

Review Paper

Exploring the Dimensions of Online Child Sexual Abuse:
A Qualitative Meta-synthesis StudyHadi Gholamrezaei¹, Mohammad Reza Falsafinejad^{1,2*}, Anahita Khodabakhshi-Koolaei^{1,3}

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ABSTRACT

Objective: With the expanded use of the Internet, online child sexual abuse has been facilitated through the growing number of malicious websites that allow criminals to interact with children. Online child sexual abuse involves acquiring, displaying, collecting, and distributing sexual content to obtain sexual satisfaction from a child. Online child sexual abuse threatens the public mental health of society through its adverse effects on the mental health of children and families. To this end, the present study aims to review the studies on online sexual abuse to provide a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon.

Methods: This study was conducted with a qualitative and systematic review method. The research population was 113 articles published in scientific databases in the last decade about online sexual abuse and its dimensions. The research sample consisted of 22 articles, which were selected based on thematic monitoring and theoretical saturation of data via purposive sampling. The data were collected from a qualitative analysis of the studied documents and records.

Results: Data analysis revealed that indicators of online child sexual abuse are divided into 4 dimensions, 9 categories, and 56 subcategories, including knowledge components (low cyber knowledge, unawareness of the boundaries of online activities, low media literacy), psychological components (intrapersonal, interpersonal, personality, and interactive factors), approach-based components (cyberbullying, intimacy, and sexual-emotional abuse), and environmental components (cyberspace features and distribution platforms).

Conclusion: Paying attention to the virtual environment for learners leads to the reduction of the existing injuries in this environment. Identifying the indicators and components of online sexual abuse of children allows educational leaders and those involved in virtual space to examine online sexual abuse from various dimensions.

Keywords:Children, Cyberbullying,
Sexual abuse, Cybercrime,
Qualitative research*** Corresponding Author:**

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Highlights

- Online child sexual manhandling has been encouraged through the developing number of pernicious websites that permit hoodlums to connect with children.
- The show considers surveying the ponders on online sexual manhandling to supply a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon.
- The results indicated that knowledge components, psychological components, approach-based components, and environmental components.

Plain Language Summary

The developing rate of online sexual mishandling cases within the 21st century has ended up a major issue that has pulled the consideration of numerous analysts around the world. Thus, numerous ponders have tended to this marvel. To this conclusion, the show ponders given an orderly audit of the past considers within the writing on online child sexual mishandling. The discoveries uncovered 4 measurements of online child sexual manhandling counting information components, mental components, approach-based components, and natural components, as examined below.

Introduction

The rapid development of communication technologies, along with the widespread use of the Internet, has fundamentally transformed almost every part of human life, including work, health, education, communication, and entertainment, to the extent that these technologies have become a common basic need for human daily life due to their relatively low cost and easy access (Cikman et al., 2017). With the widespread use of the Internet, commercial sites that contain pornographic content, chat rooms, and uncontrolled communication networks serve as platforms that connect children with pedophiles, thereby promoting potential online sexual abuse (Keçe, 2018). Sex offenders often use the Internet to communicate with children to facilitate in-person sexual abuse or to create and distribute sexual images of children (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). Online child sexual abuse includes displaying, collecting, compiling, and distributing child sexual abuse content for personal sexual gratification, financial gain, interaction with other pedophiles, participation in online live streams of child sexual abuse, and grooming to encourage children to engage in sexual acts online and then offline and in reality (Özçalık & Atakoğlu, 2021; Açar, 2017). Child grooming refers to a relationship based on trust between a minor and an adult who uses information and communication technologies to solicit and exploit young people to provide online and offline child sexual abuse acts (Kloess et al., 2014).

Child sexual abuse material has become a big problem in the 21st century, and despite the increased awareness and efforts of governments and non-governmental organizations in the private sector, still alarming statistics exist in this field. In 1998, the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children identified online sexual abuse as a new form of child sexual abuse. In the following year, 9 673 reports were received by this center, and in 2021, these reports reached >29 million reports, of which 99% were related to online child sexual abuse, indicating a three-thousand-fold increase over the past 22 years (IWF, 2020). Sex offenders often use the Internet to communicate with children to facilitate in-person sexual abuse or to create and distribute sexual images of children (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). Online sexual solicitation (OSS) of children occurs when an adult stranger uses the Internet to access, interact, and establish relationships with children to induce them to engage in sexual conversations and acts, offline and/or online. Online sexual solicitation may involve a variety of sexually explicit acts, desired or undesired by the child, such as initiating conversations of a sexual nature (e.g. cybersex, describing sexual acts, and exchanging sexual information), exchanging pornographic images, and meeting offline and engaging in sexual acts (Gemara et al., 2022). Various studies have addressed the effect of experiencing physical abuse, sexual and emotional abuse, and physical and emotional neglect in children in the etiology of mental disorders in children (McNally et al., 2021; McKay et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020) and have shown that many factors, including cyberspace and its widespread use, are effective in the phenomenology

