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Vries, I. de; Ebrahim, S.; Donninger, D.; Meer, B. van der; Bemmél, S. van

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Social contexts of isolation, vulnerability, and resilience among minors with experiences of commercial sexual exploitation in the Netherlands

Ieke de Vries^{a,*}, Sarah Ebrahim^a, Daan Donninger^a, Berber van der Meer^a,
Sjoerd van Bommel^b

^a Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, Leiden University, Steenschuur, 25 2311 ES Leiden, the Netherlands

^b Centrum Kinderhandel & Mensenhandel (Centre Child Trafficking & Human Trafficking), Burgemeester Schalijlaan 70, 2908 LS Capelle aan den IJssel, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite extensive research on vulnerabilities to commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) of minors, knowledge gaps remain in understanding the broader contextual conditions that put young people at risk for CSE. Individual risk factors alone are insufficient to capture the broader context of risk; 'contextual vulnerability' to CSE requires further exploration.

Objective: This study provides an empirically-driven theoretical framework that unpacks vulnerability and resilience to CSE, focusing on the socioecological context of minors, including family, friends, schools, neighborhoods, institutions, and others.

Participants and setting: Data were obtained from an online platform in the Netherlands, where young people anonymously shared experiences of CSE by engaging in conversations with online care providers. The sample included conversations from 240 minors with CSE experiences between 2019 and 2022.

Methods: A constructivist grounded theory method was used, combining inductive coding to identify patterns and themes in the data with deductive reasoning to link themes to theoretical concepts, generating new theoretical insights into the socioecological aspects of vulnerability.

Results: Three key themes emerged from the findings: (1) minors often faced *social isolation* within unsafe or unstable family environments, with limited external support; (2) relationships beyond the family, when unsafe or unstable, contributed to minors' *social vulnerability* due to withdrawal, heightened exposure to harm, and distrust in formal institutions; and (3) positive experiences and supportive relationships across socioecological levels fostered *social resilience* and mitigated harm.

Conclusions: A socioecological approach is needed to unpack contextual vulnerability to CSE and should guide prevention and intervention strategies.

1. Introduction

Awareness of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) has significantly increased in recent decades, prompting a close examination of its definitions and risk factors. CSE is a pressing concern in the Netherlands as much as it is at the international level, where it is

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: i.de.vries@law.leidenuniv.nl (I. de Vries).

recognized as a critical issue affecting the safety and well-being of many children (Dutch Rapporteur, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2024; UNODC, 2024). According to Dutch law, CSE of minors is defined as a form of juvenile human trafficking that concerns the exploitation of children under 18 years of age for sexual activities in exchange for money, goods, or other benefits, through means of coercion, manipulation, or deceit (although these means are assumed and do not have to be proven if CSE involves children, see Art. 273f Sr.).

Efforts to combat CSE in the Netherlands involve a multifaceted approach supported by comprehensive laws and measures. These include community prevention initiatives, mandatory reporting requirements in specific sectors (e.g., healthcare and social work), a national referral mechanism to identify and assist victims, victim shelters and other victim support services, and the legal principle of not prosecuting offenses committed during exploitation (Dutch Government, 2018, 2024; Dutch Rapporteur, 2022). Although the Netherlands is often recognized for its strong legal and policy frameworks (see e.g., U.S. Department of State, 2024), challenges remain in effectively responding to CSE of minors. Of particular concern is the decline in formal identifications of CSE of minors in the past decade (Dutch Rapporteur, 2017, 2021), reflecting broader global challenges in protecting vulnerable young people (De Vries et al., 2019; De Vries & Cockbain, 2024).

One significant challenge to effectively address CSE is the knowledge gap regarding the conditions that place young people at risk of sexual exploitation. This gap stems from empirical research on CSE predominantly focusing on individual-level experiences and behaviors, such as previous abuse, substance use, and a history of running away from home or care, as key contributors to vulnerabilities (Choi, 2015; De Vries & Goggin, 2020; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Laird et al., 2020). The reasons why these factors increase risk of CSE vary. To illustrate, previous abuse, whether physical, emotional, or sexual, often leaves minors with deep psychological scars, eroding their sense of self-worth and making them vulnerable for repeat victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Papalia et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2019). Furthermore, the significance of a history of running away from home is frequently linked to contextual circumstances such as unstable or unsafe family environments, leading minors to seek refuge elsewhere, which may expose them to potentially exploitative situations (Hershberger et al., 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2014). These experiences and behaviors may not only increase the likelihood of being targeted by exploiters but also make minors less resilient and equipped to escape or seek help, especially when they lack social support or trusted, healthy relationships with adults. The literature consistently underscores these and other experiences and behaviors of minors who have experienced CSE, illustrating how they contribute to heightening the risk of CSE.

While these individual-level factors mark the experiences of many minors with CSE histories, recent scholarship has critiqued the narrow focus for its exclusion of CSE-involved people with different experiences such as those who have not experienced prior abuse, those exposed primarily to emotional abuse, or those navigating familial or peer environments rife with crime and violence (e.g., De Vries et al., 2019, 2024; Reid et al., 2019). Additionally, this emphasis often overlooks the complex social realities many young people face, including unhealthy relationships with peers, family or adults, socioeconomic deprivation, systemic discrimination, and unstable housing (De Vries et al., 2024; De Vries & Cockbain, 2024; Weston & Mythen, 2023). The focus on individual-level risks and vulnerabilities, however, is not unique to the context of CSE; it reflects a broader trend in public health research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) toward the “privatization of risk” (Rockhill, 2001; see also Karatekin et al., 2022). This trend has shifted attention from addressing cumulative psychosocial risks to focusing on narrower, household-confined subsets of risk factors (Felitti et al., 1998) and, ultimately, to individual risk profiles, often overlooking the societal harms that shape these risks (see Karatekin et al., 2022, for a scoping review). Moving forward, a better understanding of the broader relational, community, and societal facets in the lives of young people is required to provide deeper insights into their social realities, the structural barriers they face and the support systems that may help mitigate certain challenges, more effectively shaping a multifaceted response to CSE.

2. Previous research on the role of the socioecological context for understanding vulnerability to victimization

The broader literature on child development and child maltreatment has long acknowledged the importance of the social context in shaping the development and level of resilience of young people (Belsky, 1980; Zielinski & Bradshaw, 2006). Much of this work builds on the Ecological Systems Theory, according to which the behaviors and experiences of individuals are shaped by the larger social and ecological contexts around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1993). Using this theory, our work supplements the focus on individual vulnerability in the existing literature on CSE by considering the extent to which harm and vulnerability to victimization stems from relations and events within 1) the microsystem, which comprises the immediate context of social relationships of individuals (e.g., family and intimate partners), 2) the exosystem, which includes social structures around the microsystem (e.g., classmates, friendship networks, and neighborhoods), and 3) the macrosystem, which represents the public or political climate through which violence may persist or be prevented.

