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Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children on the Internet:

A Case Study of Social Workers roles and Interventions in England

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Abstract

Responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse has grown more complex as perpetrators leverage digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, deepfakes, image-based abuse, grooming, coercion, and manipulation, to amplify harm. Although current literature examines the nature and impact of online harm, there is less empirical focus on the roles and interventions of social workers responding to online child sexual exploitation and abuse, also known as technology-assisted child sexual exploitation and abuse (TA-CSEA). This study used an adapted cyber-ecological systems model to explore social workers' roles and TA-CSEA interventions in England.

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight social workers selected through purposive and snowball sampling. In addition, document analysis of three anchor documents: the Children Act 1989, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* 2023 and the Online Safety Act 2023, was conducted to examine the relationship between policy and social work practice in responses to TA-CSEA. The data were coded and organised using MAXQDA and analysed through a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic approach.

The findings show that social workers perceive technology-assisted child sexual exploitation and abuse as a complex, evolving, and often hidden harm that demands digitally adaptive and cyber-ecological child protection practice. Participants viewed children's vulnerability as shaped by interactions across multiple contexts, including child-level factors, family and relational dynamics, school and community settings, social inequalities, and the digital environment. Social work responses in England are present but largely proceed through time bound and adapted traditional safeguarding pathways; however, these are constrained by a range of barriers, especially where digital harm is concealed and swiftly evolving. This study systematises social work roles and interventions in TA-CSEA, underscoring the urgent need for child protection strategies that are capable of addressing the digital and interconnected realities of children's lives.

Keywords: Technology-assisted child sexual exploitation and abuse; social work roles and interventions; child protection in England; digital safeguarding; cyber-ecological systems model

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List of abbreviations

AIG- CSEAM	Artificial Intelligence Generated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASYE	Assessed and Supported Year in Employment
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
CSEAM	Child Sexual Exploitation Abuse Material
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IT	Information Technology
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and others
LD	Learning Disability
MASH	Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
NICE	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NCA	National Crime Agency
OFCOM	The Office of Communications
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SG- CSEAM	Self-Generated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Material
SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
STRATS	Strategy Discussion

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CHAPTER 1:INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM AREA

1.1 Introduction

The chapter highlights the background to the study, the objectives and justification of the research. The study also highlights relevant terms related to the research topic and the study's delimitations.

1.2. Background to the study

Child sexual abuse remains a major global concern. UNICEF (2020a) reports that, about 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys, experience sexual abuse before age 18. This underscores the need for effective safeguards. Increasingly, it occurs in online spaces where children interact and form relationships as technology now plays a central role in children's socialisation, education, and identity formation (Martellozzo, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed digital vulnerabilities among children. Increased unsupervised internet use, economic hardship, and emotional distress heightened their risk of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TA-CSEA), including online grooming, image-based abuse, and live-streamed exploitation (UNICEF, 2020b). Global organisations have reported dramatic changes in the surge of TA-CSEA. These include organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), which has highlighted the proliferation of indecent child sexual abuse images after having processed 424,047 reports of suspected CSEAM globally (IWF, 2024). Similarly, the European Commission (2023), reported over 85 million child sexual exploitation and abuse materials (CSEAM) globally. Large-scale surveys conducted across 54 countries, also highlighted that more than half of young adults aged 18–20 reported experiencing some form of technology-assisted sexual abuse during childhood (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021).

Caveats of the internet, such as the dark web, create unregulated online environments for the perpetuation of the phenomenon, as noted through the exposition of more than 3 million accounts across the ten most harmful child abuse platforms by law enforcement agencies (Europol, 2021). Studies have attributed the rapid growth of TA-CSEA to the high-speed development of digital tools, including end-to-end encrypted (E2EE) platforms and Artificial Intelligence (AI), making it easy for offenders to produce, alter, or share CSEAM at scale.

Moreover, the accelerated escalation of TA-CSEA is outpacing child protection professionals' responses and interventions in safeguarding children (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021). Among the frontline involved in safeguarding children, are social workers who play a vital role in identifying risks, coordinating interventions, and supporting affected children and families.

In countries such as Canada, social workers report minimal systemic change and professional confidence in the digital adaptation of practice and interventions as a key challenge in responding to TA-CSEA (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022).

Similarly, in England, studies have highlighted the need for formal training of social workers when working with children affected by TA-CSEA. This is due to knowledge gaps, which may result in professional uncertainty or even blaming the victim. Social workers may overlook online harm in favour of offline harm, exposing blurred lines between children's offline and online lives in child protection practice (Bond & Dogaru, 2019; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021).

Gaps in the conceptualisation of TA-CSEA and limited professional capacity among key child protection actors, may create uncertainty about social workers' roles and interventions when addressing online sexual exploitation and abuse of children. Consequently, the issue may remain under-recognised and insufficiently addressed in social work practice.

1.3 Problem statement

The rapid growth of digital technologies and online communication platforms has transformed how children interact, learn, and socialise. However, these technological evolutions have also created new dimensions and loopholes for perpetrators to sexually exploit and abuse children on the internet. Sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet have become a transnational and multifaceted threat, which is challenging traditional child protection systems in England and globally. The proliferation of digital platforms, encrypted messaging and AI, has heightened children's exposure to risks such as online grooming, sexual extortion, live streaming abuse, and the sharing of both self-generated and AI-generated child sexual exploitation and abuse material. Agencies such as the National Crime Agency and the Internet Watch Foundation, have reported alarming increases in these forms of TA-CSEA. In 2025, the IWF , globally, identified 3,443 AI-generated child sexual abuse videos, an increase of 26,385% compared with the previous year, when just 13 such videos were recorded (IWF, 2026). In addition, the Report Remove service in England received 394 reports of sexual extortion in 2025, a 34% increase from 2024 further exposing the pervasiveness of the phenomena in children's realities (The Guardian, 2026).

Although England has established a comprehensive child protection framework that includes legislation such as the Children Act 1989 and the Online Safety Act 2023, as well as statutory guidance such as *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*, social work practice continues to encounter challenges in responding effectively to the digital facet of TA-CSEA. Social workers play a vital role in safeguarding children by identifying children in need of support, assessing risks, coordinating multi-agency safeguarding responses, and supporting families through early help interventions and referral pathways.

However, the emergence of TA-CSEA, has heightened professional uncertainty within social work practice. As frontline actors, social workers often work within traditional in-person response models, which are built on 'physical presence', being in a room, observing a child's home, and verbal and non-verbal cues. However, TA-CSEA goes on to remove the 'room', making it even a greater challenge for assessment. Additionally, traditional statutory assessment frameworks may not fully account for the dynamic nature of TA-CSEA that children may also experience, making identification, monitoring, and interventions more difficult (El Asam et al., 2021; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). This is heightened by the discord between the Online Safety Act 2023, which focuses on technology companies' responsibilities, and the Children Act 1989, which focuses on individual parental responsibility, making it a challenge for social workers to bridge the gap in practice.

While existing research has increasingly dissected the prevalence and structure of TA-CSEA, much of the literature primarily centralises on perpetrator behaviour, the impact on victims, and the role of other professionals, such as law enforcement and psychologists. Compared with other areas, relatively limited attention has been afforded to the role of social workers within this evolving child safeguarding in digital environments. Specifically, there remains a lack of research that explores how social workers in England, conceptualise TA-CSEA, identify and assess risks associated with sexual exploitation and abuse on the internet, and the intervention strategies they utilise when working with affected children and families.

Given the pivotal role of social workers within England's child protection system, it is vital to establish a clearer understanding of how practitioners interpret and respond to the complex challenges presented by sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet. Examining social workers' perspectives can provide insight into the perceived nature and dynamics of TA-CSEA, the risk factors that exacerbate children's vulnerability, intervention strategies implemented in practice and the professional or systemic barriers that may stifle effective child safeguarding interventions.

This study aimed to fill this critical gap. It explored how social workers in England conceptualise the nature and dynamics of TA-CSEA, the risk factors behind children's vulnerability, the intervention strategies used, and the professional challenges faced when addressing sexual exploitation and abuse of children online.

1.4 Justification of the study

The problem discussed above merits some justifications for this study, as the findings from the research have the possibility of influencing:

1.4.1. The Social Work Body of Knowledge

This study is justified by its contribution to a limitedly studied area in social work research and practice where despite existing frameworks in the UK, social workers' roles and interventions, remain unclear, siloed, and under-integrated across digital safeguarding systems. This research seeks to be the first to systematise social work roles and interventions across the cyber-ecological spectrum, clarifying responsibilities, mapping practice gaps, and strengthening coherence. In doing so, it advocates for the development of a cyber-social work paradigm: that implores the adaptation of digitally informed assessments and interventions into already existing social work responses in child safeguarding systems.

The findings aimed to contribute not only to frontline practice but also inform social work education, digital training, and interprofessional collaboration, placing social workers as key actors in a coordinated response to online harms.

1.5. General Research objective

This study aims to explore and analyse the roles and intervention strategies of social workers in England in responding to TA-CSEA, and to contribute to the systematisation of professional safeguarding responses within England's child protection framework.

1.6. Specific research objectives

- Explore social workers' understanding of the nature and dynamics of TA-CSEA.
- Examine social workers' perceptions of the key risk factors that increase children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA.
- Analyse the roles and intervention strategies used by social workers in responding to TA-CSEA.
- Identify the professional and systemic challenges social workers face when safeguarding children from TA-CSEA.

1.7. Research questions

1. How do social workers understand and encounter the different forms and dynamics of TA-CSEA within their professional practice?
2. From the perspective of social workers, what factors increase children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA?
3. What roles and intervention strategies do social workers employ when responding to cases of TA-CSEA?
4. What professional and systemic barriers do social workers face when safeguarding children from TA-CSEA?

1.8. Operational Conception

1.8.1. Child

A child is defined as any person below the age of 18 (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

1.8.2. Child protection

Child protection refers to the policies, procedures and interventions created to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and all forms of violence against children (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020).

1.8.3. Child Safeguarding

Child safeguarding includes the universal responsibilities of professionals and institutions to protect children from harm, promote well-being, and ensure their development in safe and supportive spaces. It includes early intervention, protection from maltreatment both offline and online, and support for family-based care where necessary (Department for Education, 2023).

1.8.4. Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse refers to the involvement of a child in sexual activity that they do not fully understand, cannot give informed consent to, or are not developmentally prepared for. It includes both contact and non-contact forms of abuse (WHO, 2002).

1.8.5. Child Sexual Exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse involving an imbalance of power, where individuals or groups coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child under 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the child needs or for the perpetrator's gain (Department for Education, 2023).

1.8.6. Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TA-CSEA), refers to the use of digital technologies to facilitate sexual exploitation and abuse of children. These acts include; online grooming, sexual extortion, live-streaming abuse, and the creation, possession, or dissemination of child sexual exploitation and abuse material. (United Nations General Assembly, 2024).

While the title of the study uses the term 'internet', it adopts a broader understanding where the internet is conceptualised as the foundational cybersystem, a digital context that not only consist of web-based platforms, but also the interconnected infrastructure of messaging applications, online gaming

environments and AI-driven generative technologies of sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet.

This study acknowledges that while these tools may operate via private protocols or encrypted services, they are inextricably linked to the global internet infrastructure, forming a seamless 'on life' reality for the child

1.8.7. Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Material

Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Material (CSEAM) refer to visual, written, or audio material that depicts, describes, or represents a person under 18 engaged in or subjected to sexual activity, or whose sexual parts are displayed for exploitative purposes. The term includes both realistic and fabricated representations (United Nations General Assembly, 2024).

1.8.8. Social work Interventions

Social work interventions refer to systemic professional actions undertaken by qualified and practising social workers to prevent, mitigate, or respond to social ills faced by individuals, groups or communities to ensure positive change and promote their well-being (Ronad, 2024). These interventions may include risk assessment, case management, counselling, family support and coordination of multi-agency safeguarding responses (Department for Education, 2023).

1.8.9 On-life reality.

Having adapted from Floridi (2015) concept of onlife, the study uses the word “on-life reality” to describe children’s interconnected online and offline world in the context of TA-CSEA

1.9 Chapter Conclusion

The chapter introduced the background and context of the study, highlighting the emerging complex challenges presented by TA-CSEA. It presented the research problem, aim and specific objectives and the research questions guiding the inquiry. Additionally, it outlined the scope, limitations, assumptions and delimitations of the study, providing operational definitions of key terms used throughout the research.

The next chapter reviews the relevant literature and theoretical perspectives that guide the study and positions the research within existing academic and policy discussions on child safeguarding and TA-CSEA.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This chapter offers an analysis of existing literature on the nature and forms of sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet. It reviews the literature legal interventions, vulnerability factors, followed by studies addressing social workers' roles and safeguarding interventions. The chapter concludes by examining professional and systemic challenges in responding to TA-CSEA.

2.2 Conceptualising TA-CSEA

2.2.1 The CSA vs CSE Paradigm

When conceptualising TA-CSEA, the contemporary paradigm between child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE), influences how practitioners recognise risks, assess vulnerability, and design appropriate interventions as they represent closely related but conceptually distinct forms of harm within child protection frameworks. In England, CSA is broadly defined as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that they do not fully comprehend, cannot consent to, or which violates legal or social norms. This may involve both contact and non-contact behaviours, including rape, sexual assault, grooming, and the production and distribution of sexual images of children (Department for Education, 2023).

In contrast, while child sexual exploitation falls under the broader category of sexual abuse, it specifically describes cases where individuals or groups exploit a child sexually through coercion or manipulation in exchange for something of value, such as money, gifts, accommodation, or social status (Department for Education, 2023).The key distinction is that, although the child may appear to benefit, the presence of a power imbalance means these exchanges are not consensual.

In real life, the difference between CSA and CSE is often unclear. Studies show many children suffer more than one type of abuse at the same time, especially where problems like poverty, trafficking, family trouble, or being left out in society exist (The Children's Society, 2023).

These overlapping dynamics are exacerbated by the rapid growth of digital technologies, further shrinking the conceptual distinctions between CSA and CSE as many forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse are increasingly facilitated through online contexts. For example, a child living in poverty may be coerced in online digital environments where the exchange of value in CSE is not just monetary but also due to the normalisation of digital risky behaviours, thereby blurring the line between choice and exploitation for social workers to intervene. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TA-CSEA).

While the concept includes a range of technology-facilitated forms of harm, for the purpose of this study, the term TA-CSEA is used primarily to refer to sexual exploitation and abuse of children occurring on the internet, recognising that the internet constitutes the primary medium through which these harms occur.

TA-CSEA represents a significant shift in the scale, anonymity, and complexity of abuse experienced by children. It includes crimes such as online grooming, sexual extortion, live streaming of sexual abuse, self-generated (SG-CSEAM) or Artificial Intelligence (AI-CSEAM) generated child sexual exploitation abuse material. These offences frequently occur within large-scale cross-border networks and often target children on digital platforms where they are most active (Ali et al., 2023; Ringenberg et al., 2022; United Nations General Assembly, 2024).

An understanding of these concepts is vital as children increasingly navigate their "on-life reality" a term adapted from the concept onlife by Floridi (2015) to highlight the interconnection of online and offline environments , challenging the outdated notion of digital dualism (Martin, 2014).

Despite the growing prevalence of TA-CSEA, many social workers and child protection professionals demonstrate limited professional confidence in identifying and responding to TA-CSEA. One particular challenge is the increasingly blurred consent-to-non-consent digital harm pathway. For example, cases involving self-generated sexual images (SG-CSEAM) among adolescents may initially appear consensual but can rapidly evolve into situations of exploitation and abuse when such material is shared, distributed, or used for coercion by peers or other perpetrators. This creates undesirable fogs for social workers to appropriately interpret an act.

Consent in the digital environment is but a byproduct of digital platform architecture. The 'algorithmic normalisation' embedded in the persuasive designs of online platforms, such as infinite scrolls and targeted notifications, exploits children's developmental vulnerabilities by bypassing their cognitive defences, particularly their ability to know when to stop (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Children go on to develop the illusion that such risky digital behaviours are standard ways of behaving in childhood, thus creating a consent gap and a legal dilemma. This highlights the digital architectural vulnerabilities that continue to exploit children, a world that is blindly devoid of technology companies' accountability. These complexities may create uncertainty among social workers in countries such as England, as they adopt 20th-century legal interpretations of consent to 21st-century exploitative digital designs to determine whether children are in need or meet thresholds of significant harm under the Children Act 1989.

The pervasiveness of TA-CSEA, highlights how digital and offline lives of children are no longer separate but form a seamless on-life reality. Harm is now omnipresent, contrasting the traditional analogy-based interpretation of harm, grounded in legislation such as the Children Act 1989, formulated in a different timeline in which harm may be conceived as predominantly existing in physical settings, 'the room', thus creating a challenge in risk assessments. The omnipresence of harm blinds carers and practitioners into prioritising the child's physical safety, yet TA-CSEA permeates through the safety of the 'room', as children in their bedrooms may be experiencing sexual exploitation through their phones or

laptops. The digital invisibility thereby leads practitioners to minimise their interpretations of the impact of digital harm, to be less serious than offline abuse. Such perceptions, infused with selective amnesia or victim-blaming attitudes, impede voluntary disclosures from children, thereby affecting potent risk assessments, interagency work, and the design of effective social work interventions, creating a glaring gap in practice (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

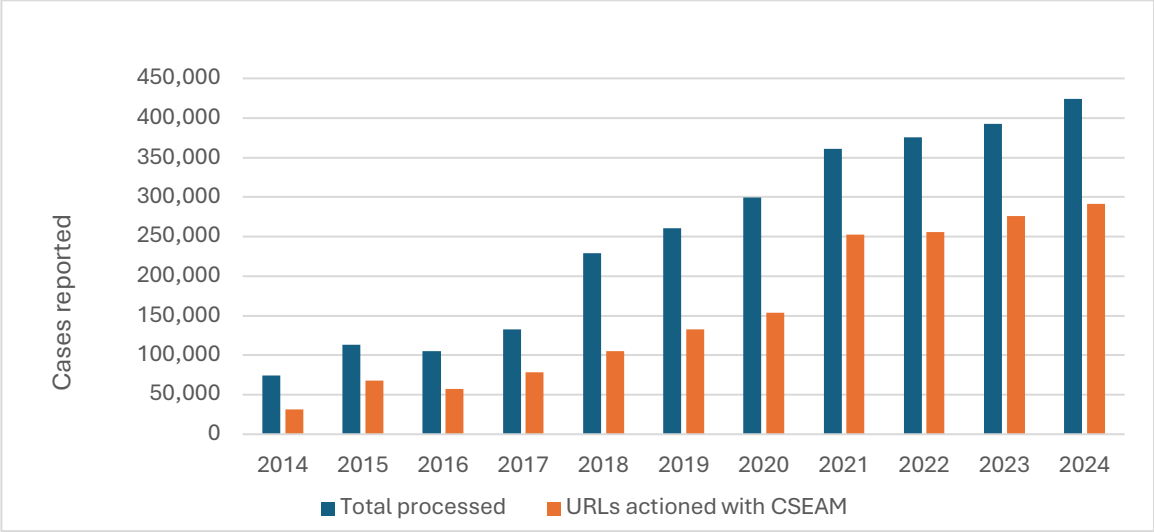
Additionally, conceptual coherence around TA-CSEA is not merely academic. It is foundational to examining how social workers interpret the phenomenon, as it directly affects their roles and interventions. Without an explicit, mutual comprehension of the digital forms and dynamics of TA-CSEA, interventions risk becoming fragmented, reactive, and ineffective.

Accordingly, this study examined the different forms of TA-CSEA, associated multi-level risk factors, and existing legal and social work intervention strategies to develop a comprehensive understanding of social workers' interpretations, roles, and responses to TA-CSEA.