of child abuse (Drăgan, 2018). However, the reported cases of child sexual abuse are like the tip of the iceberg as the exact rate of sexual abuse is not stated in detail. For example, Abbas and Jabeen (2020) showed that 44% of the men and 39% of the women participating in the study reported that they have experienced at least one form of sexual abuse (looking at private parts, pornography, touching private parts, talking sexually and or having sex) in childhood.

As stated earlier, online child abuse has been addressed by many studies conducted in the last few years. Since children start using the Internet at a young age and for a long time, they are at risk of engaging in online sexual abuse and these online threats pose a potentially growing problem to the mental health of the community, leading to a dramatic increase in child abuse reports. Accordingly, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), a UK-based NGO, identified >153,000 new web pages containing child sexual abuse images in 2020, showing a 16% increase compared to 2019 (IWF, 2020). In the UK in 2016, 100,000 people were involved in online sexual abuse, and 5%-25% of children in Europe and the US experienced sexual abuse, viewed pornography, and became involved in online sexual abuse. Moreover, from 2009 to 2013, four thousand child victims of sexual abuse were identified by the Interpol (Carr, 2020). Acar also reported that during 10 weeks, more than a thousand different people offered money to a virtual Filipino child named Sweetie, so that in exchange for receiving this money, he would send them online sexual images of himself. Landberg et al. (2022) showed that 27.5% of high school students, including 40.5% of females and 12.8% of males in Sweden with an average age of 18 have engaged in online sex or been forced to do so in the past year.

Thus, it is essential to raise the awareness of parents, psychologists, counselors, teachers, and all health professionals dealing with children and families about online child sexual abuse. To this end, this systematic review study seeks to review the studies conducted in this field to reveal the dimensions of online child sexual abuse highlighted in the literature in recent years. The insights from this study can contribute to developing child sexual abuse prevention and training programs.

Materials and Methods

Using a systematic review approach, the present study was conducted to analyze studies that addressed online child sexual abuse. Systematic review is a standard approach to examining the questions and findings of sev-

eral studies (Boland et al., 2014). A systematic review is an explicit method to identify, evaluate, and analyze the previous work done by researchers and scholars (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). Studies that can be evaluated using a systematic review should be published online and present field and empirical findings. Thus, the research setting includes all valid scientific articles addressing online child sexual abuse. Since sexual abuse on online platforms has increased in recent years, all the selected articles were conducted within this time frame (2014-2023). The required data were collected using a researcher-made worksheet form. The identified scientific documents and records were categorized using content analysis. The collected data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding and Wright et al.'s seven-step model (Wright et al., 2007). To assess the reliability of the coding scheme, the data were re-coded by four raters using Scott's method. The inter-rater agreement was estimated as 0.74, showing a 74% agreement between the raters (Equation 1).

$$C.R = \frac{55 + 49 + 50 + 42}{4 \times 66} \times 100 = 74.24$$

1.

$$C.R = \frac{\text{The number of agreed categories}}{\text{Total number of categories}} \times 100$$

This study was conducted through five steps as detailed below:

Step 1: Developing the research question

Table 1 presents the research questions.

Step 2: Formulating the research protocol

To reduce any probable bias, the review protocol was developed before retrieving the related records. To collect the data, we developed a set of criteria to select and categorize the articles (Moffet, 2015).

A. The inclusion criteria used in this study included:

1. The articles that addressed learners' online sexual abuse
2. The articles that reported adequate data (the sum of data or information required to create an influential contention or back a specific conclusion) on online child sexual abuse
3. The full-text articles that were reviewed by subject-matter experts and published online

Table 1. Research questions and parameters

| Parameters | Questions |
|----------------------------------|--|
| What (the research question) | What are the components of online child sexual abuse? |
| Who (research population) | Different databases and search engines |
| What (findings) | The studies whose results focused on online child sexual abuse. |
| When (time frame) | Studies published in 2014 and onward |
| How (data collection procedures) | The studies were based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria and assessed using a systematic review. |

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B. The exclusion criteria used in this study included:

1. The articles that did not report enough data about online child sexual abuse or the articles that only assessed the relationship between online child sexual abuse and other variables quantitatively
2. The articles lacked scientific rigor and were published in low-quality journals and conferences without an international index or reported impact factor.
3. The articles that were not published in the intended time frame (2014-2023). In other words, the articles that were published before 2014 and their results were no longer useful for current issues.

