences. I also assumed that the

pathways model might explain how individuals are recruited into sexual exploitation via social media platforms by solicitors and sex traffickers.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

O'Brien and Li (2020) researched service providers' perceptions on the role of the internet in CSEC victimization. However, I could not locate literature on how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment (O'Brien & Li, 2020). The concept of the pathways model explains that there are multiple pathways leading to the sexual abuse of a child (Ward & Siegert, 2002). I used this qualitative approach to capture participants' perceptions on how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment by sex offenders and exploiters.

Finkelhor's (1984) precondition model of child sexual abuse showed how sexual predators have sexual interests in children and why this interest is manifested in sexually abusive behavior. Hall and Hirschman's (1992) quadripartite model showed sexual aggression against children and sexual arousal may contribute to sexual offenses. Marshall and Barbaree's integrated theory (1990) was derived to explain how various influences (psychological, biological, or sociological) on behavior, account for the reasons why sex offenses may occur by sex offenders. Theories such as Agnew's general strain theory are used to explain how negative psychosocial emotion, running away, and initiation of sexual relationships at earlier ages contribute to a child becoming involved in CSEC. However, those theories primary concentrations are victims' experiences and not the initial recruitments of the victims and the various pathways to exploitation (O'Brien

& Li, 2020). Additionally, the stated theories fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of child sexual abuse (Ward & Siegert, 2002).

### **Limitations**

This qualitative approach included eight participants. Patton (2015) stated that marginalized and fringe groups may have a difficult time trusting outsiders and may fear that the information will be misused. Patton (2015) suggested that the researcher know when not to push hard for information. The interviewer must balance the questions and the potential responses to avoid distress. I was able to build rapport with the participants prior to conducting individual interviews. As a researcher, it was my ethical duty to protect the dignity and welfare of the study participants. I used interview questions that were designed not to humiliate, embarrass, scare, sadden, or discourage the participant. Study participants were informed that they were participating in this study at their own free will and were advised that they may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time. I gave all participants a pseudonym during the data collection process to ensure their confidentiality and enhance the readability of the participant data in the Findings section.

Researcher bias may occur when conducting qualitative studies. To mitigate researcher bias, I used bracketing journals to write down my preconceived biases throughout the course of the study. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to alleviate factors that may taint the research process (Baksh, 2018). Researcher bias can also occur during the process of selecting participants. CSEC affects anyone on the gender spectrum. I did anticipate not identifying enough study participants to volunteer

for my study, especially women participants. It was my assumption that data collected by only women participants could influence the study data in unknown ways. CSEC is a sensitive topic and involves interviewing vulnerable persons. To mitigate the problem, I provided resources to the participants in the event the subject matter triggers emotional concerns.

### **Significance**

The internet (e.g., social networking, online marketing, and encryption technologies) has been identified as a means to facilitate CSEC recruitment and activity (Nhan & Bowen, 2020). There is inadequate research examining how social media and internet platforms are used in the recruitment of children into the sex trade industry (O'Brien & Li, 2020). This study may bring awareness to the avenues in which children/youth engage in CSEC recruitment and ways of combatting CSEC recruitment on platforms, such as social media and internet applications (apps). My goal for this study was to highlight the impact that social media platforms have on CSEC recruitment. Research to enhance understanding of this subculture may be used by human services professionals to identify signs of online CSEC activity and recruitment when working with this vulnerable population. The results of this study may lead to the development of local and national policies that can be used by human services professionals in the prevention of CSEC recruitment and involvement.

The significance of this study, as it relates to social change, is to bring awareness to the social phenomenon of CSEC recruitment and activity. Human services professionals can ensure that the human rights of children are not being violated by



becoming aware of the paths of CSEC recruitment, such as social media platforms. This may lead to fewer vulnerable children being recruited into the sex industry by way of social media. While there has been minimal research conducted on this population, regarding the use of social media, this gap in the literature illustrates the need for further exploration of this practice in order to improve societal awareness of this phenomenon.

### **Summary**

Existing research is limited regarding how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment (O'Brien & Li, 2020). I explored the perceptions of commercially sexually exploited children and the social media platforms used to recruit them into the sex trade industry. Friendships developed on the internet play a role in the facilitation of sexual exploitation. Human services professionals can ensure that the human rights of children are not being violated by becoming aware of the paths of CSEC recruitment such as social media platforms. This may lead to fewer vulnerable children being recruited into the sex industry by way of social media. Lastly, changing how society views child sex trafficking survivors may result in more societal awareness and appropriate identification.

In this study, I explored the perceptions of former CSEC on how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment. I provide a review of the literature in Chapter 2, and in Chapter 3, I discuss the research design and methodology. In Chapter 4, the results of the study are analyzed and in Chapter 5, I conclude my study with a discussion of the results.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The sexual exploitation of children is a serious form of sexual abuse and a violation of their human rights (Barnert et al., 2017). The presenting problem emerged when I could not locate research literature describing how specific social media platforms are utilized in the recruitment of individuals, particularly children, into the sex trade industry. The purpose of this generic, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adults who were CSEC and their thoughts about online activities and specific internet platforms used in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. I explored how social media platforms are used in the recruitment of children into the sex trade industry.

My literature review synthesizes the characteristics and risk factors associated with CSEC, and the role interpersonal relationships play in the grooming process via the internet and social media platforms. Risk factors include having a prior history of sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, placement in foster care and a lack of appropriate parenting (Alderson, 2016; Horner et al., 2020). Interpersonal relationships are a risk factor that leads youth toward sexual victimization (Fedina et al., 2019). According to Kloess et al. (2014), many children are unaware that they are being sexually exploited or sexually groomed, and they may assume that the contact is a genuine relationship via the internet. Additionally, children may not be aware that they are conversing with an adult or someone with a sexual motive. Recruitment into the commercial sex industry may include coercion tactics (Fedina et al., 2019). Children exposed to a dysfunctional living

environment and poverty are more susceptible to participation in CSEC recruitment and involvement in sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen, 2021). Exposure to dysfunctional living environments reduces a child's coping skills leading to an increased risk of becoming dependent on an exploiter for shelter and basic needs (Franchino-Olsen, 2021).

For many, the internet is used to work, play, learn, and communicate but unfortunately, the internet can also be used for CSEC purposes. Sexual grooming tactics are used via the internet and communication platforms to prepare children for sexual abuse (Kloess et al., 2019). Moreover, technology is now being used as a distinct mechanism for sexual victimization. Parents may allow children more online freedom with less monitoring and supervision, which poses a greater risk of being exploited and solicited. Ward and Siegert's (2002) pathways model shows that there are multiple pathways leading to the sexual abuse of a child and explains that a vulnerability must be present in the child. I provide a thorough summary of Ward and Siegert's (2002) pathways model in the Conceptual Foundation section of this study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Literature searches were conducted on several databases, and select keywords were used to locate relevant works related to CSEC and CSEC grooming. The databases searched included Academic Search Premier, EBSCO Host, Elsevier, Lexis Nexis, Lexis Advance, ProQuest, PsyARTICLES, Psychological and Behavioral Science Collection, ResearchGate, Sage Publications Social Sciences Full Text, Sage Journals, and SocINDEX. Keywords included: *commercially sexually exploited children, CSEC, CSEC vulnerabilities, commercial sexual exploitation, CSE, exploited, commercial sex*

*trafficking, online recruitment, social media, grooming, internet grooming, online luring, recruitment human trafficking, domestic minor sex trafficking, DMST, sexual exploitation of children, child abuse, interpersonal relationships, sex industry, pathways model, child pornography, sex offender, exploiter, juvenile delinquency, sextortion, child cybersexploitation, and child prostitution.*

The keywords searched in the databases Academic Search Premier and ProQuest Central were *commercially sexually exploited children*. In the Sage Publications Social Sciences Full Text, I searched the term *domestic minor sex trafficking*. Conducting research with this population has many challenges, which can therefore limit the range of available data. In reviewing research on this population, there were areas where there was little or no current research regarding the sexual grooming of children using the internet or social media platforms. Exploration into literature involving various forms of sexual exploitation and CSEC vulnerabilities yielded more information. Throughout the research process, I reviewed theories such as Agnew's general stress theory, and eco-developmental theory and these theories contributed to my analysis of CSEC vulnerabilities, sexual grooming, recruitment into the sex industry, and the selling of sex (Agnew, 1992; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Reid, 2011). These theories were the most mentioned throughout the literature. Most articles and studies presented in this review were in the aforementioned databases from Walden University's online library. To prepare for this literature review, I also found additional resources via the web search engine, Google Scholars, and used Google to search the United States Department Office

to Monitor and Combat Trafficking and in Persons and the United States Department of Justice websites.

### **Conceptual Foundation**

As previously mentioned, the common theories contributing to the understanding of sexual exploitation and CSEC vulnerabilities included Agnew's general strain theory, and eco-developmental theory. Robert Agnew's general strain theory was developed in 1992, explaining how societal stressors impact people. Child maltreatment occurs when caregivers experience various sources of strain, which is also a source of strain for the child and may result in a child developing poor coping skills. The general strain theory suggests that depending on the stressor, there is an increased likelihood that a person will engage in criminal or negative activity (Agnew, 1992; Alderson, 2016; Reid, 2011), and the risk increases or decreases dependent on the severity of the strain. Based on the theory, negative experiences can lead a person to experience stress, which creates a strain on the person if they have not developed appropriate coping ability. It is suggested that coping mechanisms are needed to reduce the influence of stress and strain (Agnew, 1992). The application of the general strain theory to the selling of sex identifies the vulnerabilities present in child victims (Alderson, 2016; Reid, 2011). Theories such as Agnew's general strain theory also propose that negative psychosocial emotion contributes to behaviors such as running away, and the initiation of sexual relationships at earlier ages.

Other contributing theories included Finkelhor's (1984) precondition model of child sexual abuse; Hall and Hirschman's (1992) quadripartite model; and Marshall and

Barbaree's integrated theory (1990). Finkelhor's (1984) precondition model of child sexual abuse explained how sexual predators have sexual interests in children and why this interest is manifested in sexually abusive behavior. Finkelhor (1984) concluded that the four stages to sexual offending are the offender's motivation to sexually abuse, their internal inhibitors, external inhibitors, and the ability to overcome the resistance of the child. Hall and Hirschman's (1992) quadripartite model was first developed as a theory of rape, but was later applied to child sexual exploitation. Hall and Hirschman's (1992) quadripartite model explained that sexual aggression against children is based on four components: physiological sexual arousal, cognitions justifying sexual aggression, affective dyscontrol (ability to regulate moment-to-moment emotion), and personality problems. Hall and Hirschman (1992) suggested that each component factor might contribute to sexual offenses. Marshall and Barbaree's (1990) integrated theory was derived to explain how various behavioral influences (psychological, biological, or sociological) account for reasons why sex offenses may occur by sex offenders. This theory suggests that sexual offending would be aggressive. Therefore, it does not seem to account for the phenomenon of sexual grooming, as the mechanism of sexual grooming is usually non-aggressive.