2.3. Conceptualising TA-CSEA in a Globalised Cybersystem

TA-CSEA's architecture of Predation has intensified. Despite growing international detection efforts, the circulation of CSEAM, livestreamed abuse, and grooming content continues to escalate. This section analyses global, European, and England prevalence trends to contextualise the scale and complexity of TA-CSEA.

Figure 1: *: Reports of CSEAM processed by IWF, 2014-2024*



Source: Adapted from IWF,(2024).

The proliferation of digital technologies, despite its positive impacts, exposes children to significant harm.

A 2024 global estimate by the Childlight Global Child Safety Institute suggested that over 300 million children have experienced TA-CSEA perpetrated by adults or peers.

However, this dark figure of crime is merely the tip of the iceberg due to definitional ambiguities, the digital divide, and inconsistencies in global prevalence data (Childlight Global Child Safety Institute, 2024). The IWF in (Figure 1), have reported a sustained and significant increase in confirmed cases of CSEAM over the past decade. In 2024 alone, the IWF processed 424,047 reports of suspected CSEAM, of which 291,273 were confirmed and actioned.

In addition, approximately 91% of the confirmed content involved SG-CSEAM, indicating the growing prevalence of peer-mediated and grooming-related exploitation. A meta-analysis by Lu et al. (2024), drawing on 125 studies across 57 countries, found 12.6% of children experienced non-consensual exposure to sexual content, and 12.5% were solicited online, with girls slightly more affected than boys. However, critical data gaps, conceptual inconsistencies, and growing technological threats, reinforce TA-CSEA's omnipresence, weakening the collective conscious value of urgency in interventions, as society may lean on narratives that there is a need to exhaust resources in responding to unknown threats. This global ideological interpretation permeates and influences social workers' interpretations of TA-CSEA, as they may feel justified in feeling powerless to develop contextually responsive interventions when addressing digital harms in the global arena itself, which is avoidant and unclear.

There have been several policies developed at the global, regional and national levels in response to the transnational nature of the TA-CSEA. Globally, responses have been adapted from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a basis for children’s rights (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, 1989). The acknowledgement of children’s digital rights and protection by global bodies such as the United Nations through the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 25 to the CRC (2021), is a delayed but symbolically important step in the right direction (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021).Analytically, General Comment No. 25 is but a site of enforcement inadequacy, as it does not highlight clear intervention strategies but rather masks the role of the United Nations and institutionally buck-passes the responsibilities to countries, yet TA-CSEA is transnational.

Similarly, in Africa, the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, also known as the Malabo Convention, provides a regional framework for addressing cybercrime and data protection; however, not all member states have ratified it (African Union, 2014).

While these are commendable initiatives, contextualising global norms of interventions becomes mere rhetoric. The lack of global funds to address TA-CSEA presents a challenge for fragile or resource-constrained countries. These countries must then prioritise limited resources for 'sovereignty-related' development projects over children's digital safety.

Legal enforcement and jurisdictional fragmentation further challenge efforts to address TA-CSEA.

This is highlighted by some countries' non-ratification of global treaties on online harm, especially their membership in global mechanisms such as Interpol. Notably, countries such as the United States of America, which is not a signatory to the UNCRC, and major cyber powers such as Russia, China, and India, reject the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, citing issues of sovereignty, instability, or divergence (Harris, 2024; Propp & Kennedy-Mayo, 2025).

Without a common legal ground, evidence sharing and joint investigations face procedural issues, creating a jurisdictional shadow land. These differences complicate platform accountability and allow perpetrators to exploit regulatory loopholes, enabling them to avoid prosecution in one country and go on to commit the crime in others with weaker regulations. For frontline social workers and safeguarding institutions, this creates delays or derails cross-border interventions, thereby limiting the effectiveness of localised child protection mechanisms.

From a policy and practice perspective, establishing clear, consistent terminology is essential for addressing TA-CSEA. This is to effectively reduce conceptual ambiguity, especially between social actors in the field of child protection and across other sectors such as information technology and law enforcement (ECPAT International, 2025b; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2022a).

However, there is an inconsistency in the language used across legal instruments. This is noted in international frameworks such as the Organisation of American States (1994) and the Belém do Pará Convention. While a gamechanger for women's rights, it leaves out male children in its gender specific framing, which reinforces binary assumptions and limits inclusive protection. Furthermore, frameworks such as the Southern African Development Community (2007) Model Law, uses outdated terms like "child prostitution" which imply consent and minimise the gravity of abuse. These terms also obscure accountability and hinder survivor-centred approaches. Global perspectives are moving toward very precise, victim-sensitive language such as "Child Sexual Abuse Material", which reflects the non-consensual nature of exploitation and which in turn guides accurate policy and judicial response (ECPAT International, 2025b). However, terminological inconsistencies lead to different contextualised interpretations of TA-CSEA by social workers, which may, in turn, shape the interventions adopted.

2.4. The European risk and regulatory tension

Across Europe, digital connectivity among young people is nearly universal. According to Eurostat (2025), daily internet access among youth aged 16 to 19 across 27 EU countries rose from 89% in 2014 to over 97% by 2023, heightening both digital development and risks. Coincidentally, the IWF (2023), revealed that the EU hosts the highest volume of child sexual abuse imagery globally, with over 3.4 million images and videos accounting for 59% of global reports.

This places the region at the centre of attention as questions become centred on the vulnerability of digital infrastructure within Europe and the region's commitment to child protection, noted in its failure to even reach an agreement on extending the ePrivacy Directive voluntary measures for another year whilst negotiating for a long-term legal framework for TA-CSEA (European Parliament, 2026). This highlights systemic blindfolding, creating a legal vacuum and making it an attractive hotspot for perpetrators.

Additionally, the legislative ambivalence within Europe, exposes the paradox between digital agency and digital child protection. The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 24 and the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, also known as the Lanzarote Convention, requires all member states to protect children from all forms of violence (Council of Europe, 2007; European Union, 2012). However this clashes with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as the European Data Protection Board's EDPB and EDPS Joint Opinion of 2022 and its subsequent 2025 guidance on age verification, recognise children's rights to privacy and access to information, alongside Article 13 and 17 of the UNCRC 1989 which also put forth children's rights to information and privacy (European Data Protection Board, 2022; United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

However, the GDPR's stringent data protection laws limit what can be collected to identify online harm. This creates another intervention paradox for social workers, who will question how they can protect children from TA-CSEA while simultaneously respecting their data rights? The Digital Service Act 2022, which places obligations on digital platforms to remove illegal content, further heightens tension between children and the state. The removal of illegal content on digital platforms would require access to children's digital privacy, which may lead to resistance and hostility, especially from adolescents exploring their sexuality, as they would have viewed it as a violation of their privacy. This goes on to paralyse social work interventions as child protection becomes a performative act rather than a practical reality (European Union, 2016, 2024).

2.5. England's Statutory Infrastructure (The Exosystem)

2.5.1 Local prevalence and platform trends

Official statistics for England and Wales show that sexual exploitation and abuse of children online is a growing concern.

The anonymity of digital platforms, through disappearing messages and end-to-end encryption, contributes to this issue. In 2024, the UK Home Office recorded 38,685 CSEAM-related offences in England and Wales. Platforms like Snapchat accounted for about 50% of reported cases, while Instagram and Facebook accounted for 11% and 7%, respectively (NSPCC, 2025).

The ephemeral structure of these platforms, such as disappearing or view-once messages, is exploited by perpetrators to produce and distribute deepfakes. This makes forensic investigation harder, as the perpetrator's presence is hidden. Social workers struggle to identify digital evidence using traditional models, making it difficult to meet the significant harm thresholds required by the Children Act 1989 in court.

The legal threshold can become a barrier to protection, demanding analogue proof for digital crimes and placing added pressure on social workers.

Synthetic victimisation through nudify tools has made abuse more accessible and widespread, including among children. The UK Safer Internet Centre found that 1 in 8 children aged 12 to 17 had witnessed peers creating deepfakes. Additionally, 1 in 5 reports made to the UK Report Remove platform involves images created with nudify applications (IWF, 2026). These trends show the rapid evolution of TA-CSEA, which can outpace interventions. Social workers may find it hard to distinguish between self-generated and deepfake images or assess intent and harm, undermining risk assessments. This challenge could render social work practice less effective or even outdated when dealing with synthetic harm (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2023).

2.5.2 The Dialectics of law and digital reality

England has developed an extensive legal and policy architecture to address TA-CSEA, reflecting a strong legislative commitment to child protection and digital safety. Notable are the foundational laws such as the Protection of Children Act 1978 and the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which criminalise the possession, creation, and distribution of CSEAM and the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 which put forward statutory safeguarding duties on professionals including social workers. As robust as the legislation may be, it does not address the interpretive challenges social workers face when undertaking risk assessments of cases involving TA-CSEA to determine the threshold for significant harm.

Argumentatively, complementary statutory guidance documents such as the *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*, while key in promoting collaboration and coordination and emphasising safeguarding as everyone's responsibility, position a hollow mandate for inter-agency collaboration.

The limitations of statutory guidance documents in providing clear operational guidance and the much-needed tools to achieve successful outcomes in digital safeguarding, may trap social workers in a loop of professional uncertainty.

The professional uncertainty of social workers when responding to TA-CSEA is heightened by the cross-alienation and non-complementary effect of the Children Act 1989 and the contemporary Online Safety Act 2023, which places legally binding duties of care on tech companies to remove harmful online content, including CSEAM proactively. Holding technology companies accountable for illegal content on digital platforms and ensuring the safety of children is much recommended.

The sole focus on the regulation and responsibilities of technology(Tech) companies, however, feeds into the much-raised argument of siloed, fragmented ecological interventions and systemic institutional amnesia that builds on the notion that TA-CSEA is a 'tech' problem that requires tech solutions. The social worker situated within the same legal framework that largely believes in the traditional forensic permanence of harm, is further isolated and in a conundrum to deal with the aftermath of TA-CSEA that a child would have experienced.

The proliferation of AI generative tools and models has led to the drafting of the Crime and Policing Bill (2025), which introduces new offences making it illegal to create, possess or distribute AI tools and manuals which are intended to generate CSEAM, thus closing a huge legislative gap in the arena of rising digital harms (UK Parliament, 2025). However, this may have an indirect impact on social work practice, especially during Section 47 inquiry risk assessments, as social workers may need to be equipped with the requisite skills to identify the 'digital red flags. However, emerging studies highlight constrained resources and limited training in digital risk assessment as challenges that hinder effective interventions.

Furthermore, the passing into law of the Crime and Policing Bill will exacerbate the tension that underlies the continued unaddressed ethical dilemma between balancing a child's digital agency and privacy through the GDPR and protection as enshrined in the Children Act 1989. This intricacy places ethical tension on social workers who must, at the same time, protect children and also foster their digital agency.

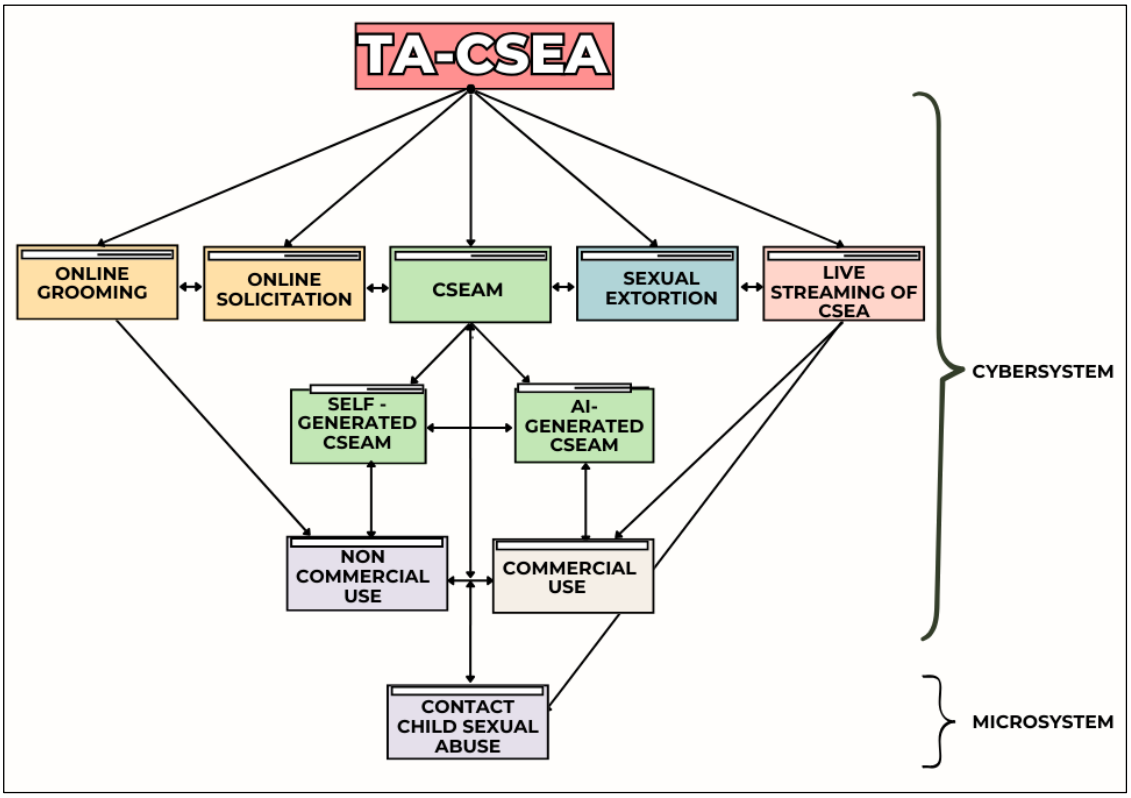
Table 1*: Theoretical Mapping of Policy-Practice tension in England*

Legal/Policy	**Digital objective**	**Practice reality -The Gap**
Online Safety Act 2023	Digital platform accountability and illegal content removal	Focuses on technology companies and does not provide social workers with intervention tools
Children Act 1989/2004	Statutory obligation to investigate and classify significant forms of harm	Focuses on an individual/s as Harm is now digitally omnipresent and invisible to traditional models of assessments
GDPR	Protects the child's right to digital privacy	Limits the data social workers can access to assess digital red flags
Crime & Police Bill (Proposed 2025)	Aims to criminalises AIG-CSEAM tools	Transition paradox as state is creating new offences for crimes that Practitioners may lack technical training to identify deepfake images and SIG-CSEAM
Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023	Emphasises safeguarding being everyone's responsibility and mandates multi-agency coordination as it provides the template for collaborative statutory interventions	Provides limited operational guidance for when working children and families in responding to TA-CSEA, leaving practitioners in a loop of professional uncertainty

Source: By Author

2.6. The Forms of TA-CSEA

Figure 2: *Interconnected forms of TA-CSEA.*



Source: Adapted from Baines (2018)

To effectively respond to TA-CSEA, it is crucial for social work profession to go beyond siloed definitions and adopt a systemic perspective of how the phenomenon under study manifest and escalate. Figure 2 highlights the interconnected nature of TA-CSEA, adapted from Baines (2018) to include the study's cyber-ecological analytical lens.

The mapping process highlights that while different forms of TA-CSEA which include AI-Generated CSEAM to Sexual Extortion operate as pervasive elements of the cybersystem, their trajectory often culminates in physical Contact Child Sexual Abuse within the child's microsystem. The following sub-sections give a broader exploration.

2.6.1. Relational Exploitation: Online Grooming and Solicitation

Online grooming, sometimes referred to as online enticement, describes a deliberate process through which offenders exploit digital environments to establish deceptive relationships with children for the purpose of sexual exploitation (ECPAT International, 2025b). Through social media platforms, and online gaming environments, perpetrators often construct false identities, a process commonly described as catfishing to build trust and emotional dependency. These interactions frequently involve sustained communication, flattery, and manipulation that exploit children's developmental vulnerabilities and curiosity (Jeglic & Winters, 2023; Singh & Nambiar, 2024).

This is enabled through the architecture of online gaming, a cybersystem element which formulates a psychological unreality where online interactions are gamified into sexualised social role plays, conceptualised as 'fantasy abuse' as children internalise the perception of consent despite underlying coercion (Jeglic & Winters, 2023; Singh & Nambiar, 2024).

Children's cognitive developmental ability to perceive contact child sexual abuse, is weakened as the online gaming environment divorces the sexualised interactions from physical reality. This de-contextualisation of harm leads to cognitive decoupling where the harm feels less serious as it is virtual and part of the gaming experience, thus the child and possibly social workers, may not be able to recognise it as a precursor to physical microsystemic harm.

Grooming frequently evolves into online sexual solicitation, defined as direct or coercive requests by adults for sexual conversations, sexual acts, or sexually explicit images which through cyberflashing, may be transmitted through messaging platforms or proximity-based technologies (Ringrose et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2025). Contemporary society has seen the normalisation of sexual solicitation within child peer networks as they become embedded in the on-life background noise of adolescence. This is evidenced in the United Kingdom were approximately 15% of children aged 11–18 have received requests to produce self-generated sexual images, while 7% report requests for sexualised messages (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2021).

Social workers may face challenges in deconstructing the transition from grooming embedded in the act of exploring sexuality through adolescent 'sexting' within peer networks to intent or significant harm as exhibited in sexual solicitation.

This leaves the social worker in a loop of systemic threshold failures due to normalisation within the child's mesosystem as the harm may be mistaken as a standard rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, the social worker will be trying not to lacerate the therapeutic trust with children whilst under-intervening may leave the children in a cycle of escalating exploitation which may lead to physical harm (Murphy & Spencer, 2021). These complexities are amplified for children identifying as LGBTQIA+, for whom online spaces such as Tinder, Grindr and Snapchat, may simultaneously function as sites of identity exploration and vulnerability. This creates a double bind of disclosure as disclosing harm experienced on digital platforms may mean detaching from a supportive digital community and also 'coming out' or disclosing their sexuality when they are not ready to do so, in an environment that may be homophobic environment. This places the social worker in a precarious position of navigating the risk of 'outing' the child whilst trying to protect from a digital perpetrator.

2.6.2. Coercive Material and the cycle of Extortion

Sexual extortion, also known as sextortion, is the use of explicit images to force children into further sexual acts, to produce more material, or to get money (ECPAT International, 2025b).

An emerging concern is mesosystemic contagion where children are engaging in cycles of weaponised vulnerability as highlighted by reports from the US, Spain, and Denmark showing an increase in peer-to-peer and intimate partner-perpetrated extortion, with boys and LGBTQ+ adolescents being at high risk of being both victims and perpetrators.

This may create a safeguarding paradox for social workers which may result community conflicts (Ray & Henry, 2025). Furthermore, abuse is commercialised as afforded by automated predation as perpetrators use AI and chatbots to scale abuse. The digital permanence leaves affected children in a continuum of eternal trauma due to the omnipresence of harm. This may threaten the traditional social work models of casework as ineffective (Drejer et al., 2024; INHOPE, 2023).

2.6.3. The Synthetic and Self-Generated Frontier

The diversification of CSEAM into self-generated (SG-CSEAM) and AI-generated (AIG-CSEAM) models, highlights a disintegration of evidence for traditional child protection (Fitts et al., 2024; INHOPE, 2023).

SG-CSEAM challenges binary distinctions between child agency and victimisation, creating a coerced autonomy paradox where peer pressure and the algorithmic normalisation of social media socialise children to use their bodies as digital currency for their on-life peer culture. This reinforces the analytical deadlock social workers may face, being blinded to notice the systemic coercion as they use traditional child protection models of risk identification and stratification to look for forced coercion.

