



# Cultural Norms, Digital Dynamics, and Community Responses: Addressing Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Medan

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**Abstract.** *Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) is a significant challenge in Medan, Indonesia. This paper explores CSEA from social and cultural perspectives, examining the influence of social media and the internet. By analyzing local cultural norms, societal attitudes, and community dynamics, this study aims to understand how these factors contribute to CSEA and shape victims' experiences. Additionally, it investigates the dual role of social media and the internet in both facilitating and combating CSEA. Employing a mixed-methods approach, employ a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach, the study combines literature review, participant observation, and qualitative interviews with survivors, children, authorities, social workers, and community leaders. The findings reveal that cultural stigmas and societal attitudes significantly impact victims' willingness to report abuse. Traditional beliefs often lead to victim-blaming and silence, perpetuating the cycle of abuse. The proliferation of digital platforms has created new avenues for exploitation but also offers tools for awareness and support. In Medan, the diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds adds complexity to addressing CSEA. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive, community-driven approaches, integrating local insights with technological tools. Strategies include community education programs, social media campaigns, and digital reporting mechanisms. In conclusion, a holistic approach combining socio-cultural understanding and technology is essential to prevent CSEA and empower victims in Medan.*

**Keywords:** *Child sexual exploitation and abuse, cultural norms, social media, community-driven approaches, intervention strategies*

## 1. Introduction

The increasing global internet penetration, which reached an estimated 5.3 billion users in 2023, has brought profound changes in how people interact online, including engagement in sexual activities (Cooper, Golden, & Marshall, 2006). With the expansion of the internet, child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) has also evolved, becoming more pervasive through digital platforms. INTERPOL's Child Sexual Exploitation database, holding over 4.9 million images and videos, has been instrumental in identifying 41,900 victims globally (INTERPOL, 2018). This highlights the growing need for robust digital surveillance and international cooperation to combat online CSEA effectively.

CSEA is not a new phenomenon; it has deep historical roots, both globally and within Indonesia. Societal taboos, coupled with a lack of reporting mechanisms, have kept CSEA hidden for generations. In Indonesia, cultural and social barriers have long obstructed efforts to address this issue, despite increasing awareness and advocacy since the 1980s and 1990s (Finkelhor, 1994). ECPAT Indonesia (2019) reported a disturbingly high prevalence of CSEA in the country, with Indonesia ranking among the top ten nations for online child sexual exploitation cases.

Technological advancements, particularly the widespread use of the internet and mobile devices, have reshaped the landscape of CSEA. Perpetrators now exploit children

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through online platforms, social media, and the dark web, which has led to an increase in the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). However, technology has also empowered law enforcement and advocacy groups with new tools to fight CSEA. Digital forensics and global databases like INTERPOL's have been crucial in identifying victims and perpetrators, underscoring the need for international collaboration (Whittle et al., 2013).

Cultural norms in Indonesia, particularly in Medan, heavily influence the occurrence and reporting of CSEA. In many communities, sexual matters are taboo, leading to underreporting and a lack of awareness about abuse. Gender roles also play a critical role; boys are often less likely to report abuse due to societal expectations of masculinity (Jones, 2017). Furthermore, the stigma associated with sexual abuse deters victims and families from seeking help, reinforcing a culture of silence that allows CSEA to persist.

Addressing CSEA in Medan faces significant challenges. Limited resources, inadequate legal frameworks, and inconsistent law enforcement hinder efforts to protect children. Additionally, law enforcement officers, educators, and healthcare professionals often lack the training necessary to handle CSEA cases effectively (Setyowati, 2020). These gaps in intervention and support systems leave many victims without adequate protection or recourse, exacerbating the problem.

Despite these challenges, community-based responses have proven vital in addressing CSEA. Local NGOs, religious institutions, and government agencies in Medan play critical roles in prevention, intervention, and support for victims. Grassroots initiatives have raised awareness and provided essential services to victims and their families (Komnas Perlindungan Anak, 2022). Religious leaders, in particular, have been effective in changing community attitudes towards CSEA, fostering environments where victims feel more empowered to come forward.

Global and local initiatives have shown that collaboration is key to combating CSEA. Organizations like ECPAT International and INTERPOL have implemented programs that combine awareness campaigns, law enforcement training, and victim support services. In Medan, local NGOs have partnered with international organizations to improve education, advocacy, and support for victims, creating safer environments for children and offering holistic care for survivors (UNICEF Indonesia, 2021). Through these efforts, a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach to addressing CSEA is emerging.