In examining contextual vulnerabilities to CSE, it is also crucial to consider how systemic inequities impact diverse demographic groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and other historically marginalized communities. Research indicates that these populations often experience heightened risks due to structural inequalities, systemic discrimination, and social stigmatization. These broader societal conditions shape the lived experiences of racial, ethnic and other minorities, and influence their interactions within social, legal, and institutional frameworks in ways that may exacerbate vulnerabilities (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017; Cook et al., 2022; Gerassi & Nichols, 2021; Hurst, 2015). Recognizing the varied ways in which socioecological contexts shape victimization is critical for a more comprehensive understanding of the structural factors contributing to CSE and for developing more equitable protective responses.

2.1. Microsystem

Among the few studies on CSE that move beyond a focus on individual vulnerability, the microsystem has received the most attention in studies on CSE, focusing on the role of intimate partners and the family context (see e.g., [Amponsah et al., 2024](#); [Choi, 2015](#); [Franchino-Olsen, 2021](#); [Godoy et al., 2024](#); for overviews). First, research shows that many exploiters are – or become – important contacts within the microsystem despite a popular narrative that exploiters are strangers who nefariously target young people for the sex industry ([Farrell & Fahy, 2009](#); [Todres, 2015](#)). Instead, several studies suggest that most people, both children and adults, are exploited by someone they trust or have fallen in love with. This dynamic often involves grooming, a process whereby exploiters deliberately build trust and emotional connections to manipulate and control minors (e.g., by expressing affection, providing gifts, or creating a false sense of intimacy, see [Gerassi, 2015](#); [Jimenez et al., 2015](#); [Reed et al., 2019](#)). While some may perceive it as a genuine romantic partnership, developing these emotional connections is a common tactic utilized by many exploiters to gain trust and coerce their partner into commercial sex ([Dank et al., 2015](#); [Kennedy et al., 2007](#); [Reed et al., 2019](#)). Although relationships and dating partners typically develop in the exosystem, intimate partners become essential actors within the immediate micro context of young people when relationships develop into more serious or longer-lasting relationships.

In addition to the role of intimate partners, extant literature provides evidence on the role of family members as exploiters, who may receive little suspicion by law enforcement, teachers, neighbors, or others due to the popular narrative that focuses on a different profile of exploiters. Family-driven sexual exploitation is often more difficult to identify and, therefore, more likely to remain hidden compared to other forms of exploitation ([Reed et al., 2019](#); [Reid et al., 2015](#); [Sprang & Cole, 2018](#)). More generally, family members have been shown to be involved in the recruitment process or in the introduction and endorsement of CSE to young people (e.g., because of the behaviors and social relationships of parents and siblings already involved in CSE, see e.g., [Goldberg & Moore, 2018](#); [Reed et al., 2019](#)).

Certain household dynamics and caregiver settings such as family dysfunction, domestic violence, substance use, separation or incarceration have been associated with heightened risks of CSE victimization due to experiences of unsafety, instability and impaired parental supervision and support at the microlevel ([Amponsah et al., 2024](#); [Benavente et al., 2021](#); [Choi, 2015](#); [Franchino-Olsen, 2021](#); [Godoy et al., 2024](#)). Exploiters may abuse this vulnerability by seemingly providing a new ‘safe harbor’ and fulfilling unmet emotional needs ([Gerassi, 2015](#); [Goldberg & Moore, 2018](#); [Reed et al., 2019](#); [Reid & Jones, 2011](#)).

2.2. The exosystem

As most studies are concerned with identifying individual-level risks or focus on a microsystem in which exploitation occurs, only a few studies examine the role of the exosystem in generating vulnerabilities for human trafficking victimizations. Nonetheless, a growing body of literature has begun to show the importance of peer networks in exposing young people to sexual exploitation or general violence and delinquency prior to their own victimization (e.g., [De Vries et al., 2024](#); [Helpingstine et al., 2021](#); [Reed et al., 2019](#)). This is consistent with broader literature that corroborates the association between exposure to violence and delinquency within peer networks and increased risk of personal victimization ([Schreck et al., 2004](#); [Stogner et al., 2014](#); [Turanovic & Young, 2016](#)).

Young people whose social networks include delinquent peers, gang-involved youths or juvenile-justice involved youths may face a heightened risk of victimization due to engaging in similar ‘risky behaviors’ or finding themselves in social contexts with heightened exposure through which they have an increased risk of violence being targeted at them ([Schreck et al., 2004](#); [Turanovic & Young, 2016](#)). Similarly, peer associations with individuals involved in commercial sex have shown to increase a personal likelihood of becoming involved in commercial sex and sexual exploitation. This may occur due to being drawn to similar lifestyles and social contexts or through recruitment, pressure, or coercion by peers (e.g., [Reed et al., 2019](#)). Additionally, the drivers behind seeking out these social networks, such as a sense of belonging that fills the void left by family dysfunction or instability, are critical to understanding the social dynamics that lead to heightened risk.

Although some studies have begun to explore the role of social contexts in sex trafficking risks, detailed data about these contexts remains scarce, especially as social interactions have moved increasingly to online domains. Online platforms and social media have introduced new risks, as traffickers exploit these spaces to recruit and groom young people, significantly increasing the chances of exposure to CSE-related practices ([Borlik et al., 2021](#); [Vogels et al., 2022](#)).

Broader contexts of young people’s communities, including schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces, may create or exacerbate vulnerability to CSE even if there is no direct social exposure to CSE. To illustrate, a previous study using data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), a voluntary data collection system covering all 50 states in the U.S., D.C., and Puerto Rico comparing substantiated CSE reports with child maltreatment reports, identified that minors residing in more rural areas compared to urban areas had an elevated risk of sex trafficking victimization ([Branscum & Richards, 2023](#)). The broader victimization literature suggests that school-related factors such as bullying, peer pressure and inadequate supervision can create environments where young people are more likely to be targeted for victimizing behaviors, both violent victimization (e.g., assault) and property victimization (e.g., larceny) (see [Hong & Espelage, 2012](#), for an overview of studies on victimizations in schools). Furthermore, neighborhoods characterized by high crime rates, economic deprivation, and social disorganization can also foster environments where violence and victimization are more prevalent and less likely to be reported or addressed (see e.g., [Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012](#), for a review on studies focusing on the effects of neighborhoods on violence between intimate partners). Other contextual examples – such as socioeconomic difficulties (e.g., poverty, low income, inequality), under-resourced schools, withdrawals from schools, and a lack of neighborhood-level social cohesion – may also elevate the risk of CSE in similar ways as has been found in contextual research linking

these factors to other victimization types (see [Turanovic, 2022](#), for a general review, and [Karatekin et al., 2022](#), for a review on studies examining ACEs). However, contextual research, especially research examining neighborhood and peer contexts, has primarily been concerned with explaining crime and criminality rather than victimization ([Bruinsma & Johnson, 2018](#); [Sampson, 2006](#)).