Simultaneously, the synthetic frontier, AIG-CSEAM, creates a shift in victimisation as it hides the victim, especially in child peer-to-peer interactions within the mesosystem, becoming a hotspot for production and consumption driven by curiosity, bullying, or harassment, as victims may not even know they have been targeted until long after the content has circulated. A UK survey conducted among 1,200 youths found that 10% knew someone targeted by AI deepfakes and 6% had been victims (Thorn, 2025). The democratisation of advanced generative AI tools and chatbots is making it easy for perpetrators to magnify harm, as noted by the (IWF, 2026), which identified 3443 category A (most extreme) AIG-CSEAM videos in 2025, compared to only 13 in 2024. AIG-CSEAM's Bot netting of the child safeguarding network within the exosystem may overwhelm traditional human-speed casework approaches and render them insufficient.

2.6.4. Real-Time Exploitation: Live streaming of child sexual exploitation and abuse

Livestreaming of child sexual exploitation and abuse involves the real-time broadcasting of child sexual abuse, often arranged through instructions from remote perpetrators on livestreaming platforms and encrypted communication environments (ECPAT International, 2025b). This form of TA-CSEA represents the commercialisation of the microsystem through the invasion of ghost perpetrators within a child's microsystemic safe space, as the invisible perpetrator exploits the anonymity of encrypted platforms and digital payment systems to even pay for familial abuse. This creates a transnational-local paradox, where harm is inflicted on the child within their locality, whilst the perpetrator may enjoy jurisdictional impunity due to anonymised encryption (Napier et al., 2021).

This splinters the 'stranger danger' narrative, reinforcing a feeling of 'intervention impossible' scenario among practitioners due to a vanishing crime scene as it quickly disappears once the broadcast ends. This leaves a forensic permanence void that traditional approaches may not be able to fill.

2.7. Understanding the impact of TA-CSEA: From Micro harm to Systemic implications

2.7.1. Micro-level: The Permanence of Trauma

Beyond the clinical diagnoses of PTSD and anxiety, TA-CSEA dissolves traditional trauma recovery methods, placing a child into a state of existential crisis due to persistent digital re-traumatisation. The permanent and reproducible nature of online content creates a digital 'scar' that does not affect them psychologically but also affects their digital biography, eroding their ability to recover and move on. The child may feel helpless, amplifying long-term risks of self-harm, substance abuse and social withdrawal. This is heightened by gendered digital harm where trauma intervention model may not adequately address shame-based withdrawal seen in boys identifying as LGBTQIA+ (Schmidt et al., 2023).

2.7.2. Meso-level: Relational and Institutional Erosion

TA-CSEA facilitates a systemic disintegration of a child's meso level support networks.

Families and schools struggle with interventions due to digital literacy gaps rendering their interventions in reported forms of harm such as peer-to-peer AIG-CSEAM rather limited.

This may result in institutional disability where practitioners remain visually impaired in understanding a child's on-life reality (Roche et al., 2023).

2.7.3. Macro-level: Systemic and Policy Implications

Globally and in Europe, trauma-informed systems are in the process of evolving; however, in the UK, there is a significant gap in the formal integration of TA-CSEA responses into existing child protection policies, tech regulation and psychosocial recovery structures (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2023). These trends highlight significant structural dissociation in safeguarding systems where focus is placed on content removal , leaving psychosocial recovery interventions vulnerable.

2.8. Risk factors : The Cyber-Ecological Architecture of Vulnerability

Risk factors associated with TA-CSEA are best understood through a cyber-ecological perspective, which recognises that children's exposure to harm emerges from interactions across multiple systems. These include individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, institutional environments, broader socio-cultural conditions and the technological architecture of digital platforms.

2.8.1. Individual and relational friction

One of the risk factors of TA-CSEA, is the heightened vulnerability that children experience due to relational orphanhood within their psychosocial developmental stages.

As children's vulnerability is not a static trait, it is constantly reformed by adversities they face, such as parental divorce, abuse, or neglect, that shape their resilience to online risks. Adolescents with low self-esteem, coming from dysfunctional home environments, have a higher chance of partaking in risky behaviours like sexting or chatting with strangers to fill an emotional vacuum due to the algorithmic predation of the cybersystem as it suggests friends or groups (Aktu, 2024). Moreover, TA-CSEA exploits the digital literacy gap in parents and the limited parental supervision of their children's online relationships. Digital harm hibernates within the generational gap and strained relationships between parents and children, as parents struggle to offer the essential psychosocial support. As a result of microsystemic isolation and socio-technical vulnerability, children find solace in peer-to-peer disclosure rather than in their parents (Álvarez-Guerrero et al., 2024; M. Joleby et al., 2021). The microsystemic collapse further weakens the protective barrier when parents from socio-economically marginalised settings engage in intrafamilial digital harm, making it hard for a child to seek external help out of fear of parental reprisal (Salter & Wong, 2024).

Moreover, children with neurodivergent needs or children with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, are 3 to 4 times more at risk than their peers as they have a hard time recognising online abuse (Álvarez-Guerrero et al., 2024; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). This complicates social workers' protective responses, particularly when the perpetrator is a trusted adult.

2.8.2. Mesosystem and Exosystem tension: The Pedagogical obsolescence

The exosystemic lag of schools not developing agile digital and comprehensive education to keep up with the pace of digital adolescence, heightens children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA.

Disability in teacher digital preparedness further limits effective pedagogy, weakening the mesosystemic barrier to promote children's digital citizenship and protect them against TA-CSEA. Consequently, the pedagogical obsolescence pressures adolescents to increasingly turn to social media in the cybersystem for sexual and relationship guidance rather than trusted adults, leaving them exposed to misinformation and algorithmic predation (ECPAT International, 2025a; WeProtect Global Alliance & Praesidio Safeguarding, 2023).

2.8.3. Macrosystemic inadequacies: Societal taboos and intersectional blind spots

The tension that exists within blind spots, such as societal gender bias, heightens the risk of children experiencing TA-CSEA. TA-CSEA is largely a gendered problem, as it is not an equal experience for girls and boys, for macrosystemic gender norms shape the social expectations of masculinity and femininity. Wider literature consistently highlights digital sexual exploitation as a female victim-oriented problem, as they are disproportionately affected by general forms of CSEAM, whilst the perpetuation of boys being perpetrators within a patriarchal society where violence is accepted as a passage to manhood, structurally silences boys, resulting in systemic visual impairment to the ongoing on-life reality of sextortion that increasingly targets male children.

This is corroborated by reported cases of financial sextortion logged to NCMEC's CyberTipline, where children aged 14–17 represented an estimated 90 % of victims (ECPAT International & UNICEF Innocenti, 2022; Finkelhor et al., 2024; Pereda et al., 2009; Rechenberg et al., 2024; Thorn et al., 2024). This creates a safeguarding blind spot for practitioners in the exosystem.

Moreover, intersecting social identities such as disability, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and being identified as LGBTQIA+, embedded within macrosystemic decay of inequality, homophobia, misogyny, sexism, prejudice and stereotyping, structure children's differential exposure and vulnerability to harm, creating double-binds of disclosure (Hatchel et al., 2021; Kavenagh & Maternowska, 2024). Fear of being stigmatised due to cultural and religious taboos around sexuality that restrict open conversation exacerbates the risks to TA-CSEA, contributing to limited reported cases, as noted with 34% of children aged 12 – 17 from a study of 13 African and Asian countries who did not report TA-CSEA (ECPAT International & UNICEF Innocenti, 2022; Stänicke et al., 2024). This highlights the gap in society's understanding of the problem.

2.8.4. Cybersystemic vulnerabilities: Digital Architecture and Algorithmic Amplification

The lack of safety-by-design features, particularly on social media platforms, greatly enables automated predation, which has become a toxic business model that prioritises financial growth and capital dominance

over accountability (Salter & Hanson, 2021; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). Children are sucked into a rabbit hole of algorithmic grooming through scrolling, which in turn shapes their cognitive and social development, highlighting structural exploitation.

Furthermore, anonymity due to cybersystem elements such as E2EE embedded within rapidly mushrooming, democratised AI generative deepfake tools and humanised AI chatbots, affords offenders the space to exploit and amplify harm against children using off-platforming across borders without physical contact, both on the Surface and Dark web. Access is via encrypted browsers like Tor, housing offender networks that normalise abuse by sharing victim profiles, evasion strategies and encryption tools (FATF, 2024; FBI & NCMEC, 2025; Kloess & van der Bruggen, 2023; U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

The surge in 8029 of AIG-CSEAM images and videos reported by the IWF in the year 2025 highlights the Macrosystemic lag in interventions against TA-CSEA, such as explicit hashtags within weak age verification systems, as more advanced deepfake AI tools emerge, placing children who are exploring their sexual identity at greater risk of digital harm (Eltaher et al., 2025; IWF, 2026). Online gaming platforms, including emerging technologies such as eXtended Reality, which encompasses virtual, augmented, and mixed realities, have also been recognised as a high-risk environment for TA-CSEA due to anonymity, interactivity, and persistent contact features (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Technology Coalition, 2025). This further heightens professional uncertainty within social work practice, as macrosystemic interventions to cybersystem problems largely present the problem as content-based rather than a system design failure.

2.9 Social Intervention Strategies and safeguarding models

2.9.1 Global and Child-Centred Models

Social interventions addressing TA-CSEA have been shaped by global child protection systems. Examples include the We Protect Global Alliance Model National Response Framework, and organisations such as the International Telecommunication Union and UNICEF. These groups promote extensive collaboration across child protection, criminal justice, education, and digital governance sectors to combat TA-CSEA. However, national implementation of these strategies remains inconsistent (International Telecommunication Union & UNICEF, 2020; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2022b).

Interventions against TA-CSEA also include the use of child-centred models, such as the Barnahus model, described as a 'child-friendly' multi-agency working approach 'under one roof' in regions such as Europe. The aim is to prevent re-traumatisation for the child during investigation and court proceedings (Prpic & Constantinou, 2025). However, such a model, traditionally designed to use physical evidence of child sexual abuse interventions, may not adequately account for the dynamic and omnipresent digital crime scenes that involve a ghost perpetrator, thereby reinforcing exosystemic vulnerabilities.

2.9.2 Regulatory Interventions: Age-Verification and Prohibitions

Moreover, interventions are increasingly adopting age-based prohibitions on social media access to mitigate the digital vulnerabilities children experience.

A primary example is Australia's Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024, which establishes a strict threshold of 16 years and shifts the regulatory burden to service providers through significant civil. This legislative precedent has catalysed global policy shifts, with other countries such as India, France, Spain, Portugal, and the UK debating proposals for regulatory measures, such as minimum age thresholds or enhanced age-verification mechanisms, rather than uniform bans. Of peculiar note are countries such as Zimbabwe, which according to Mupesa (2026), is currently drafting a Child Online Protection Policy to restrict access for minors up to the age of 18. Arguably, this highlights blinded macrosystemic adaptation as there is limited research that supports the approach. Moreover, critics argue that strict age-based templates may lead to regulatory displacement by pushing adolescents from regulated microsystem platforms to unregulated, encrypted digital platforms, potentially reducing opportunities for oversight and safeguards.

2.9.3. Prevention and Education Initiatives in England

Various systemic initiatives have been adopted in England to address TA-CSEA however, ecological fragmentations persist. While Safer Internet Day campaigns, prevention programmes such as the Personal Social Hygiene Education modules, 'Thinkuknow' platform by law enforcement agency, Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP), equip children with the knowledge and skills to make safe and informed decisions, limited knowledge about the nature of TA-CSEA remains, especially in schools. Schools have become headquarters in which digital harms are identified and reported (Ringrose et al., 2026). Notably, collaboratively designed platforms by NSPCC and IWF, such as the Report-Remove, empower children to report and remove CSEAM from the internet through anonymised self-reporting; however, arguably, a structural imbalance of authority continues to persist.

Macrosystemic interventions have limited statutory proofing and inconsistent safeguarding practice integration as they offload a great responsibility on children and parents, bypassing safety by design responsibilities of digital platforms in the cybersystem (Quayle et al., 2023; Weston & Mythen, 2021).

Additionally, the CEOP command and regional cybercrime units also use PhotoDNA, a perceptual hashing technology developed by Microsoft in 2009 to identify offenders and disrupt CSEAM networks. However, the proliferation of AIG-CSEAM is becoming a testament of the red queen hypothesis of digital safeguarding as systems must constantly evolve to sustain a protective layer whilst responding to a mutative AI phenomenon, thus widening the exosystemic forensic lag.

Organisations such as NSPCC and Barnardo's put forth essential child-centred strategies, advocating for stronger technology regulation frameworks, safety by design application and a safer internet for children, whilst the Marie Collins Foundation, through its Click: Path to Protection initiative, offers training for social workers on TA-CSEA (Bond & Dogaru, 2019; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021).

However, the exosystem gap between safeguarding obligations of social workers to comprehend digital forensics within existing heavy caseloads and a chronic resource crisis, may result in digital pitfalls in risk assessments, unknowingly heightening children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA.

2.10. Social Work Practice: Roles, Interventions and Realities in England

2.10.1. Statutory Risk Assessment

Social workers in England, play various critical roles in safeguarding children against TA-CSEA primarily through undertaking statutory risk assessments that aim to identify significant harm that may impede children's development. However, an exosystemic gap persists between traditional risk assessment tools and the dynamic on life realities of children. Social work assessments based on traditional identification of physical safety, may not account for the digital blind spots through which TA-CSEA evades detection (Brookfield et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2024).

2.10.2. Psychosocial support and Disclosure

Additionally, social workers provide psychosocial support for children who may have experienced TA-CSEA, which includes helping children navigate the challenges of disclosure. Children often encounter intersecting encrypted hurdles of silence such as fear, internalised shame and disbelief from adults within their micro and exosystem environments.

Moreover, the roles of social workers extend to preventive education and community awareness as they work with children, families and communities to address digital knowledge gaps and promote safe and positive online behaviours (McGinn et al., 2026; Schmidt et al., 2024).

2.10.3. Multi-agency Coordination

Social workers roles also include partaking and leading multi agency safeguarding responses, working with different agents such as law enforcement, health and education as they operate across many practice settings, from family outreach centres to Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH). This collaborative role is re-enforced by a robust foundation of legislation that includes the Children Act of 1989 and 2004 and statutory guidance such as *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*. Furthermore, professional and ethical practice standards within diverse settings is governed by regulatory frameworks from Social Work England (SWE) and BASW's Code of Ethics (BASW, 2024; Department for Education, 2023; SWE, 2019). However, studies highlight that collaboration efforts tend to be affected by siloed approached and inconsistent frameworks (Martin et al., 2025; Schmidt et al., 2024).

2.11. Challenges: Professional uncertainty at the boundaries of digital child safeguarding

2.11.1 Professional barriers: The Digital Competence gap

Social Workers as key practitioners in child safeguarding encounter numerous professional challenges. Studies highlight that social workers experience interpretive challenges as they feel less confident when responding to cases that may involve TA-CSEA due to limited standardised training and digital risk assessment tools within their professional practice. The mutative and dynamic nature of TA-CSEA, surges the complexity of cases that social workers encounter as they navigate practice within settings that are fraught with limited clarity in key terminologies and resource constrains, which may frequently lead to burnout. (Ahern et al., 2017; Kewley et al., 2025; Schmidt et al., 2024).

2.11.2 Systemic Barriers: The Institutional Pace Trap

Despite the evolution of the digital world and its impact on social work practice, interventions argumentatively remain rooted in traditional face-to-face models. This creates a profound incongruency in systemic safeguarding interventions for technology evolves at "internet speed" while social work training evolves at "institutional speed".

This lag further develops a permanent state of limited professional clarity where social workers feel disconnected from the child's on-life reality.

Critically, there remains limited research regarding how social workers in England interpret TA-CSEA, assess risks and intervene when working with affected children and families in a volatile cybersystem phenomena which continues to challenge traditional models of intervention.

2.11.3 Ethical barriers: The Autonomy and Protection Dilemma

A fundamental tension exists between a child's right to digital autonomy and the social worker's statutory duty to investigate or assess situation that may involve private chats to contextualise interventions, resulting in a conflict of sound ethical principles the 'right vs right' dilemma. Moreover, the challenges are further heightened by a widening gap between policy and practice characterised by limited clarity in key terminologies and intervention pathways for addressing TA-CSEA (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2024; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). This can be observed in the struggle to identify and categorise agency and exploitation where there is the difficulty in examining an adolescent's activities if it constitutes healthy sexual exploration or if it is a significant risk of exploitation. Furthermore, a secondary conflict arises when it comes to digital restriction. fear of restricting a child's access to the internet coated in providing protection, may result in an ecological systemic paradox, "crime promoting crime prevention" and 'abuse promoting child protection'.

TA-CSEA is commonly accompanied by a syndrome of secrecy and addiction, of which digital restrictions may inadvertently perpetuate these volatile dynamics especially when strengthened by weak policies and un-coordinated multi-professional interventions (Furniss, 1991). Digital restriction risks harming a child's digital development and isolating them from their peer -based support systems, effectively imitating the isolation behaviours of online perpetrators.

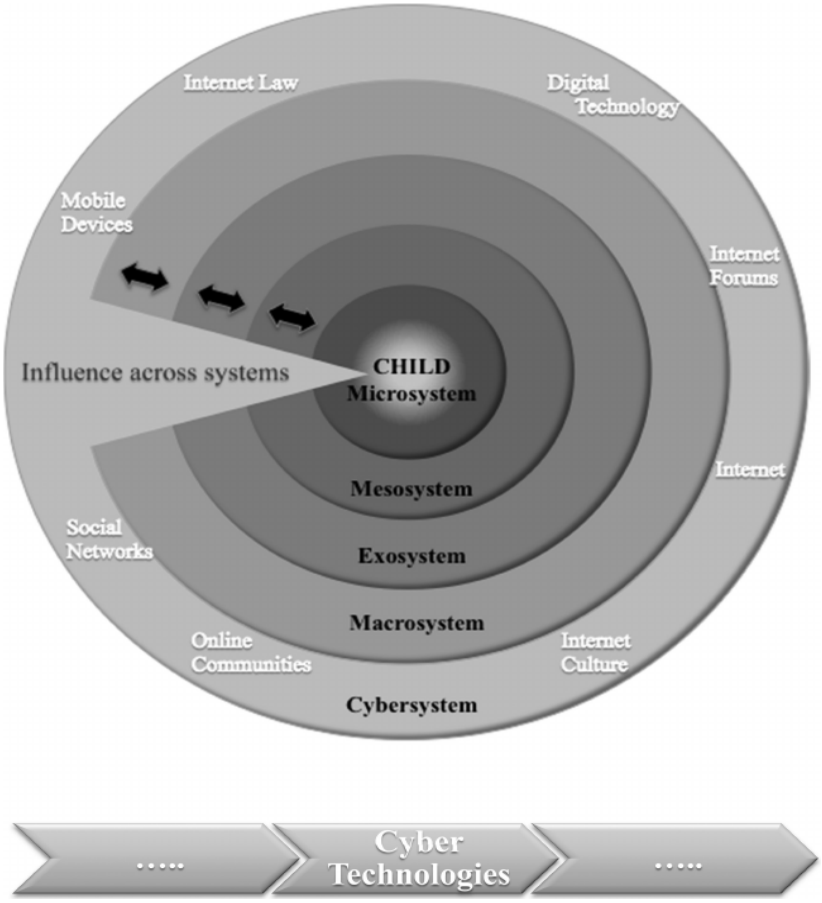
2.12. Theoretical and Conceptual framework

2.12.1. Theoretical foundation

This study's core foundation is rooted in the Ecological system theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) that postulates that children's development, be it social, emotional, cognitive or decision making skills, is influenced by complex and bidirectional interactions nested in five environmental systems; that includes immediate family (microsystem), direct interaction such as school and friends (mesosystem), the indirect interactions such as parents work environment (exosystem), laws, policies, norms, values (macrosystem) and the influence of time which is the (chronosystem). This systemic lens is essential for social work as it moves the focus away from individual pathology toward a holistic conceptualisation of harm.