valid scholarly articles were searched using the keywords “child sexual abuse”, “online child sexual abuse”, and “cyber sexual abuse” in domestic databases, such as Google, SID, Normags, Magiram, Comprehensive Humanities Portal, Iranian Research Institute for Information Science and Technology (IranDoc), and Elmnet Search Engine as well as international databases including Scopus, Emerald, Sage, Scientific Information Database, Science Direct, ProQuest, Springlink, World Scientific, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, Eric, and Wiley. The records related to the objectives of the study were retained and unrelated records were removed. Furthermore, Google Scholar and related websites, such as Child Abuse & Neglect were searched manually to identify the gray literature. To improve the rigor of the results, the databases were searched separately by two experts who were familiar with search methods and information sources. Moreover, three experts in the field of online platforms and psychology monitored the search

Step 3: Search strategy

The intended articles were searched using the search strategy proposed by Prashar (2015). To this end, all

Table 2. The search strategy

| Databases | Strategy | Inclusion Criteria | | Number of Records Found | Exclusion Criteria | Final Records |
|--|---------------------------|--|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| | | Filter 1 | Filter 2 | | | |
| Scopus | Child sexual abuse online | Article title, abstracts, and keywords/2014 to the present | Article text, invalid articles, book chapters, and thesis | 11 | Irrelevant in content | 3 |
| Sage | Online child sexual abuse | Article title, abstracts, and keywords/2014 to the present | Article text, invalid articles, book chapters, and thesis | 29 | Irrelevant in content | 2 |
| Comprehensive Humanities Portal (Ensani) | Online child sexual abuse | Article title, abstracts, and keywords/2014 to the present | Article text, invalid articles, book chapters, and thesis | 0 | Irrelevant in content | 0 |
| SID | Online child sexual abuse | Article title, abstracts, and keywords/2014 to the present | Article text, invalid articles, book chapters, and thesis | 0 | Irrelevant in content | 0 |
| Noormags | Online child sexual abuse | Article title, abstracts, and keywords/2014 to the present | Article text, invalid articles, book chapters, and thesis | 0 | Irrelevant in content | 0 |

SID: Scientific information database.

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Table 3. A checklist developed based on Carlsen et al.'s (2007) model

| Row | Criteria | Article 1 | Article 2 | Article 3 | Article 4 | Article 5 |
|-----|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|---|-----------|
| 1 | Sampling strategy | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2 | Data collection procedure | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | - | ✓ |
| 3 | Data analysis procedure | ✓ | - | ✓ | - | ✓ |
| 4 | The fit between the research design and research objectives | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | - | ✓ |
| 5 | Clarity of the findings | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 6 | Delivery | - | ✓ | ✓ | - | ✓ |
| 7 | The fit between the research paradigms and the selected procedures | ✓ | - | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 8 | Quality assessment | High | Medium | High | Low | High |
| 9 | Considerations | | | | Needs further judgment by a third rater | |

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protocol. The data in this study were collected from scholarly and research articles published in national and international databases. The articles have been published using strict review protocols in reputed journals.

Step 4: Extracting articles

A standard form was used to record the intended information, including the source (journal name, article title, and author(s)), purpose (the objective(s) of the study), methodology, and results. The data were collected by searching the intended keywords in the databases. Considering the inclusion criteria, 113 articles published in English and Persian were identified. After reviewing the articles based on the exclusion criteria, the irrelevant articles were excluded and finally, 22 articles were used for the final review. Table 2 presents the search strategy used in this study.

Step 5: Quality assessment

Every study, including qualitative studies and systematic reviews, must have acceptable validity and objectivity. In systematic review studies, a comprehensive search will lead to finding a lot of relevant studies, but since all these studies are not of adequate and acceptable quality, before the review, the extracted records should be selected following the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Before entering the analysis, each article should be analyzed using suitable tools and based on defined criteria, and only articles that have acceptable quality should be analyzed and reviewed. A checklist was used in this study to specify the high, medium, and low quality of the

selected articles. To this end, the selected articles were scored and those with lower scores were excluded. Table 3 presents a rating checklist developed based on Carlsen et al.'s model (Carlsen et al., 2008).

The extracted articles were reviewed and rated independently by at least two raters using the criteria detailed in Table 3. The raters specified the reasons to reject an article. However, in the case of any disagreement between the two raters, the article would be reviewed and assessed by a third rater.

Results

Data analysis was performed using Wright et al.'s seven-step model (Wright et al., 2007).

Step 6: Data analysis

The dimensions of online child sexual abuse were extracted through open coding from the selected articles as detailed in Table 4.