The theories mentioned above primarily concentrate on victims' experiences and not the initial recruitments of the victims and the various pathways to exploitation (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Additionally, the stated theories fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of child sexual abuse (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Ward and Siegert's (2002) pathways model is an integration of the aforementioned models/theory by using the

knitting theory to utilize the strengths of each of the theories. The knitting theory is a process of integrating the best aspects of similar theories with a newly developing theory as it relates to a phenomenon (Kalmar & Sternberg, 1988).

According to the pathways model, there are five pathways to sexual offending against children (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Ward and Siegert's five pathways are dysfunction of deviant sexual scripts, emotional regulation, intimacy and social deficits, cognitive distortions, and/or sexual arousal. Dysfunctions are present in sex offenders or people sexually offending against children (Ward & Siegert, 2002) and will affect others in ways such as internet grooming and child abuse via the internet. These vulnerability factors are also likely to play a role in maintaining offending behavior and exploitation of children (Connolly, 2004; Ward & Siegert, 2002).

The pathways model proposes that there are multiple avenues used to commit sexual abuse of a child. These distinct avenues are developmental influences and unstable traits, making it possible to commit a crime against a child. (Ward & Siegert, 2002). The pathway model explained that vulnerable children are exposed to early abuse prior to being able to process emotionally and cognitively leading to inappropriate contact with offenders (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Sexual crimes consist of emotional, intimacy, cognitive, and arousal components (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Ward and Siegert (2002) asserted that sexual offenses cannot occur without sexual arousal, emotional attachment, a relationship, and cognition. The pathways model specified that sexual offenders who prefer to have sex with adults may choose to substitute a child (also referred to as pseudo adult) in the place of an adult (Ward & Siegert, 2002). The model ascertained that child

sexual abuse results from intimacy deficits such as rejection, emotional neediness, loneliness, attachment, and acceptance (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Furthermore, offenders with antisocial cognitions are more likely to develop superiority and patriarchal attitudes toward children (Connolly, 2004; Ward & Siegert, 2002) resulting in coercion and persuasion.

It is equally important to understand how perpetrators utilize technology in the sex industry. Quayle and Taylor (2003) developed the model of problematic internet use, explaining how the use of new technologies enables sex offenders to offend against children. The model of problematic internet use addressed the role of the internet as it relates to sex offenders and child victims. However, for the purpose of this study, the pathways model was most appropriate because it suggested that there are multiple pathways leading to the sexual abuse of a child.

### **Literature Review**

The United States is both a recruitment and destination country for sex trafficking of women and children (Fedina et al., 2019; United States Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2020). Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) defines sex trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, coercion, or abuse for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and recognizes victims of sex trafficking to be all persons under 18 years of age (Stopp Trafficking, 2018). Estimates of the true prevalence of CSEC and child sex trafficking are difficult to achieve, and no accurate estimates are available due to its criminal nature, lack of a national database, inconsistencies in definitions, the inability of



victims to reveal their status, and lack of identification by authorities and service providers (Barnert et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2019). The numbers 100,000 and 300,000 are often used as estimates but are not based on scientific data and researchers do not currently know how many children are being exploited (Stranski & Finkelhor, 2017). It is difficult to collect information about CSEC and child sex trafficking despite the efforts to measure the prevalence of CSEC due to complicating factors such as homelessness and vulnerability (Barnert et al., 2017).

### **Characteristics, Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of CSEC**

Prior studies on CSEC primarily focused on the experiences of youth to assist in understanding the characteristics of CSEC (Fedina et al., 2019). Fedina et al. (2019) conducted a study to address this gap by identifying CSEC risk factors in the United States. It was concluded that certain risk factors such running away from home, conflicts with parents, homelessness, and familial dysfunction might lead some youth to engage in sexual exploitation (Fedina et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen, 2021). According to Kloess et al. (2014) and Kloess et al. (2019), many children are unaware that they are being groomed, and may assume that online contact with a perpetrator is genuine. Moreover, children may not be aware that they are conversing with an adult or someone with a sexual motive. Additionally, family members and friends appear to influence a child's involvement in the commercial sex trade industry (Horner et al., 2020).

Klimley et al. (2018) identified the characteristics of children who may be at risk for becoming CSEC victims and indicated that in-person sexual abuse and child prostitution were the most common CSEC offenses that victims experienced. Children

exposed to a dysfunctional living environment and poverty are more susceptible to participation in CSEC recruitment and activity (Klimley et al., 2018; Thorburn, 2018). Finkelhor (1984) also explained that the selection of a victim is determinant of the ease of access and the victim's vulnerability. These vulnerabilities include but are not limited to poor social connection, familial dysfunction, educational difficulties, involvement in child protective services/child welfare, and emotional issues (Franchino-Olsen, 2019, 2021). Franchino-Olsen (2021a) concluded that research indicated there are numerous gaps in the understanding of the risk factors that lead vulnerable children into CSEC.

### **Interpersonal Relationships and the Pathways**

Fedina et al. (2019) asserted that pathways into the sex trade industry for children/youth are different from pathways into the industry for adults. There is limited research on interpersonal relationships between CSEC and their exploiters (O'Brien, 2018). O'Brien (2018) studied domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) survivors to investigate the role of interpersonal relationships in their lives and specified that interpersonal relationships are a risk factor that leads youth toward sexual victimization. Interpersonal relationships with individuals, other than caregivers, may facilitate sexual exploitation. O'Brien (2018) concluded that "interpersonal relationships have a profound impact on victims' entry into the life as well as their exit and subsequent re-entry into their chosen communities" (p. 8). Reed et al. (2019) explored the various pathways into CSEC and the extent to which interpersonal relationships influence CSEC involvement.

Familial relationships play a pivotal role in the sexual exploitation of children, and unhealthy relationships with friends, family, and boyfriends can lead to commercial

sexual exploitation (Reed et al., 2019). Further, interpersonal relationships can change over time. Reed et al. (2019) concluded that CSEC survivors often engage in solicitation or the selling of sex unwillingly and indicated that CSEC involvement is initiated when the victims attempt to escape familial abuse in their home. Additionally, Franchino-Olsen (2019) explored the effects of peer and family influence on CSEC victims and the pathways that lead to exploitation. Franchino-Olsen (2021a) indicated that numerous risk factors (i.e., child abuse, neglect, and maltreatment) increase a child's vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Exploiters who lure and entrap underage girls into forced labor and sex trafficking use a variety of strategies to maintain power and superiority over their victims (Moore et al., 2020; Thorburn, 2018). Although there are numerous contributing factors to CSEC involvement, research is scarce due to the secret nature of the exploitation and the unwillingness of the victims to report the abuse (Alderson, 2016; Klimley et al., 2018). Thorburn (2018) explored the experiences of adolescent victims with recruitment and entrapment. It was determined that exploiters present as "boyfriends", use persuasion along with physical and sexual violence to demonstrate power and influence within the relationship. For many victims of forced labor, fraud is a strategy used by traffickers to exploit dreams or hope for a better life (Alderson, 2016; Joleby et al., 2021). Victims of sexual exploitation experience several forms of sexual abuse and may suffer from long-term physical injuries and emotional distress while in the life (Bouché, 2018; Klimley et al., 2018). Child victims frequently face abuse and exploitation, which may continue even after they escape the sex industry (Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2013).

In a study conducted by Reed et al. (2019), over half of the study participants indicated that friendships with others facilitated their entry into sexual exploitation. Specifically, friendships developed on the internet are distinct avenues toward the facilitation of sexual exploitation (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Bouché (2015) explored whether the internet is being used by exploiters for the purpose of CSEC and found that CSEC victims initially became acquainted with their traffickers via online interactions. Bouché (2015) concluded that there should be continued efforts to track new technology including websites, new keywords, and new methods of recruitment of CSEC victims. Another study conducted by O'Brien and Li (2020) displayed service providers' perceptions on the role of the internet in CSEC victimization, while another study by Lefevre et al. (2017) explored the experiences of professionals who have a working relationship with CSEC youth. Both studies concluded that online grooming has a profound impact on the sexual exploitation of children.

Finkelhor's (1984) precondition model, is relevant to this phenomenon in explaining a sex offender's motivation to sexually abuse a child by using online sexual grooming and associated offending behaviors. According to Kloess et al. (2014), researcher O'Connell (2003) is one of the few who has studied the process of sexual grooming and exploitation via the internet, concluding that the use of the internet requires less effort and provides for easier access of numerous users on different platforms.

### **Sexual Grooming**

Sexual grooming refers to preparing children for sexual abuse (Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019). Grooming is described as the preparatory stage prior to an

offense being committed by the offender (Finkelhor, 1984; Kloess et al., 2019).

Grooming has been referred to as a major component in sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that take place via the internet and communication platforms (Kloess et al., 2019). Additionally, a sex offender/exploiter may attempt to gain a child's compliance by using flattery, complimenting the child, and making them feel special (de Santisteban et al., 2018). The different types of grooming include self-grooming (denial of sex offending behavior), grooming the environment and others (using people closely related to the victim as a vessel to offend the child), and grooming the child (identifying vulnerabilities within the child) (Craven et al., 2006; Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019).

O'Connell (2003) conducted a participant observation study and concluded that the sex offender's interaction with child victims progresses into the following stages: friendship-forming, relationship-forming, risk assessment stage, exclusivity stage, sexual stage, and the concluding stages. O'Connell (2003) coined the term child cybersexexploitation, to describe the different degrees of online sexual exploitation of children and online grooming. O'Connell's contributions to CSEC research also included providing insight on the behavioral patterns of sex offenders who prefer to offend against children and use online grooming processes (Kloess et al., 2019). O'Connell's contributions demonstrated the ways in which communication technologies are used as a tool for exploitation and sexual abuse (O'Connell, 2003).

First, the friendship-forming stage involves the sex offender getting to know the child victim, while the subsequent relationship-forming stage is an expanded form of the

friendship-forming stage, allowing the perpetrator to build rapport and really get to know the child (Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003). Next, during the risk assessment stage, the sex offender assesses the child's vulnerabilities including the accessibility of the child's internet use and the likelihood of detection by others (Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003). Then, the exclusivity stage is the period of time when the offender has the child profess that they trust the offender and transitions to a relationship that is more intimate and of a sexual nature (Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003). Lastly, the sexual stage is introduced to the child to gauge the child's sexual experience and the progression of the interactions intensifies with time (Kloess et al., 2014; Kloess et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2003). According to the findings, offending differed in terms of the types of stages the offender/child went through and the order in which the offender/child went through them (Kloess et al., 2019). Some perpetrators took much longer to get to know the child and develop an exclusive relationship, while others jumped right to the sexual level (Kloess et al., 2019).

Sex offenders use strategies to gain the CSEC victim's trust so that in the future the victim does not expose the sex offender or divulge to others that the crime is occurring. A study by Kloess et al. (2019) found that certain offenders developed more indirect and elaborate tactics for establishing relationships and trust with children. In addition, coercive grooming strategies and tactics may be employed to gain control of the CSEC victim (Craven et al., 2006; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019). The tactics may include bribery, threats to harm the CSEC victim or their immediate family as

well as violence. Wolak et al. (2018) conducted a study on sextortion (threats made by an exploiter to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favors). The study indicated that about half of respondents reported incidents of sextortion occurring when they were a minor and disclosed that they did not tell a family member or friend (Wolak et al., 2018). Furthermore, the respondents reported that the exploiters also carried out their threats approximately in half of the incidents (Wolak et al., 2018).

