

CENTRE FOR ABUSE AND TRAUMA STUDIES (CATS) NEWSLETTER, JUNE 2024

We are delighted to present our most recent newsletter to outline some of the exciting research and training that CATS has been doing in recent months. As can be seen we have a number of ongoing and new projects, publishing findings and disseminating at conferences. We have a broad reach, despite relatively small staff size, encompassing issues around abuse and trauma in the digital world, affecting children, young people and workers. We are pleased to share this with you and welcome feedback. Toni Bifulco, (Director).

Addressing AI-generated child sexual abuse material



**LUCY
FAITHFULL
FOUNDATION**

CATS remains at the forefront of research tackling emerging threats posed by AI-generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM). After submitting a bid for a 1-year research project to the National Research Centre on Privacy, Harm Reduction and Adversarial Influence Online ([REPHRAIN](#)) last month in cooperation with the British Police and the [Police Education Consortium](#) (led by MDX), we are currently working on bid for a 2-year research project in collaboration with leading partners such as the Lucy Faithful Foundation, the CSEA Covert Intelligence Team, the Marie Collins Foundation and partners from the global south. We aim to comprehensively understand and deal with these technological advancements in order to better safeguard vulnerable individuals, provide resources to law enforcement, and influence critical policy changes in digital safety.

Bids submitted:

- *VR-RESPONSE PROJECT – Virtual Reality Training for Police to Detect and Disrupt Crimes Against Children in the Metaverse.* REPHRAIN, Martellozzo, Bradbury, Meggyesfalvi. £92k
- *Tackling victim-blaming language in the Criminal Justice System using large language models: Leveraging domain expertise to produce targeted results.* Digital Good Fund, Spence (PI), Sayers, Polajnar. £49k
- *Evaluating Digital Platform Spaces for Wellbeing: platform users as living threads for analysing good social relationships,* Digital Good Fund, Tseng, Spence (Co-I). £50k

Bids awarded:

- Developing an algorithm to identify high risk/high harm perpetrators of domestic abuse and VAWG. Devon & Cornwall Police, Spence (PI), Sayers, Polajnar, Davies, Horvath. £38k.

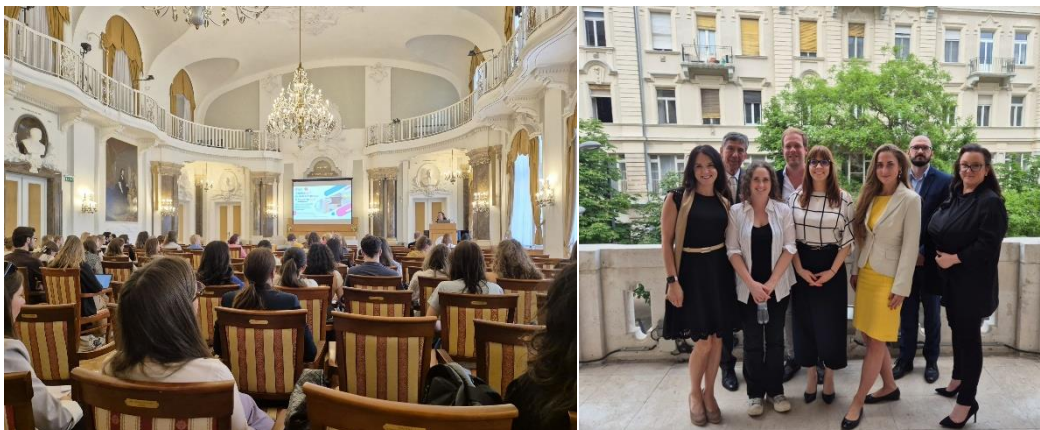


Sharing knowledge & Developing gap filling tools

Conferences:

We are proud of our members' leading roles at the national "PIER24: Tackling online harms: Transforming the whole system approach conference". Prof Elena Martellozzo and Paula Bradbury presented key insights to our "Virtual Reality Risks Against Children" ([VIRRAC](#)) project. The project, led in cooperation with the University of East London, and focused on capturing the experiences and voices of young people directly, produced 5 short videos for children and a toolkit report for professionals as part of a 1-year project tackling child safety in the virtual worlds/metaverses.

- Martellozzo, E., & Bradbury, P. *Virtual Reality Risks Against Children / Education and Awareness section*. PIER24, May 2024, London.
- DeMarco, J., & Spence, R. *Content Moderator Welfare*. PIER24, May 2024, London.
- Martellozzo, E. Bradbury, P. & Meggyesfalvi, B. *Preventing and Tackling Online Sexual Violence Against Children & Youth in the Metaverse*. [2nd International Conference on Promoting Digital Wellbeing](#), May 2024, Porto, Portugal.
- Bradbury, P. *Child adolescent behaviours online*. ['Safeguarding Children in the Digital World'](#), May 2024, Budapest, Hungary.
- DeMarco, J. *Sex offenders' online behaviour*. ['Safeguarding Children in the Digital World'](#), May 2024, Budapest, Hungary.
- Martellozzo, E. *Online pornography and how it may impact young people*. ['Safeguarding Children in the Digital World'](#), May 2024, Budapest, Hungary.
- Meggyesfalvi, B. *Online Child Safety*. ['Safeguarding Children in the Digital World'](#), May 2024, Budapest, Hungary.
- Spence, R. *Secondary trauma of frontline workers exposed to CSAM*. ['Safeguarding Children in the Digital World'](#), May 2024, Budapest, Hungary.