Step 7: Reporting the results

This systematic review was conducted to reveal the components of online child sexual abuse. First, all components were identified through open coding. Afterward, all scientific findings were integrated to come up with a solid understanding of the components of online child sexual abuse. Then, the extracted open codes were recoded and the overlapping codes and those with a similar meaning were merged into axial codes. Fi-

Table 4. The dimensions of online child sexual abuse

| Row | Author (y) | Components of Online Child Sexual Abuse |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 | Finkelhor et al., 2023 | Title: Which dynamics make online child sexual abuse and cyberstalking more emotionally impactful, perpetrator identity and images? Results: Attention to emotional support, people's satisfaction with sharing content online, determining the limits of communication with close friends in cyberspace, inability to express emotions affected by cyberspace, and unfamiliarity with cyber literature |
| 2 | Schmidt et al., 2023 | Title: Understanding healthcare services response to technology-assisted child sexual abuse: Freedom of information study Results: Global access, anonymity, and ease of network building through the Internet, extreme compliance, fear and forced silence in cyberspace, gaps in general knowledge and education regarding online risks, inability and low confidence to effectively address online risks, raising children's awareness about encouraging/manipulating/threatening a child to perform sexual acts in front of a webcam, and or distributing and publishing sexual images or videos |
| 3 | Thomas et al., 2023 | Title: Offenders' approaches to overcoming victim resistance in technology-assisted child sexual abuse Results: Awareness of strategies for dealing with online abuse and threats (feigning ignorance and complying with some but not all requests), increasing self-control and self-confidence in Internet users, understanding strategies for online abuse (direct tactics, such as insistence, pressure, emotional manipulation, and blackmail) |
| 4 | Cirik et al., 2023 | Title: Investigation of fathers' metaphors regarding child sexual abuse in Turkey: A metaphor study Results: Antecedents of bullying, aggression, and abuse of a life partner, intimacy between parents and children, influence on children's behavior, effective communication with children, improving parent-child communication, promoting self-confidence and self-efficacy, and publishing images on blogs, forums, and social media |
| 5 | Bouchard et al., 2023 | Title: Child sexual abuse and employment earnings in adulthood: A prospective Canadian cohort study Results: Paying attention to the identity of the offender (within the family and outside the family), intensity (attempts for intimate sex, caressing/touching, no contact), chronicity (single, multiple), emphasis on self-concept and understanding of the personality in cyberspace, understanding online risks, familiarity with educational networks, reviewing and analyzing the dimensions of the subjects |
| 6 | Rohanachandra et al., 2023 | Title: Parental knowledge and attitudes about child sexual abuse and their practices of sex education in a Sri Lankan setting Results: Emotional/psychological violence, physical violence, controlling/threatening behavior, and coercion between intimate partners and toward children (both within and outside the family by parents/children, biological or non-biological caregivers), unawareness of sexual health, disregard for sex education beyond imparting knowledge about human physiology, reproductive system, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases to children |
| 7 | Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023 | Title: "I was the only one talking about the abuse": Experiences and perceptions of survivors who underwent child sexual abuse as boys Results: Disclosure of information and identity of victims, jeopardizing sexual identity and inconsistency between social construction and personality in victims, use of cultural and religious taboos in the community, use of pathological consequences in abusive strategies, victimization, and sexual aggression, feelings of helplessness and despair |
| 8 | Augusti et al., 2023 | Title: Violence and sexual abuse rates before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A prospective population-based study on Norwegian youth Results: Environmental stressors, pandemic concerns and the increased parenting burden imposed by homeschooling and home daycare, the diminishing of the vital role of schools and healthcare services, the continued harassment of children online, directing children's attention to pornography |
| 9 | Moorman & Romano, 2023 | Title: The experience of childhood sexual abuse: An exploratory description of psychological and adaptive functioning in Canadian men Results: Paying attention to the quality of online friendships, recognizing illegal and criminal behaviors, moral confusion and contradictions in people's beliefs, not setting clear boundaries in online communication, lack of social support for victims, and considering it taboo in some societies |
| 10 | Miyakado et al., 2023 | Title: Online sexual exploitation of adolescents in Tanzania: Explaining help-seeking intention using the theory of planned behavior Results: Attitude toward seeking help by victims, perceived social support, self-efficacy and social stigma perceived by children in cyberspace, reduction of generalized self-efficacy, publishing private files via computer games and messengers |
| 11 | Filice et al., 2022 | Title: Sexual violence and abuse in online dating: A scoping review Results: Paying attention to the depth and level of friendship in online relationships, ignoring unconventional data, checking, and collecting online information about the client's personality, background, interests, and desired characteristics in a partner, and normalizing online dating culture |