### **Online Victimization**

As previously mentioned, a child's environment can also play a role in CSEC victimization. Research has previously focused on the topic of child sexual offending online and ways in which the internet is used to commit offenses related to child pornography (de Santisteban et al., 2018). Research has also focused on identifying common characteristics of those who have experienced CSEC. The limited literature on online child grooming has focused mainly on studying the characteristics of perpetrators and victims that facilitate the sexual abuse of children. However, the offenders' views of the abuse process and the tactics used to perpetuate sexual abuse over time have received little attention (de Santisteban et al., 2018).

The internet is widely used amongst youth in the United States (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; O'Brien & Li, 2020). It is estimated that approximately 90% of youth access the internet on a daily basis (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Internet accessibility has made it easier to abuse children online. The use of the internet by sexual predators has become more prevalent due to increased access to computers by children and sexual predators

increased use of the internet (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019). Researchers de Santisteban et al. (2018) studied how perpetrators perceived the sexual abuse process and collected data on the strategies used over time in online grooming. The results shown that the perpetrators actively studied the environment of the child victims including their vulnerabilities, then deployed strategies adapted to the needs of the children to get the children involved in the sexual abuse (de Santisteban et al., 2018).

Additionally, Madigan et al. (2018) studied the prevalence of unwanted online exposure and solicitation. The study results concluded that approximately one in five youth experience unwanted online exposure in the form of sexually explicit material and one in nine youth experience online sexual solicitation (Madigan et al., 2018).

Livingstone et al. (2018) studied children's experiences of the Internet and various platforms in Europe and concluded that there is potential for harm when children have unlimited and unsupervised access to the Internet. Study participants reported being exposed to sexual and pornographic content, meeting strangers, and being groomed (Livingstone et al., 2018). Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018) tested the theoretical model of online adolescent grooming by hypothesizing that online persuasion strategies were key aspects of the process of grooming children. It was concluded that 40% of adolescent victims (ages 12 and 15 years) reported that they had been deceived by an adult, 44.7% reported any type of bribery, and 36.3% reported nonsexual involvement with the adult. The study assisted in clarifying that grooming tactics, social influence and persuasion are associated with nonsexual involvement, bribery and deception as it relates to CSEC.



Montiel et al. (2016) conducted a cross-sectional study on the prevalence of online victimization of Spanish youth in a targeted community due to there being a lack of information and details that only included information on cyberbullying. The study concluded that online victimization frequently occurs in the form of sexual coercion, sexual pressure and online grooming by an adult. Klimley et al. (2018) also concluded that victims more frequently experienced internet forms of sexual abuse and engaged in risky sexual behaviors outside of the victimization. Prior research suggested that increased use of the internet might have a negative impact on one's social and psychological functioning (Gonsalves et al., 2015; Ward & Tracey, 2004). Particularly, researchers Gonsalves et al. (2015) identified how increased use of the internet may have a negative impact on one's social and psychological functioning and indicated that there is a relationship between online behaviors and characteristics associated with sexual coercion.

### **Social Media**

There has been a constant increase of online sexual offending in recent years. However, there is limited information available regarding individuals' use of the Internet to befriend children for the purpose of exploitation. Few studies explore the sex offender's interactions with children or inappropriate sexual communications via the internet and other platforms (Kloess et al., 2019). Sex offenders visit social media sites that are frequented by children with the goal of initiating sexual contact with them. Once contact is successful between the child and the sex offender, the offender may begin to

engage in a process of sexually grooming the child (Craven et al., 2006; Kloess et al., 2019).

In the study conducted by de Santisteban et al. (2018), it was determined that perpetrators perceived the internet as a tool because they could express themselves openly and with very little difficulty. The number of communication devices equipped with capability of accessing the internet has increased as technology evolves. The growing popularity of smartphones (having the capability to download applications/apps, surf the internet, and text) provides access to child victims. Anderson and Jiang (2018) conducted a study on social media and messaging app usage among teens (ages 13 to 17) and found that 95% of teens have a smartphone or reported having access to one. Approximately one-third of the teen participants studied reported having mostly negative experiences on social media, listing the most popular online platforms other than Facebook as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Social media platforms allow exploiters and buyers of sex the opportunity to identify CSEC victims (Bach & Litam, 2017; O'Brien & Li, 2020). A study conducted by Bouché (2015) found that DMST reported having initial contact with their exploiters online and further investigation was conducted of "pimps" allowing access to telecommunications devices after the victims have been defrauded by them (Bouché & Shady, 2017). According to Bouché (2018), the most popular websites accessed by DMST victims were Facebook, Backpage, Craigslist, Instagram, and Google, with solicitors advertising on those sites (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Offenders begin by deciding which mediums they will use to communicate with potential victims, such as chat rooms

or social media (de Santisteban et al., 2018). Offenders change their vocabulary and attitudes by using teenage jargon and slang, lying about different aspects of their lives, or even creating a more attractive new persona (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018).

By utilizing the internet and social media platforms, solicitors communicate with child victims and buyers of sex simultaneously (Bouché, 2018). The study conducted by Bouché (2018) concluded that the use of technology appears to be gradually replacing in-person contact and has been shown to increase the trafficker's access to child victims and potential buyers of sex. Bouché (2018) suggests that further examination of patterns in the process by which social media and applications are used by buyers to communicate with traffickers and child victims is needed. It was also suggested that future studies should consider examining how specific online activities and platforms are involved in DMST facilitation, as well as how different internet technologies, and online communities and platforms can be used as resources for prevention, intervention and implementation.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Before a sex offender begins to groom a child, some level of motivation to abuse a child needs to be present (de Santisteban et al., 2018). The pathways model proposed that there are multiple avenues used to commit sexual abuse of a child. Sexual offenses cannot occur without sexual arousal, emotional attachment, and relationship (Ward & Siegert, 2002). Finkelhor (1984) explained that the selection of a victim is determinant on the ease of access and the victim's vulnerability. It is important to understand how

perpetrators and victims/survivors of sexual crimes utilize technology in the sex industry. Quayle and Taylor (2003) developed the model of problematic internet use explaining how the internet is used by perpetrators to offend against children. The model of problematic internet use addressed the role the internet plays in committing online sexual offenses relating to children and sex offenders, but the pathways model was most appropriate for this study because with it one can account for multiple pathways leading to the sexual abuse of a child.

A literature review of studies and articles on CSEC indicated that grooming has been identified as a major component in sexually exploitative interactions between offenders and victims that take place via internet communication platforms (Kloess et al., 2019). Sex offenders often visit social media sites that are frequented by children with the goal of initiating sexual contact with them, which usually starts with relationship forming and later inappropriate sexual contact. It is important to note that many children are unaware they are being exploited or groomed because they may assume that the contact is a general online relationship via the internet. My research identified that CSEC have existed long before computers and that the internet is merely one of the many avenues for perpetrators to recruit CSEC victims and solicit buyers of sex (Bach & Litam, 2017). Furthermore, certain factors associated with a child's internet use may increase the probability of online sexual solicitation and interaction (de Santisteban et al., 2018). Perpetrators actively study the environment of child victims to determine their vulnerabilities to get the children involved in the sexual abuse (de Santisteban et al.,

2018). By utilizing the internet and social media platforms, solicitors communicate with child victims and buyers of sex simultaneously (Bouché, 2018).

A qualitative approach was used to explore the perspectives of former CSEC on how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment. Bouché (2018) recommended further examination of patterns in traffickers' and child victims' interactions through social media and apps. Bouché (2018) also suggested that future research investigate how specific online activities and platforms are involved in DMST facilitation, as well as how different internet technologies, online communities, and platforms can be used as tools for the creation and implementation of prevention and intervention strategies. I believed that the pathways model was the most appropriate as it explained how CSEC are recruited and groomed by sex offenders via the internet and by way of social media platforms. This phenomenon and this vulnerable population are rarely discussed in studies. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology of this qualitative study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this generic, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. Qualitative research is an exploratory design used primarily in sociology and the social sciences, and generally draws from theories in education, developmental, or cognitive psychology (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, non-numerical data are gathered and analyzed to better understand experiences and occurrences. Generic, qualitative scholars investigate the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of people (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question was: What are the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry? I chose a generic qualitative study as the research methodology to explore the perspectives of former CSEC. A gap in the literature exists because there is little research on how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment. As a researcher conducting a generic, qualitative inquiry, I explored the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of former CSEC victims and survivors. Because of the use of a generic, qualitative approach, former CSEC victims and survivors were able to be

subjective in their experiences and thoughts concerning sexual exploitation and the online recruitment process.

I did consider other qualitative approaches for this research study: (a) ethnography, (b) phenomenology, and (c) case study. With the ethnography approach, a researchers can analyze a group of people based on the cultural setting that they share (Patton, 2015). Through the phenomenological approach, the participants have the opportunity to explain their lived experiences in their own words, which emphasizes their unique experience (Patton, 2015). Lastly, with the case study approach, one can assess events involving particular individuals and conduct an in-depth investigation of an individual or group (Patton, 2015). The generic, qualitative approach was more suited for this research study and was used to explore the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of the CSEC population.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As stated in Chapter 1, the plan was to build rapport with the participants selected for this study prior to conducting individual interviews. As a researcher, it was my ethical duty to protect the dignity and welfare of the study participants. I used interview questions that are designed not to humiliate, embarrass, scare, sadden, or discourage the participant. To avoid potential study participant distress, I balanced the study questions and possible responses. Study participants were informed that they were participating in this study at their own free will and were explained that they may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time. All participants were given a pseudonym during the data

collection process to ensure their confidentiality and enhance the readability of the participant data in the Findings section.

Researcher bias may occur when conducting qualitative studies. To mitigate researcher bias, I used bracketing journals to write down my preconceived biases during the study. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to alleviate factors that may taint the research process (Baksh, 2018). Researcher bias can also occur during the process of selecting participants. To mitigate this problem, participants were selected by using intentional selection based on the criteria of being a former CSEC and having prior involvement in CSEC activities online.

CSEC affects both women and men. Because CSEC survivors may be reluctant to candidly share their experiences for various reasons, including fear, shame, embarrassment, and guilt, I anticipated not identifying enough study participants to volunteer for participation, especially male participants. Data collected exclusively from women participants could have influenced the study results in unknown ways. My study included an equal number of men and women.

CSEC is a sensitive topic and involves interviewing vulnerable persons. To mitigate ethical concerns, after the interview, I debriefed with each participant and provided resources to the participants in the event the subject matter triggered emotional concerns or feelings of distress. I gathered and compiled mental health resources and support services into a referral packet. I distributed the referral packet which included mental health self-care worksheets and tips at the conclusion of the interview.



## **Methodology**

### **Target Population and Sample Size**

Eight study participants were recruited and intentionally selected with purposeful sampling from various community organizations providing services to former CSEC. The participants were recruited through the community organizations' social media pages on Facebook.

### **Sampling Procedures**

Purposeful sampling, also referred to as purposive sampling, is used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling emphasizes studying a phenomenon in depth by using small participant sample sizes. The participants are information-rich resources because the selection is deliberate (Palinkas et al., 2015). This study can be replicated using purposeful sampling to collect data from participants who have experienced CSEC. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of CSEC facilitation and recruitment by exploring the participants' points of view, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. I extracted information-rich qualitative data from the interviews to understand the perspectives of former CSEC youth who were recruited via social media platforms.