2.3. The macrosystem

The macrosystem, encompassing broader cultural, societal, and institutional contexts, may affect CSE through various channels such as residing in residential care, contact with police, or engagement in judicial systems and with child welfare agencies ([Finigan-Carr et al., 2019](#); [Sanchez & Pacquiao, 2018](#)). While much of these institutions are designed to enhance child welfare and prevent future victimization or delinquency, research highlights the challenges in doing so. For example, placement in residential care settings may further expose minors, who often already lack stable familial support and supervision, to others who have experienced CSE. This exposure can put them at heightened risk for experiencing CSE due to a lack of access to respectful, healthy relationships and the presence of problematic sexual behaviors, such as peer-to-peer grooming, within care settings (see, for a scoping review of the literature, [McKibbin, 2017](#); see also [McKibbin et al., 2022](#)). Moreover, interactions with police and judicial systems may inadvertently re-traumatize people who have experienced victimization or fail to provide adequate protection and support due to systemic barriers. Examples of these barriers are limited institutional capacity to provide specialized trauma-oriented responses or biases such as officer biases about the offence and victims (see [Farrell et al., 2019](#), for a study on police responses to human trafficking victims using incident data reported to the police and qualitative interviews with law enforcement and service providers). Similarly, child welfare agencies, while tasked with safeguarding children, may encounter challenges in identifying and addressing the diverse risk factors and pathways through which CSE manifests. These difficulties can contribute to missed or inadequate identifications of victimization, potentially exacerbating vulnerabilities (see, for a conceptual discussion, [Reid, 2018](#)). A comprehensive understanding of these unintended consequences is crucial for developing effective policies that dismantle systemic barriers and strengthen protective measures for minors with CSE experiences or minors at risk of experiencing CSE. In this effort, it is also critical to acknowledge that systemic disparities within these institutions – disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and other historically marginalized groups – have been shown to heighten risks and create barriers to support. These disparities often result in harsher criminalization and limited access to victim services, further compounding vulnerabilities ([Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017](#); [Cook et al., 2022](#); [Gerassi & Nichols, 2021](#); [Hurst, 2015](#)).

Linking macro-level dynamics (e.g., economic, educational, and social policies) to individual behaviors and personal risk of victimization presents several challenges in research and practice. This is particularly true for macro-level factors such as cultural norms, socioeconomic inequalities, and institutional policies, which may exert broad influences shaping environments where exploitation occurs. Translating these systemic influences into specific individual behaviors and risks requires elucidating complex pathways and interactions across different levels of the socioecological model. For instance, while socioeconomic deprivation at the macro level may increase overall vulnerability to CSE, its manifestation in individual behaviors and risk profiles likely depends on contextual factors like neighborhood characteristics, familial support, and resilience factors such as having social support networks, healthy coping strategies, and access to resources that can buffer the risk of (re)victimization ([Alderson et al., 2022](#); [O'Brien, 2018](#); [O'Brien et al., 2022](#); [Whaling et al., 2020](#)). These challenges underscore the need for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates macro-level analyses with micro-level insights, including resilience factors, to enhance understanding and responses to victimization.

3. Purpose of the current study

While several studies have suggested the relevance of a socioecological approach to tackling CSE (e.g., [Amponsah et al., 2024](#); [Finigan-Carr et al., 2019](#); [Sanchez & Pacquiao, 2018](#)), existing work is mostly conceptual or limited to identifying vulnerabilities within specific layers of the socio-ecological model. Robust empirical research unpacking why and how contextual factors expose minors to harmful settings, including CSE, remains scarce. Our aim is to shift the focus from individual-level factors to the socioecological environments in which children live by providing a detailed, empirical substantiation for a theoretical framework through which to examine vulnerabilities and protective factors in the socioecological context of young people. We seek to understand the varying ways in which interpersonal relationships within the socioecological systems around young people shape experiences of sexual exploitation through the following key question: What role does the socioecological context play in creating, exacerbating, or mitigating vulnerabilities for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE)? By answering this question, this study advances prior research by providing an empirically led theoretical framework describing how interpersonal relationships across various socioecological layers may impact minors' vulnerability to exploitation.

The Netherlands was chosen as the site for this study because it provides a unique opportunity to examine CSE within a socioecological context of young people. The research team had access to unique data capturing the experiences of minors in CSE (discussed below). Moreover, as discussed earlier, the Netherlands has comprehensive and multifaceted legal and policy frameworks to address CSE, while challenges in identifying CSE persist. By situating this study within the Netherlands, we aim to bridge gaps in empirical knowledge and advance a framework that can inform both local and international efforts to address CSE.

4. Methodology: constructivist grounded theory

To examine the multifaceted role of the socioecological contexts in the sexual exploitation of children, we employed a constructivist grounded theory methodology ([Charmaz, 2014, 2017](#); [Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021](#)), an approach particularly well suited for

capturing the complexities of the lived experiences and the social processes underlying them. Grounded theory was chosen over other qualitative techniques because it provides a systematic yet flexible framework for generating theoretical insights that are deeply rooted in the perspectives and experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2014). This was critical for our study, which sought to generate new insights about the nuanced and diverse ways in which the socioecological contexts of young people play a role in creating, exacerbating or mitigating risks of CSE. Unlike traditional grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), constructivist grounded theory actively engages with existing literature as a foundation for the research process, facilitating constant comparison and theoretical reflexivity to deepen understanding and advance knowledge on the topic (Charmaz, 2017; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

4.1. Data and data setting

Our data consisted of the personal accounts from 240 minors who accessed the online platform “Chat met Fier” (www.chatmetfier.nl) between 2019 and 2022. These accounts were provided by the Center against Child and Human Trafficking in the Netherlands, a knowledge and innovation center affiliated with Fier, the care agency that hosts the chat. Since 2009, the chat has enabled young people experiencing (sexual) violence to anonymously connect with specialized online care providers. These care providers have a professional education in social work or a related discipline and received specialized training in providing online victim support to young people with experiences of threats, violence, abuse, and dependency. By engaging in online conversations with young people, they work collaboratively to identify appropriate assistance and support. To ensure the quality and effectiveness of support, care providers work within a multidisciplinary consultation framework (MDC), which involves the team leader of the chat, a registered healthcare psychologist and a clinical psychologist. The MDC oversees service quality, training, and offers guidance on complex cases. Collaboration with external partners is also a key component of the chat, which engages both online and offline organizations when offering victim services (e.g., police, human trafficking care coordinators, and victim service agencies). Each year, more than 15,000 unique users engage in over 20,000 chat conversations (Fier, 2024), some of which discuss violence in dependent relationships, including – but not limited to – CSE. Users of the chat can choose their own nickname and engage in conversations within a secure online environment. They also have the option to create an account, which facilitates sustained support and assistance over an extended period of time and enables young people to have multiple conversations, review past chat interactions and access relevant information on the chat.