| Row | Author (y) | Components of Online Child Sexual Abuse |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|
| 12 | Dimitropoulos et al., 2022 | <p>Title: Experiences of Canadian mental health providers in identifying and responding to online and in-person sexual abuse and exploitation of their child and adolescent clients</p> <p>Results: Neglecting risk reduction strategies including chatting in private, not disclosing search information, refraining from providing personal information, having app protections, luring, or distributing sexual images to victims, limited education and awareness, lower self-confidence, and barriers when identifying and responding to sexual abuse</p> |
| 13 | Hornor et al., 2022 | <p>Title: Online sexual solicitation of children and adolescents in a high-risk population</p> <p>Results: Perception of privacy and anonymity, children's history of drug/alcohol use, child's history of suicidal thoughts, child's history of mental health/behavioral concerns and sexual activity, domestic violence, caregivers' mental health concerns, examination of family psychosocial characteristics, presenting content regardless of age range and support</p> |
| 14 | Joleby et al., 2021 | <p>Title: Offender strategies for engaging children in online sexual activity</p> <p>Results: Use of pressure strategies (threats, bribes, or nagging), and sweet-talk (flattery, acting as a friend, or expressing love), controlling, grooming, and following (checking and following different networks), insulting, minimal use of force, sexual conversations, attempting or persuading the victim for nude or semi-nude gestures, exposing the offender via webcam</p> |
| 15 | Haginoya et al., 2021 | <p>Title: The combination of feedback and modeling in online simulation training of child sexual abuse interviews improves interview quality in clinical psychologists.</p> <p>Results: Paying attention to the avatar and profile in social networks and access to it, downplaying the dangers of cyberspace, dealing with child sexual crimes, training, and support for reporting the dangers and risks of cyberspace, ignoring warning notifications, threatening to publish private content in the dark net and Internet chat rooms</p> |
| 16 | Bounds, 2021 | <p>Title: Online facilitated sexual abuse: Characteristics, risks, and a pathway toward prevention</p> <p>Results: Familiarity with types of cyberspace users, conceptualizing the process of online activity, determining the limits of forming friendships, forming relationships, assessing risk, monopoly, and sexual stages in cyberspace, paying attention to sexual exploitation and its dimensions with the help of education and awareness, wider validation in different cultural issues, and expanding education beyond questioning skills</p> |
| 17 | Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 | <p>Title: Unraveling cyber sexual abuse of minors</p> <p>Results: Neglect of mental health (depression, anxiety, etc.), low self-esteem, substance abuse, excessive online behavior, and related self-harm, close emotional relationships with adults, and inability to distinguish between influencing and communication strategies in cyberspace</p> |
| 18 | Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020 | <p>Title: Technology-assisted child sexual abuse in the UK: Young people's views on the impact of online sexual abuse</p> <p>Results: Ease of access to online environments regardless of the permitted age range, lack of control over cyberspace, attention to blackmail using images, disregard for the importance, and loss of control over personal images in peer environments</p> |
| 19 | Kilimnik et al., 2020 | <p>Title: A randomized, active placebo-controlled trial of an online expressive writing intervention for the sexual well-being of women with childhood sexual abuse histories</p> <p>Results: Education of sexual-mental health components (concerns about sexual safety, concerns about sexuality, the need for gender equality, concerns about emotional dependencies, the need to reduce sexual consequences of physical or mental disability, the need to raise family awareness), attention to sexual well-being, sexual satisfaction, and sexual distress in adult Internet users</p> |
| 20 | Alaggia & Wang, 2020 | <p>Title: I never told anyone until the Me-Too movement: What can we learn from sexual abuse and sexual assault disclosures made through social media?</p> <p>Results: The incidence of depression, anxiety, trauma disorders, and addiction among online users, emphasis on intimate relationships and peers, parenting awareness, emphasis on popularity in social media, various factors and explorations related to sexual disclosures</p> |
| 21 | Pusch et al., 2020 | <p>Title: The environment of intrafamilial offenders—a systematic review of dynamics in incestuous families</p> <p>Results: History of parental sexual victimization, parental problems, children's physical or mental condition, intimate partner violence, parental problematic relationships, parental substance abuse, low parental care, low sense of parental competence, accepted nudity between father and daughter, low maternal affection, and the presence of a non-biological father in the family, private and unconventional communication in non-controlled environments such as email and dark nets</p> |
| 22 | Müller et al., 2014 | <p>Title: Child sexual abuse prevention goes online: Introducing "cool and safe" and its effects</p> <p>Results: Low awareness of behavioral intentions, emotional awareness, and anxiety when using cyberspace, children's inability to hide their emotions, improving children's knowledge about safe behaviors, sexual and non-sexual touching, good and bad secrets, awareness of the threat of publishing images through computer networks, media, and emails</p> |