2.12.2. Cyber Ecological Systems Model

Figure 3: *Cyber-ecological systems model*



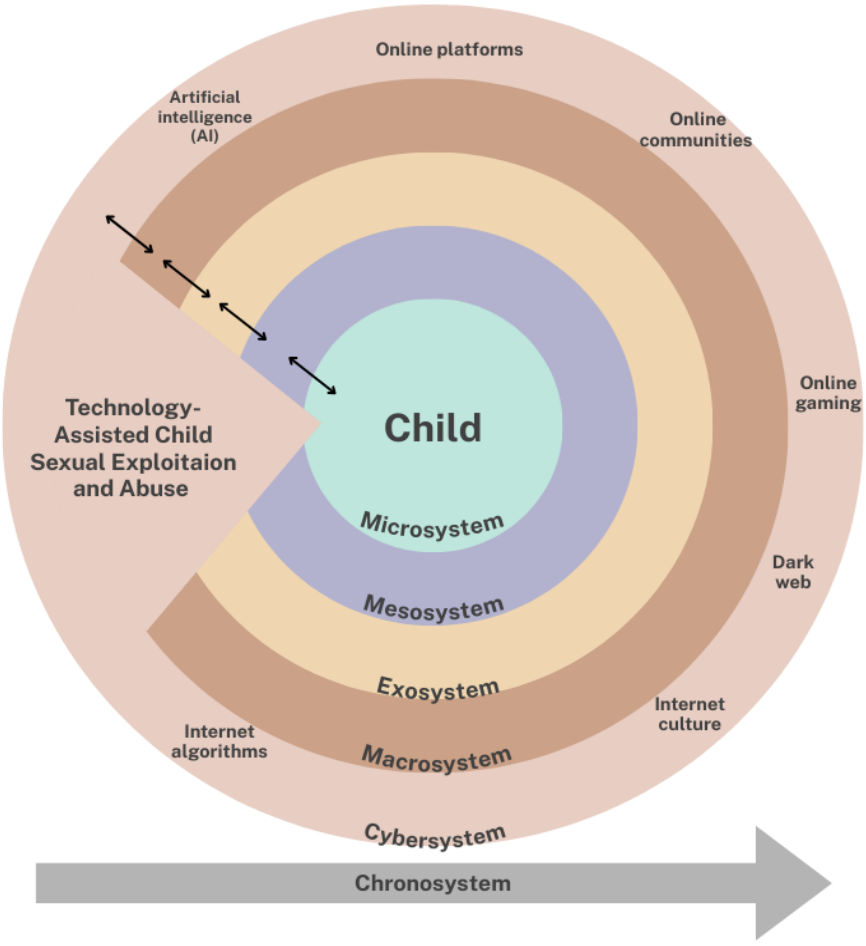
Source: Martin (2014)

While Bronfenbrenner (1979) provided the structural foundation, the advancement of the digital world necessitated a conceptual evolution to have an appreciation of the complex and systemic phenomenon of TA-CSEA. This study utilised the Cyber-Ecological Systems Model developed by Martin (2014) to bridge the gap between traditional social work and the on-life reality of contemporary child safeguarding.

The model, highlighting a conceptual evolution, rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and the techno-subsystem by Johnson and Puplampu (2008). Martin (2014) added the cybersystem as a critical ecological system and established the cybersystem as a pervasive layer that permeates and interacts with all the layers that influence a child's development, from the micro level to the chronosystem level. The models emphasise that in the digital environment, the cybersystem is no longer just a 'sub-system' but has evolved into an environment in which the child's immediate setting now exists. The cybersystem exhibits the porousness of the traditional ecological microsystem in which an online preparator can exploit instantly. The model, therefore, provides an initial analytical lens through which the multi-level dynamics of TA-CSEA can be examined.

2.12.3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 4*: Conceptual framework*



Source: Adapted from Martin (2014)

Acknowledging the rapid technological developments since 2014 and emerging literature on artificial intelligence, deepfakes and online gaming environments, this study proposes an adapted conceptual framework as illustrated in Figure 4. These elements represent sophisticated technological catalysts in contemporary society that significantly shape a child's behaviour and development and risks that were not fully realised in the model's original 2014 iteration. These additions serve as a preliminary theoretical lens and will be further examined and refined during the analysis of empirical data.

Justification of the model. The adoption and subsequent adaptation of the Cyber-Ecological Systems Model are justified by the rapid technological shifts that have occurred since the model's original inception by Martin (2014). While the foundational layers of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem remain relevant for understanding a child's environment, the contemporary landscape of TA-CSEA requires a revised Cybersystem layer for the following reasons:

- *Responding to AI harm and deepfake* : The inclusion of Artificial Intelligence and Deepfake within the Cybersystem is necessitated by reports from global monitoring organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), which highlighted a catastrophic 26,835% surge in detected Category A, AIG-CSEAM in 2025 (IWF, 2026). This form of harm allows perpetrators to fabricate content that is increasingly difficult to distinguish from real images, harming the child at the micro level and complicating social work's roles and interventions within the exosystem, which includes identification and assessments.

- *Addressing the Permeability of online Gaming*: the study included Online Gaming as one of the sub-sectors at the Cybersystem level, to account for the high-risk nature of these interactive spaces, where grooming may escalate to full-scale exploitation in a very short time, bypassing parental or trusted adults' supervision and statutory safeguarding.

- *Representing the ever-evolving nature and dynamics of TA-CSEA*: This is evident in the Chronosystem arrow in the model (Figure 4), which shows the rapid evolution of digital tools such as end-to-end encryption (E2EE) and deepfakes, which currently outpace the traditional frontline response of social workers. Additionally, the model acts as an analytical lens to explore the widening gap between legislation, policy and social work practice, where practitioners often rely on traditional models of interventions that do not account for the blurred lines of a child's 'on life' reality.

2.13. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter analysed the dynamics of TA-CSEA, associated risk factors, and policy responses at the global, European, and England levels. It highlighted the ontological crisis of social work through systemic gaps in role clarity, intervention coherence, and digital safeguarding frameworks. Moreover, these establish the justification for the study, which examines how social workers in England interpret, assess and intervene when responding to TA-CSEA within statutory safeguarding frameworks.

CHAPTER 3 : METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter highlight the research design utilised and the target population. It explains the sampling strategy and data collection methods and how the data was analysed. Additionally, it describes the ethical considerations that guided the study.

3.2 Research design

The study used a qualitative exploratory case study design. The bounded case was social work practice responses to TA-CSEA within England's child protection ecosystem, with a strong focus on social workers' roles, intervention strategies, and engagement with statutory safeguarding processes.

A qualitative exploratory case study was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to capture intricate and nuanced perspectives in the contemporary digital world, especially when the boundaries between the TA-CSEA phenomenon and the context that includes ecological systemic interventions are unclear. A qualitative exploratory case study approach also helps address the 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 2017). Additionally, this research design was appropriate, as it allows the use of multiple sources of evidence, such as policies and interviews, to increase the credibility and validity of the findings, given that there are limited studies exploring the roles and interventions of social workers in England who intervene in TA-CSEA.

According to Creswell (2014), research designs are plans and procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis. The research study is informed by a social constructivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through interactions and interpretations. From this perspective, the study sought to understand how social workers interpret and make sense of TA-CSEA within their professional practice embedded within safeguarding policies and legislation. This paradigm justifies the utility of qualitative methods by emphasising the lived experiences of social workers navigating the institutional pace trap rather than quantifiable data, which may not adequately expose the complexities of social work digital safeguarding.

3.3 Target Area

The study is delimited to England, specifically focusing on the roles and interventions of social workers when responding to sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet. The selection of England was primarily based on its well-established child protection frameworks and the development of recent digital safeguarding legislation such as the Online Safety Act of 2023 and statutory guiding frameworks such as the *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*.

The research prioritised depth over breadth, drawing directly from the experiences and insights of social workers amidst workforce pressures and critiques of the statutory child protection systems. Additionally, England alone was selected to avoid cross-jurisdictional complexity, as safeguarding systems are devolved across the United Kingdom, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who have their own unique legislations and policies.

3.4. Target population

The target population under study was qualified social workers practising in child-protection and safeguarding contexts in England, as they represent a key professional group responsible for child protection interventions. This was done irrespective of their age, sex, race, religion, ethnicity or culture.

3.4.1. Inclusion criteria

To be eligible, participants were required to have a minimum of one year's post-qualification practice experience in statutory or non-governmental settings. Additionally, participants were required to be currently or previously involved in safeguarding interventions related to the sexual exploitation and abuse of children facilitated by digital technologies. Eligible forms of involvement included, but were not limited to, needs and risk assessments, group or community work, supervision, training and capacity-building, multi-agency coordination, policy or programme development, research, or engagement in digital-safeguarding and technological initiatives.

3.4.2. Exclusion criteria

Excluded from the study were social-work students, newly qualified practitioners with less than one year of experience, individuals not registered with Social Work England, and practitioners without any direct or indirect involvement in cases or initiatives concerning TA-CSEA or online child protection. Those practising outside England were also excluded to maintain policy and contextual consistency.

3.4.3. Justification

Sampling practitioners from statutory and non-governmental sectors and across ecological levels, the study captures a comprehensive view of how social-work roles and interventions are enacted and evolving within England's digital child-protection landscape.

This approach directly supports the study's overarching aim: to explore the roles and interventions of social workers in addressing TA-CSEA.

3.5. Sample

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy, complemented by snowball sampling, to include participants with direct and relevant expertise in TA-CSEA.

Purposive sampling was appropriate because TA-CSEA is a specialist and emerging field within child protection, where practitioners with specific experience may be relatively limited.

The non-probability approach enabled the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing in-depth insights into social work roles and interventions. Additionally, snowball sampling, also known as chain referral, was incorporated to access social workers operating in less visible or non-traditional contexts such as digital-safeguarding units, multi-agency partnerships, or collaborations with technology organisations that might otherwise be underrepresented (Patton, 2015).

Diversity of participants was a key consideration to ensure that the sample reflected both statutory and non-governmental contexts, as well as varying levels of practice, reflecting a maximum-variation sampling logic. Guided by the Cyber-Ecological Systems Model, the sampling strategy aimed to capture perspectives across multiple ecological levels of intervention. These included frontline social workers practising at the micro level, safeguarding leads within organisations at the meso level, and senior managers involved in strategic oversight at the macro level.

Initial recruitment of participants involved contacting statutory child protection agencies, non-governmental organisations and safeguarding networks through professional email invitations. Also, online professional platforms such as LinkedIn were used. Snowball referrals were used to identify colleagues in specialist or emerging roles. The final recruitment consisted of 8 social workers as the research process had reached data saturation from the interviews due to provision of redundant evidence ensuring a robust and theoretically stable foundation for the analysis. In qualitative research, the determination of a sample is not the numerical power however the attainment of data saturation, the point in which there are no more new emerging themes or concepts (Saunders et al., 2018).

3.6. data collection

The research study data collection process involved primary and secondary data sources using two research instruments; Semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

3.6.1. Semi-structured interviews

Empirical data for this study were gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews with social workers practising in the child protection field, who are directly or indirectly engaged in responding TA-CSEA. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide composed of open-ended questions supported by probes. The probes were used flexibly and selectively to deepen analytically relevant responses rather than being applied uniformly. The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded using Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams, depending on the participant's preference. AI-assisted transcription software, Otter.ai, was used, and the resulting transcripts were reviewed and corrected manually to ensure accuracy. The length of each interview was 35 minutes to 1 hour .

Participants were informed about the study in advance, and those who expressed interest in participating were given informed consent forms via email to build rapport and ensure ethical compliance.

Additionally, prior to the interviews, participants were briefed on the purpose of the interviews, and verbal consent was audio-recorded at the start of each interview.

3.6.2 Document analysis

In addition to semi-structured interviews, this study employed document analysis as a supplementary data collection method to analyse the relationship between statutory obligations and social workers' practice reality. Document analysis is a research instrument used in qualitative research that enables researchers to systematically review and interpret documentary evidence, both printed and electronic, to gain contextual and policy-level insights(Bowen, 2009). The study used this instrument due to its cost-effectiveness, availability, stability, and lack of obtrusiveness or reactivity. The instrument afforded the opportunity to strengthen the rigour and trustworthiness of the study by triangulating social workers' experiential accounts with statutory, policy, and professional frameworks, thereby reducing bias(Bowen, 2009).

Documents were purposively selected following Bowen's (2009) five-stage approach: selection, authenticity and credibility checks, thematic coding, comparative analysis, and synthesis. For the documents to be considered, they had to be of official status as law, statutory guidance with reference to child protection and safeguarding responsibilities and included issues related to digital harms or online child safety. To ensure feasibility and depth, the analysis focused on a corpus of three anchor documents that collectively capture legal, policy, digital, and professional dimensions of practice.

The first document was the Children Act of 1989, which establishes the statutory duties of social workers in child protection. The second document was the *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023***,** which operationalises these duties through multi-agency guidance. However, the study used the 2023 statutory guidance document during data collection, and any updates that followed were not considered. The third document was the Online Safety Act 2023, an act primarily for digital regulation in England. Its inclusion allows for an examination of the regulatory-practice gap between technology governance and social work interventions.

3.7. Data Analysis

The study employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) according to the six-phase framework of familiarisation by Braun and Clarke (2022).

This process included Data generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and presenting the findings as a recursive and iterative process.

This approach was selected for its alignment with the research study's social constructivist paradigm and its capacity to generate theoretically informed yet experientially grounded insights.

Familiarisation involved reading of interview transcripts and policy documents to identify patterns of meaning relevant to social workers' interpretations and responses to TA-CSEA. MAXQDA was used for coding. In addition, a mixed approach of deductive and inductive strategies was used. Deductive codes were influenced by the Cyber-Ecological Systems Model through the study's research questions, particularly regarding ecological levels of risk, roles, and interventions. Simultaneously, inductive coding remained open to participants' experiences, capturing practitioners' expressions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and professional judgement.

Codes were refined through constant comparison both within and across interviews, allowing for the identification of patterns, divergences, and contradictions in participants' accounts.

An abductive analytical logic guided the interaction between theory and data. While the Cyber-Ecological Systems Model provided an initial analytical framework, it was not imposed rigidly. Instead, the study allowed the capturing of emerging findings, particularly from participants' accounts.

Themes were developed from correlated codes and by analysing their relevance to the research questions. Themes were defined to reflect both descriptive patterns and interpretive insights, particularly regarding policy and practice tensions in digital safeguarding.

Data-source triangulation was done through combining interview data with documentary analysis of relevant policy frameworks. Complementarity between statutory expectations and lived professional practice was identified. Any variations between data sources were considered important.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout, recognising the researcher's active role in the research study, supported by regular supervisory debriefing. The final themes were supported by participant quotations and documentary evidence, to provide a nuanced account of how social workers interpret, assess, and respond to TA-CSEA within England's child protection system.

3.8. Ethical considerations

The research study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethical Conduct in Research - ISCTE (The Code), which was also aligned with the research ethics and values within the four-university consortium of the study programme.

The research study ensured that the ethical considerations as guided by the Code, including respect for autonomy, transparency, objectivity, reliability, and rigour, were adhered to throughout the research process, including data collection and analysis.

Additionally, informed consent, confidentiality, and integrity were valued, as the researcher obtained explicit consent from interviewees electronically before the interview using an informed consent form. This also included consent to digitally record their responses, guaranteeing data minimisation and confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.

Moreover, participants, upon agreeing to partake in the interview process, were briefed before the commencement of the interview about the purpose of the interview, their rights as participants, which included the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any justification, duration of the interview, support mechanisms for potential emotional distress and contacts for any clarification and contributions during or after the research. In addition, an explanation was provided regarding how the information they shared would be password-protected, with only the researcher and supervisor having access to the collected data to ensure data security in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations. In addition, the interviewees were informed that data retention and deletion would be guided by the Code's research data management policy.

3.9. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research methodology hinged on a social constructivist paradigm through the use of a qualitative exploratory case study research design to explore the roles and interventions of social workers when responding to TA-CSEA. Data collection was through the use of triangulation of semi-structured interviews of 8 social workers as a sample size and document analysis of three statutory documents, in an effort to analyse the relationship between practice and statutory frameworks. Reflexive thematic analysis was supported by the use of MAXQDA 2024 following rigorous criteria of trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability whilst also recognising the importance of ethical considerations such as for the purpose of protecting and promoting the autonomy of research participants.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and discussion arising from the semi-structured interviews and document analysis utilised in this study. The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis within the broader qualitative exploratory case study design outlined in Chapter 3. The chapter is structured according to the study objectives, presenting the key themes that emerged from participants' accounts, as direct quotes from participants were used alongside discussion of their relevance to the wider literature and the cyber-ecological perspective guiding the study. To contextualise the findings, a brief professional profile of the participants is presented below in Table 2. This provides an overview of participants' roles, practice settings, levels of practice, and professional experience in relation to the phenomenon under study.

4.1.1. Professional profile of research participants

To uphold the ethical principle of confidentiality, participants identities were anonymised and presented using participant identification codes

Table 2*: Professional profile of participants*

Participant ID	Professional Role	Practice Setting	Level of Practice	Professional Experience
SW01	Senior Executive Leadership	Chairty Sector-Specialist services for Online Child Sexual Abuse	Organisational level, Individual and family level	Social worker since 2012
SW02	Autism Social Worker	Local Authority Children with Disabilities / Complex Needs Services	Individual and family level	6 years
SW03	Experienced Social Worker	Local Authority Long-Term Children and Families Team	Individual and family level	3 years
SW04	Children's Social Worker	Local Authority Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)	Individual and family level	Practising since 2020
SW05	Children and Family Social Worker	Local Authority Children's Services	Individual and family level	Just over 1 year
SW06	Independent Social Worker	Independent Social Work across schools, local authorities, and child/family services	Individual and family level, Community Level, Organisational level	15 years
SW07	Qualified Social Worker	Local Authority Long-Term Safeguarding / Child Protection Team	Individual and family level	Qualified since 2011
SW08	Team Manager / District Area Manager	Local Authority Assessment Team	Managerial and strategic level	Social worker since 2004

Source: By the Author

4.2. TA-CSEA as hidden, evolving, and difficult to categorise

Participants interpreted TA-CSEA through ambiguity, hiddenness, and escalation across digitally mediated contexts, which complicated victim recognition and disrupted conventional safeguarding understandings.

4.2.1. TA-CSEA is an ambiguous and complex phenomenon

Participants described TA-CSEA as being largely challenging and complex to interpret. This is noted by some participants, such as SWO2, who said it is "very, very, very convoluted now". SWO3 went on to describe TA-CSEA as a "grey area", while SW08 defined it as a "complex thing". Additionally, the interpretive uncertainty was reinforced by SW06's more tentative framing, "I suppose it includes things such as sexting. I think that's what it's called." These accounts indicate that TA-CSEA's evolving nature introduces complexities in how it is interpreted in social work practice.

Furthermore, TA-CSEA is understood through shifting, at times uncertain, professional framings. This was noted in the different terminologies participants utilised to explain the phenomenon. While SW04 referred to TA-CSEA more widely as "digital exploitation" that "comes in many shapes and forms", SW07 suggested that the language used in practice had changed beyond child sexual exploitation as they stated,

> In UK now we no longer say child sexual exploitation because of how broad it is. Now we say child exploitation. We put child exploitation and abuse, why? Because it's not only sexual, but there's also a lot going on.

These definitional variations suggest conceptual conflict among participants about how the phenomenon is interpreted. This also reflects an uneven professional framing among participants, through which harm could be consistently interpreted in practice. Arguably, the absence of a more consistent professional vocabulary may contribute to uneven interpretation and, in turn, to variability in how concerns are responded to in practice. This aligns with the We Protect Global Alliance (2022) and ECPAT International (2025b), who emphasise the importance of establishing clear, consistent terminology to effectively reduce conceptual ambiguity when responding to TA-CSEA. Additionally, this suggests that ambiguity is becoming more pronounced as TA-CSEA is not located in one system but permeates across all levels of the child's environments, as highlighted in the cyber-ecological systems model.