Although the primary purpose of the chat is to provide online support and – if possible – facilitate access to offline services, it also yields unique data about a group of people who often disclose their victimization experiences for the first time (van Bommel et al., 2023). Moreover, research on CSE is usually based on information from the police and the judiciary while there are growing concerns about the decreasing number of formally identified minor victims of CSE in the Netherlands (Dutch Rapporteur, 2021, 2023). As such, the anonymous chat offers a unique alternative data source, providing invaluable insights into the perspectives and experiences of minors without the ethical challenges associated with conducting direct interviews with minors. However, a notable limitation is that minors may not always be fully aware of certain contextual dynamics shaping their experiences and the absence of research-driven prompts may have resulted in the omission of significant aspects of the socioecological context. Consequently, the chats present an unprompted and subjective view of the socioecological context as perceived by the minors themselves.

In the selection of chat accounts concerning alleged CSE, we applied a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2014) to ensure representativeness across the study years and to capture variations in experiences over time. Chat accounts meeting the following criteria were included. First, only chat accounts from minors (below the age of 18 years) who allegedly had experienced CSE at the time of their contact with an online care provider or within the past year were included. Professionals operating the chat service adhered to the legal definition of CSE in the Netherlands when assessing whether a minor had experienced CSE. This assessment was based on self-reported information that users provided during conversations, which included narratives about being involved in sexual services in exchange for financial, material, or other benefits (given the focus on minors, specific evidence of force, fraud or coercion was not required to confirm alleged CSE). The Center against Child and Human Trafficking in the Netherlands receives these and other chat accounts that concern potentially related facets of CSE without being labeled as such (e.g., about forced sexual activity) and verifies which of all these chats concern alleged CSE of minors according to the legal definition. Second, chat conversations had to be initiated in recent years, specifically between January 1, 2019 (right after an administrative change that impeded including earlier years) and December 31, 2022 (the last year before the research was initiated). Third, conversations had to be from minors creating an anonymous account and whose conversations lasted for at least five minutes to ensure that sufficient information was shared to confirm a suspicion of CSE and for an online care provider to ask questions about their experiences and social settings. Through these selection criteria, the conversations of 418 minors, with presumed experiences of commercial sexual exploitation at the time of their outreach to the online chat, were identified in the period 2019–2022.

To allow for in-depth analyses on a manageable dataset while maintaining breadth in the analysis, the Center against Child and Human Trafficking provided us with a random selection of a subset of the conversations of 240 minors (60 each year), among whom 35 % ($n = 85$) returned to the chat on multiple days, up to 58 days. Because of the anonymity of the chat, we are unable to provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of these minors. While some minors provided information about their demographics (e.g., gender, age, or race/ethnicity), many did not. Additionally, it is possible that some minors returned to the chat using different account names and that our sample contains duplicates, although the uniqueness of each narrative suggests that duplicates are minimal.

All information in the chats was pseudonymized to ensure that none of the research data could be traced back to individuals or organizations. After pseudonymization, all conversations, a total of 1749 single-spaced pages, were uploaded to Atlas.ti (2023) for systematic qualitative coding and analysis. Pseudonymization, coding and analyses were done in a team involving four senior and junior researchers with familiarity to the Dutch socioecological context as well as expertise and training related to human trafficking,

criminology, and qualitative research. A comprehensive review of the literature, pseudonymization of the data, and the development of initial theoretical constructs were primarily done by the second and third author, under supervision of the first author who has extensive expertise related to the subject matter. The first and fourth authors were primarily involved in the process of open, axial and selective coding. Potential ambiguities and inconsistencies were discussed and resolved in team meetings. All research steps were in line with the ethical guidelines and procedures that were developed for this study, which received a positive evaluation by the Ethics and Data Committee at the Faculty of Law at Leiden University (#2022-037, October 24th, 2022).¹

4.2. Analytical strategy

We conducted an in-depth qualitative content analysis on the retrieved chats, guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014, 2017; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). In doing so, we employed iterative coding cycles to identify and refine themes while linking them to the four preidentified layers of the socioecological model – the individual nested within micro, exo, and macro contexts – using logico-deductive reasoning (Charmaz, 2008, 2017; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Practically, our coding strategy involved open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2017). In the first phase, open coding served as an inductive process for identifying initial codes across the layers of the socioecological model. This phase revealed themes such as familial instability and unsafety (micro), exposure to CSE and other potential harms at school, in friendship networks or within neighborhoods (exo), and distrust toward authorities (macro). To ensure no relevant themes were overlooked, even those discussed only infrequently, an additional round of deductive coding was conducted to identify supplementary aspects of the socioecological context, focusing on interpersonal relationships within the micro-, exo-, and macrosystems, allowing predefined themes to complement the initial codes.

In the next phase, axial coding was employed to categorize these inductively generated codes around theoretically relevant core phenomena. During this step, we used logico-deductive reasoning, continuously comparing emerging concepts with existing literature (Charmaz, 2008, 2017; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). This process helped contextualize and organize the data around both established and novel theoretical insights. The core concepts that were identified in this phase included experiences of social isolation, social vulnerability due to harmful exposures, and enhanced social resiliency through harm reduction efforts.

Finally, selective coding was used to examine the interplay between the different layers of the socioecological model, drawing connections between sub-themes and overarching themes. This phase also involved a process of constant comparison between codes and interaction with existing theoretical and substantive literature on the socioecological model and CSE. Fig. 1 presents a simplified version of the connectivity between our key thematic codes, which guided the interpretation of our findings.

To ensure the validity of the key themes and assess the homogeneity of the data, we analyzed the frequency of theme appearances across cases. This step ensured that thematically relevant codes were consistently captured across the dataset. Additionally, we proactively identified and analyzed negative cases, which are unique themes that did not fit the common narrative across cases. This process helped refine our understanding of the data and provided a more comprehensive view of the socioecological context of CSE.

The next section includes quote extracts from the interviews to support the description of the themes. Included quotes were translated from the Dutch original texts and fully deidentified to avoid the possibility that information could be traced back to certain individuals or families, which in some cases also meant deidentifying demographics, social media platforms, and organizations. Initial translation was done by the research team and verified by employees working with the chat platform, who are familiar with its context, language nuances and terminologies. Any discrepancies or ambiguities were resolved through team meetings and in discussions with employees directly working with the chat platform.