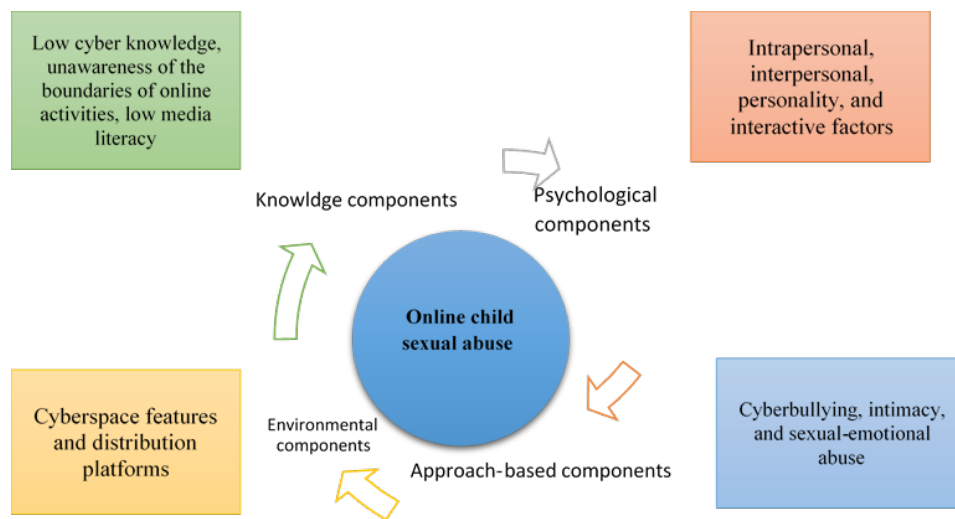


Figure 1. The components of online child sexual abuse

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nally, the analysis of the resulting codes revealed that online child sexual abuse could be explained by four dimensions (selective codes) as detailed in [Table 5](#).

[Figure 1](#) displays the components of online child sexual abuse. As can be seen, all the components are non-linearly interrelated, affecting each other.

Discussion

The growing rate of online sexual abuse cases in the 21st century has become a major problem that has attracted the attention of many researchers around the world. Hence, many studies have addressed this phenomenon. To this end, the present study provided a systematic review of the previous studies in the literature on online child sexual abuse. The results revealed 4 dimensions of online child sexual abuse, including knowledge components, psychological components, approach-based components, and environmental components, as discussed below.

Knowledge components of online child sexual abuse are related to children's unawareness of cyberspace boundaries and the lack of knowledge required for analyzing online opportunities. Moreover, low cyber knowledge is rooted in an unawareness or partial awareness of the functions of online networks and data protection techniques in online media and platforms. In addition, children's unawareness of cyberspace complexities, cyber ethics, and the impacts of online media on other aspects of their lives can contribute to online sexual abuse as highlighted in previous studies ([Alagija & Wang, 2020](#); [Bounds, 2021](#)). These researchers

reported that awareness of online networks and their impacts is one of the main factors underlying cyber abuse and victimization. Furthermore, the present study showed the failure to identify the boundaries in online dating and relationships, the inability to evaluate cyberspace risks, the failure to distinguish between good and bad secrets when communicating with adults, and the inability to make a distinction between influencing and communication strategies in online platforms can facilitate online child sexual abuse, as confirmed in the literature ([Hornor et al., 2022](#); [Moorman & Romano, 2023](#)). The third knowledge component was low media literacy because it is essential to pay attention to the current actions and the requirements of the current era for a better understanding of media analysis and cyberspace activities. Low media literacy is related to the unawareness of methods used to analyze internet input information, unawareness of active educational media and platforms, unawareness of ethical principles governing social networks, the failure to understand the goals and consequences of online messages, inability to analyze opportunities in cyberspace and assess their validity, and weak critical and reflective thinking. These results were consistent with the results reported in the literature ([Augusti et al., 2023](#); [Hornor et al., 2022](#)).