### **Participants Selection**

I recruited former CSEC victims and survivors who were solicited via social media platforms to participate in interviews. Participants were required to fulfill several inclusion criteria to participate in this study. They had to have a history of previous

CSEC involvement using social media platforms, have been 18 years of age or older at the time of the study, and have completed some counseling addressing past CSEC involvement and experience. The participants were also advised that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. At the conclusion of the interviews, the participants were debriefed and provided resources for mental health services (low cost/no cost). The participants were given my contact information in the event they had follow-up questions. I also contacted the participants telephonically or by email to ask clarifying questions as needed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data were collected by conducting semistructured, one-on-one interviews with former CSEC victims and survivors. Information-rich qualitative data were obtained to understand the perspectives of former CSEC youth who were recruited via social media platforms. I developed interview protocols to address the problem statement and purpose of the study. The study participants were asked open-ended, clarifying and follow-up questions to obtain information-rich data during the interviews. I also asked the participants for permission to take notes during the interview process and informed them that I would be keeping a journal. I transcribed the interviews, and used the transcriptions and notes taken during the interviews to identify codes and themes to address the research question.

I recorded the one-on-one interviews with the permission of the participant, Then, I transcribed and coded the interviews to identify themes and patterns in the data by using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software. By using codes, the researcher can

analyze the data collected and categorize them. Coding in qualitative research is the process of collecting data to be categorized and thematically sorted to provide concrete meaning and through this process, researchers can identify, organize, and build theory (Williams & Moser, 2019). With QDA software, one can organize and code data electronically and visualize the patterns in codes and categories. The researcher uses coding methods to reveal themes embedded in the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). As it pertains to qualitative research, codes are defined as a word that illustrates an idea. By coding data, the researcher becomes familiar with the information gathered and initiates the analytical process (Saldaña, 2016). I manually coded to ensure accuracy of the data analysis.

I conducted an analysis and assessed how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. I ensured confidentiality and enhanced readability of the findings by giving all participants a pseudonym during the data collection process. I transcribed the digital recordings verbatim by hand using the summative method and captured the most information from the interview by incorporating the recordings, journal notes and interview notes. A summative approach extends further than word counts and includes interpreting the qualitative content to discover underlying meanings of the words or the content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **Trustworthiness**

To maintain validity, provisions were made to ensure that data collected were information-rich by employing qualitative validation techniques such as triangulation,

purposeful sampling and in-depth interviews. Triangulation is the act of using various resources to develop a finding and justify themes identified in the study (Patton, 2015). I chose a semistructured interview guide because it gives participants the choice to discuss topics while ensuring that specific research questions are being addressed (Patton, 2015). I asked the participants open-ended, clarifying and follow-up questions to obtain information-rich data. The use of open-ended questions may lessen participant reactivity and researcher biases (Patton, 2015). Interview questions were rephrased for clarification when needed. Also, interview questions were rephrased in the event that responses to the initial questions were ambiguous as recommended by Patton (2015). Participant responses during the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim to demonstrate that the results were obtained from data analysis and not from my opinion or bias.

To establish validity, I maintained raw data from the study field notes, transcripts of the individual interviews, and a reflexive journal. I coded the data by hand and attempted to validate this process using NVivo QDA which assisted with the coding, organization, categorization of the data. The information was double-checked for accuracy. I also conducted peer debriefs. Peer debriefing provides researchers with feedback regarding initial findings and procedures (Stahl & King, 2020).

### **Transferability and Dependability**

Throughout this process, I used journaling, also known as bracketing, to track my progress, challenge preconceived thoughts, and analyze my findings. Stahl and King (2020) asserted that researcher bias is always present when conducting research. Thus,

throughout the study process, I used this reflexive practice to provide me valuable insight and awareness into my assumptions and biases. I reflected on my assumptions and data to clarify my thoughts, recognize additional information, and incorporate these insights into my findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I invited former CSEC victims and survivors receiving services from various community organizations to participate in this study. The study was planned in a manner that participants were treated equitably and fairly, regardless of their sex, race, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or physical limitations. The purpose of the study and the implications of the study were made clear to the participants. The participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time. I reviewed the procedure for interviewing with the participants which entailed communicating voluntary consent, privacy, and transparency. The goal of this process was to encourage the participants to be more open and cooperative and trust the interviewer.

Participant confidentiality was protected by conducting the interviews in private rooms via a secure teleconference platform. De-identification occurred by removing all direct identifiers, such as names, addresses, or telephone numbers from the raw data and databases. Participant information or any part of the data that was linkable to a participant's identity were not used in the study. I obtained permission to conduct this study from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Any files that contain actual names were password-protected as soon as all interviews were recorded.

Files containing pseudonyms were also password protected for the duration of the study.

Data will be destroyed 5 years from the date of the study.

### **Summary**

I have provided an overview of the methodology of this study in this chapter. I used a purposeful sample of former CSEC from various community organizations providing services to former CSEC and through the organization's social media platforms for this generic qualitative study. The study was initiated by conducting one-on-one participant interviews. By listening to former CSEC victims and survivors of CSEC, this study provided first-hand experience and knowledge of the CSEC recruitment process via social media platforms. CSEC is a huge global issue. By exploring the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment, researchers and service providers are able to gain a deeper understanding of CSEC facilitation and recruitment. The participants' points of view, experiences, feelings, and perspectives are valuable and information-rich. In this chapter, I have provided an overview of how data were collected and analyzed, how ethical issues were addressed, and how permission to conduct the study was sought through the Walden University's IRB.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this generic, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. I collected data by interviewing eight adults who were sexually exploited as children. I developed interview questions with the intent of eliciting information-rich responses from the participants to address the research questions. Themes emerged during the data analysis phase, illustrating the participants' experiences and perceptions of their lives as former sexually exploited youth on online platforms. The main research question of this study was: What are the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry? In this chapter, I describe the settings, participants' demographics, data collection, data analysis, and the findings as they developed for this study.

### **Settings**

My approved procedures involved recruiting potential candidates using Facebook social media pages, which included CSEC-related agencies and mental health providers. I posted study participant invitations to solicit participants to participate in this research study as per the Walden University IRB guidelines; approval number 11-22-21-0987329. My recruitment of eligible participants began immediately after I received IRB approval. It took approximately three months to identify all the viable participants and complete the

interview sessions. I posted several times a week on the community pages to generate attention. Gradually, potential candidates began to respond to the Facebook community page postings. I received email message responses from potential participants expressing interest in the study. However, many of the respondents did not meet the criteria. The postings were made from November 23, 2021, to February 14, 2022.

I received responses from individuals from various geographical locations within the United States. Some individuals were from diverse geographical areas, such as California, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Oregon. All those individuals expressed an interest in participating in this study. Every potential candidate was emailed the study criterion to review. It was a mandatory study requirement that potential participants had to have previously participated in mental health services. Many of the potential candidates expressing interest disclosed that they had not received any form of counseling or mental health services in the past to address the childhood trauma. Therefore, they were excluded from the participant pool. Nevertheless, I thanked these individuals for their interest in the study.

I received several inquiries via text messages on my personal cell phone and emails via the Walden University email account from 33 individuals. The 33 potential candidates identified themselves as adults who were sexually exploited as children. However, upon further vetting, several had not been exploited via social media and/or had not participated in mental health services to address the childhood trauma. Therefore, they were excluded from the participant pool. These individuals were also thanked for their interest in the study.



I scheduled the participants' interviews after confirmation of eligibility was complete for the earliest date and time possible because only five to eight subjects were the target population for this study. Four potential candidates did not follow through on their scheduled interviews and became nonresponsive to telephone calls and emails. Therefore, I replaced them with the other available candidates as they showed interest. I suspected some potential participants were preoccupied with prior commitments or other obligations, especially as it was the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday season. I identified the first participant as 'P001', and then assigned each participant thereafter the letter "P" and the next chronological number in sequence (i.e., P002...P008). In the next section of this chapter, I document some general details about each participant who volunteered to participate in this study. The subjects were adults who were sexually exploited as children via social media and made themselves available for virtual interviews at their earliest convenience.

### **Demographics**

The profiles of the participants for this study are depicted in Table 1, below.

**Table 1***Demographics of Former CSEC Participants*

Participant	Race	Sex	Age	Location	Age of Exploitation
P001	African American	Female	30's	California	13
P002	African American	Female	Late teens	California	12
P003	African American	Female	Mid 20's	Maryland	13
P004	African American	Male	Late 20's	New York	12
P005	Caucasian	Transgender Male	Late Teens	Massachusetts	16
P006	African American	Male	Mid-20s	Illinois	13
P007	Caucasian	Female	Early 20's	California	11
P008	Caucasian	Male	Early 30's	North Carolina	13

Demographics pertaining to personal information were not included in this study to protect their identity and ensure the confidentiality of all the candidates. The eight CSEC consisted of four women, three men and one transgender man. As a minor and during the time of exploitation, the transgender participant was an adolescent cisgender female. For the purpose of this dissertation study, adolescent cisgender female is defined as an individual whose gender identity or gender expression is aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth while transgender adolescents are those whose gender identity or gender expression is not associated with the gender they were assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2019; Salk et al., 2020). The participant now identifies as a transgender man. All participants were given a pseudonym during the data

collection process to enhance the readability of the participant data in the Findings section.

### **Data Collection**

I used purposeful sampling to identify potential candidates for this research study. Purposeful sampling is a nonrandom sampling technique that utilizes a specific criterion to select a particular sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015; Suri, 2011). Creswell and Creswell (2018) illustrated that purposefully selecting participants for qualitative research can help the researcher better understand the problem and the research question. I posed open-ended, semistructured questions to the eight interviewees virtually on the Zoom platform and carefully considered the candidates' time and willingness to volunteer for the study. This created a comfortable, familiar, and safe setting which facilitated openness for our discussions. The participants were able to select a time slot that was convenient for their schedule and time zone. Prior to each initial interview, all the subjects received the participant invitation letter (Appendix B) and the consent form to keep for their records (Appendix C) via email. Upon logging into the secure Zoom virtual room, I asked the participants for their consent to record the session. Once they agreed, I began to record the session.

I started with the introduction formalities, read the informed consent document, and reviewed the interview questions document (Appendix C & A, respectively). I introduced myself, described my role as the researcher, and explained the purpose of the research as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012). Each participant indicated that they were willing to proceed by stating, "I consent." Then, I started the interviewing

process. The interview format consisted of reading an interview question to the participant and allowing the participant ample time to respond, provide stories, and give follow-up examples. I engaged in responsive interviewing to induce information-rich responses with the use of main, follow-up and probing questions. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), main questions assist in opening up the dialogue regarding the research question while probing questions help manage the conversation (p. 116). By using open-ended questions, I gave the participants opportunities to offer additional information. Throughout each interview, I documented field notes on the interview protocol worksheet in addition to recording the audio of each interview (Appendix A). For example, I wrote down additional questions to ask the participants and jotted down keywords the participants used in their responses.