5. Findings

The analyses highlight three key themes on how context shapes the experiences of minors in CSE: 1) Social isolation within an unstable, unsafe, and neglectful microsystem with few healthy external connections; 2) Social withdrawal and vulnerability due to unstable or absent exosystem relationships and distrust in formal organizations; and 3) Opportunities for resilience through positive experiences and healthy relationships across the socioecological system. The following sections explore these themes in detail while providing the necessary nuances by also outlining experiences of minors with different experiences.

5.1. Social isolation due to being entrapped in unstable and unsafe microsystems

Most minors found themselves in microsystems marked by instability and physical or emotional unsafety. In over two-thirds of the cases, the exploitation occurred within these microsystems, often involving intimate partners and family members as the exploiters. Specifically, in 58 % of the analyzed chat conversations, the suspected exploiter was the minor's intimate partner. Many minors knew their partners before the relationship began, with several minors noting that they had met their partners at school, sports, or recreational clubs, in their neighborhoods, or during social outings (i.e., in their exosystem). Social media often facilitated the initial contact:

¹ Decisions by the Ethics and Data Committee at the Faculty of Law at Leiden University are non-binding but either encourage (in case of a positive evaluation) or discourage (in case of a negative evaluation) the initiation of the study.

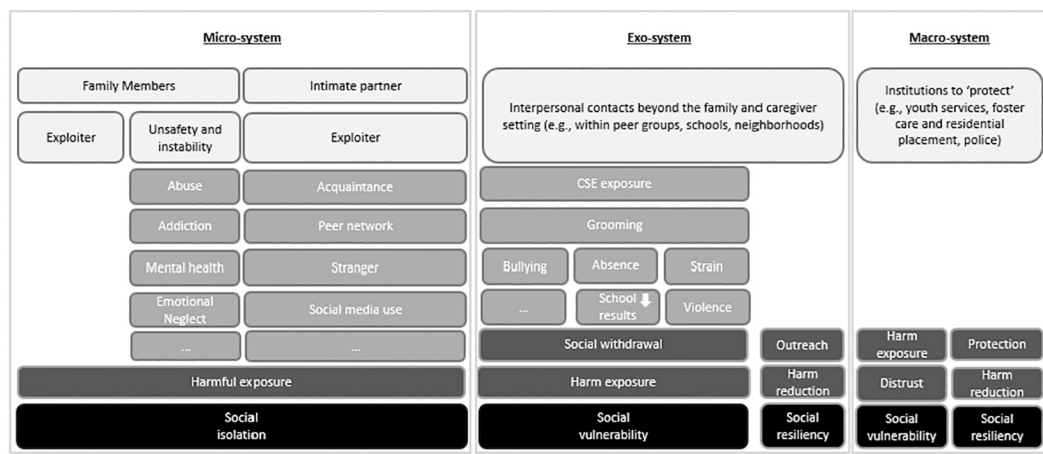


Fig. 1. Simplified coding scheme illustrating key themes.

"He sent me a message via [social media platform] and mentioned that he often saw me biking and thought I was a nice girl." ... "At first, I thought he was just saying something, but when I asked where he often saw me biking, what he said matched up. We chatted frequently, and later he asked for my number so we could chat on [instant messaging app]." ... "I recognized his profile picture. We often called, and after a while, we decided to meet up."

(A_20)

While this case exemplifies the role of social media in facilitating offline contact, in only a few cases minors had met their abusive and exploitative intimate partner for the first time through social media, using apps for chats and (group) calls with strangers.

In 26 % of the analyzed chats, family members, including parents or caregivers, were the suspected exploiters. Experiencing (financial) strain and aiming for financial profit were at the core of many family-driven sexual exploitation, as illustrated by the following example:

"My [parent] and I live together." ... "it's nice, but a while ago my [parent] said we were short on money and that I should figure it out or work harder, but I didn't earn much." ... "then [my parent] came up with the idea of sending [their] friends on dates with me for money. I thought, 'It's just one or two times until we can pay it off.'"

(B_11)

Family-led driven exploitation often lasted for years, with some minors being unfamiliar with what healthy home situations look like. For example, one minor reached out with the following question: *"Can a [parent] use [their] daughters [for commercial sexual exploitation] to earn money?"* (C_5, interpretation added). While most minors expressed being afraid to leave their home settings or continued to care for their caregivers despite abusive experiences, others reached out with the immediate desire of leaving their situation.

Family-driven vulnerability extended beyond the exploitation by family members alone; over two-thirds of the analyzed chats involved minors who found themselves in home environments characterized by unsafety, instability, and/or neglect, frequently due to experiencing or witnessing domestic violence and abuse: *"I often had arguments at home and sometimes I was abused, but it was also my own fault. I fought back"* (B_3). Many minors expressed how they had internalized violence and abuse and blamed themselves for their situation, for example due to awareness of personality disorders or being in abusive home situations since they were born and not having had exposure to healthy relationships (see also above). Besides abuse and violence, home settings were also unstable due to parental mental health issues, substance abuse, family conflicts, divorce, or other familial challenges. To illustrate, a minor explained the change in behavior of her parent after her other parent had passed away: *"my [parent] became half-depressed, but with anger as well" ... "throwing things and stuff" ... "hits us sometimes too."* (D_21). In several other cases, significant life events like death, family separation, or family mobility triggered unsafe family dynamics.

Unsafe and unstable home settings matter, especially because exploiters often abuse these vulnerable home situations by offering alternative housing, new social networks, and a sense of a 'safe haven.' For example, the following example illustrates how a minor's intimate partner exploited her unsafe home environment: *"He made me realize things, like how what my [parent] does isn't right, and how my [other parent] is never around"* (D_58). Her exploiter's knowledge of and manipulation of her vulnerable home situation created a cycle of abuse with him offering an alternative, yet exploitative social setting. Similar cycles of abuse were reported in other cases. For example:

"I officially live with my [parent], but I don't really want to be there often because [they] drink a lot." ... "one of my [parent's] friends said I could come to his place if things weren't good at home, and I thought he was really nice. But now it's more like I 'have' to go to him."

(D_46)

As illustrated by this example, offering alternative social settings can initially seem appealing to some minors, with coercion only becoming apparent to them in later stages.

When a minor's microsystem was not evidently characterized by unsafety, instability, and/or neglect, it often still failed to function as a safe haven, mostly due to little or superficial contact between parents/caregivers and children. Parental mental health issues were frequently cited as a reason for why parents failed to notice the exploitation. For example, when asked how her parent responded to her leaving the house every night, one minor explained: "[My parent] is not doing well mentally, so [they] usually don't notice." ... "I'm always in my room, and when I go downstairs, I can just leave through the back door" (D_19). Another minor describes how the little contact between her and her parent due to a busy work schedule allowed the exploitation to go unnoticed:

"I live alone with my [parent] who isn't home much. [They're] kind but mostly busy". ... "[They] work a lot, and when coming home, [they're] so tired that [they] just go to sleep. I hardly talk to [them], except about practical things sometimes."