Psychological factors, including intrapersonal and extra-personal characteristics of children, can increase the risk of online sexual abuse. Moreover, children with low self-confidence, disrupted self-concept, anxiety and worry, emotional concealment, trauma disorders, and

Table 5. The dimensions of online child sexual abuse

| Open Codes | Axial Codes | Selective Codes | Ref. |
|----------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| | | Unawareness of information protection strategies | Schmidt et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023 |
| | | Unawareness of the functions of online networks | Schmidt et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022 |
| | | Unawareness of cyberspace risks | Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Haginoya et al., 2021; Bounds, 2021 |
| | Low cyber knowledge | Unawareness of the nature of online relationships | Schmidt et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Pusch et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | Unawareness of ethical and religious standards in online environments | Bouchard et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023 |
| | | Low emotional awareness in online environments | Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021; Bounds, 2021 |
| | | Lack of awareness-raising about mental and sexual health in online media | Cirik et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Kilimnik et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | The failure to understand the impact of media on beliefs and individual and collective culture | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Bouchard et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Hornor et al., 2022; Bounds, 2021; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 |
| | | Unawareness of privacy issues | Cirik et al., 2023; Bouchard et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022 |
| | | Unawareness of boundaries of online activities | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Filice et al., 2022; Pusch et al., 2020 |
| Knowledge components | | The failure to evaluate online risks | Bouchard et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Haginoya et al., 2021 |
| | | The failure to distinguish between good and bad secrets when interacting with adults | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Bouchard et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | The failure to distinguish between influencing and communication strategies in online environments | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Bouchard et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Kilimnik et al., 2020 |
| | | Unawareness of methods used to analyze internet input information | Bouchard et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022; Hornor et al., 2022; Bounds, 2021 |
| | | Unawareness of active educational media and platforms | Bouchard et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Kilimnik et al., 2020 |
| | | Unawareness of ethical principles governing social networks | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Hornor et al., 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020 |
| | | The failure to understand the goals and consequences of online messages | Thomas et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020 |
| | Low media literacy | Inability to analyze opportunities in cyberspace and asses their validity | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 |
| | | Weak critical and reflective thinking | Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 |

| Open Codes | Axial Codes | Selective Codes | Ref. |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Psychological components | Intrapersonal and personality factors | Low self-confidence | Thomas et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Kilimnik et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014; Kilimnik et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | Disrupted self-concept | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; Müller et al., 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 |
| | | Anxiety and worry | Thomas et al., 2023; Augusti et al., 2023; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Emotional concealment | Cirik et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Traumatic disorders | Hornor et al., 2022; Kilimnik et al., 2020 |
| | | Emotional dependence on online friends | Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Pusch et al., 2020 |
| | | User's sexual distress | Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Hornor et al., 2022; Bounds, 2021; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Weak connection with real space and attachment to cyberspace | Bouchard et al., 2023; Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Augusti et al., 2023; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 |
| | Interpersonal and interactive factors | Emotional detachment of family members | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Pusch et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | Accepted nudity at home | Joleby et al., 2021; Pusch et al., 2020 |
| | | The failure to control cyberspace and extreme freedom | Schmidt et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022 |
| | | Support for reporting online risks | Thomas et al., 2023; Haginoya et al., 2021 |
| | | History of traumatic thoughts (suicide, etc.) | Hornor et al., 2022; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Disregard for the intensity of friendship in online relationships | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Augusti et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023 |
| | | Normalization of online dating culture | Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022 |
| | | Low intimacy in parent-child interactions | Cirik et al., 2023; Kilimnik et al., 2020; Pusch et al., 2020 |
| Approach-based components | Cyberbullying strategies | Cyber violence | Schmidt et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Threatening to notify parents | Rohanachandra et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023 |
| | | Threatening to expose nude and semi-nude images | Schmidt et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Online extortion through psychological pressure on the child | Thomas et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022; Joleby et al., 2021; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| | | Continuous child abuse through different communication networks | Augusti et al., 2023; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020 |
| | | Exploiting or encouraging a child to engage in sexually inappropriate behaviors | Schmidt et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022; Pusch et al., 2020 |
| | | Ignoring the child's need for interaction | Cirik et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023 |