4.2.2. TA-CSEA is hidden and hard to detect

Participants described TA-CSEA as a form of abuse that is particularly challenging to identify, especially for carers and practitioners. This was reflected in SW05's note that it is "easily hidden from parents and professionals for a longer period of time." In support, another participant gave an example of the difficulty of naming exploitative interactions where concern was present but sexual intent was not immediately visible:

> We've had somewhere where we picked it up, so it wasn't really sexual exploitation in its most overt form, but there was definitely a very peculiar undertone. I just kind of felt that it's got exploitation undertones to it, but because it was only undertones, (SW04)

Such accounts highlight not just the complexity of cases encountered. They also show the challenge of categorising technology-facilitated interactions when exploitation is detected through nuanced undertones, rather than clear, evidential indicators.

Online harm was not limited to adult oversight; it was also tied to how children interpreted their own experiences. This was reflected in one participant's statement:

> Most often, children don't recognise themselves as victims, because the context is welcome and it feels consensual. The risk perception from the children and young people is definitely limited when there's peer-on-peer exploitation, so children view themselves less as victims (SW05).

Similarly, SW07 highlighted that "Sometimes we find that they think they are in a relationship, but they are not." These accounts from participants suggest that when children interpret their experiences online as part of growing up, it becomes difficult for them to notice any form of harm, especially when their interactions are consensual. This is supported by Quayle et al. (2026) and Whittle et al. (2014), who highlight that abusive dynamics may be encountered as meaningful, normalised, or consensual, particularly where peer-to-peer grooming or emotional manipulation blur the differentiation between consent and exploitation.

Moreover, participants highlighted that abuse was not always visible through direct disclosure from the children. In some accounts, cases were identified through investigative processes of other forms of abuse.

This suggests that TA-CSEA may remain hidden longer, for it creates digital blind spots as it hides within traditional or familiar forms of abuse. The study argues that the hidden nature of TA-CSEA may strain traditional assessment models rooted in the evidence of immediately visible external signs of harm, which are now often embedded in private, ongoing online interactions, making early detection more difficult. This suggests the importance of more digitally informed assessment approaches that are better able to recognise how exploitation may be embedded within online environments (Chui et al., 2025). This pattern is consistent with the cyber-ecological systems model, particularly its emphasis on recognising the cybersystem environment as a permeable influence on a child's development.

4.2.3. TA-CSEA as a technology-facilitated process of exploitation

Several participants conceptualised TA-CSEA not as a single or isolated incident, but a dynamic process of exploitation and coercion mediated by technology. This was illustrated by SW01, who described the problem as ,"Online classic sexual exploitation, where there's an exchange, whether the child is sent gaming tokens, access to Amazon vouchers, payments through PayPal, Bitcoins, that sort of thing, all in exchange

for child abuse images". This is supported by the FATF (2024) report ,which highlights that TA-CSEA increasingly involves financial exchanges facilitated by digital technologies.

Grooming was commonly identified as a key pathway through which trust-building, deception, and manipulation were used to draw children into exploitative situations. This was illustrated by SW08, who reflected that "sometimes it starts as a seemingly innocent contact, and then it goes into coercion. It then gets into sexualized content, and then, self-generated images," while SW04 recalled cases involving very young children, "I have seen children as young as five, six years old, being asked to send very graphic, probably category A, some images and videos of themselves to people that have groomed them".

This interpretation of TA-CSEA was further reflected in how participants situated the phenomenon within a range of digital environments as access points for harm. SW08 explained, in online grooming, "children are being contacted via social media, gaming platforms, or messaging apps". These responses highlight how social workers situate TA-CSEA within digital environments, not as neutral backdrops, but as active spaces of access and risk in which contact could be initiated, sustained, and concealed.

Participants described TA-CSEA as multifaceted and rapidly evolving. Some participants expanded this understanding to include sextortion, peer-to-peer abuse, self-generated and AI-generated abuse material, and offending through livestreaming. For example, SW07 described cases in which children were blackmailed after being asked to expose themselves, while SW01 referred to "Deepfake and AI" as well as "an offender talking to a child through live streaming."

In addition, some participants conceptualised TA-CSEA as a transnational and wide-reaching form of exploitation that can affect children beyond the stereotyped assumptions of vulnerability, as SW04, who said;

> I have seen this happen in the poorest of the poor families, children who are in local authority care, all the way to children who live in mansions in affluent areas, children who come from middle-class families, children who go to private schools, and public schools. The only way I can describe it is it's so non-discriminatory, and that's really, really underreported.

This suggests that participants did not interpret TA-CSEA through a fixed or narrow victim profile, and assumptions should not be hinged on the idea that the problem only affects children known to social services or residing in notably vulnerable circumstances.

In addition, participants' accounts suggest that TA-CSEA is processual in nature, where exploitation unfolds gradually through stages of manipulation, control, and escalation rather than appearing immediately in a fully visible form.

This is consistent with Joleby et al. (2021), who highlight that technology-facilitated abuse can develop through staged engagement, manipulation, and gradual escalation.

The study argues that from a cyber-ecological analytical view, the online environment does not just operate as a medium of abuse but as an active agents that enable easy access to children and accelerate the escalation of the perpetrator's ability to harm children.

4.2.4. TA-CSEA as part of an online–offline continuum of harm

Participants conceptualised TA-CSEA as a continuum between online and offline exploitation. This was reflected by SW05, who described how "in some cases, online exploitation does progress to become physical meetings which really escalates the emotional and psychological impact". This suggests that TA-CSEA is understood as having consequences beyond the digital environment, affecting children's offline lives and interactions. This supports the view that participants understood how the permanent and reproducible nature of online content creates a digital 'scar' that does not just affect children psychologically but also affects their digital biography, eroding their ability to recover and move on.

This interpretation was reinforced by some participants, who explicitly challenged any minimisation of abuse on the basis that it occurs offline rather than online. One participant stated that:

> Whatever we've termed sexual abuse in the physical sense, in real life, the only difference is that this is now happening via technology. So… a young person being sexually interfered with in their body in real life, I would also still worry about that, even if it's online (SW06).

This suggests that practitioners tend to focus on categorising harm between online and offline abuse. Rather, what mattered is the exploitative nature of the interaction and its impact on the child, regardless of the medium through which it occurred. Thus, adding nuance to TA-CSEA being part of an online–offline continuum of harm that operates across interconnected environments consistent with the cyber-ecological systems model.

Additionally, some participants situated their understanding of TA-CSEA in overlapping exploitation pathways, in the context of child criminal exploitation to include county line and gangs. This was illustrated by one participant who said,

> Gun crime it's now quite ripe… The initiation starts online and then there will be the meetings. Sometimes you'll find that 15-year-olds, they are already smoking cannabis in schools and it's something that's so common in UK. You find someone who will say, 'Okay, I'll give you cannabis'…in return, you have to travel to a certain place'. Police will never think that children can travel by train, two hours, three hours traveling to deliver drugs… (SW07).

Even though these accounts may not exclusively be about TA-CSEA, the study found them analytically critical as they denote how the understanding of TA-CSEA was within wider patterns of coercion, control, and victimisation, where sexual abuse, criminal exploitation, and digital grooming can overlap.

This aligns with Marshall (2024) and the Home Office (2023), who emphasise the importance of understanding children's realities as their involvement may appear consensual, and yet it's not.

A small number of participants also described TA-CSEA within a broader landscape of digital harms, including harmful online content, online radicalisation, and parents' oversharing online, suggesting some blurring between TA-CSEA and wider digital safeguarding concerns, as this may highlight the complexity in categorising online harm even at the referral stage.

4.3. Vulnerability is produced cumulatively across child, relational, institutional, structural, and digital systems

4.3.1. Child-level vulnerabilities

Participants described children's vulnerability and resilience to TA-CSEA as being shaped by how children ,conceptualised, experienced and responded to risks, as highlighted by SW06, who emphasised that "…there are factors that will exacerbate the vulnerabilities".

One of the common factors that participants articulated was the value of age and developmental needs. However, participants highlighted that age was not a static factor and did not fully capture the picture of developmental functioning. This was shown by SW08 who said, "…A child could be 16 but having a developmental age of a nine-year-old". This suggests that vulnerability is not limited to a child's age alone, as some adolescents may have limited developmental capacity including social maturity and emotional intelligence than their age would imply, thereby influencing their comprehension and response to digital risks. This is supported by research showing that children's decision-making when it comes to risk processing and exploratory behaviour, changes with development (Blanco & Sloutsky, 2024).

Additionally, participants constantly highlighted emotional and mental health needs as another factor. This included feelings of low self-esteem, loneliness, emotional distress, trauma and seeking validation being key elements in heightening children's risk to manipulation, coercion and false online intimacy. This was explained by SW05,

> I think adolescents are at high risk of online sexual exploitation, like especially …those that are emotionally vulnerable, they experience low self-esteem. Those that are socially isolated are usually really easy to manipulate, or children that have faced previous trauma and seeking to validate themselves(SW05).

This highlights that the occurrence of TA-CSEA is strongly linked to a child's emotions, with perpetrators exploiting children's unmet emotional and mental needs.

This resonates with wider exploitation literature that argues vulnerability surges when children have prior experiences of trauma, feeling depressed or are seeking validation (Aktu, 2024; Assink et al., 2019).

Another crucial pattern in the findings was the association of neurodivergence and disability with increased safeguarding complexity. Participants noted that children who may have special learning needs may face greater difficulties in identifying or interpreting harm. This is exhibited by SW03 who stated,

> It's children with disabilities, like especially learning disabilities or SEMH needs. Really, those are the children that are quite at risk of this. I'm speaking of children who are on the neurodiverse pathway because of their condition. At times, they are not able to perceive abuse as readily as other children

This highlights the complex nature of responding to TA-CSEA when it is associated with children's neurodivergent needs and the need not to treat neurodivergence as a peripheral element but a significant factor influencing both exposures to harm and safeguarding interventions. This resonates with literature that stipulates children with neurodivergent needs or children with disabilities are 3 to 4 times more at risk than their peers as they have a hard time recognising online abuse (Álvarez-Guerrero et al., 2024; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

However, the study argues that the risk should be conceptualised relationally and contextually, not as static vulnerability located in the child. Of key interest is how only one participant related a child's own online behaviour as part of the vulnerability picture. However, it was not framed in a victim-blaming manner. Rather, the participant linked it to emotional needs as they stated, "I think there's a significant element of online addiction first and foremost, and that yearning for socialisation online…that really ends up in grooming and sexual exploitation" (SW02). This is analytically critical as it highlights the need to shift focus from blaming the child to identifying the root source that perpetrators then exploit, especially when risky digital behaviours are engaged with the algorithmic predation of the cybersystem (Aktu, 2024; Tang et al., 2024).

4.3.2. Family and relational vulnerabilities

Participants consistently described children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA as also shaped by the quality of their family and relational environments. A recurring pattern was the role of limited parental supervision in exacerbating children's exposure to online harm, and how physical safety may be seen by parents as adequate when it comes to parenting, yet not being aware that the ease of access of the digital environment allows a perpetrator to enter a home undetected. SW03 emphasised this point, stating,

> Some is just lack of interest from parents, 'the child is in their bedroom so It's fine. They're in there, on their computer, at least they're not outside'. But what children are accessing online is not known by parents

Participants' accounts suggest that parental supervision is no longer a single dimension of safeguarding but a continuum between the offline and online environments of a child. Participants also identified limited parental digital literacy as a significant relational vulnerability. SW04 articulated this concern, stating,

> … If you went to your average parent and say, ‘okay, can you tell me six apps your young person's on?’ They'll probably say, ‘TikTok, Instagram’, they're not going to be ‘Telegram’. They're not going to know about Discord. They're not going to know about the next one that's on its way. They're not going to know about their back channels at Roblox

This highlights that digital literacy is no longer just a mere rhetoric about knowledge but the need to be constantly appraised on the digital developments. Moreover, it becomes arguably critical for it shows that vulnerability presents itself not only from parental absence or indifference, but also from a mismatch between children’s digital realities and caregivers’ digital competence, where online activity becomes normalised but insufficiently understood. However, the study further contends that, although parental supervision and digital literacy is key, the findings should not be interpreted as vilifying parents. Instead, the findings highlight a wider safeguarding tension; parents are expected to safeguard children against a complex phenomenon and yet institutions are also struggling to keep pace with the rapid evolution of the digital world. The study arguably positions the approach by institutions to blame parents as a macrosystemic blame-shifting tactic. Studies by Geržičáková et al. (2023) show that supportive and active parental mediation offers parents more meaningful insight into their children’s digital activities than digital control alone.

Parental conflict was also highlighted by several participants as another factor that heightened a child’s vulnerability to TA-CSEA. As SW08 observed, “when children are coming from high conflict households, then online could be their safe space. But it being a safe space, it can also be a space where they access stuff that is not good for them” . Participants suggested that dysfunctional home environments in which children reside, fraught with domestic violence and abuse, may seek refuge in online spaces as a way of coping and escaping the offline realities. The findings suggest a paradox where children on one hand, may be drawn to online environments partly because of relational instability and adversities offline, yet that same movement into digital space can increase their exposure to TA-CSEA.

From a cyber-ecological perspective, these results support the perspective that online vulnerability cannot be detached from the emotional climate of the home.

Moreover, participants also associated parent conflict with neglect in a manner that the study argues, extended the traditional interpretation of neglect that includes food, clothing and physical care to now include digital negligence. This was observed when SW08 said, “…And then where there's neglect, where we are saying there's lack of supervision, what does that look like? Is it because the child is just left on their own on gadgets all day long.”

This is a significant finding because it suggests that neglect may also be digitalised, where it includes the absence of digital supervision and boundaries for a long time. In other words, digital safeguarding failures may become part of how neglect is experienced and assessed in contemporary family life.

Neglect was also discovered to be actively shaping children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA by weakening the protective and supervisory functions of the family as compared to treating it only as a background condition. This is consistent with broader exploitation literature linking neglect-related family dysfunctions and downsized protective capacity to surged exposure to TA-CSEA (Assink et al., 2019).

4.3.3. Community and institutional vulnerabilities

Participants' accounts suggested that children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA was also shaped by weaknesses within the wider institutional environments surrounding them, particularly schools. This was expressed by SW03, who said, "I don't think online safety has been…even embedded in curriculum, in schools. I've not heard of online safety as a subject that's taught". Similarly, SW04, who shared,

> I was having a chat with a school the other day, and I was like, 'do you know about, you know, Andrew Tate?', 'Oh, yeah, that guy'. I was like, "do you know how young men are reeled into Andrew Tate?', and they were like, 'no, like. Oh, God', 'okay… young boy goes on TikTok or Instagram, looks up gym videos…they get hooked…then it starts with little bits of misogyny, it gets bigger, bigger and bigger, all from one gym hook.' And they were like, 'Oh, we didn't know that'. And in my mind, '…You should be knowing that as an educator.

Participants suggested perceived gaps in some school's digital safeguarding curriculum and that schoolteachers could observe concerning behaviour, inappropriate sexualised language, peer image-sharing, or changes in presentation, and yet not consider such as possible indicators of TA-CSEA. This study argues that since children spend a substantial amount of time within educational settings, weak professional awareness in schools may delay recognition, referral, and early intervention This is supported by existing literature which emphasises how schools are crucial for safeguarding, but often lag behind in providing current digital education, making children more vulnerable to TA-CSEA (WeProtect Global Alliance & Praesidio Safeguarding, 2023).

Participants also mentioned uneven community safeguards as a contributory factor as SW01stated that, "…the safeguards aren't there that may be in another community, if I'm honest". This reflects the idea that protective responses outside the family are not uniformly available or robust. In practice, some children may receive support from schools, youth professionals, or community actors who recognise online risk and respond proactively, while others may not get the much-needed support as warning signs are missed or responsibility is diffused. The study argues that the unevenness of community safeguarding is analytically critical because it suggests that vulnerability to TA-CSEA is partly structured by geography, service structures, and the differential capacity of local institutions to respond coherently.

Another relevant dimension from the findings was care-related vulnerability. This was noted by SW05, who stated that "children in care or at the age of care" are also vulnerable to TA-CSEA.

The study argues that children in care systems may, on paper, provide the much-needed welfare support and protection; however, in reality, direct work with children in such settings may also be challenging due to systemic pressures, which include maintaining trust relationships with children to be able to disclose any online harm they may be experiencing. This is critical as TA-CSEA harm is heightened by the overlapping vulnerabilities that children in care experience.

4.3.4. Structural and identity- related vulnerabilities

One important pattern in the findings was the issue of gender-based targeting related to vulnerability. Participants indicated that some children may be targeted in ways that are shaped by gendered expectations, sexualisation, or stereotyped ideas about girls and boys. This was noted by SW01, who said, "we've seen with financial sextortion, more targeting males…"

Additionally, some participants highlighted that some adolescents who identified themselves as LGBTQIA+ may turn to online spaces for identity exploration, belonging, or connection when they feel misunderstood, isolated, or unable to disclose their identity offline, as SW02 shared, "I would say young people that identify as LGBTQIA, and the likelihood of them being exploited online, is significantly higher, because then they will be looking for relationships online". This suggests that intersecting social identities, such as being identified as LGBTQIA+, may shape children's exposure and vulnerability to harm, creating double-binds of disclosure (Hatchel et al., 2021; Kavenagh & Maternowska, 2024).Participants not directly mentioning poverty as a factor, their accounts on issues related to limited parental capacity, financially strained households and unmet needs, however, highlighted the role of socio-economic contexts influencing the wider vulnerability landscape.

4.3.5. Digital-environment vulnerabilities

Participants described children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA as largely shaped by the design and features of digital environments. They highlighted platform design and algorithmic predation, as noted by SW08 who stated that "the algorithms of the social media which we use. Sometimes it just directs kids into those things, even though they may not necessarily be searching… the algorithm leads you into other aspects."

The findings suggest that online harm is not simply as a matter of children making unsafe choices, but as something facilitated by platform design, ease of access, anonymity, constant connectivity, and the rapid circulation of content and contact across digital spaces. Additionally suggesting that vulnerability is embedded not only in the child or their immediate relationships, but also in the technological environment in which interaction takes place.

From a cyber-ecological perspective, digital environments operate as an active layer of risk production, creating conditions in which exploitation can be initiated, intensified, hidden, and scaled.

This is a particularly important insight because it shifts the analysis from individual behaviour to socio-technical design.

Vulnerability here is not only about what children choose to do online, but also about the algorithmic curation structures on how they organise attention, visibility, and access. This is supported by wider literature which highlight that the lack of safety by design features of AI-optimised social media platforms by technology companies, designed to capture attention without prioritising ethical concerns, personalising content and enhancing user engagement, have become toxic business models that prioritise financial growth and capital dominance over accountability. Moreover, dopamine pathways are altered speeding the development of addictive behaviours and exposure to online harm (De et al., 2025; Salter & Hanson, 2021; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023). In addition, the online-enabled ease of access to children on digital platforms was regarded as a key element of digital architecture related vulnerabilities ,. This was noted by participant who said,

> If a guy just pulled up to a kid and said, 'you look amazing, get in', the kid's going to often go…'get off you pedo' and own that. Whereas, if you're online, some of those barriers are already down. We've already connected because we're online connected so, that side of things, makes it slightly easier (SW01)

The findings are highly critical as it shows the evolution of exploitation from the traditional dependence on physical proximity to that being undertaken on online platforms without any adult supervision.