(D_59)

The superficial nature of initial contact, coupled with feelings of fear and shame, can create emotional unsafety, and may allow exploitation to go unnoticed by creating a barrier for minors when it comes to disclosing personal experiences. Similarly, another minor expresses her relationship with her parents as follows: "Just fine, but that's all there is to it. It's more of a 'business' relationship and then I just meant that it's more about the grades at school" (D_12). After the case worker asked how her parents would respond if she decided to disclose, she responded: "Veeeeeery disappointed. Without a doubt." Various others expressed having good relationships with their parents but lie about their absence and experiences ("I often say that I am with friends and such") (B_32) and do not want to disclose to their parents, fearing their parents' response: "I think [they] will get angry with me" (B_32). In few exceptions, the chat encouraged minors to disclose (parts of) their experiences to a trusted parent or other caregiver or family member (see further below).

The lack of emotional safety as described in the examples above can intensify feelings of social isolation, as minors find themselves confined within a limited social environment with few connections outside of it. As discussed in the next section, feelings of isolation – and vulnerability to CSE – can be exacerbated by exposure to harm, negative experiences, and distrust through interactions with people beyond their immediate social circles.

5.2. Social vulnerability due to exposure to harm, social withdrawal and formal distrust

The analyses revealed three main ways in which minors had experienced, what we call here, a "social vulnerability" to CSE, indicating a context-driven vulnerability. First, many minors who had experienced CSE routinely found themselves in unsafe and unhealthy exosystems where they were exposed to harm. Notably, many exploitative romantic relationships (discussed above) initially developed through peer contacts:

"I was at a [former] friend's house." ... "She had a bunch of dodgy friends – friends who deal drugs and stuff.. That's where I met him." ... "We hit it off immediately." ... "We started meeting up frequently and then got into a relationship."

(B_6)

Beyond direct exposure to potential exploiters within peer networks, many minors were exposed to harm within their broader social environments, experiencing or witnessing violence and abuse. For example, one minor explains her repetitive and routine experiences of bullying at school, making her not wanting to attend school:

"I don't like school." ... "I'm bullied at school." ... "Some bullies transferred to the same school, so they just continued." ... "Now, even kids who didn't know me before are joining in."

(D_24)

These experiences, along with other reports of (sexual) violence at school, drug use among peer groups, and unsafe neighborhood conditions, may create a social vulnerability by undermining personal resilience, limiting opportunities, and increasing experiences of stress and social isolation.

Second, in addition to a social vulnerability stemming from direct exposure to harm, many minors withdrew from certain social settings. Social withdrawal occurred not only due to pressure by their exploiter seeking to break existing social contacts, but often (also) due to shame, negative perceptions by peers, or previous losses of friends, exacerbating feelings of social isolation. The analyzed chats frequently highlighted the absence of friends, difficulties fitting in at school, truancy, and declining academic performance. For example, one minor reported that she had previously discussed her abusive relationship with friends, "they all left after they found out about the abuse and commercial sex" (A_9), which increased her feelings of social isolation and made her less willing to reach out to other peers. Many minors also reported socially withdrawing from school settings, as illustrated by the following example:

"Sometimes I don't go [to school], and I'm often marked as absent without excuse. My grades aren't really good, and when I'm at school, I'm always arguing with teachers, so I just don't feel like it anymore."

(A_29)

Similarly, others frequently reported being sick at school, noting that "at school, they don't really pay attention to that" (C_24). When present, they often exhibited behavioral problems or declining academic performance. For example, after being asked how things are going at school, a minor explains: "Not very well. My grades are just passing, but I can't concentrate and have arguments with everyone." She continues with explaining that some teachers notice things are not going well and are willing to give her extra lessons. However, after

the case worker asked whether teachers ever ask more questions, she responded “No, they don’t” (A.58). Many other minors felt that teachers often did not inquire about potential underlying issues affecting the students’ well-being. This lack of engagement often led minors to withdraw even further from school, exacerbating their social isolation and vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Third, social vulnerability was reinforced through a formal distrust toward certain authorities, community organizations, and victim service agencies, which can be illustrated by the following minor explaining why she is reluctant to reach out to certain community or medical services: “They already called child protective services on me once. When I said I was going to live with my grandpa. If they hear this, they’ll do it again. I’m sure of it”. Even after the case worker explained how certain organizations could help ensure her situation would improve, she responded: “And then have those nasty people at my door again? Child protective services are really nasty, you know. They only bring trouble and crap” (D.58). Various other minors reported having had negative experiences with social services, youth care, and law enforcement, which shaped their perceptions of these organizations, reduced their likelihood to disclose and contributed to their entrapment in unsafe living conditions. To illustrate, another minor described how he felt the abuse by his parents worsened after calling the police: “I’m still in this house where everyone hates me, and it’s my fault.” ... “Now [victim service agency] is calling too, and everyone hates me even more.” ... “I’ve only made everything worse” (B.27). These negative experiences with and distrust in formal support systems represent a significant barrier to intervention and highlights the need for these institutions to build trust and ensure they provide effective, non-retraumatizing support.

5.3. Social resiliency and harm-reduction

While the absence of healthy and safe relationships outside the family sphere increases social vulnerability, making it more challenging for minors to escape exploitative situations, trusted and healthy relationships outside the family environment can have an important role in enhancing the social resilience of people who have experienced CSE. The experiences shared by minors illustrate this concept. For example, the following person describes how reaching out to “kind people” who reside nearby and are well-acquainted provided a crucial support system. Her testimony emphasizes the significance of these external, trusted relationships:

“Hello, I went to the kind people and I told them everything about what happens at home and about my friend and his friends and they are going to help me find help and I can live with them” ... “They are very nice and live a few streets away from where my parents live and I ran away from home and I went to them and I gave them a note about the things at home.” ... “They called the sexual violence center.” (D.31)

This interaction demonstrates the practical impact of having an alternative and supportive social network for immediate shelter, emotional support, and a pathway toward professional assistance. Even brief interactions with external individuals, such as neighbors, can provide crucial support when it creates an opportunity to connect with a trusted person. For example, one minor recalls a situation where a neighbor intervened during a crisis at home:

“My [parent] was making so much noise, even broke the glass then and the neighbor came to see if everything was okay.” ... “I made up an excuse.” ... I got his phone number then.” (D.35)