| Open Codes | Axial Codes | Selective Codes | Ref. |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|
| Approach-based components | Emotional/physical intimacy and abuse | Manipulating the child's emotions | Thomas et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021 |
| | | Verbal flattery | Joleby et al., 2021 |
| | | Hostile verbal humiliation | Cirik et al., 2023; Rohanachandra et al., 2023; |
| | | Concerns about victims' social desires | Attrash-Najjar et al., 2023; Moorman & Romano, 2023; |
| | | Grooming children to perform sexual acts preferred by the offender | Schmidt et al., 2023; |
| | | Gaining trust through the victim's desired online communication | Thomas et al., 2023; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021 |
| | | Sexual exploitation by making the child interested in pornography | Augusti et al., 2023; |
| | | The offender's flattery and expression of love by pretending to be a friend | Schmidt et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021; Alaggia & Wang, 2020 |
| Environmental components | Cyberspace features | An insecure and shared environment | Joleby et al., 2021; Bounds, 2021; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020 |
| | | Providing various accesses to users in online network platforms (webcam, microphone, etc.) | Finkelhor et al., 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Joleby et al., 2021 |
| | | Disabling notifications and alerts | Haginoya et al., 2021 |
| | | The failure to provide age-appropriate content | Honor et al., 2022; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020 |
| | | Disregard for malware | Filice et al., 2022; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Bounds, 2021 |
| | | Lack of support from security services for the online environment | Mlyakado et al., 2023; Honor et al., 2022 |
| | Distribution and dissemination platforms | Email | Pusch et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | Websites | Schmidt et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023 |
| | | Darknets | Haginoya et al., 2021; Pusch et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | Forums | Cirik et al., 2023 |
| | | Social media | Cirik et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2014 |
| | | Instant messaging | Mlyakado et al., 2023 |
| | | Saving files | Schmidt et al., 2023 |
| | | Internet chat rooms | Haginoya et al., 2021 |
| | | Peer-to-peer networks | Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014 |
| Computer games | Mlyakado et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2014 | | |

emotional dependence on friends in cyberspace are more likely to be victims of online sexual abuse, as highlighted in previous studies (Finkelhor et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021). Moreover, interpersonal characteristics, including an emotional detachment from family members, accepted nudity at home, the failure to

control cyberspace and extreme freedom, support for reporting cyberspace risks, history of traumatic thoughts (suicide, etc.), disregard for the intensity of friendship in online relationships, normalization of online dating culture, and low intimacy in parent-child interactions can contribute to ineffective and counterproductive in-

teractions in online media and networks as confirmed by previous studies in the literature (Haginoya et al., 2021; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Finkelhor et al., 2023).

Approach-based components, including cyberbullying strategies, intimacy strategies, and emotional-sexual abuse refer to the techniques used by offenders to abuse and extort children in cyberspace. Cyberbullying involves threatening to notify parents, threatening to expose nude and semi-nude images, online extortion through psychological pressure on the child, frequent child abuse through different communication networks, exploiting or encouraging a child to engage in sexually inappropriate behaviors, and ignoring the child's needs for interaction, leading to online child sexual abuse (Schmidt et al., 2023; Cirik et al., 2023; Filice et al., 2022). Emotional-sexual intimacy and abuse involve manipulating children's innocent feelings consistent with criminals' sexually destructive goals. Accordingly, verbal flattery, hostile verbal humiliation, concerns about victims' social desires, grooming children to perform sexual acts preferred by the offender, gaining trust through the victim's desired online communication, sexual exploitation by making the child interested in pornography, and the offender's flattery and expression of love by pretending to be a friend can increase the risk of online sexual abuse in children, as confirmed in the literature (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2021; Cirik et al., 2023).

Previous studies also indicated that environmental factors, such as an insecure and shared environment, providing various accesses to users in online network platforms (webcam, microphone, etc.), disabling notifications and alerts, the failure to provide age-appropriate content, disregard for malware, lack of support from security services for the online environment can contribute to increasing the risk of online child sexual abuse (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Hornor et al., 2022). In addition, the platforms used for producing and sharing sexual content, such as websites, dark nets, forums, social media, instant messaging, internet chat rooms, peer-to-peer networks, and computer games can increase the risk of online child sexual abuse (Cirik et al., 2023, Haginoya et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Addressing cyberspace risks for learners can reduce the possibility of online sexual abuse. The present study

sought to extract factors contributing to online child sexual abuse in previous studies. The insights from this study can be helpful for educational administrators and cyberspace managers to develop programs or adopt strategies to reduce the risk of online sexual abuse in Iranian children. This study was conducted with some shortcomings, including the unavailability of studies on online sexual abuse in Iranian children and difficulty accessing related databases. In line with the results of the study, the following suggestions are offered:

Cyber, media, and sexual literacy should be incorporated into educational curricula for students. Moreover, online sexual education should be provided for children and adolescents, especially during the post-COVID-19 period through training courses and workshops.

Parents and teachers should pay attention to children's self-confidence and emotional dependence on online, social media and platforms. They can also provide some training on online sexual abuse and how to prevent it.

A safe virtual environment should be developed for children using artificial intelligence technologies and biometric authentication tools. Besides, children's awareness needs to be raised using educational platforms and they should have access to websites with content fitting their age requirements.

Parents should establish effective emotional relationships with their children. They should also receive some education about parenting styles and effective parent-child interactions.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study approved by Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, [Tehran North Branch, Islamic Azad University](#), Tehran, Iran (Code: IR.IAU.TNB.REC.1402.036).

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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