Additionally, participants shared the nature of TA-CSEA being a phenomena that rapidly escalates in various digital platforms affecting multiple children within a short space of time which wouldn't be possible in an offline setting. This was particularly evident in when a participant said,

> I think that the internet allows. If you think of a child living in the house with you...a 14-year-old girl, one of the red flag ages, how many perpetrators, if she's offline, is she going to meet? …it's still a limited pool. Where if you're online, you just naturally have expanded that pool regarding that… people who you know are using that to nefarious measures (SW01)

Participants' accounts suggest that the internet has become a mechanism that amplifies reach, speed, and persistence.

4.4. TA-CSEA responses are absorbed into existing time-bound and threshold-based safeguarding frameworks

4.4.1 Identifying concerns and entry into safeguarding systems

Participants described social work responses to TA-CSEA as commonly beginning through statutory referrals, particularly where concerns were brought through the 'front door' of local authority children's services. This was clearly highlighted by SW03, who stated, "Let me start with the front door of the local authority. We have what's called MASH… once a concern of a child is raised, it is referred through the MASH."

Additionally, SW08 highlighted how the referrals are to be filtered through a shared threshold framework as they stated, “They use what we call our threshold document…the document that all the professionals need to be aware of that will determine whether this is a significant issue to refer in or to deal with at their own level”

This suggests that referrals received and processed are statutorily guided through existing safeguarding pathways rather than through a distinct digital exploitation pathway. Participants also described referrals as arising from a range of different sources, which suggests that the identification of TA-CSEA is situated across the wider safeguarding network rather than resting solely with social workers. As SW08 explained

> Primarily, most of our referrals, we get them via schools, … from the police,… Sometimes it’s also through the parents themselves raising concerns around child being beyond parental control, for example, or because they are concerned about what the child is accessing online.

This aligns with statutory guidance document *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*, (hereafter *Working Together 2023)*, which frames safeguarding as ‘providing help and support to meet the needs of children as soon as problems emerge’ and explicitly includes children being protected from maltreatment occurring ‘including online’ (Department for Education, 2023,pp. 7-8).

However, the findings denote a gap between policy and practice as the *Working Together 2023* expects early identification, but participants accounts denote identification in TA-CSEA cases is interpretive rather than automatic as entry into safeguarding systems in TA-CSEA cases was rarely straightforward. Rather than presenting as obvious exploitation cases from the beginning, concerns were often first encountered through broader concerns. This was reflected in SW08’s observation that “for us, when it comes to exploitation… some of the cases, especially for the older children, they do come or they are unearthed whilst we are doing another piece of work.”

4.4.2 Screening, assessment, and threshold decision-making

Once concerns entered the safeguarding system, practitioners described the need to gather contextual information and complete screening tools within a set time frame.

This was described by SW08, who said,

> We have what we call a Strategy meeting that needs to be done within 24 hours of a referral coming through… So, in that Strategic meeting, the team manager chairs it, which will be myself. You will have the police...somebody from health...youth justice, … education...school …the GP. So, you sit in that meeting, discuss the referral that has come through, …then towards the end, you decide on whether threshold of significant harm has been met. That threshold determines the response strategy that will be put in place with the social worker being the lead practitioner in everything that's being done.

This suggests that practitioners do not respond to TA-CSEA solely through intuition or general child protection knowledge, but through attempts to systematise interpretation using assessment mechanisms designed to organise concern and guide statutory decisions within a set timeframe, as assessments are time-bound. This is reinforced by the *Working Together 2023, which emphasises that* initial assessments should be conducted within one working day after having received the referral, and feedback should also be given back to the referee. Additionally, a full assessment based on the needs of the child has to be done within 45 working days (Department for Education, 2023,p.103).

Participants additionally describe social workers' roles and interventions in the context of assessing risks and determining whether the threshold for significant harm had been met, as guided by the Children Act 1989. This was highlighted by SW08, who stated that,

> So, when you agree … say for example, could be 'the threshold has been met' so we need to progress what we call section 47 according to the Children's Act of 1989…Then there are sometimes when we say threshold of significant harm has not been met, but we need to support the family despite under child and family assessment, then that still needs to be done under what we call Section 17.

This closely reflects section.47.(1)(b) of the Children Act 1989 which provides that where there is "reasonable cause to suspect that the child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm," assessment and further action may be required. The *Working Together 2023* similarly sets out that following a strategy discussion, the outcome may be to initiate section 47 enquiries, to proceed under section 17, or to arrange other services depending on the assessment of the child's needs and level of harm.

4.4.3 Early help intervention

Participants described non-statutory interventions to include early help where concerns are identified and addressed before they escalate, as stated by SW06, who stated that,

> If we have concerns for a child, they will go on to the early help services, the early intervention, as early as we can… early intervention essentially is slightly below the threshold of section 17. These are the children that we are saying, if we do not intervene now to close this gap, this gap is likely to get bigger, and this child will end up being a child in need under Section 17.

This suggest that social work interventions aim to minimise the likelihood of children experiencing significant harm.

Similarly,SW03 stated that "we also try to educate the affected children and families on safe technology use," while SW07 similarly described explaining parental controls and directing parents to programmes where "they will learn about strategies to parent or on some of the dangers of online, the risks and everything."

Participants' accounts suggest that early help aimed at reducing family vulnerability as early as possible, before any escalation requiring statutory interventions, as emphasised by Working Together 2023 (Department for Education, 2023,p.44). However, the study argues that it can be less agile where online harm is hidden and misinterpreted as the intervention is voluntary based.

4.4.4. Case planning and statutory progression- Child in Need Plan and Child Protection Plan

Participants highlighted social work roles and interventions when responding to TA-CSEA, including case planning. While assessment determines whether statutory thresholds are met, case planning determines intervention processes. This was evident in participants' descriptions of statutory progression. SW07 stated that "from the beginning, we get referrals of such cases. And then from those cases, if we think the child is at risk, we then put them on what we call a child protection plan." Similarly, SW06 explained that:

"If it's gone to a compulsory intervention, such as being taken further to section 17, section 47, I'm duty bound to participate in any plans that are to do with, any child that I'm working with in whatever capacity."

These accounts show that participants understood case planning as a formal statutory process rather than simply informal coordination.

This corresponded well with the *Working Together 2023*, which states that after a strategy discussion, if there is a need for further investigations, the outcome may be an assessment under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. If, after the assessment, the outcome is that statutory support is needed for the child and family, then the child is placed ona child in need plan[1], in agreement with the family and other practitioners to ensure the child's future safety and welfare.

If there are concerns that the child has suffered actual or is likely to suffer significant harm where significant harm is identified, a section 47 inquiry is initiated followed by a child protection conference where a child is placed at the centre and if further concerns arise, the lead practitioner prepares an outline child protection plan[2], and a core group is established (Department for Education, 2023,p.104).

Participants' accounts suggest that there is no tailored case planning model when responding to TA-CSEA , as cases are being attended to using already existing child in need and child protection planning frameworks. The study argues that this is not a reflection that response is not present; rather, it highlights that online harm is being managed through general statutory planning structures that were not originally designed with TA-CSEA in mind.

[1] Child in need refers to the statutory support provided under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 for a child who is unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of development, or whose health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of children's social care services, and the duty to provide support is on the local authority.

[2] Under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority must make or cause to be made enquiries to decide if any action must be taken to safeguard or promote the child's welfare where a child is the subject of an emergency protection order or is in police protection or there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

4.4.5 Direct and indirect work with children and families

Participants described social work roles and interventions involving both direct and indirect work with children and families. Direct work included family advocacy. This was mentioned by SW01, who stated that "I'll attend meetings to advocate on the family's behalf" This highlights how TA-CSEA intervention appears as both statutory and relational.

Direct work also included helping children recognise exploitative situations, discussing online risks, and reducing immediate vulnerability. This is noted when SW07 stated,

> We do what we call direct work with the children. We use so many tools. We can show them videos, case studies that give them examples, or role play of what is happening exactly. We can do that direct work with them.

This suggests that social work responses to TA-CSEA also involve pedagogical, relational, and supportive forms of intervention. Participants further described direct work with families to include parental guidance on online safety, parenting programmes which may include restrictive approaches, and monitoring and follow-ups as an important part of intervention. SW07 explained that practitioners would,

> Make the parents aware that this is the situation… either they take the phones away from them or the laptops away from them and try and just avoid so that the children don't continue to communicate with those bad people... If they are on a plan, what we do is we will send parents sometimes for parenting programs where they will learn about strategies to parent or on some of the dangers of online... It means we'll be visiting the family every 10 days.

Such accounts align with section 17 (1) of the Children Act 1989, orientation toward providing a 'range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs' and promoting children's upbringing within their families where possible.[1]

Participants also highlighted social workers' roles and interventions through the use of indirect engagement, especially to ensure children's voices are incorporated in the intervention processes. This was emphasised by SW08, who stated that:

> we have got colleagues from the Exploitation Hub who can also support social workers, it could be one to one support with the young person, deliver a piece of work with that young person in terms of, example, consent with that particular child…at the end of the day, what we intend to do is to make sure that whatever sources of information we can gain in terms of the child's voice feeds into the assessment,…planning of the work that's being done

This process is also consistent with the *Working Together 2023*, which states that lead practitioners should "undertake direct work with the child and family in accordance with the child protection plan," explain the plan to the child in an age-appropriate manner, and work with the family network to support the plan (Department for Education, 2023,p.96).

However, the study argues that there is a dual tension between protective containment and relational engagement. While such accounts align with the Children Act 1989, restricting devices may disrupt therapeutic trust and support, conflicting with the need for child-centred planning and factoring in the child's voice in assessments that both the Children Act 1989 and *Working Together 2023* expect.

4.4.6. Role allocation and leadership of response

Participants described roles and interventions embedded in the establishment of leadership roles in settings such as strategy discussions. This was noted by one participant, SW06,who said, "Depending on what thresholds you're at, there will be a lead professional," and added that "If a child is still at universal services, there is a consensus or a decision of who might be the best placed person to lead as the lead practitioner. The team around the child will decide."

This aligns with the *Working Together 2023,* which states that following section 47 inquiries, an initial child protection conference should appoint "a lead statutory body" and "a lead social worker," while the core group and conference process are used to establish action, timescales, and responsibility (Department for Education, 2023,pp.93-94). It further sets out that local authority children's social care should "designate a social worker to be the lead practitioner," and that lead practitioners should coordinate multi-agency work, support implementation of the child protection plan, and "lead core group activity"(Department for Education, 2023,pp.96-97).

This suggests that leadership and role allocation fluctuate, as they are threshold-dependent. When TA-CSEA cases meet the threshold, children's social services take the lead.

On the other hand, when cases are deemed to be at a lower threshold, leadership is negotiated with other professionals who are part of the wider team around the child's context, taking the lead.

4.4.7. Multi-agency collaboration and specialist intervention pathways

Participants described social work roles and interventions to include multi-agency collaboration when responding to TA-CSEA. This is noted by SW07 who shared that, "once they are referred to exploitation, there is what they call a multidisciplinary team that involves police, schools, community services, health and so they will map up and see who are involved". Similarly, SW05 stated that "In terms of multi-agency collaboration, I've worked closely with police, schools, health professionals and sometimes charity organizations".

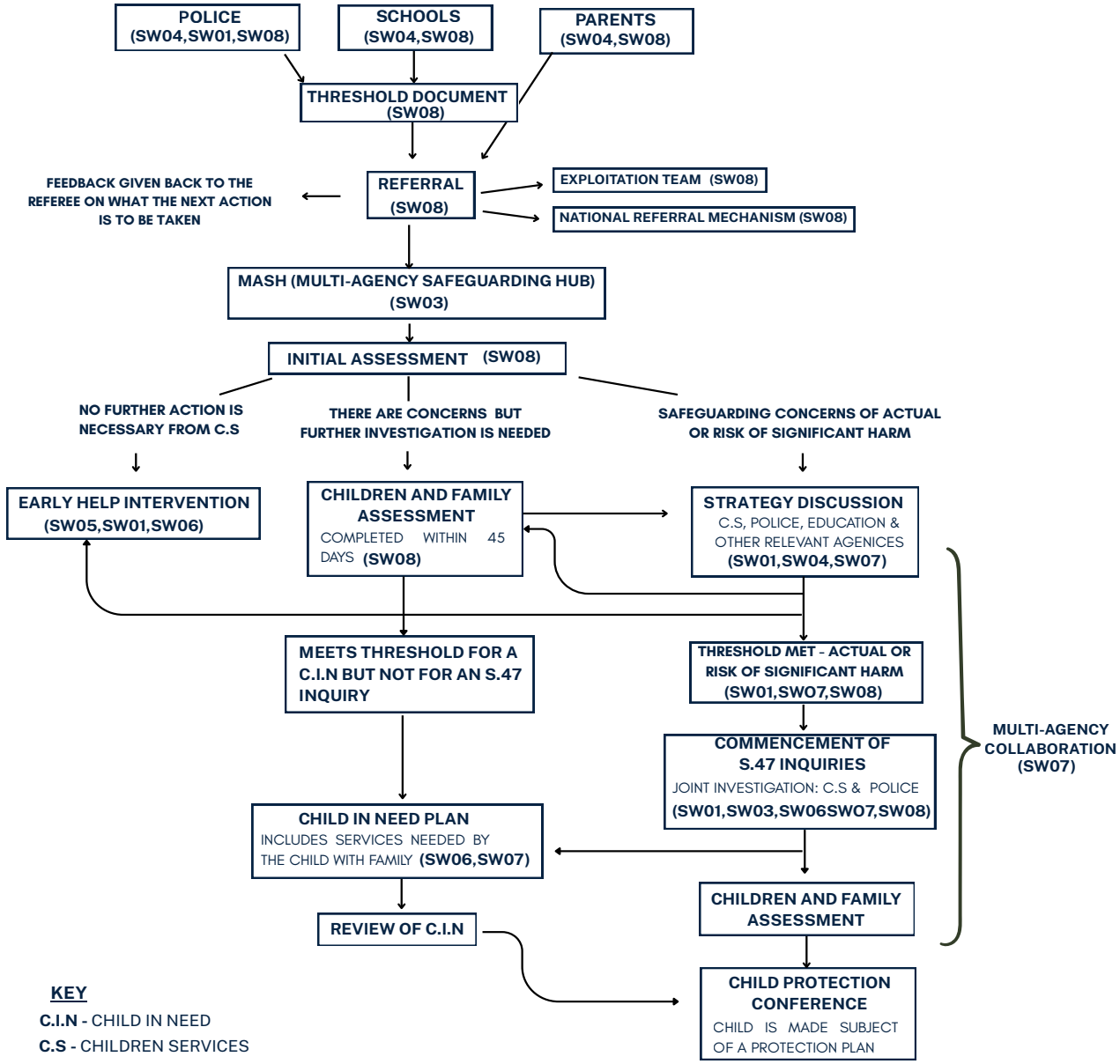
This resonates with the statutory guidance document, which states that child protection conferences are intended to 'bring together and analyse, in a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary meeting, all relevant information,' and to determine how organisations should work together to safeguard the child in future(Department for Education, 2023,p.93).

It further states that all involved practitioners should work together to safeguard the child, provide their agency perspectives, and implement the agreed plan, while the core group should share information about available services, agree on what should be provided, and take joint responsibility for agreed tasks (Department for Education, 2023,pp.97-98).

However, the findings also suggest that multi-agency working is not collaborative by default. Participants implied that effective coordination depends on role clarity, willingness to share responsibility, and the quality of relationships across agencies. This is hinted at in SW08's remark that some professionals may think, "that's not my job, that's your job as a social worker, deal with it." This suggests that TA-CSEA responses may be formally multi-agency but uneven in practice, especially where online harm is poorly understood, or there is limited willingness to hold risk collectively.

Figure 5 highlights the empirically derived safeguarding response pathway through which TA-CSEA concerns are identified, referred, assessed and escalated within England's child protection framework.

Figure 5:*Empirically derived TA-CSEA safeguarding response pathway in England*



Source: Author

4.5. Responding to TA-CSEA is constrained by interpretive, evidentiary, organisational, and structural barriers

4.5.1 Professional conceptualisation and interpretive barriers

Participants described several barriers linked to how they understand, interpret, and respond to TA-CSEA. These included uncertainty in distinguishing exploitative interactions from normative adolescent online behaviour and interpreting children's online language on digital platforms. This was reflected in SW01's observation that "How we interpret teenage relationships is often one of those issues".

Children's online behaviour was further explored through the language they use, as SWO3 added that:

"there's the issue of the language that the children use to communicate. They use a language that they only understand, which most social workers, including myself, don't understand".

Similarly, SW07 stated that, "they've got their own language that they use, that we don't know". This suggest that social workers encounter professional uncertainty as their interpretations of TA-CSEA are embedded within children's social and cybersystem contexts that may not be well understood within traditional safeguarding practice.

The study noted an additional interpretive barrier where numerous participants highlighted that practitioners tend to minimise online abuse in comparison with offline harm and victim-blaming. SW01 stated that

> when we're looking at online, quite often, professionals, I call it a bias…they minimize that through unconscious biases, 'well, it's not as harmful because it's online, could have been worse. It could have been in person

SW06 also reflected that "there is something about our practiced views on it which indicates that we're probably not thinking of it as seriously as we should." These findings are key for they indicate that the challenge is not just merely recognising harm but recognising it as serious harm. This was further reinforced by the participant's comment that some professionals may look at a case and say,

> 'Yeah, but you sent it, so you therefore have some culpability to this'… we'll just don't go online', or 'we'll take their phone away from them for six months, and that will stop it', and of course, it won't. It's all madness and rubbish… When it comes to online, we seem to want to fall back into doing the online safety stuff, and it fits into victim blaming (SW06).

Cumulatively, these findings suggest that TA-CSEA may remain insufficiently addressed, not because it is entirely invisible, but because it is insufficiently understood through practice that places a greater emphasis on offline harm which may result in oversimplified responses and professional victim-blaming . Additionally, it may lead to practice blind spots where practitioners remain visually impaired in understanding a child's on-life reality.

This is supported by Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021) and Photiou and Christodoulou (2025), who respectively highlight how minimisation of online harm can heighten children risks as victim blaming becomes more common from professionals who may have limited training and confidence in TA-CSEA cases. On the other hand, a qualitative study by Ball et al. (2026) with social workers across six local authorities, highlighted that practitioners had an understanding of the fluidity of TA-CSEA however, the challenge was capturing the risks within household-based or static recording systems.

4.5.2 Limited Digital knowledge, training and guidance

Participants starkly highlighted having limited digital knowledge and training as a major barrier when responding to TA-CSEA. This was expressed by SW0, who said:

> I don't have enough knowledge about the digital world, I know nothing. I know very little about technology, about social media sites, about how they work, about the likes, the sharing, the double tapping and the stuff... It's not required of social workers. We are not I.T people, we are not computer people, but at least, I believe we need some basic training to keep up to date with what's happening in social media, in the digital world

This paints how practice may be weakened when professionals lack familiarity with the environments in which harm occurs. This was also highlighted by SWO4 who emphasised that, "as social workers, we don't have that training. I only know more about it because I do it independently, yes, but us as social workers, don't have that knowledge" .This was also reenforced by SW05 and SW06 stating that "There's no national model. It would be very much seen as part of your CPD. If you choose to do domestic abuse training or attend a workshop, then that's very much down to the individual"

This suggests that professional knowledge development about TA-CSEA is largely dependent on voluntary engagement from social workers. The study argues that fragmented and non-statutory training and non-formal guidance may lead to inconsistencies in social work practice when responding to TA-CSEA cases.

The study noted that, at the managerial level, digital knowledge also influenced case allocation when it comes to responding to TA-CSEA. This was noted expressed by SW08 who stated that:

> …if I have got a 50-year-old social worker in my team, I don't particularly expect them to know what AI does or what it can generate. But if I have a 20-year-old social worker or a 21-year-old newly qualified social worker, they may know all those things because of age

This correlates withSW03 who stated that " In all honesty I myself, I don't know the sites that children communicate in. I also consider myself old school. I only know how to use WhatsApp, and Facebook". .This suggests that participants perceived generational variation in digital literacy amongst social workers. This correlates with findings from Bond and Dogaru (2019) on the importance of digital training which can include real-life case studies to effectively improve knowledge and understanding of TA-CSEA and practitioners' confidence in responding to referred online harm cases. However, the study argues that this finding, should be not generalised as evidence that younger social workers are inherently digitally competent than older social workers as digital literacy is not the same as professional digital safeguarding competence.