After some encouragement by the case worker, she later decided to reach out to her neighbor with the following text message: “Hey. I wasn’t completely honest because things aren’t really going well with my [parent]. I didn’t want to lie, but I was startled when you suddenly came.. Greetings” (D.35). As this quote illustrates, the presence of supportive figures in a minor’s life can provide the necessary encouragement and assistance to seeking help. Besides neighbors, teachers and school staff are frequently in a position to notice changes in behavior or signs of distress, and their intervention can be pivotal in connecting minors to the resources they need, if responding promptly and appropriately. For example, after a meeting with the school counselor, a minor reached back out to the case worker on the chat platform:

“I think it went well.” ... “We talked for quite a long time. She asked a lot of questions and some things I still couldn’t really talk about, which was a bit frustrating. But now she is going to talk to the help organization first and then see if they can talk to me at school, and she promised not to tell my [parent] about it.” (A.2)

For many minors, however, reaching out to someone at school is a barrier too high. Those who already have established safe and trusted relationships with teachers, mentors, or school counselors may find it easier to reach out again. For example, one minor explains: “I really want to confide in my mentor again. She already knows a part of it and I have always been able to talk to her” (B.58). This example highlights the importance for minors in situations of sexual exploitation to establish safe relationships beyond the family sphere.

Online help services can also expand the social network of minors who have experienced CSE in two critical ways: first, by providing a direct safe haven for conversation without stigmatization, and second, by working with the help-seeker to identify trusted individuals in their environment and, in some cases, assisting with making the initial disclosure (first disclosure). For example, after a case worker asked whether there were any adults around who were nice and safe sources to talk to, a minor responded with “My teacher is nice”, but “I’m afraid of what she will say and think” (D.45). She was ultimately encouraged to reach out to her teacher, feeling empowered by the option to call upon the chat for further help: “I want to try it myself first, and if it doesn’t work, we can call together” (D.45). As such, an online service approach can offer immediate emotional support and empower people to build a network of contacts

facilitating their recovery and protection.

Even though trusted contacts beyond the microsystem seem an essential intervention mechanism due to the scale of unsafety and instability within the microsystem, minors might still find it easier to disclose and reach out to trusted family members (even if scarce to find). The analyses reveal that, in some cases, feelings of emotional unsafety (discussed above) may be triggered by shame and fear, instead of or in addition to parents' actual emotional neglect. To illustrate, one minor mentioned that she would like to strengthen her bond with one of her parents, which made her consider disclosing: *"I would like our bond to become stronger again"* (A_3). Her potential willingness to disclose was strengthened by the thought that parents would likely want to know about their child's safety and exposure to harm.

An important nuance to make is that the current analyses cannot fully shed light on the mechanisms of social resiliency and harm reduction: Only in a few instances did the case workers hear back from minors with positive news about a disclosure or intervention. For example, one minor reported:

"I wanted to let you know that I'm at the police station and he has been arrested along with a number of others." ... "It was a very intense arrest, but I was well taken care of by the police." ... "I especially wanted to thank you [case worker on the chat] for listening and giving me the final push."

(B_7)

While a handful of others also reported similar interventions and expressed their appreciation on the chat, it is often unknown whether online services result into an intervention.

Nonetheless, these interactions collectively illustrate the broader theme that supportive social networks, whether through direct intervention or continued (online) communication, can play a crucial role in fostering resilience and aiding recovery. These supportive relationships help reduce the isolation that often accompanies CSE, creating a buffer against further trauma and facilitating pathways to recovery by mobilizing additional resources and support systems.

6. Discussion

The findings from our analysis highlight the multifaceted role of socioecological contexts in shaping the experiences of minors who have experienced CSE. By examining online chat conversations of 240 minors with care providers and employing a constructivist grounded theory approach, we gained unique insights into the lived experiences of these young people, revealing important themes across different layers of the socioecological model. Building upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1993), the analyses provide empirical building blocks for a theoretical framework that describes the contextual vulnerability to CSE by unraveling social isolation, social vulnerability and social resiliency.

First, a primary finding from our study concerns the pervasive feelings of social isolation experienced by minors in situations of sexual exploitation, often stemming from structurally unstable or unsafe microsystems. These environments frequently involved intimate partners (58 % of the cases) or family members (26 % of the cases) as exploiters. The proportion of family members acting as exploiters is relatively high compared to other criminal offenses, such as property crimes and non-domestic interpersonal violence, but aligns with international research on human trafficking, which highlights the significant role of family members in exploitation (Cole & Anderson, 2013; Reid et al., 2015; Sprang & Cole, 2018). Two-thirds of the minors described home environments characterized by neglect, abuse and violence, or lack of parental supervision, a finding that aligns with existing literature on the risk factors for CSE emphasizing the notable prevalence of repeat victimization due to previous experiences of abuse, familial instability, and unsafety among CSE-involved minors (Amponsah et al., 2024; Benavente et al., 2021; Choi, 2015; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Laird et al., 2020). These conditions often compel minors to seek refuge and support outside their homes, inadvertently increasing their potential exposure to exploitative situations. Only a few minors described having stable or good relationships within their microsystems, specifically with their parents, yet most of them expressed the lack of emotional safety due to parental neglect or personal fear or shame, hindering their potential disclosure to their parents, which contributed to feelings of social isolation.

A second key finding from the analysis is that feelings of social isolation are often exacerbated by social vulnerabilities stemming from poor integration or negative experiences within the exo- and macrosystems. The analyses revealed exposure to harm, social withdrawal, and formal distrust as the three potential mechanisms that heightened social vulnerability to experiencing CSE and hindered minors from disclosing their CSE experiences to others. Exposure to harm involved, for example, exposure to CSE recruitment, drug dealing, or abuse and bullying within peer networks and at school, which confirm previous studies suggesting that delinquent peer networks and CSE proximity are key risk factors for being recruited for CSE (e.g., De Vries et al., 2024; Helpingstine et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2019). Social withdrawal, for example from friendship networks or through absence at school, occurred not only at the request of an exploiter (to socially isolate a person) but also due to feelings of shame, fear, or hopelessness. Overall, these findings support the broader notion in the literature that negative peer interactions and schools can play crucial roles in victimization risks (Burrow & Apel, 2008; Hong & Espelage, 2012).

While exposure to harm and social withdrawal mostly concerned the exosystem, the third mechanism, formal distrust, primarily concerned the macrosystem. Formal distrust involved the negative perceptions, often due to negative experiences, of young people toward agencies originally founded to 'protect' (e.g., youth care, police, residential care). However, when institutional responses fall short, they may inadvertently exacerbate these vulnerabilities. For example, the analyses revealed that several interactions with these systems were seen as worsening the situation or failing to provide adequate protection and support, which may result in an increased risk of CSE (see, for a review, Helpingstine et al., 2021; see also Farrell et al., 2019; Reid, 2018). Practitioner-led research on CSE in the

Netherlands highlights several other challenges that may worsen distrust in formal systems, including lack of expertise or capacity of some agencies, waiting lists for youth care, the lack of coordinated collaboration between institutions, a potential mismatch between the care needed and the care provided, and increased risk of (re-)victimization when minors with CSE experiences or heightened risk of CSE are placed into the same treatment groups as potential exploiters (Balogh et al., 2022; van Bommel et al., 2023).