During the data collection processes, no unusual circumstances occurred. Each participant appeared to be honest as they answered the questions. Each participant spoke openly and candidly about their experiences in addition to providing concrete examples and recounting stories. Each initial interview lasted approximately 50 minutes to 1 hour. The initial interviews were completed between January 2, 2022 and February 22, 2022. Additionally, at the end of each data collection, I secured and stored the information on a code-encrypted cloud on my password-protected personal computer in my home, pending future analysis. I used NVivo data transcription services to transcribe the audio recordings from the Zoom application. I reviewed the transcripts by simultaneously replaying the recorded audio and checking the transcript for accuracy. This procedure was conducted following the interviews with the participants. The individual interviews

resulted in qualitative data that may improve understanding and knowledge of how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry.

Approximately 1 week after the initial interview, I held follow-up interviews with six participants to address additional questions and conducted member checking. The follow-up meetings with the participants took place via Zoom and lasted approximately 15 minutes. Member checking is a process that includes the researcher asking the study participants to verify the accuracy of the information they shared to ensure the truth value of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Two participants could not to meet a second time via Zoom, which required me to conduct member checking through emailed correspondence. They each expressed agreement with their transcripts and indicated there was no need for a follow-up interview. I transcribed the follow-up interviews to be coded with the transcripts from the initial interviews.

During the follow-up interviews, I asked participants to clarify their responses to certain statements. For instance, I asked the question “What did you mean by...?” and the participants referred me to particular sections of their transcribed interviews while providing additional supporting information. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested that a fair amount of background is needed to ask a good follow-up question (p. 165). For example, in a follow-up interview with Participant P002, I asked, “In our previous interview, you stated that you did not participate in any type of street solicitation and only posted on social media? Please explain in more detail.” Participant P002 provided more detail in the follow-up interview session. The participants reviewed the transcripts and

indicated they were pleased with the transcribed audio recordings. Once I completed the last follow-up interview, I conducted another review of the collected data before I began the analysis of all the information generated by the participants.

### **Research Question**

The research question in this study was: What are the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry?

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the interview questions was to collect in-depth information addressing and exploring the main research question. I constructed research questions that would elicit deep and detailed responses. Research questions are used in interviews to encourage the interviewee to disclose perceptions, or beliefs (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After completing data collection, audio transcription, and member checking, I began the data analysis process by coding and analyzing the participant statements. The aim of coding is for the researcher to understand and familiarize themselves with the data to develop an initial code set (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I read each transcript line by line while listening to the actual audio recordings, to assess accuracy. Later in the coding process, I read the transcripts line by line to seek out commonalities in the data. The next steps in the analysis process included continued familiarization and immersion in the data. (Saldaña, 2016).

I initially manually coded the data and then attempted to use the data analysis software to verify data accuracy and to assist with managing the information data.

Specifically, I used NVivo version 12 for PC users (2018) as it is used to help organize, categorize, and store the data for later retrieval. However, it became very challenging to navigate the data analysis software. According to QSR International NVivo (2021), patterns and themes should evolve as the software package is used, giving the researcher the ability to produce visualizations, graphs, word art, and frequency plots as a means of oversight. I also assumed that the use of data analysis software would have afforded me the opportunity to code the data much faster than manual coding. However, I decided to continue manual coding and then proceeded to manually code the data for the final analysis. Guided by the methods of Patton (2015), I submerged myself in the data by reviewing the individual audio recordings and the transcriptions. As suggested by Saldaña (2016), I manually coded the information-rich data (first level and second level coding) to further refine the data and narrow the focus to relatively few codes to use in the development of common themes.

I used the pattern coding technique to convert large amounts of data into relevant segments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) indicated pattern coding is a process of codifying things into categories (p. 10). I reviewed the raw data for the third time and manually coded the results. As suggested by Saldaña (2016), I coded the participants' statements based on identifying keywords used in their responses. The next steps included recoding repetitive words or phrases with similar meaning (Saldaña, 2016). For example, I combined the words "friendship", "friendly", "friend", "befriended", and "random friendship" due to the similarities in meaning expressed by the study participants. During the interview, I asked the participants, "Were you

introduced to your solicitor by a family member or friend on a social media platform?”

Participant responses included, “Yes, my friend told me about party lines and how I could make money” and “Well, basically he was being the only friend I had at that time.”

Another participant shared,

So she befriended me on one hand, like I said this earlier, but young and naive. It was a very taboo thing to, you know, talk to strangers on the internet. So of course, I went and did it anyway, and I ended up meeting that girl.

Additionally, a participant stated,

I was making a lot of friends on Facebook, the ones I knew and the ones I didn't know, so I just kept like accepting because I felt like, you know, I could be friends with basically everyone. And so, yeah, that was basically my goal. And the person befriended me also on Facebook when I was 13.

Next, guided by the methods of Patton (2015) and Saldaña (2016), I grouped the codes generated into categories based on their likeness to one another. As proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), Patton (2015), and Saldaña (2016), I used my raw field notes and memos written on the interview questions document (Appendix A) to assist with grouping the codes into categories. Memos are notes made during the research process to reflect on or to help shape the creation of codes and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that the idea of saturation comes from grounded theory, in which one stops collecting data when the categories or themes are saturated and no longer reveal new information (p.186). Subsequently, within the categories, five themes emerged.



A category labeled accessibility consisted of codes like absent parent/ parental figure, lack of supervision, no verification, and fictitious usernames because they represented ways social media and the internet were easily accessible to children and used to solicit them. A few participants expressed the following regarding the accessibility to social media and the internet: “There's no way to even verify age or verify identity because you're behind a screen or a keyboard” (P008). Participant P005 reported, “My parents monitored my online activity and activity on social media so we would create fake accounts to avoid detection.” Participant P004 stated, “Like there, there is no type of verification.” P007 shared, “Yeah, to avoid detection, on Snapchat, I had at one point changed his name to a girl's name. I don't remember what it was, it could have been like Courtney or something.”

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Throughout this study, I utilized reflexive journaling to track my development, challenge my biases, and examine my findings. This exercise gave significant understanding and mindfulness into my assumptions, distinguished my predispositions, and informed my choices all throughout the research process. I also participated in peer debriefing to receive feedback regarding initial findings and procedures. It provided the opportunity to think about my assumptions, identify additional data, and assisted me with explaining my findings.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Rudestam and Newton (2015) asserted that validity and reliability are achieved in qualitative research by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Confirmability is the ability to confirm

that the research study's findings are based on the data from the study participants and not due to potential researcher bias (Patton, 2015). I achieved credibility and confirmability through member checking and peer debriefing. As stated above, member checking is a process that includes the researcher asking the study participants to verify the accuracy of the information they shared to ensure the truth value of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Member checking occurred when I provided the participants with copies of the transcripts of their initial and follow-up interviews to verify accuracy. In addition, I also asked the participants to clarify any discrepant information. The participants indicated no opposition to the transcription of the interviews and did not have any additional information to include.

To establish validity and dependability, I followed the procedures proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Rudestam and Newton (2015) by maintaining raw data from the study, field notes, transcripts of the individual interviews, and the reflexive journal from the study. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The initial interview with each participant was conducted virtually. Video/audio was recorded, then transcribed with NVivo data analysis software, and finally manually coded. I determined the transcripts to be reliable because they were a replication of the audio recordings. I did not include the transcripts of the participant interviews, to ensure that I would not jeopardize the confidentiality of any of the study participants. I assumed that participants would be forthcoming and share their experiences for this qualitative, generic research study. It was also my assumption that the pathways model might explain how individuals are recruited into sexual exploitation via social media platforms by

solicitors and sex traffickers. In the following Results section, I used emergent themes to represent the participants' experiences and connected them with the research objectives, conceptual framework, and literature review.

## **Results**

This research study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. The eight participants in this study discussed their experiences and perceptions of how social media and the internet were used to exploit them as children. A review of the individual interviews' audio recordings, and transcription provided rich data to code, categorize, and use in the development of common themes. I identified five themes along with supporting quotes from the study participants. These themes were (a) accessibility, (b) secrecy, (c) manipulation, (d) coercion, and (e) technology.

### **Theme 1: Accessibility**

The accessibility of a child or youth is a determining factor in whether or not a sexual predator is likely to groom a child and research suggests that recruitment and sale of victims is moving online (Bouché & Shady, 2017; Whittle et al., 2013). The participants raised concerns about the lack of parental supervision while accessing social media and the internet. Five of the eight participants indicated that there was a lack of parental supervision or easy accessibility to social media or the internet. Parents can play a significant role as protectors of their children by providing supervision and monitoring (Rudolph et al., 2018). Several of the participants expressed that they spent time on

gaming platforms with little or no adult supervision, which increased a sexual predator's ability to establish relationships, introduce sexually explicit chats, photos, videos, and live-stream sexual behaviors.

P008 provided a vivid recollection of being technically savvy and his parents not really knowing much about technology. P008 stated:

I recall that my parents had a primary account, and then there was a sub-account for me and I was accountable to them. If I used profane words on AOL they were reported, my parents would have to pay a fee or a fine to get the account reactivated. I think there might have been age restrictions on my AOL account, but by the time I got to AIM, well, ultimately for both accounts, because I was, you know, I'm a millennial, I ended up becoming the IT department, like the tech, I ran the family computer just because I grew up natively with technology. A lot of those age restrictions just I gave myself permission, so I gave myself permission for everything.

P008 later added:

Our parents would complain about technology being this black box thing that is destroying and rotting the youth of the nation, while at the same time coming to us like, I can't get this thing to print. You need to fix the computer. And, so we all just natively ended up becoming good at computers. So when it came time to decide for myself how much restriction should my account have? Well, I selected none, obviously.

P003 stated:

The second guy who would come over and stuff and blackmail me. We used to text until the early mornings. My mom would see on my phone plan that I was texting early in the mornings or I was on MySpace or the internet doing some type of surfing, web surfing early in the morning and the most that she did was question me. You know, she really didn't question it like who I was talking to or why I was up there late. She would just put a block on my phone for after 11 o'clock or however, whatever time it was, but they never found out.

P005 provided information outlining the efforts that she made to avoid detection because her parents monitored her online activity. P005 commented:

My parents monitored my online activity and activity on social media so I would create fake accounts to avoid detection. I remember creating an Instagram with a fake name and used an email account that was linked to my mother's phone. She ran up the stairs so fast and made me delete it. My mom was also alarmed because I used a disturbing username. Also, I would enter in the wrong age information to be allowed into the websites. I was that kid that would just go into a site even though there was a warning not to do so. I participated a lot in VR virtual reality communities where there are a lot of bad people who specifically make sexual gestures toward young children. They are mainly older men, you know predators. We sometimes have to protect the young kids in VR because they don't even recognize the gestures as being sexual because they are so young and don't know. There are people who send random pics like dick pics and pictures of their genitals. I think they do it because of the availability, accessibility, and

opportunity. They hide behind a computer screen undetectable. I really thought it was cool to talk strangers online, not knowing how risky it really was.

P002 expressed that there was lack of parental supervision due to dynamics in the home such as mental health and an incarcerated parent. P002 stated, “My mom, she was suicidal, my mom was at home, she was raising me sometimes. Sometimes my daddy was in jail.”

Several participants indicated that they turned to internet due to feelings of loneliness. P003 stated:

My parents were, you know, at times, very emotional and physical and mentally abusive at times just because I feel they really didn't know much about mental health at that time. Once my siblings had left the house, I was in a very alone mindset.