4.5.3. Hiddenness, disclosure, and evidentiary barriers

Whereas Theme 1 identified hiddenness as a feature of TA-CSEA, this section shows hiddenness as a practice barrier: Where participants indicated that it affected disclosure, evidential confidence, threshold decisions, and inter-agency action.

This was highlighted by SW06 who stated that, “The policing of young people’s lives online, makes it even a much more harder task to support, I suppose, A, to support young people in and then also B, to prevent.”.

This was further exemplified by SW04 who said, “… I didn't have that evidence. We spoke to the police, the NCA, and we all sat there scratching our head, saying, ‘there's nothing overtly sexual about this communication for us to pin it”. This suggest that hidden nature of online harm makes it difficult for identification and response which may result in evidentiary uncertainty for social workers to then have the confidence to name TA-CSEA during assessments.

Participants also highlighted another challenge, delayed disclosure by children due to the grooming process they may have experienced. SW05 stated that “Most often, children don’t recognise themselves as victims, because the context is welcome and it feels consensual. So, this really delays disclosure and complicates online sexual exploitation as compared to offline sexual exploitation.” The study argues that this highlights the exploitative nature of TA-CSEA.

Similarly, SW07 noted that “most of these cases are just going underground and no one knows what’s happening.” These findings indicate that TA-CSEA often remains ambiguous and undetectable to professionals who may not be able to keep pace with children’s digital culture (El Asam et al., 2021; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021).

4.5.4 Professional stigma and non-engagement from children and families.

Participants highlighted non-engagement from children as one of the barriers they encounter when responding to TA-CSEA. This was expressed by SW05,SW03 and SW08, where SW08 went on to highlight the challenge being when “…a teenager, say a 16-year-old or 17-year-old, who just doesn't want to engage with you in as much as they can understand the risks associated with what we are talking about.” Arguably, non-engagement from children should not be interpreted as simplified resistance but may reflect shame, mistrust of children's service officers, or fear that their parents will punish or restrict them from accessing their phones. Furthermore, non-engagement was also being experienced by participants from parents, as reflected by SW08, where “…concerns could be raised, but if the parents don't engage, that becomes a challenge”. This suggests that social workers' interventions that aim to be child-led may be greatly affected due to non-participation from children and families. However, analytically, the study places the need to examine the relationship between care and control, where the argument becomes if parents truly engage willingly or if they fear statutory reprisal.

Additionally, the findings suggest that social workers may also experience professional stigma, especially from children and carers, for “when they hear 'a social worker', they will put a barrier, they're not going to open up” (SW08, Pos. 28).

4.5.5 Assessment and threshold barriers

Participants repeatedly highlighted barriers in relation to assessment and threshold decision-making, in particular, difficulty deciding whether concerns in high-stakes decisions met the threshold for statutory intervention.

The findings suggest that threshold decision-making also becomes a challenge in strategy discussions, as SW08 states:

> sometimes a challenge comes where you are in that Strategic meeting…the school might raise some concerns, but in your own analysis as a manager or as the person chairing the meeting, you feel like, 'yes, these are concerns, but they don't meet that threshold for us to say the child is suffering significant harm

SW01 highlighted that the inability to meet the threshold may result in less robust lower-level interventions, as they stated that, "If they don't meet that, then they might go to a team around a family, or a plan within the family, and then that can get a little bit more woolly"

Participants' accounts suggest that the response to TA-CSEA cases below the intervention threshold may become less clear when coordination depends on who attends and engages.

The study observed that the formal statutory basis for threshold decision-making was from the Children Act 1989. On the other hand, *Working Together 2023* provides the goal of assessments, in particular, to analyse risk and decide whether the child is in need under section 17 or meets the section 47 significant harm threshold. However, participants' experiences suggest that applying these thresholds in TA-CSEA cases is more complicated than in more visible forms of abuse, as it does not simply fit into existing threshold models in a clear-cut manner. The study argues that TA-CSEA places social workers in a conundrum when it comes to decision-making, for it challenges the traditional interpretations of what significant harm looks like, its indicators and how it can be made visible when justifying meeting the threshold of significant harm as statutorily required. In light of the above, it then becomes crucial to emphasise the importance of the safeguarding threshold of 'balance of probabilities' that includes an analysis of the likelihood or actual significant harm occurring as opposed to the overreliance of the criminal standard of proof, which requires there to be 'evidence beyond a reasonable doubt (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024,p.14).

4.5.6 Organisational and inter-agency barriers

High caseloads and limited resources . Participants highlighted organisational and inter-agency barriers that include high caseloads and limited resources when responding to TA-CSEA. This is noted by SW07 who shared that:

> We are not dealing with our cases effectively. The caseloads are so high, we are just working. I don't know, on the surface, we are not really going deep to find out the issues, because you've got so many of them.

Additionally, participants highlighted limited resources and uneven service capacity, as barriers when responding to TA-CSEA as SW07 further shared: “there's poor funding for any services that we as social workers, want for intervention. They will expect you to do without any”. SW04 similarly shared: “they are constantly working with physical exploitation, physical sexual exploitation, physical criminal exploitation. They tend to not have the time or resources for online exploitation”. The cumulative account from participants, suggests that social work responses to TA-CSEA, require time-intensive work, of which high caseloads in a constrained resourced setting, may weaken in-depth digital safeguarding practice.

Inter-agency blame shifting. Several participants, such as SW01,SW08 and SW07 expressed a ‘blame game’ amongst professionals as another organisational barrier when responding to TA-CSEA. SW01 shared that:

> If things don't start improving, you often get people who always say, ‘well, you need to do that’, ‘well, police why aren't you doing that?’, then people look at scapegoating or blaming the other agencies for not filling in the gaps

The findings suggest that, shared risk holding among professionals within the child protection fraternity, is a challenge that threatens and heightens effective interventions when responding to complex cases. Arguably, siloed interventions may continue to persist due to limited accountability that may exist amongst professionals when it comes to sharing risks (Martin et al., 2025; Schmidt et al., 2024).

Information sharing uncertainty. Participants highlighted uncertainty in information sharing when responding to TA-CSEA cases. This was noted when SW01 said:

> The main one, and it always is, confidentiality, ‘can I share this?’, ‘can I tell you this?’. I've been in Strats where I've had a police officer say, ‘I'm not sure what I can tell you’, then I would say, ‘well, what you don't tell me is down to you, but if the child dies and you haven't told me about it, you're liable. So, we'll start with that. Shall we?

Similar sentiments were expressed by SW03 who indicated that “sometimes people are afraid of over sharing information, especially, they're afraid of violating the GDPR”. Participants did not suggest information sharing being legal unattainable, however denoted professional uncertainty and risk aversion in multi-agency working which may impact the progress of interventions. The study argues that there is need for not just information sharing but consistency in right information sharing, as uncertainty may lead to an increased policy and practice lag. The *Working Together 2023*, emphasises the need for information sharing amongst professionals especially if there are reasonable concerns that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm.

Fraught inter-agency working. Participants highlighted hostility and defensiveness subtly existing in inter-agency working. This was noted when SW01 stated that:

> It's usually quite a hostile environment…, multi-agency meetings and that sort of thing, you can say, 'well, actually, I can do this'. When they see that there's a benefit in regards to that, then they'll usually buy in, but it can be a bit fraught at the beginning.

These findings suggest that inter-agency working is not a simple and automatic process. Although the *Working Together 2023* according to the Department for Education (2023,pp.15-18), emphasises that "Strong multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working is vital" and that practitioners must work collaboratively to recognise exploitation and support children, the study argues that professional relationship building is a process and not an event especially if responses to TA-CSEA are to be successful.

One unique finding is how one participant, SW04 describing more subtle organisational barriers linked to professional culture, as they drew a historical analogy between the 2014 Jay Report on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham by Jay (2014), and contemporary interagency responses to TA-CSEA arguing that "the same attitudes are there," only now "in the digital space" . The significance of this comparison is how the participant highlighted that the report exposed professional's misinterpretation, minimisation of risks, fragmented interventions, allowing exploitation to remain hidden. Additionally, the participant used the report to highlight how in their view, history is repeating itself as TA-CSEA may similarly be mis-interpreted and minimised as a serious cause of concern.

This suggests that organisational barriers are not only about workload or staffing, but also about cultures of response that oversimplify online harm and displace responsibility. Therefore, the study argues that such reactions fail to reflect the embeddedness of the cybersystem in contemporary childhood and may result in delayed digital safeguarding adaptation.

Jurisdictional limitations. Participants expressed jurisdictional limitations when it comes to responding to TA-CSEA. This was highlighted by SW08 who stated that, "if it's going to be within the country, then it's easy. Obviously, the police can liaise with which ever police constabulary in that particular area where that is happening .but if it's intercontinental, that's where the challenge is". This suggests that effective responses to TA-CSEA can be limited by the transnational nature of TA-CSEA which affords perpetrators to harm children outside environments where legislation may be deemed weak. The study argues the need for stronger continental inter-agency work. However, inconsistency in continental legal frameworks may stifle the process.

*Legal and policy misalignment***.** Participants' accounts also highlighted misalignment between policy frameworks and frontline practice when responding to TA-CSEA where child protection frameworks that inform practice do not always map neatly onto hidden, fast-evolving, and digitally mediated harm.

SW06 stated that "what's really unclear about it is the legislative framework around it and its implementation." The same participant further observed that current responses "are adapted from offline harm protection. You're still looking at the signs of safety and all of that. They're adapted from that." This suggests a partial fit between statutory framework expectations such as the Children Act 1989, the *Working Together 2023* and lived social work practice when responding to TA-CSEA.

The study argues that TA-CSEA is being governed through frameworks originally built for offline harm, thereby contributing to a practice adaptation burden as social workers may be trying to bridge legislations rooted in traditional models of practice that centralise physical identification of harm.

This interpretation is reinforced by SW06's reflection that:

> When we came up with the Children Act, 1989, we've had that many years, many decades, to think and develop around sexual abuse in the offline world. clearly, we have a long journey with online sexual abuse.

The Children Act 1989 remains foundational for the promotion of child welfare, especially section 17 and section 47, while the *Working Together 2023* operationalises these into assessment and multi-agency child protection processes. However, the study further argues that neither document is designed specifically as a frontline digital exploitation practice framework.

Furthermore, practitioners highlighted the misalignment of legislation and practice especially regarding the Online Safety Act 2023 where the Act, places the legislation as a regulatory framework for internet services[3] and giving OFCOM[4] regulatory powers. This is noted when SW01 shared,

> there's an Online Safety Act, but that's not targeted at social care, that's targeted at Tech... If I was looking at online sexual abuse of children, I'm not going to the Online Safety Act. That has no relevance to me at all... that's more about making the environment safer for children, rather than practitioners coming in and doing that.

The participant's shared experience suggests that there is limited coordination and complementation of the legal framework around online child protection.

Technology is outpacing practice adaptation. Another major barrier that participants identified when responding to TA-CSEA was the rapid evolution of technology where elements such as social media platforms, encrypted communication, evolving online cultures, were all described as moving faster than professional knowledge, parental understanding, and safeguarding adaptation.

[3] ss. 1(1), and 1(2)(a) of the Online Safety Act 2023 places the Act as a regulatory framework by requiring service providers to identify, mitigate and manage risks arising from illegal content and activity, and content and activity that is harmful to children.

[4] s 1(2)(b) of the Online Safety Act 2023 confers new functions and powers on the regulator, OFCOM.

This was shared by SW01 who asked “How do you help someone reduce risks online when there are so many out there? … it’s quite a complicated issue to deal with.”. SW06 similarly described the problem as “a needle in a haystack kind of thing.”

Additionally, SWO4 compared TA-CSEA to a ‘Whack-a-Mole’ game due to its unending evolution of harm as they said,

> It's a paradox. Technology moves too quick for adults to keep up. That is the issue and it's a Whack-a-Mole. You have one app pop up and a grown up can delete that app, ban it, and then another one pops up. If you have a child that is in the absolute depths of sexual online exploitation, that person is going to get to them on one app or another, and parents cannot keep up.

Analytically this indicates a profound incongruency in systemic safeguarding interventions for technology evolves at "internet speed" while social work interventions evolve at "institutional speed" which is slow and hamstrung by red tape. Arguably, the lag further develops an ongoing state of professional uncertainty where social workers feel disconnected from children’s on life reality.

4.6. Social workers’ perceived strategies for strengthening responses to TA-CSEA

Participants’ proposed strategies highlight how they situated the much-needed improvement at multiple cyber-ecological system levels:

4.6.1 Digitally adapted training and practice

Several participants unanimously highlighted the need for adaptive digital training and practice as a key strategy for improving social work responses to TA-CSEA. This need was articulated clearly by SW05, who said, “We’re living in a digital world, with fast-changing technologies. So, I think social work needs to adapt more explicitly, really, to the digital forms of harm”. Similar sentiments were shared with SW03, who stated:

> I think we need training on any intervention, around the digital world, social media, online safety and all that and I think this training, should be done in such a manner that all agencies that deal with children, have that training as a mandatory training.

This was further reinforced by SW02, stating that practice should be “Agile-based, inter-policy and intra-agency risk-based work… When I say agile, it would be highly responsive, highly iterative, that is, able to evolve, changing needs quite cheaply but then contextually based on risk”.

Participants' accounts suggested that practitioners need more than general training when it comes to effectively responding to TA-CSEA, as current safeguarding systems are still catching up with the realities of children’s digital lives. Participants also highlighted the part played by practice supervision and receiving support from managers in addressing these gaps.

SW08 explained that “sometimes you know, as a manager, your job also is to identify those training needs. And also, you know, signpost your workers to say, ‘can you please attend this because I realise that you have a gap in this’.” This suggests that digitally adapting practice is not solely the responsibility of individual workers, but it also depends on organisational recognition of training needs and active support for continuous professional development.

These findings correlate strongly with the *Working Together 2023* which states that practitioners need appropriate training so that they ‘are aware of new and emerging threats, including online harm, grooming, sexual exploitation criminal exploitation, radicalisation and the role of technology and social media in presenting harm’(Department for Education, 2023,p.46). It also emphasises the importance of “multi-agency and multi-disciplinary training” in building a collective understanding of local needs and safeguarding risks.

This is also supported by Bond and Dogaru (2019), who emphasise the value of multidisciplinary training on TA-CSEA to strengthen multi-agency working. However, the study argues that digital adapting practice is but a process of intervention co-creation ,where it will be complementing the already existing models of interventions and not replacing them.

4.6.2 Strengthening prevention and early intervention

Another strategy proposed by participants was a stronger shift towards prevention and early intervention as SW05 highlighted responses to TA-CSEA being “to a greater extent, reactive”. Rather than responding only after significant harm, disclosure, or crisis escalation, participants argued for more anticipatory approaches that equip children, families, and practitioners to recognise risks earlier and intervene before harm escalates to levels that outpace institutional responses. This was expressed by SW08 who shared that, “when we do more preventive work, we can actually prevent some of these concerns from actually emerging in the first place”. The participant went on to add practical responses to include,

> Awareness campaigns, whether it could be in person, social workers, visiting schools, talking to children, whatever it is or it could be online, running adverts online or on radio or on TV, because most kids these days, they've got TVs in their rooms (SW08).

However, SW07 emphasised that awareness should include parental responsibilities as they stated, “I think there is also need for more awareness on parents, so that they really protect their children. Because if they don't protect their children, we are not there. 24/7 as social workers.”

Participants also referred to the value of referral pathways into more specialist support at an earlier stage. SW07 explained, “We can also refer them to exploitation teams, where they are also experts about online exploitation and grooming.” SW08 likewise noted that “there is also what we call a national referral mechanism that we can also tap into,” indicating that earlier referrals to specialist structures may support better prevention and containment.

These suggestions align with the *Working Together 2023,* which emphasised that local organisations and agencies should have effective ways to identify "emerging problems and potential unmet needs" (Department for Education, 2023,p.46). Furthermore, safeguarding should involve "providing help and support to meet the needs of children as soon as problems emerge" (Department for Education, 2023,p.7). Overall, these accounts suggest that strengthening prevention means placing TA-CSEA as a problem requiring earlier, proactive safeguarding rather than primarily post-disclosure intervention. However, the study argues that prevention frameworks without sustainable funding become less responsive and effective, as they develop into rhetoric arguments written on paper. Thus, it is crucial to hold policymakers and the government accountable.

4.6.3 Building stronger specialist and multi-agency infrastructures

Participants also proposed stronger specialist and multi-agency working as an important route for improving responses to TA-CSEA. One of the proposals came from SW03, who argued that:

> we might need a separate team… If we can have a separate team looking at online safety, maybe they can carry on the role of everything that has to do with online safety, be it child sexual exploitation, be it grooming online, be it bullying online.

This is a significant finding because it suggests that individual practitioner effort alone is insufficient where online harm is complex, hidden, and rapidly evolving. Additionally, some participants saw contemporary child protection structures as limitedly equipped for the complexity of online harm. Rather than merely increasing awareness within existing teams, this participant pointed toward the need for more specialised practice capacity.

Participants also stressed the value of professional guidance and multi-agency support. SW08 referred to external agencies that "support us in terms of what it is that needs to be done on the practical side of things, how we can better support that family," and noted the usefulness of organisations such as Barnardo's in exploitation cases. SW03 similarly referred to connecting families with resources such as "the UK Safer Internet Centre, who are more able to provide up to date information." However, SW07 emphasised the importance of avoiding the blame game as a means of strengthening multi -agency working as they stated, "I think mainly there should be avoidance of blame culture, just saying, 'it's social work business'. It should be everyone's business". These accounts indicate that participants viewed improvement as requiring stronger access to expertise, teamwork and not simply more work by social workers alone.

This is also consistent with the *Working Together 2023* which emphasises that safeguarding is a multi-agency responsibility, and that multi-agency and multi-disciplinary training is important in supporting a shared understanding of harm and services. This highlights the need for organisational capacitation, specialist pathways, and more clear frameworks through which responses to TA-CSEA can be coordinated and sustained.

However, arguably, the study reiterates that specialist involvement should not discard contemporary social services but strengthen digital adaptation in child safeguarding when responding to TA-CSEA.

4.6.4 Creative child and family engagement approaches

A final strategy proposed by participants was the need for social workers to adopt creative approaches of engaging children and families that remain child-centred, relational, and attentive to recovery, rather than being limited to threshold decisions, risk management, or restrictive containment.

This was expressed by SW08 who shared that, " if social workers could, try to think of other inventive ways of how they can engage young people. Because with most young people, the older ones, it's rare for them to just bring the disclosures".

This suggests that improving responses to TA-CSEA requires not only earlier identification and stronger systems, but innovative ways of engaging children after concerns arise.

Additionally, participants described the importance of trust-building, advocacy, and direct work that helps children understand what is happening to them. SW03 explained that practitioners should "try to build trust with the family and the children, so that they're able to share openly, information around how they use the internet." These accounts suggest that participants saw relational engagement as key to effective intervention, especially in helping children disclose their concerns without feeling shame, fear or being blamed.

The study noted, for example, SW07 referred to limiting children's access to devices or removing phones to stop contact with perpetrators. While such actions may work in the short term, it is crucial that present and future practice must balance containment with relational and recovery-focused support. Thus, the value of a child-centred approach when responding to TA-CSEA.