## 2. Literature Review

### Children Sexual Exploitation And Abuse (CSEA)

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) is a critical global issue with alarming statistics and trends. Globally, the prevalence of CSEA is significant, with the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC, 2021) reporting that millions of children are exploited each year. The UNODC (2020)<sup>1</sup> estimates that approximately 1 in 5 children have experienced sexual violence globally. Furthermore, data from INTERPOL's Child Sexual Exploitation database reveals over 4.9 million images and videos, highlighting the extensive nature of the problem (INTERPOL, 2018). Studies such as those by ECPAT International (2019) provide evidence of increasing trends in both offline and online abuse, underscoring the need for comprehensive strategies to address these issues.

### Cultural And Societal Factors

Cultural norms and societal attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping the incidence and reporting of CSEA. Cultural stigmas and traditional beliefs can either exacerbate or mitigate the occurrence of CSEA. In many cultures, discussing sexual abuse is taboo, which often results in underreporting and a lack of support for victims. For instance, in some Asian

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2020). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org>

cultures, including Indonesia, there is a strong cultural stigma surrounding sexual matters, which can lead to victim-blaming and hinder the reporting of abuse (Jones, 2017). The concept of "honor" and family reputation may contribute to suppressing reports of abuse (Herman, 2005).

In Indonesia, and specifically in Medan, cultural and societal factors significantly influence the dynamics of CSEA. Indonesia is a diverse country with a variety of cultural practices and social norms that impact how CSEA is addressed. In Medan, local cultural norms often emphasize the importance of family honor and societal reputation, which can discourage victims from coming forward (Kusuma, 2021). The stigma associated with sexual abuse can lead to victim-blaming, where victims are often seen as bringing shame upon their families (Nugroho, 2020).

The role of traditional beliefs and gender roles is also significant. In many parts of Indonesia, traditional gender roles and patriarchal attitudes can contribute to the marginalization of women and children, making it difficult for them to seek justice (Setiawan, 2019). Gender stereotypes and societal expectations may further exacerbate the challenges faced by victims, as boys and girls might receive different levels of support or face different kinds of stigma (Tanuwidjaja, 2020).

### Digital Dynamics

The rise of social media and the internet has transformed the landscape of CSEA, both by facilitating abuse and offering new tools for intervention. The internet provides perpetrators with anonymous platforms to exploit children through social media, chat rooms, and websites dedicated to child sexual abuse material (Wolak et al., 2011). Research by Ringrose et al. (2013) emphasizes how online platforms are used for grooming and exploitation, creating new challenges for detection and prevention.

However, digital tools also hold significant potential for raising awareness and supporting victims. Online campaigns and educational resources can help increase public awareness and provide crucial information on recognizing and reporting abuse (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Additionally, digital forensic tools and databases, such as those maintained by INTERPOL and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), are vital for tracking perpetrators and rescuing victims (NCMEC, 2020). The use of machine learning and artificial intelligence in analyzing online content for signs of exploitation is an emerging area with promising potential for combating CSEA (Hollis, 2019).

## 3. Methodology

### Data Collection

1. **Participant Observation:** engage with participant observation within various communities in Medan. This involves spending extended periods in the field, observing daily activities, interactions, and practices related to child protection and exploitation. Detailed field notes will be kept to record observations and reflections. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of the social and cultural context in which CSEA occurs.
2. **Focus Groups:** Focus groups will be organized to facilitate discussions among community members, including parents, educators, and youth. These group discussions will help uncover collective attitudes, beliefs, and experiences related to CSEA and community responses. Focus groups will provide a platform for participants to share their views and interact with each other, revealing communal norms and values.
3. **Document Analysis:** Relevant documents such as local reports, policy documents, and media articles will be analyzed to provide additional context and corroborate findings from fieldwork. This analysis will help understand the broader societal and policy environment related to CSEA in Medan.

### Data Analysis

Data collected through ethnographic methods will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involves:

1. **Thematic Analysis:** Themes such as community attitudes, gender roles, stigma, and family honor will be explored in depth. Thematic analysis will help in understanding how these factors contribute to or mitigate CSEA.
2. **Narrative Analysis:** Personal stories and narratives from survivors and community members will be analyzed to understand individual and collective experiences. This will help illuminate the human impact of CSEA and the cultural context in which it occurs. Narrative analysis will focus on the structure, content, and meaning of these stories, providing rich insights into the lived experiences of participants.

Role of social media and the internet, the data analysis also explored the dual role of social media and the internet in facilitating and combating CSEA.

1. **Facilitation of Exploitation:** Interviews with authorities and social workers revealed that digital platforms are increasingly used for grooming and exploiting children. A social worker reported, "Many cases we handle involve perpetrators who first contacted their victims online. Social media provides anonymity and easy access to children." This trend was supported by field observations and document analysis, which highlighted the prevalence of online abuse cases.
2. **Tools for Awareness and Support:** Conversely, the internet also offers valuable tools for raising awareness and supporting victims. Several NGOs in Medan have launched social media campaigns to educate the public about CSEA and provide resources for victims. One campaign coordinator shared, "Our social media outreach has significantly increased awareness about CSEA. We receive many messages from people seeking help or wanting to report abuse." Digital reporting mechanisms and online support groups were identified as effective tools in empowering victims and encouraging them to come forward.