Furthermore, P003 shared she utilized the internet to meet and chat with friends (familiar and unfamiliar) and would change her age during the age verification process to be able to chat and connect with others. P003 also stated:

During this time, I don't exactly remember which keyword I put in. But, you can have it where you can simply just chat with people, or you can have your camera on, and I remember it was some type of form saying if you're of age or something like that. And, of course, me not being of age, still saying yes, I was of age just so I can be able to talk to friends.

P007 stated, “He (exploiter) had shut my phone off so she (mother) couldn't find me or contact me in any way.” P004 explained that his mother worked a lot and he struggled

with loneliness as well as the inability to freely state to his family that he was gay. He indicated that he turned to the internet and social media for validation. P004 stated:

My mom is always working and, you know, just me and my siblings, you know, try to go to school and translate live that life. And then right from being young, I've always felt different. I've always felt like I know really, you know, I'll just say I'm gay, and I just felt like nobody understood me and I couldn't really come out to my mom and my siblings. I was kind of ashamed of what you think and stuff. So, you know, I kind of turned toward social media and on Facebook to find validation.

The internet and new technologies have enabled offenders and solicitors to exploit children online while remaining anonymous and hiding their identity. Because of the anonymity provided by the internet, predators can more easily find, identify, exploit, and sexually abuse young children and youth online or in person. The emotional trauma a child endures through online grooming is significant, even without a physical meeting ever taking place. In the coding process, I noticed an intersection between the accessibility and secrecy.

## **Theme 2: Secrecy**

The participants in the individual interviews raised concerns about the need for secrecy on the part of the solicitor and the child attempting to keep the behavior from parental figures. The participants indicated that as it pertains to online grooming, the solicitor gained their trust prior to introducing them to sexual material or accosting them

for sexual acts or favors. The solicitors encourage the children and youth to keep their interactions a secret or private.

P007 shared that specific social media platforms were used to avoid detection and because the history automatically erased. P007 stated:

Snapchat was used...so it was used to send nude photos to him and he preferred Snapchat because the messages will disappear once they've been opened.

P007 also added:

Oh, I did want to talk about this one app called Confide. It's very, very secure, I think. You can send messages and I believe photos through it, and you have to drag your finger across the message to view it. It doesn't show the whole message all at once, so people can't look over your shoulder or anything. It like only shows a word at a time, depending on where you're dragging. And, then after you've opened it, it'll completely disappear, and you can never retrieve it.

P008 recalled taking nude photos on the family's digital camera and explained in the detail the tedious task of erasing the photos and resetting the camera on a daily basis.

P008 stated:

It became more like I want to see her. I want to see you around and what have you and doing all of this stuff as a young kid, and then also manually erasing them for fear of anyone seeing what I was taking pictures of.

P008 also added:

And as I said, I panicked with a sort of mania, taking these pictures, uploading them on the computer, sending them over like a ...digital connection, which was



slower then. It was dial up speed and then erasing and setting the camera back to factory settings day after day after day and going through all of that stress just for some semblance of validation from somebody.

P003 stated:

I grew up in a very religious household, where at the time we were considered Jehovah's Witness and there was like a lot of restrictions on everything. If you wanted to make friends, they had to be in the same congregation as you. So, because you didn't want "outsiders to influence" your ways of thinking and your mindset because it could influence you to do wrong things or things that you shouldn't be doing, and you should always be obedient to your parents, so I used the internet in secrecy.

P004 shared:

And you know, I was really into him and, you know, just let him know that I liked him, and he said it to. From there, we kind of had this secret relationship between ourselves. At the time it kind of started with him asking for sexual pictures of myself.

### **Theme 3: Manipulation**

The participants expressed several concerns regarding their solicitor's manipulation techniques to persuade them to participate in online sexual activity or continue the inappropriate interactions. Three of the eight participants provided detailed accounts of how their solicitors used social media platforms to manipulate them. This online grooming process often includes sexual conversation, exposure to adult

pornography and/or child sexual abuse material (CSAM) to the victim, and pressuring or coercing the child to create and share sexual images of themselves (Joleby et al., 2021; Montiel et al., 2016). It was not uncommon for non-contact sexual abuse to occur even without a face-to-face meeting. Another method of recruitment is manipulating the victim into believing they have a romantic relationship which later leads to the youth being asked to perform sex acts (Bouché & Shady, 2017). Additionally, offender strategies may include applying pressure to perform the desired online sexual activities, by using threats, using bribes, and repeated nagging (Joleby et al., 2021).

P006 stated:

I think I didn't get to that part because I felt like the pressure sending me pictures and videos and then trying to video call me was really uncomfortable for me so when I pulled the plug, basically, I blocked the person and started talking to people, real friends.

P003 stated:

A lot of persuasion, I guess, to say in a sense, a lot of like, my wife isn't here for me, or she doesn't understand me like you do. And of course, since I really wasn't sexually active, I didn't understand anything of that nature as to what any of that really meant.

P007 explained her solicitor's attempts to manipulate her by indicating that he was going to turn himself in to law enforcement but stated that it was just a plot to get her continue a relationship with him and made her feel bad about the situation. P007 stated:

He threatened to turn himself in one night. He said, I'm going to the police right now. I'm going to show them all the pictures of you and me, and it's going to be all over.

P003 also shared that her exploiter would attempt to make her feel guilty then pressure her to send more nude photos. P003 stated:

But it became a point where he would send pictures of himself and he'll be like, you know good girlfriends will send pictures back. He would be like you're not going to leave me hanging this time and he would be naked and erect and so I would then, of course, send pictures as well because I didn't want to be a bad girlfriend or whatever I was to him. And then, when things would get rough between us, it was always, well, I have those pictures of you. He would say, I'll send it to the whole school, or I'll post it all over MySpace. I know all of your friends; I know of everybody. So just to basically persuade me into either send me more pictures or to get over whatever I was mad of at the time, if it was him me finding out that he was talking to somebody else or anything like that.

Sex trafficker's use several strategies to convince or manipulate youth (Bouché & Shady, 2017). Offenders may use flattery as part of manipulation and control to make the youth feel special, loved and cared for (Bouché & Shady, 2017). I noticed an intersection between manipulation and coercion in the coding process. In both situations, the participant was influenced or persuaded to participate in sexual related acts as a minor. The only difference is that coercion is the solicitor forcing the child to make a decision or do something specifically through force or threats.

**Theme 4: Coercion**

The participants raised several concerns about the coercion techniques the solicitors used to participate in online sexual activity or continue their inappropriate interactions. Three of the eight participants provided detailed accounts of how they were coerced by their solicitor on social media platforms.

P003 shared that her exploiter would use coercion tactics as a way to obtain sexually explicit photos and have sexual intercourse. P003 stated:

So, the first time we had met, he came over my house, he drove to my house when my parents weren't home. And, he had like brought over some liquor and or at the time, I remember it was like it was like Four Loko's (malt beverage) or whatever you would buy, like the quick beer that you would buy from, like the corner liquor store. And he would like persuade me by stating you don't have do something sexual with him or anything like that. And then, it was always rebutted with something like, you know, if you don't do it, then I'm going to show these pictures, or I have pictures and I'll send them. And of course, at the time I was thinking I'm about to go to high school. I don't know anybody here. I don't want to have like this huge rep of who I am before I even get there.

P008 stated:

And you've seen all of these pictures of me and it was a 180 degree turn very quickly from like hey, how are you doing, sweetie to, have you taken any pictures for me today, to you idiot, you fool, I could ruin your life. I was told everyone in school will know what you look like naked. If you cross me, I will send these to

people that go to your school and to the people in these neighborhoods, completely screw your life up and make you look like an absolute punk unless you continue to you give me what I want. A lot of the pictures that were requested from there were less like show me your butt like bend over. They were absolutely explicit.

P008 stated:

I am hesitant to gender things, so but it was just such a quick acceleration from like just chatting, what are your hobbies? Where do you live to what are you into to, have you ever touched yourself yet?

Additionally, the study participants indicated that they were coerced and threatened when they wanted to stop contact or when they no longer wanted to engage in the exchange of the sexual acts. Sexual dialogue, exposure to adult pornography, and/or child sexual abuse material, and forcing or coercing the child to create and distribute sexual photographs of themselves are all common parts of the internet grooming process.

### **Theme 5: Technology**

A recent study found that 89% of 13- to 17-year-olds have their own smartphone (Pundsack, 2018). Another study found that nearly 97% of children and youth aged three to 18 have access to home computers (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). Several of the eight participants raised concerns about the accessibility of technology and the lack of paternal control, which enabled them to participate in online sexual activity or continue having inappropriate interactions with their solicitor/ exploiter. Online grooming places children at risk and facilitates the sexual abuse of children. The internet and new technologies

have enabled offenders and solicitors to exploit children online while remaining anonymous and hiding their identity. Email, instant messaging apps, social networking sites, chatrooms, online gaming sites, photo sharing sites, and dating apps, all of which are accessed via personal computers, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones are widely used (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). The study participants indicated use of the various forms of communication listed above. Several of the observations are listed below.

P008 stated:

These algorithms because they are so designed to keep people engaged regardless of how old they are. I was on like dial up internet. I had to wait two or three minutes for a dirty picture to load on my computer. And yeah, I shouldn't have been looking at that. My mind was not prepared for that. It did some harm to my expectations of sex, certainly. But now, any kid with a smartphone can be looking at something that is grotesquely harmful, like nonconsensual hardcore sex at any given time of day. And, I worry about what all of these things in aggregate, are doing because there's no gatekeeping, there's no progress. So, the best that we can do is create an environment that's transparent and empathetic and supportive and emotionally present. There's no way to even verify age or verify identity because you're behind a screen or a keyboard. I think these platforms do have to do better because while there are people on the other side that are genuinely on it to socializing and gaming in the virtual reality gaming world or whatnot. There are people that are genuinely trying to meet others, right? But then, there are people,

like the woman that I met or that said they were a woman or pretended to be a child when it was really an adult. That's the dangerous part about it.

P003 stated:

I believe it was one of my friends was like, hey, did you know there was a website where you can make friends and stuff? And, it was similar to a website that now is known as like Omegle, which is this website where strangers can basically talk about anything and you are able to communicate with people that are interested in the same things that you're interested in.

P003 also stated:

So the process that was used at this point, I feel like it was definitely a sense of like trust and care, really making it seem as though this person was trustworthy and that they were there for me. So I got into that by meeting this gentleman who was definitely way older. I believe at this time we had used this little thing that you would always put in like ASL, which would be age, sex and location. And you would put your age. You would put if you are female or male and then your location, like what area that you're from? And, at the time, even though I probably was maybe pushing like 13, because I wanted to seem like I was older, I put my location and all of this would be the way that we would communicate. We would put in a specific word, code word that I guess not that many people would use so we can end up talking to each other again.

P003 added:

Kids can go on and you had to get consent from your parents to join this website (Club Penguin), and on this one, you can make your whole character and you can go places virtually. So, it was a virtual reality world and you could chat with people. The only difference was that you didn't have to necessarily get some type of consent. They did say that you would have to put in your parent's email address. But of course, we're not dumb. We know if we really want to play this game or to talk and make friends with people that we would just put another email address that we had and then just go to that email and press, accept and be like, yeah, this is my child or whatever, and I consent that you can go on this website.