Knowledge Exchange & Addressing policy makers and professionals:

Dr Jeffrey DeMarco and Dr Ruth Spence will deliver a workshop on Psychological First Aid at the upcoming "Digital Justice & Online Harms Conference" hosted by the University of Suffolk. This event will explore trauma-informed practices, policy implementation, and the transformative role of technology in enhancing online safety. After exploring the issues facing content moderators and identifying coping strategies that work, presenting in the San Francisco HQ of Google last year, and extensively publishing in peer-reviewed journals, we are currently using the results to develop a supportive pilot intervention in cooperation with the MDX led [redLoop](#) group.

Professor Elena Martellozzo participated in a roundtable discussion on child protection in extended reality (XR) environments hosted by the international WeProtect Global Alliance. It brought together key stakeholders from government, technology sectors, civil society, and academia to address emerging risks and opportunities in digital environments.

Boglarka Meggyesfalvi presented in the REPHRAIN All-Hands meeting Edinburgh on our international efforts disseminating the VIRRAC research project findings in 4 different countries.

Dr Ruth Spence organised 'Responsible Machine Learning in Policing' a hybrid event exploring the ethical implications of deploying machine learning (ML) within law enforcement. The STAR funded project critically examined the complexities of ML algorithms in policing and created a framework for ethical implementation of complex algorithms.

Participation in recent international events & Networking:

CATS continues to strengthen its global impact through recent engagements at international events in Portugal and Hungary. Last month, colleagues participated in the '[2nd International Conference on Promoting Digital Wellbeing](#)' in Porto, Portugal, and the '[Safeguarding Children in the Digital World](#)' conference in Budapest, Hungary, highlighting our commitment to advancing child protection and digital safety on a global scale.

The whole team trained the cybercrime unit of the Hungarian national police forces, alongside content analysts of the Internet Hotline on topics such as online sexual offenders' behaviour, vulnerable groups' characteristics and victim support, and the prevention of secondary traumatisation of frontline workers.



Professor Martellozzo participated in an **ECPAT International** workshop in Brussels in June 2024, focusing on gender, safety, and help-seeking in online gaming environments.

The workshop addressed critical questions such as:



- Are civil society organizations engaging the online gaming sector in a way that best serves the interests of boys and girls?
- How can online games be leveraged to address the gendered dimensions of harm and help-seeking?
- How will the evolving regulatory landscape impact child safety in online gaming?

While in Brussels, Professor Martellozzo also participated in a closed-door event organised by the Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini (FGB) for the **European Commission** as part of the SAAGE Network's efforts to build effective responses to cyber violence against women.

Elena shared her scientific insights on gender-based violence alongside distinguished experts from across Europe, contributing to the broader understanding and strategic planning needed to combat these issues effectively.

These events provided platforms for our researchers to contribute significantly to discussions on emerging risks in digital environments and share insights from our research projects, as well as growing Middlesex University's international reputation. Both conferences were featured in national media. Our collaborations with international partners, including universities, students, NGOs, and law enforcement agencies, exemplify our proactive approach to building and maintaining meaningful professional networks.

Peer-reviewed publications



Our team regularly publishes in peer-reviewed journals. Our latest contributions to the academic community are:

Bradbury, P. and Martellozzo, E. (2024). Exposed Online: Exploring Risks and the Imperative for Rethinking Children's Online Safety Education. *Safeguarding and Child Protection Association Journal*, 1, pp. 15-29.

Martellozzo, E., & Bradbury, P. (2023). How the pandemic has made young people more vulnerable to risky online sexual trade. *ISSUES Pornography*, 423.

Bradbury, P., Bleakley, P. and Martellozzo, E. (2023). 'I Had No Choice': Adult Neutralisation of Online Sexual Engagement with Children. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 38(2), pp. 295-309.

Martellozzo, E., Bleakley, P., Bradbury, P., Spence, R., & DeMarco, J. (2023). Supporting digital key workers: Addressing the challenges faced by content moderators during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Technology, Policy & Management*.

Bleakley, P., Martellozzo, E., Spence, R., & DeMarco, J. (2023). Moderating cyberspace: Should policing online CSAM be a matter of self-regulation by technology companies, or is greater state regulation needed? *European Journal of Criminology*.

Spence, R., Harrison, A., Bradbury, P., Bleakley, P., Martellozzo, E., & DeMarco, J. (2023). Content moderators' strategies for coping with the stress of moderating content online. *Journal of Online Trust & Safety*.

Zasiekina, L., Duchyminska, T., Bignardi, G., and Bifulco, A. (2023). War trauma impacts in Ukrainian combat and civilian populations: Moral injury and associated mental health symptoms. *Military Psychology*, 35(1), pp. 45-60.

Meggyesfalvi, B. (2023). Challenges in investigating self-generated online child sexual abuse material. *Belugyi Szemle*, English Edition. Published by the Home Office.

These publications highlight CATS' commitment to advancing knowledge and informing policy on critical issues in abuse and trauma related topics. Besides academic journals we regularly publish blog posts, feature our work on social media platforms, and contribute to programmes of different media outlets such as the BBC and Radio 4.

CPD training

TRAINING



Our online training for social workers and psychologists in children's services, on the Attachment Style Interview and Parenting Role Interview continues, directed by Catherine Jacobs. Despite challenges faced in local authority social care teams, practitioners have sought out training in assessment tools to aid their evidence-based practice. This has included teams in the UK and the Isle of Man as well as in Australia. Our trainings provide follow-up mentoring to enable good translation from research to practice. See more here:

[Centre for Abuse & Trauma Studies | Lifespan Training](#)

OUR TEAM

Antonia Bifulco (Director) Elena Martellozzo & Jeffrey Demarco (Assoc Directors); Ruth Spence (Project manager); Catherine Jacobs (CPD training lead) Jenni Ward (Senior Researcher), Paula Bradbury and Boglarka Meggyesfalvi (Researchers).



Find out more here: [Academic research in the digital age | CATS research centre](#)