Ethnic and cultural diversity, The ethnographic approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how Medan's ethnic and cultural diversity influences CSEA dynamics.

1. **Variations in Cultural Practices:** The study found that cultural practices and attitudes towards CSEA varied among different ethnic groups in Medan. For example, communities with strong traditional values often had more pronounced stigmas around discussing sexual abuse. In contrast, some urban communities were more open to addressing CSEA issues. A community leader from a traditional ethnic group stated, "Talking about sex is taboo in our culture. This makes it hard to address sexual abuse openly." These variations necessitate tailored intervention strategies that respect cultural sensitivities.
2. **Community-Driven Approaches:** The findings emphasized the importance of community-driven approaches in combating CSEA. Successful initiatives involved local leaders and respected community members in education and intervention efforts. For example, a program involving religious leaders who spoke out against CSEA had a positive impact on community attitudes. One participant noted, "When our religious leader talked about protecting children from abuse, it changed many people's minds. They started seeing it as a serious issue."

## 4. Discussion And Findings

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed several key themes related to cultural stigmas and societal attitudes towards CSEA in Medan. Thematic coding identified recurring patterns in interviews and participant observations.

1. **Victim-Blaming and Silence:** Cultural stigmas, particularly among older generations, often place blame on victims, discouraging them from reporting abuse. Many survivors

feel responsible for bringing shame to their families.

2. **Family Honor:** The emphasis on family reputation prevents many families from reporting CSEA to avoid public disgrace, perpetuating the cycle of abuse.
3. **Capacity Building:** Local organizations lack adequate training and resources to handle CSEA cases effectively, affecting their ability to respond to these incidents.
4. **Collaborative Efforts:** Partnerships between local NGOs, government agencies, and international organizations have significantly improved prevention and intervention efforts.

Role of social media and the internet, the data analysis also explored the dual role of social media and the internet in facilitating and combating CSEA.

1. **Facilitation of Exploitation:** Digital platforms, especially social media, are increasingly used for grooming and exploiting children, providing anonymity and easy access to potential victims.
2. **Awareness and Support:** Conversely, social media campaigns by NGOs raise awareness and provide resources for victims, offering reporting tools and online support groups.

Ethnic and cultural diversity, The ethnographic approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how Medan's ethnic and cultural diversity influences CSEA dynamics.

1. **Cultural Variations:** Different ethnic groups in Medan have varying attitudes toward CSEA. Traditional communities often have stronger stigmas, making discussions about sexual abuse more difficult, while urban areas tend to be more open.
2. **Community-Driven Approaches:** Engaging local and religious leaders in prevention efforts has positively influenced attitudes towards CSEA, leading to greater community awareness and action.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has identified and analyzed various social, cultural, and digital factors influencing child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) in Medan. From a global to a local perspective, CSEA remains a significant challenge that requires a holistic and community-based approach for effective intervention.

The findings reveal that cultural norms and societal attitudes in Medan play a crucial role in the dynamics of CSEA. Cultural stigma and victim-blaming often hinder victims and their families from reporting abuse, perpetuating the cycle of violence and exploitation. The ethnic and cultural diversity in Medan adds complexity to prevention and intervention efforts, necessitating culturally sensitive and inclusive strategies.

Technological advancements, particularly the use of social media and the internet, have transformed the landscape of CSEA. While digital platforms provide new opportunities for perpetrators to exploit children, they also offer tools for raising awareness, providing support, and facilitating reporting. Social media awareness campaigns and digital reporting mechanisms show great potential in reducing CSEA when implemented effectively.

Local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, and government agencies play a crucial role in the prevention, intervention, and support for CSEA victims. Community-based approaches involving education, psychosocial support, and capacity building have proven effective in reducing CSEA incidents and aiding victim recovery. This research also highlights the key challenges in addressing CSEA in Medan, including limited resources, inadequate legal frameworks, and lack of awareness. Overcoming these challenges requires closer collaboration among stakeholders, capacity building through training, and advocacy for policy changes that support children's rights.

In conclusion, a holistic approach that integrates socio-cultural understanding with technology is essential for preventing and addressing CSEA in Medan. Recommended strategies include community education programs, social media campaigns, and effective digital reporting mechanisms. By adopting a comprehensive and collaborative approach, it

is hoped that the incidence of CSEA can be minimized, and victims can receive the protection and support they need.

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