The internet and new technologies have enabled offenders and solicitors to exploit children online while remaining anonymous and hiding their identity. The anonymity that the internet allows makes it easier for predators to search for, identify, exploit, and sexually abuse young children and teenagers online or in person.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Overall, no participant made a statement refuting another participant's statement or opinion. There were no identified discrepant cases. A discrepant case is one in which participant experiences differ from the main body of evidence. Research shows that when a negative case can be explained, the explanation for the other cases is strengthened. Each participant provided their own information-rich data that aligned with the research question.



## Summary

In this chapter, I collected data from eight former CSEC to address the research question: What are the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry? I recorded the audio from virtual interviews and transcribed them using NVivo transcription software. I secured and stored the information on a code-encrypted cloud on my password-protected personal computer. Initially, I manually coded and then attempted to use the qualitative analysis computer software, NVivo version 12, to analyze the data for accuracy. However, that became challenging; therefore, I went back to manually coding exclusively. I used pattern coding to arrange the data into categories. Five themes emerged from the pattern coding of the data. These themes were (a) accessibility, (b) secrecy, (c) manipulation, (d) coercion, and (e) technology. In addition, I defined each theme and used passages from the transcribed interviews to explain the participants' experiences. In Chapter 5, I provide further discussion of the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. In addition, I also elaborate on this study's limitations, recommendations, and implications.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather perspectives and perceptions of former CSEC victims and survivors who were recruited through the internet or social media platforms to facilitate online sexual exploitation. To address the research questions, I conducted a generic qualitative study. Due to the use of the generic, qualitative approach, former CSEC victims and survivors were able to be subjective in their experiences and thoughts concerning sexual exploitation and the online recruitment process. Generic, qualitative researchers investigate the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of people (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To obtain first-hand perspectives, I gathered qualitative data through individual interviews with eight former CSEC victims and survivors from different areas of the United States who had previous CSEC involvement via social media or the internet. I asked each participant several questions about CSEC recruitment via online platforms and the internet. The themes I uncovered point to recommendations for parents and caregivers of CSEC regarding the internet and social media.

Email, instant messaging apps, social networking sites, chatrooms, online gaming sites, photo sharing sites, and dating apps, all of which are accessed via personal computers, laptops, tablets, and mobile phones are widely used (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020). The study participants indicated use of the various forms of communication listed above. Online grooming places children at risk and facilitates the sexual abuse of children. The internet and new technologies have enabled offenders and

solicitors to exploit children online while remaining anonymous and hiding their identities. Several themes were identified in the participant interviews. Key factors influencing the perspectives of CSEC recruited via social media and the internet in this study were recruitment tactics used by perpetrators, the lack of parental supervision, coercion tactics, and the wide use of technology to lure young children and youth into to sexual exploitation. The findings yielded insight from former CSEC victims and survivors in the form of feedback, inform current and future vulnerable children and their parents on the ways the internet and social media are used in CSEC recruitment. Several participants shared that they frequently indicated that they were of age (16-18 years or older depending on the scenario) when accessing material with a parental advisory on social media sites, applications, and the internet, although, the participants were much younger in age when accessing the sites and apps. Others indicated that they would change the parental controls on social media and, the internet to gain unlimited access to materials and sites. Given the themes I discovered, it is recommended that parents and caregivers of CSEC set internet and social media restrictions and increase privacy for their children.

In the Literature Review section presented in Chapter 2, I explained that a child's environment can play a role in CSEC victimization. It is difficult to precisely quantify the exact number of sexually exploited children since many are afraid to disclose the abuse, and sexual exploitation carries a negative stigma (Barnert et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2019). Children are sexually exploited by persons who are familiar and unfamiliar to them. Interpersonal relationships with individuals, other than caregivers, may facilitate

sexual exploitation. The sexual exploitation of children is influenced by family ties, poor friendships, and partners (Reed et al., 2019). Furthermore, because of the anonymity provided by the internet, predators can more easily find, identify, exploit, and sexually assault young children and teenagers online or in person. The results of this study expand existing literature on CSEC and present details not previously mentioned in the literature on how social media and the internet are used in the recruitment process.

In the following section, I discuss the interpretation of the findings and then compare those findings to the literature review presented in Chapter 2. I draw conclusions from the study findings and make recommendations based on participant stories. Lastly, I discuss possibilities for future research and implications for social change.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Data presented in Chapter 4 reflected former CSEC perceptions and experiences, and addressed the research question this study aimed to answer. The findings are an interpretation of the participants' reflections on their experiences and are listed below. In this study, I explored the following research question: What are the perceptions and experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry?

In previous literature on CSEC, the researcher Bouché explored whether or not the internet was being used by exploiters for the purpose of CSEC and found that CSEC victims initially became acquainted with individuals who would become their traffickers online (Bouché, 2015). Many children reported engaging in solicitation and exploitation

online after using the Internet and being approached by individuals seeking to initiate contact with children for sexual purposes. According to Bouché (2018), the most popular websites accessed by DMST victims were Facebook, Backpage, Craigslist, Instagram, and Google, with solicitors advertising on those sites (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Most studies written about CSEC did not explore how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment (O'Brien & Li, 2020).

Study participants shared that early sexual exploitation occurred in group chats on BlackBerry, telephone party lines, AOL, AIM, Instant Messenger, and Myspace during the dial-up era prior to the evolution of high-speed internet and more prominent social media networks and platforms. Online gaming and communication sites identified by participants included Omegle and Message in a Bottle. Study participants identified the most common social media platforms for CSEC. They were Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Backpage, and Only Fans. Study participants cited disappearing chats as the most common reason those platforms were used. The platforms with disappearing messaging capabilities included Snapchat and Instagram. On these platforms, users can secretly send messages which disappear once they are read and accessed (Chakraborty, 2022). This feature makes it difficult to identify abuse and exploitation. While social media platforms were the most common form of communication for sexual exploitation, several study participants indicated that they were exploited at very young ages on online gaming platforms, such as virtual reality (VR) communities.

According to the participants of this research study, their exposure to online sexual exploitation may have stemmed from the lack of parental supervision and controls.

Five of the eight participants indicated a lack of parental supervision or easy accessibility to social media and the internet. This lack of parental control also included parents giving their children total control of technology, accounts related to smartphones, and other paternal-controlled applications such as email. Participant P008 specified that his parents were not technologically savvy, therefore giving him unlimited access to his parents' accounts, parental controls, and referring to himself as "the family tech." Because of the unique characteristics of video games, video and voice communications between a child and an offender are often enabled. According to a study conducted by the National Crime Prevention Council, more than 80% of youth surveyed indicated that they did not have parental rules about the internet or that they found ways around the rules (National Crime Prevention Council, 2022). Several participants of this study indicated that they frequently spent time on online gaming platforms with little or no adult supervision. This lack of parental supervision may increase an offender's capacity to create and develop a relationship, eventually introducing sexual chats, sending and receiving images/videos, and even live-streaming sexual actions. Parents must be aware that every child, regardless of family composition or socioeconomic status, is vulnerable.

The pathways model is the conceptual basis that informs this generic, qualitative study and was used to guide my research. The pathways model by Ward and Siegert (2002) explained there are five pathways to sexual offending against children and that dysfunctions present in offenders affect how they abuse vulnerable children. This includes intentional internet grooming via the internet. I used the pathways model to explore how sex offenders and exploiters use grooming tactics to recruit vulnerable

children into CSEC. Exploiters who lure and entrap underage girls into forced labor and sex trafficking use various strategies to maintain power and superiority over their victims (Moore et al., 2020; Thorburn, 2018).

Sexual grooming tactics are used via the internet and communication platforms to prepare children for sexual abuse (Kloess et al., 2019). According to the participants of this research study, the perpetrators used grooming tactics along with coercion and manipulation techniques on social media platforms and online gaming networks. Three of the eight participants provided detailed accounts of how their solicitors manipulated them on social media platforms. Wolak et al. (2018) conducted a study on sextortion.

Sextortion includes threats an exploiter makes to expose sexual images in order to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favors (Wolak et al., 2018). Several study participants experienced threats of physical violence as well as threats to expose them to others if the requests for more sexually explicit content or actions were not fulfilled. In one instance, the perpetrator used blackmail as a technique to entice the children to exchange pornographic materials and engage in online sexual activity via webcam.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations are present in this current study. First, the sample size was limited to eight participants. The use of a purposeful sampling limits the findings from my study. However, it is typical to have a small sample in qualitative studies. Not all of the characteristics of the former CSEC involved in this study, such as exploitation via the internet and social media, are representative of all former CSEC. The number of persons

engaging in online sexual behavior has increased dramatically in recent years (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Kloess et al., 2019). I cannot state conclusively that the findings apply to those former CSEC exploited on social media whose characteristics were not represented in my study. Therefore, it is likely that these excluded persons were more knowledgeable of experiences related to CSEC via online and social media.

Another limitation in this study was the exclusion of former CSEC who had not received previous mental health services. While canvassing participants for this study, I received 33 inquiries. Only participants with a history of previous mental health services to address CSEC could be used for this study. The 33 potential candidates identified themselves as adults who were sexually exploited as children, but of those candidates, several had not participated in mental health services to address this childhood trauma. Twelve viable candidates met the criteria; however, four potential candidates did not follow through on their scheduled interviews and became nonresponsive to telephone calls and emails. Former CSEC with no prior mental health services could have potentially provided essential data. They may have had similar viewpoints like the participants of this study.

The purpose of this generic, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. With the anonymity of the internet, predators can more easily find, identify, and exploit children and teenagers online. The results support the need to track new technology, including websites, new keywords, and new recruitment methods of CSEC



victims. Despite these limitations, this study resulted in valuable insights into a small group of former CSEC's views of their experiences of exploitation and recruitment via the internet and social media. Collecting more data in the future will provide an opportunity to make more robust inferences and implications concerning the experiences of former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry.

### **Recommendations**

In this study, through the use of a generic, qualitative approach, I uncovered the contributing factors to the facilitation of CSEC via social media and the internet. Although a vast amount of research has been dedicated to exploring sexually exploited children, there has been little research exploring how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment. With the rapid evolution of communication technologies, there is a need to examine how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment. I used a relatively small sample in this study compared to the number of children sexually exploited across the United States. I recommend that researchers in future studies use a larger sample size and include recruiting participants from other regions of the United States with higher concentrations of CSEC populations. The inquiry into the experiences of CSEC in specific geographical areas could identify unfamiliar trends and assist in creating more online safeguards in the future.

In my findings, I identified several vulnerabilities that lead to CSEC involvement. Key factors influencing the perspectives of CSEC involvement via social media and the

internet in this study included recruitment tactics used by perpetrators, a lack of parental supervision, coercion tactics and the wide range use of technology to lure young children and youth into sexual exploitation. Recommendations included scheduling supervised times when children can use the internet and social media, limiting the amount of time children can use technology, and assessing the internet and social media history of the children due to the children being in danger or at higher risk of being trafficked. Research should focus on strategies that specifically highlight privacy and ways of controlling access to social media, address critical safety issues while using technology, and protect children from online sexual perpetrators.