A third key finding pertains to the importance of contacts within the exo- and macrosystems in developing social resilience among minors. In the few instances where minors indicated a desire to seek offline assistance—such as reporting to the police or initiating a shelter or support program—attentive neighbors, teachers, mentors, general practitioners, and other individuals within the exo- and macrosystem played a crucial role in facilitating these actions. While social resilience can also develop within the microsystem, most minors experienced unstable and unsafe microsystems and, especially for them, trusted contacts outside the family environment may significantly enhance their social resiliency. This finding aligns with the broader literature that underscores the importance of supportive social networks in mitigating vulnerability to victimization and fostering recovery (e.g., Helpingstine et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022). For most minors, however, it is challenging to find which contacts can be trusted, especially when the same settings may both exacerbate social vulnerability and foster social resilience. To illustrate, our findings indicate that schools can serve both as sites of risk and protection: While the lack of adequate supervision and bullying at schools can expose minors to victimization (see Hong & Espelage, 2012, for a review), the presence of supportive teachers and counselors are crucial points of contact for intervention and preventing exploitation (Greenbaum, 2020; Helpingstine et al., 2021). As such, the quality of interpersonal relationships across different layers of the socioecological context can either mitigate or exacerbate vulnerability to exploitation.

Together, the findings of this study highlight that minors with CSE experiences endure trauma not only from abuse and exploitation, but also from the severe disruption of their social and emotional development during critical stages of childhood and adolescence. This disruption is marked by social isolation and heightened vulnerability to victimization. At a time when minors begin to form vital social connections outside the family, this study reveals that many minors with CSE experiences lacked the opportunity to develop trusted, healthy relationships outside the family. Previous research on childhood abuse highlights the profound long-term effects of trauma, social isolation, and the absence of healthy relationships on youth development. These challenges often persist into adulthood, making it difficult to establish healthy connections, fostering cycles of repetitive abuse (Finkelhor, 2008; Macmillan, 2001).

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. In particular, the reliance on self-reported data from chat conversations introduces certain constraints. Minors might not fully articulate or recognize all the factors influencing their experiences of exploitation, and the absence of prompted questions in the dataset limits our ability to confirm whether and how minors themselves connected their social experiences (e.g., school absence, bullying) to their actual CSE experiences. While some minors explicitly linked experiences such as parental distress or lack of social support to their exploitation, others did not articulate these connections, whether due to difficulties recognizing them, feelings of shame or stigma, or internalized blame hindering their ability to express this to the online care providers.

Furthermore, this research does not examine differences by gender, age, race/ethnicity, or other demographics, as chat anonymity precluded data collection. However, studies show marginalized groups face higher CSE risks and limited support due to stereotyping and discrimination (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017; Cook et al., 2022; Gerassi & Nichols, 2021; Hurst, 2015). Future research should further contextualize the experiences of CSE among minors by examining their social positionality. Rather than reducing these experiences to demographic categories, research should incorporate an intersectional approach that considers how multiple, interwoven identities interact with the socioecological context, recognizing that identities are often multifaceted and complex, with considerable variation in individual experiences.

Moreover, this study sheds little light on the role of the neighborhood context while previous research has begun to show that neighborhood dynamics may, in fact, impact vulnerability to victimization (e.g., Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012; Turanovic, 2022). Similarly, macro-level factors, such as societal attitudes and systemic factors, were only tangentially addressed in the chats, primarily through negative perceptions of agencies such as youth care, police, and residential care settings. These broader socioecological factors are challenging to directly link to individual behaviors and experiences, especially given the secondary and qualitative nature of the data. Future research should aim to triangulate this study's findings with other data sources (e.g., interviews with service providers), to build a more comprehensive understanding of the socioecological contexts of minors experiencing CSE.

Lastly, this study cannot be used to draw conclusions about risk or protective factors that are unique to minors with CSE experiences, compared to others with different or no victimization experiences. While this study provides essential theoretical building blocks for understanding how context matters for CSE, quantitative research is needed to further test the importance and manifestations of social isolation (e.g., identifying the number of contacts within and beyond the microsystem), social vulnerability (e.g., linking CSE to exposure to harm and social withdrawal due to school dropout) and social resiliency (e.g., identifying when social connections and agency contact improves one's life course).

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides the first theoretical building blocks for further qualitative and quantitative research to uncover how context matters for vulnerability to CSE and potential other victimization types. Moreover, this study indicates that by fostering healthy relationships and supportive community structures, especially beyond family contexts, it may be possible to reduce the social vulnerabilities that contribute to the exploitation of minors. However, the online chats revealed only a few examples on social resiliency; further research is needed to understand the factors increasing social resiliency and the development of healthy relationships.

The findings from this study also have important implications for policy and practice. To effectively address CSE, interventions must be designed to operate across all layers of the socioecological model. For example, strengthening family support systems, enhancing school-based prevention programs, providing training to frontline professionals, including healthcare professionals,

improving community safety, and reforming institutional responses could collectively reduce the risk of CSE (Finigan-Carr et al., 2019; Firmin, 2020; Greenbaum, 2020). These findings also highlight the importance of integrating online and offline support systems to bolster the social resilience of minors who have experienced CSE. Furthermore, by fostering trauma-sensitive and non-stigmatizing environments that includes developing connections with trusted individuals within their exo- and macrosystems, it is possible to create a more supportive environment that encourages and facilitates help-seeking and help-accepting behaviors. Relatedly, it is crucial that agencies and other central actors within the socioecological contexts of minors (e.g., schools) are trained to proactively reach out to minors who may be stuck in unsafe and harmful ecological systems, to facilitate pathways to professional support systems. This should include developing guidelines for non-specialized people (e.g., neighbors) to act upon concerns of unsafe settings.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical need for a socioecological approach to understanding and addressing CSE. The findings emphasize the importance of considering not only the immediate familial environment but also broader social and institutional factors in understanding and addressing the vulnerabilities of minors who have experienced CSE. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, utilizing comprehensive and multi-layered approaches to better identify and mitigate risks associated with CSE. By recognizing the complex interplay of factors across different environmental layers, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to protect vulnerable young people, prevent exploitation and promote their healthy development.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ieke de Vries: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sarah Ebrahim:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Daan Donninger:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Berber van der Meer:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Sjoerd van Bommel:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

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The data that has been used is confidential.

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