4.6.5 Strengthening regulation of online platforms

Some participants suggested the need for stronger regulation of online platforms and limiting children's access to digital platforms as a means of protecting children from TA-CSEA as one participant stated that, "I think there should be stronger regulation of online platforms and with very limited access for children under the age of 18 years"(SW05). However, this point of view was in contrast with SW04 who argued restrictive measures being in-appropriate as they stated, "We have a generation of children addicted to their phones. We've created a monster. You can't Just take phones off kids after you've given them since they were five years old to keep them quiet". Participants contradictions suggest tension between supportive and restrictive approaches. However, the study argues that strict age bans may lead to children looking for alternative online spaces where digital regulation may be a challenge, resulting in limited child safeguarding.

4.7. Towards a systematisation of social work roles and interventions in responding to TA-CSEA

To move beyond a descriptive presentation of themes, this section synthesises the findings into a more systematic account of social work roles and interventions in responding to TA-CSEA.

Using the Cyber-Ecological Systems Model as an analytical lens, the synthesis demonstrates that while TA-CSEA frequently originates in the child's digital environment, social work responses are organised across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem safeguarding structures.

It therefore provides a clearer basis for understanding both the structure of practice and the key gaps shaping contemporary responses to TA-CSEA in England.

Table 3: *Systematisation of social workers roles and interventions in responding to TA-CSEA*

Domain of practice	**Core role/intervention**	**Ecological level(s) of social work response**	**Policy/Legislation Anchor**	**Analytical implication/gap**	**Practice implication**
Identification and entry into children services	Referral intake through MASH and statutory pathways, with concerns raised by schools, police, and parents, or emerging during other safeguarding work **(**SW03; SW08).	Exosystem / Mesosystem	*Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*	TA-CSEA often enters safeguarding indirectly and may remain difficult to identify early. The policy framework provides structure, but only a partial operational fit for TA-CSEA.	Referrals and screening processes should include explicit inquiry on digital contact, SG/AIG-CSEAM, online coercion, platform use, peer-mediated harm, and hidden forms of exploitation
Assessment, screening, and threshold decision-making	Initial assessment, screening, contextual information gathering, and decisions about whether concerns meet section 17 or section 47 thresholds (SW08; SW06).	Exosystem / Macrosystem	Children Act 1989-s.17 &s.47, *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*	TA-CSEA complicates conventional threshold assessment because harm is often hidden, cumulative, or difficult to evidence. Child welfare legislation guides social work intervention while the Online Safety Act 2023 regulates digital platforms through OFCOM	Practice guidance should imbed digital safeguarding expectations into frontline tools, including child and family assessments, digital risk indicators to assess online/offline continuity rather than minimising online harm, training standards, supervision guidance, and specialist referral pathways.
Case planning and statutory progression	Child and family assessment, child in need planning, child protection planning, and formal review (SW07; SW06; SW08).	Exosystem / Macrosystem	Children Act 1989-s.17 &s.47, *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*	TA-CSEA is mainly managed through existing statutory planning structures rather than a distinct digital safeguarding model.	Child in Need and child Protection Plans should include digital safety goals, online contact disruption, family digital support, platform/reporting routes, and recovery from online harm.

Direct and indirect work with children and families	Direct work, parental guidance, advocacy, trust-building, and use of trusted practitioners where statutory engagement is resisted (SW07; SW08; SW01).	Microsystem / Mesosystem	Children Act 1989, *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*- child-centred safeguarding principles	Effective intervention is both statutory and relational, requiring flexible child- and family-centred engagement	Social workers should avoid dependence on device restriction. Practice should creatively combine protection, explanation, relationship-building, child-centred digital safety planning, and recovery-oriented support.
Strategy discussions, role allocation, and leadership	Clarifying lead roles, coordinating responsibility, and organising response according to threshold and statutory status (SW06; SW08).	Exosystem / Mesosystem	*Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*	Leadership is clear when threshold is met, as it is threshold dependent. But in practice may remain negotiated and disintegrate at lower levels of concern	Strategy discussions should designate responsibility for digital evidence, child engagement, parent support, police liaison, specialist consultation, and online reporting/removal pathways .Equal attention should be given from higher levels to lower level of concern
Multi-agency collaboration and specialist intervention	Information sharing, referral, joint working, and engagement with police, schools, health, MASH, and specialist exploitation services (SW07; SW08; SW06).	Mesosystem / Exosystem	*Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*	Collaboration is central, but depends on role clarity, shared understanding, and specialist capacity.	Multi-agency responses should include shared TA-CSEA language, clear escalation routes, specialist consultation pathways, and shared risk holding for digital safeguarding interventions.
Prevention and early intervention	Early help, parental advice, online safety guidance, and referral to specialist support (SW01; SW06; SW07).	Microsystem / Mesosystem / Exosystem	*Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*	Prevention is recognised as necessary, but responses remain more reactive than preventive especially when TA-CSEA is only noticed after escalation	Early help should include agile digital parenting support, age-appropriate online safety education, school-based recognition, accessible disclosure routes, and support before risk escalates into statutory intervention

Source: By the author

Table 3 portrays the position of social work responses to TA-CSEA across multiple ecological levels. However, the table also highlights a key gap between policy and practice, where, while existing child welfare frameworks provide routes for intervention, they are ambiguous in providing specific operational guidance for assessments when responding to TA-CSEA. Therefore, the findings suggest that social work responses to TA-CSEA can be systematised, but they remain constrained by the partial fit between existing child protection frameworks and the rapidly evolving nature of digital harm.

CONCLUSION

This study provided critical insights into the roles and interventions of social workers when responding to TA-CSEA within England's child protection framework. The findings show that participants conceptualised TA-CSEA as a complex, evolving, and often hidden form of harm. Rather than being interpreted as a single incident, TA-CSEA was described as a technology-facilitated process of exploitation that may involve grooming, coercion, image-based abuse, online manipulation, and an online and offline continuum.

We argue that a deeper analysis of the problem is critical, and that this analysis should be inclusive, pragmatic, and applicable across upstream macro-level responses and downstream micro-level responses. This is not to blame social workers or question their experience or skills. Rather, it is a call for a shared understanding of the phenomenon, from policy and legislation makers to frontline social workers, that is child-centred and able to influence shared risk-holding beyond multi-agency working alone. This may help minimise varied interpretations that can lead to siloed responses, as child safeguarding is not the sole responsibility of the social worker, but the responsibility of all.

Additionally, holding policy makers accountable and involved allows opportunities to revisit existing policy and practice frameworks and to look for agile and alternative approaches, rather than placing all responsibility on frontline practice. To address these interpretive variations, the cyber-ecological systems model provides an interpretation baseline from which professionals can build and contextualise within their own setting. This is because the model emphasises the existence of the cybersystem level, which permeates through all other nested environments that influence a child's development. We emphasise that a child's development is no longer dependent only on their offline environments, but also on their online realities. It is therefore necessary for child protection practitioners to acknowledge and fully understand the online-offline continuum. Without this critical understanding of the problem, assessments and responses may remain incomplete, further perpetuating the hiddenness of TA-CSEA.

The findings also show that participants understood children's vulnerability to TA-CSEA as cyber-ecological and cumulative. Vulnerability was not located only within the child, but was influenced by interactions between child-level factors, family and relational dynamics, school and community settings, wider social inequalities, and the digital environment. This supports the relevance of the cyber-ecological systems model by showing how online harm is produced and sustained across multiple interacting systems.

We argue that vulnerabilities should not become a form of stigma through victim profiling and that a child should not be blamed for their experiences. However, a limited understanding of the phenomenon, including the hidden nature of digital platforms, may result in unwanted victim-blaming. We argue that it is critical for social workers during risk assessments, as they use the assessment framework triangle model to assess parental capacities, the child's developmental needs, and family and environmental factors, to be conscious of digital harms present within family and environmental factors and not minimise online harm.

The study found that existing threshold-based safeguarding systems set the baseline for social work roles and interventions when responding to TA-CSEA. The social workers' roles were described by participants in the context of referral and entry into safeguarding systems, screening and assessment, threshold decision-making, early help, child in need and child protection planning, direct and indirect work with children and families, role allocation, and multi-agency coordination. The Children Act 1989 and *Working Together to Safeguard Children* 2023, to a greater extent, informed assessment, planning, leadership, and multi-agency responsibilities. On the other hand, the study noted that the Online Safety Act 2023 did not shape social workers' responses, but just focused on the role of OFCOM and the regulation of internet service providers. This highlights the nature of the siloed approaches when it comes to responding to TA-CSEA, as institutional responses are not connected and yet the purpose of protecting children from online remains the same.

However, findings from the study highlighted that social workers experienced interpretive, evidentiary, organisational, and structural barriers when responding to TA-CSEA. Participants described difficulties in recognising hidden digital harm, applying thresholds to TA-CSEA, securing disclosure, working across agencies, and responding to rapidly changing technologies. The study therefore suggests that the debate is not the absence of safeguarding frameworks, but the partial operational fit between digital harm and statutory child protection frameworks that were originally established around more visible and physically located forms of abuse.

Our study does not disregard the value and importance of traditional face-to-face risk and harm assessment, as they remain relevant in social work practice. However, the argument stems from the importance of co-creating interventions that embed digital risk assessments. It is no longer enough to focus only on the child's offline reality. Child and family assessments and section 47 enquiries should include prompts to assess the child's online interactions and how these impact their wellbeing and safety. Clearer operational guidance regarding TA-CSEA should be established to support minimum standards of practice that do not further harm children and families.

Furthermore, the study emphasises that social work responses to TA-CSEA in England are not absent, but are largely adapted through existing safeguarding pathways. This provides practitioners with routes for intervention but also creates practice uncertainty around digital harm that is hidden, fast-moving, and difficult to evidence. Strengthening digital training, adapting assessment and planning tools, improving specialist consultation pathways, and embedding prevention-oriented cyber-social work practice may help reduce professional uncertainty and strengthen social workers' capacity to respond to TA-CSEA as it continues to evolve.

Additionally, we emphasise the need for systemic investment in TA-CSEA responses across the ecological child protection system, as echoed by the participants, to effectively disrupt TA-CSEA pathways, rather than relying on reactive practices that focus on identification, reporting, and containment. Moreover, there has to be a shift in academic research from heavily focusing on content information analysis to shaping frontline interventions. Knowledge of the phenomenon, which builds on stating the impact, forms, and relationships, should now be utilised to improve practice. We are not saying research on the nature of the phenomenon should stop, as TA-CSEA constantly evolves, but the knowledge obtained from research should urgently inform social work practice.

The future of child protection cannot remain primarily offline when children's lives are no longer lived only offline.

Limitations of the study

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the study adopted a qualitative exploratory case study design and drew on a relatively small, purposively selected sample of social workers. Although this approach provided in-depth insight into how participants understood and responded to TA-CSEA, the findings are context-bound and cannot be statistically generalised to all social workers or safeguarding systems in England. The value of the study lies instead in its analytical transferability and its practice-based insight into an under-researched area of child protection.

Secondly, the study focused only on the perspectives of social workers. It did not include the voices of children, parents, carers, police officers, teachers, health professionals, or technology-sector actors involved in TA-CSEA responses. This limits the extent to which the findings can represent the full multi-agency safeguarding response. However, this focus was justified by the study's aim to systematise social work roles and interventions specifically.

The Children Act 1989, *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023,* and the Online Safety Act 2023 were the only key policy and legislative documents used for the study's document analysis. Even though these documents did not fully represent the legal child protection ecosystem, they were selected because of their relevance to statutory child protection, multi-agency safeguarding, and digital platform regulation.

Another limitation of the study was that it was time-bound. This was due to the rapidly evolving nature of TA-CSEA and safeguarding protection frameworks. The findings, therefore, should be interpreted in relation to the period in which the research was conducted, as their applicability may change as new digital platforms, legislation, and practice guidance develop. Reflexive journaling was used to support transparency by documenting the researcher's assumptions, decisions, and interpretive reflections throughout the research process.

Future perspectives

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Co-creation of a clearer national TA-CSEA operational guidance for children's social care between The Department for Education, social workers, specialist child protection organisations, police, health, education, online safety regulators (OFCOM), and communities. Local safeguarding partnerships should then translate this guidance into local thresholds, assessment prompts, supervision tools, referral pathways, and multi-agency procedures.
- Introduction of mandatory and regularly updated multi-agency TA-CSEA training.
- Strengthening specialist consultation pathways: Local authorities and safeguarding partnerships should develop access to specialist TA-CSEA advice and consultation. This does not necessarily mean separate teams in every area, but clear paths to expertise.
- Protection of supervisory time and workable loads for complex digital safeguarding issues: TA-CSEA cases require in-depth time for digital risk assessment, relationship-based work, and multi-agency coordination, which high caseloads do not give this work justice.
- Strengthening early help to include more agile digital parenting support, school-based TA-CSEA safety programs, community awareness campaigns, and easy access routes for children to get help before issues become serious.
- Embed cyber-social work practice in social work education and training: In this study, cyber-social work, refers to a digitally adapted form of social work practice that integrates digital risk assessment, online safeguarding knowledge, ethical technology use, child-centred engagement, and multi-agency responses to harms occurring across online and offline

environments. It should not be treated as a separate replacement for child protection practice, but as a necessary adaptation of mainstream social work to children's digital lives.

- Future studies should examine how children experience safeguarding responses to TA-CSEA and how different agencies coordinate, share responsibility, and act within multi-agency systems.

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APPENDIX I: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research title

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children on the Internet: A Case Study of Social workers roles and Interventions in England.

Introduction

My name is Clinton Sipho Ncube a European Joint Master's in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY) Student, under the Erasmus Mundus Programme. My study programme is jointly offered by four institutions; Mykolas Romeris University (Lithuania), Riga Stradiņš University (Latvia), Catholic University in Ružomberok (Slovakia) and ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Portugal)

What is this study about?

Thank you for considering participating in this study. I am conducting this research to explore how sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet, also referred to as Technology Facilitated-Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TF-CSEA), is understood within social work practice, and to learn about the ways social workers work to prevent and respond to this phenomenon. Your insights and experiences will contribute to a deeper understanding of social work approaches to TF-CSEA.

What does participation involve?

If you choose to take part, you will be invited to an online semi structured interview lasting 45–60 minutes. You will be asked about your professional experiences, views, and current practices. Participation is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question and may stop the interview at any time, without needing to give a reason.

Confidentiality and data protection

The following explains how I will use the data collected in the interview. To ensure that the research study meets ethical requirements and is conducted in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EU 2016/679) and the ethical standards of the ESWOCHY consortium universities, I promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.

- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for me to document what is said during the interview and helps me in the continuing work with the project. In my analysis, some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data I collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

Who to contact

If you have any questions or wish to follow up on anything related to this study, you are welcome to contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: *Clinton Sipho Ncube* – clncube@stud.mruni.eu

Supervisor: *Professor Jorge M.L. Ferreira* – Jorge.Manuel.Ferreira@iscte-iul.pt

☐ **I declare** that I have understood the aims of what was proposed to me, as explained by the researcher, that I was given the opportunity to ask any questions about this study and received clear answers.

☐ **I AGREE** to participate in the study and consent to my data being used in accordance with the information provided.

☐ **I DO NOT AGREE** to participate in the study and consent to my data being used in accordance with the information provided

Participant's Name: **Signature:** **Date:**

APPENDIX II : SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Title: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children on the Internet: A Case Study of Social Workers roles and Interventions in England

Researcher: Clinton Sipho Ncube

Research Supervisor: Assoc. Prof Jorge.M.Ferreira

Institution: ESWOCHY Consortium

Estimated time: 45-60 minutes

Introduction

I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and sharing your experiences. My name is Clinton Sipho Ncube and I am conducting a research study as part of my Master's thesis under the European Joint Master's in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY) programme.

This study explores how social workers understand and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet, sometimes called technology-assisted child sexual exploitation and abuse, (TA-CSEA). It focuses on the roles and interventions of social workers in protecting children and young people online while upholding their rights to safety, privacy, and participation

In light of the above mentioned, I am greatly interested in your professional experiences and perspectives in dealing with such a problem, either directly or indirectly, in your role as a social worker. I hope to have a greater appreciation of the challenges and or successes you have encountered. Additionally, it will be a way to reflect on potential improvements or recommendations you have for the social work profession when dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet.

As a reminder, the interview is voluntary, and all information you provide will remain confidential. You may withdraw at any point or choose not to answer any question. The discussion will take approximately 45–60 minutes and will be recorded.

Section 0: Background and Context

What is your current job title?

What sector (e.g. local authority, NGO, government agency, private sector, tech industry) and level of practice (individual, community, organisational, policy) do you currently work in?

How long have you worked as a social worker in your current setting?

Could you briefly describe your current role and main responsibilities in your setting?

Before we move on, I just want to clarify the general topic for this interview. When we refer to "sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet", sometimes called "technology-assisted child sexual exploitation and abuse (TA-CSEA)" ,we are talking broadly about situations where digital technology is used to groom, exploit, coerce, or harm children sexually. This can include, for example, online grooming, sexual extortion, or the sharing and production of sexual images of children.

You don't need to follow a strict definition .I'm interested in how you understand and encounter this issue in your own work.

Section 1: Characterising the nature and dynamics of sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet

From your professional experience, how would you describe or define sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet, and what forms or emerging patterns of online sexual exploitation or abuse have you encountered in your work?

Probe:

How does this differ from offline sexual exploitation in terms of identification and response?

Section 2: Identifying and analysing key risk factors

From your experience, which group of children or young people appear most at risk of online sexual exploitation or abuse, and what factors contribute to that vulnerability?

Probe:

Are these risks primarily individual(child), or produced by broader social or digital systems (community, technology, policy)?

Section 3: Exploring and mapping social workers' roles and intervention strategies

How does you or your organisation respond to or work to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet?

Probe:

Can you describe any direct interventions, in particular your role across different stages (prevention, identification, intervention, recovery)?

b). What organisational frameworks, policies, or training programmes guide your work to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse on the internet? (*For example, Working Together to Safeguard Children, the Children Act, Online Safety Act, or any international safeguarding standards)*

Probe:

Are these frameworks designed specifically for digital harm, or adapted from offline child protection?

How do you collaborate with other agencies or stakeholders (e.g., police, schools, NGOs, technology companies) when dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse of children on the internet?

Probe;

Are there specific processes you follow when working in a multi-agency team?

What challenges within your role or organisation do you encounter when safeguarding children against TA-CSEA?

Are there any specific barriers you face when addressing online harm children experience?

Thinking about your experience across different levels (practice, organisation, policy), what should social workers or agencies do differently to better prevent or respond to TA-CSEA?

Probe:

Are new or more specialised social work roles needed, or do existing roles need redefining?

What systemic or policy changes would strengthen social work responses?

Thank you for your valuable time and insights. Your contribution is highly appreciated and will remain confidential.

APPENDIX III: NON-PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

Submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Child and Youth:

• Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College

• Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work

• Has listed all citations in a list of references.

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize

and will result in a failing grade in the programme.

Date (dd/mm/yyyy): 28 May 2026

Signature: 

Name (in block letters): CLINTON SIPHO NCUBE

APPENDIX IV: USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

The thesis utilised AI-supported writing tools, Grammarly and ChatGPT, only for academic and language support. Grammarly was used to improve grammar, sentence coherence, readability, and minor sentence restructuring. ChatGPT was only used for clarity in sentences and appropriate academic phrasing in researcher-written prose across the abstract, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and the conclusion. It was not used to analyse interview transcripts, create codes or themes, generate research data, produce findings, formulate interpretations, or generate references.

No interview transcripts, audio recordings from research participants, identifiable participant information, or confidential empirical material were uploaded to Grammarly, ChatGPT, or any other AI tool. Participant quotations included in the study were not rewritten by AI tools. All AI-assisted wording was critically reviewed, edited, and approved by the researcher. The researcher assumes full responsibility for the final thesis, including the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, citations, references, findings, discussion, and conclusions.