There is a massive prevalence of children engaging in online gaming. Predators often approach children for the purpose of exploitation via gaming platforms and gaming systems. Predators may use mainstream social media sites like Facebook and gaming systems with social networking capabilities, such as Xbox Live, to make connections with children, advertise minors for sex, record sexual videos and images of minors for advertising, and transfer payment for CSEC, to name a few examples. I recommend that parents closely monitor the usage of these gaming platforms and systems. Several study participants indicated that they rarely disclosed to their parent or guardian when they were approached or solicited in an exploitative manner during online gaming. It is also vital for parents to build healthy, open, and communicative relationships with their children. Children are more likely to share information regarding attempts at online exploitation and whom they talk to online when there is an open line of parental communication.

Social media and the internet, as well as other networking technologies, provide traffickers the ability to connect with potential victims. There appeared to be a connection between early online usage and sexual exploitation. For instance, participants P001, P002, P003, and P008 reported that a lack of parental supervision and unlimited access to the internet facilitated them being sexually exposed and exploited on the internet. One participant reported being a foster youth and expressed that running away from child welfare placements led to being introduced to sexual exploitation online. Professionals working with homeless and runaway youth must recognize that the internet and social media function as tools to facilitate human trafficking. Friends of friends and word-of-mouth tactics are used by traffickers to discover and target vulnerable children. Further, I recommend additional qualitative case study research with other CSEC victims and survivors to detail their experiences and to gain a better perspective of recruitment techniques and grooming tactics employed by predators and exploiters. Case studies are studies that researchers conduct to focus on an individual or process and are more commonly associated with qualitative designs (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Involving children and teens in the formulation of policies and procedures relating to social media, the internet, mobile devices, gaming, and other networked technologies is another recommendation. Children and youth are more likely to adhere to policies they had a role in developing. Service providers are encouraged to incorporate harm reduction into policies and procedures, as well as to listen to adolescents, understand their problems and their need to stay connected via social media and the internet, and design policies that incorporate this knowledge. Service providers and parents are encouraged to have

adequate knowledge of technology and how to safely utilize it and pass the information to children and youth.

### **Implications**

CSEC is a global problem and a major human rights violation. Data obtained in this study support past findings that perpetrators developing a relationship with a child and creating a false sense of trust can lead to sexual exploitation and the use of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse to keep the child trapped in a life of exploitation (Klimley et al., 2018). Because there is minimal research surrounding the recruitment of CSEC via social media, there was very little known about how specific online activities and internet platforms are involved in CSEC facilitation and recruitment (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Past studies, such as a study published in 2020 by O'Brien & Li, explored service providers' perceptions of the role of the internet in CSEC victimization.

During the data collection phase of this study, the participants discussed concerns about the accessibility of technology and the lack of paternal control, which enabled them to participate in online sexual activity or continue having the inappropriate interactions with their solicitor/ exploiter. Future studies should focus on involving parents and caregivers in order to assess their perceptions and experiences being a parent of a CSEC who was exploited via the internet or social media. I recommend focusing research on strategies that specifically highlight privacy and ways of controlling access to social media, address key safety issues and protect children from online sexual perpetrators.

The current study offered some insight into CSEC via online platforms and social media that previous research has not offered. Based on the literature review, this was one

of the first in-depth interview studies to explore the perceptions of CSEC via online platforms and social media. Positive social change can occur by advocating for stricter social media protections that can make the internet, social media sites, and online gaming safer for children. Berry et al. (2017) asserted that risk factors associated with CSEC are a constant challenge for professionals working with this population. The findings of this study may create positive social change by increasing knowledge of the dynamics of CSEC recruitment and activity, informing best practices for parents and human services professionals working with this vulnerable population, and improving societal awareness of this phenomenon. Understanding how social media and the internet are used in the sexual exploitation of children can actively improve outcomes for CSEC. This study can be used to assist in practices working with CSEC and help society understand the perspectives of CSEC to improve outcomes, increase awareness of online child sexual exploitation, and expand harm reduction efforts.

### **Conclusion**

In this generic, qualitative study, the perception and experiences of eight former CSEC in the United States were explored. This study was conducted to discover and explore the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. The findings in this study indicated that the participants were sexually exploited at very young ages via their interactions on the internet. The participants stated that the onset of sexual exploitation via social media began as young as 11 years of age. The average age of entry into the commercial sex industry is 12 years

of age in the United States (Cecka, n.d.; Franchino-Olsen, 2021). This study was designed to answer one research question. The question focused on the perspectives and perceptions of CSEC as it relates to the recruitment via the internet and social media. The results of this study indicate that accessibility of technology and the lack of paternal control enables online sexual activity or the continuation of inappropriate interactions with their solicitor/exploiter. The initial social media contact often stems from the desire to meet friends and gain social attention or emotional issues, such as loneliness, and gain social attention.

The internet is a powerful tool providing numerous positive benefits, but also facilitates risks of abuse and sexual exploitation through the online grooming of children. I discovered that sexual dialogue, exposure to adult pornography and/or child sexual abuse material to the victim, and forcing or coercing the child to create and distribute sexual photographs are all common elements of the internet grooming process. Moreover, the findings of this study indicated that this abuse occurred via online gaming and not just on social media platforms. This study, along with prior studies, suggests that the internet's anonymity makes it easier for predators to search for, identify, exploit, and sexually abuse young children and teenagers online.

Because online predators can remain virtually anonymous and conceal their true identities, the internet and new technologies appeal to online predators as a means of contacting and exploiting children. This makes it easier to approach children and more difficult for law enforcement agencies to identify online predators. Online gaming has risen in popularity for adults and children over the previous two decades. Sexual

predators are increasingly turning to online games to gain easy access to and communicate with children to sexually exploit them. Regrettably, many countries do not have legislation prohibiting internet grooming. Most regulations require that communication with the child be followed by a meeting or a clear plan, such as traveling or making arrangements to meet the child.

During this generic, qualitative study, CSEC participants shared their experiences, beliefs, and upbringing and expressed how they were sexually exploited on social media and the internet. Many indicated that the internet was used as a mechanism to seek attention and find friends. This activity led to exploitation and unwanted sexual advances. Even without a face-to-face meeting, non-contact sexual abuse is entirely achievable through communication technologies. All victims of online grooming may suffer long-term consequences. In internet grooming cases, the perpetrator has betrayed a child's trust, and this breach of trust can affect a child's capacity to relate to others later in life. In summary, this study sheds light on the complexity of CSEC. It may create positive social change by increasing knowledge of the dynamics of CSEC recruitment and activity, informing best practices for parents and human services professionals working with this population, and improving societal awareness of this phenomenon.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

**Interview Questions**

*Tell me about your experiences as a child. Where did you grow up?*

*Thinking about the first time you were introduced to the sex industry, what was the grooming process used?*

*How did your solicitor befriend you?*

*How did your solicitor use the internet to lure you into the lifestyle?*

*On what social media platform did your solicitor befriend you?*

*Were you introduced to your solicitor by a family member or friend on a social media platform?*

*What is your experience with specific social media platforms as it relates to sexual exploitation?*

## Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

### Recruitment Letter

\*\*\*\*\*SEEKING STUDY PARTICIPANTS\*\*\*\*\*

Hello,

My name is Shawnté Beacham-Houston. I am a PhD candidate at Walden University, conducting a study on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). I am writing because I am seeking participants for my dissertation study: *The Perspectives of Former CSEC on the Recruitment Process through Online Platforms*. The study explores how CSEC online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry. There is currently a lack of information on how the internet is used in the recruitment process. Research plays an important role in our understanding of sexual exploitation and helps improve how society addresses this phenomenon.

Here is a little about my dissertation topic. CSEC is a global problem. CSEC is defined as minor children under the age of 18 who perform sexual acts in exchange for money, food, clothing, shelter, or drugs. CSEC is a billion-dollar industry. Many traffickers use various tactics to recruit children into sexual exploitation. This includes developing a relationship with a vulnerable child, creating a false sense of trust, and using physical, emotional, and psychological abuse to keep the child trapped in a life of prostitution.

For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences in the sex trade industry whereas online activities and specific internet platforms were involved. Participation in the study is voluntary, and will include completing an Informed Consent statement as well as allowing me to conduct an interview via Zoom or a similar videoconference platform. All participants will be given a pseudonym during the data collection process to assure their confidentiality.

**Volunteers must meet the following requirements:**

- **Must be 18 years of age or older**
- **History of previous CSEC involvement using social media platforms**

- **All participants must have completed some counseling on the topic of CSEC in the past**

The whole process should take no more than 90 minutes of your time and may occur in two sessions. A \$50 Target gift card will be provided for your participation. This is a thank you gift for your valued time and participation. Please let me know if you would like to participate. You can contact me by phone [REDACTED], e-mail [REDACTED] if you have any questions.

## Appendix C: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study about the recruitment process of formerly sexually exploited children through online platforms for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 5-8 volunteers who are:

- Former Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) victims
- History of previous CSEC involvement using social media platforms
- 18 years of age or older
- All participants must have done some counseling on this topic in the past

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Shawnté Beacham-Houston, who is a doctoral candidate at Walden University.

#### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of adults who were former CSEC regarding how online activities and specific internet platforms are involved in CSEC recruitment and entry into the commercial sex trade industry.

#### **Procedures:**

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- take part in a confidential, audio recorded interview (phone option available) (1 hour)
- review a typed transcript of your interview to make corrections if needed (email option available) (10 minutes)
- speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher’s interpretations, provide clarification and share your feedback (20-30 minutes, phone option available)

Here are some sample questions:

*Thinking about the first time you were introduced to the sex industry, what was the grooming process used?*

*How did your solicitor befriend you?*

*How did your solicitor use the internet to lure you into the lifestyle?*

*On what social media platform did your solicitor befriend you?*

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer, so everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. Please note that not all volunteers will be contacted to take part. The researcher will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether or not they were selected for the study.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information and experiences. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing. Mental health resources (low cost/no cost) will be provided at the conclusion of the interview process.

- ❖ L A County 211 (dial 2-1-1 within LA County or visit [www.211la.org](http://www.211la.org))
- ❖ [Saving Innocence](http://SavingInnocence.org)  
P.O. BOX 93037  
Los Angeles, CA, 90093  
(323) 379-4232  
<https://savinginnocence.org/>
- ❖ National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC)  
Call National Human Trafficking Hotline 1-888-373-7888 or text "INFO" to BeFree (233733) for direct assistance from an NHTRC representative.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by addressing the need to track new technology including websites, new keywords, and new methods of recruitment of CSEC victims. This may lead to fewer vulnerable children being recruited into the sex industry by way of social media. Lastly, changing how society views child sex trafficking survivors will aid in creating more societal awareness and appropriate identification. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by posting online in Scholarworks (a publication of Walden University research).

The researcher is a mandated reporter and is obligated to report any and all disclosures of child abuse or elder abuse to law enforcement, child welfare or adult protective services.

**Payment:**

The researcher will email a \$50 Target gift card to 8 volunteers once they complete the interview.

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. The researcher will not ask for your full name at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is Shawnté Beacham-Houston. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by Shawnté Beacham-Houston. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**



You can ask questions of the researcher by calling [REDACTED] or emailing [REDACTED]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at (612) 312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 11-22-21-0987329. It expires on November 21, 2022.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

### **Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by **stating, "I consent" on the audio recording.**