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## How Plausible are the Accounts of Child Victims of Sexual Abuse? A Study of Bizarre and Unusual Scripts Reported by Children

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### ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse is a serious social problem. In reports of sexually abused children, victims' narratives often contain elements that suggest the abuse was recorded to create images for child pornography with sadistic, bizarre, or perverted details. The presence of unusual or bizarre elements in the accounts of abused children affects their credibility. The purpose of this paper is to assess the presence and prevalence of these elements in the reports of children with suspected sexual abuse and to examine their consistency with verified cases of child abuse. We conducted two studies. In Study 1, we developed a list of 16 categories of unusual and bizarre scripts reported by children in reports of sexual abuse. In Study 2, we validated the list by examining the presence of the identified scripts in the actual experiences of both individuals convicted of crimes related to child pornography and Italian police officers who were involved with child pornography as part of their official duties. Our findings suggest that children's accounts of sexual abuse should be considered credible even if they contain unusual or bizarre elements that also occur in child pornography and therefore may reflect events actually experienced rather than merely the child's fantasy or imagination.

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Child abuse; child pornography; police officers; sex offenders

Child sexual abuse is still a social emergency today. It is estimated that between 8% and 31% of females and between 3 and 17% of males in the world have received some form of sexual abuse during childhood (Barth et al., 2013; Finkelhor & Dunne, 2013). In Italy, an extensive survey by CISMAI and Terre des Hommes (2015) reported that about 4.2% of children taken into care by social services were reported to have experienced sexual abuse. A recent retrospective self-report study conducted with young Italian adults (Prino et al., 2018) estimated that approximately 18% had experienced some form of sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence, with females reporting a higher incidence than males. According to the most recent data made available by the Ministry of the Interior (ISTAT, 2020), an estimated 1418

cases of sexual abuse against minors were reported in 2018, with the incidence among females three times higher than that of males. The data appears to be in line with the previous quinquennium. Researchers have identified the 5 to 11 year old age group as most at risk of sexual abuse (Cattaneo et al., 2007). Cattaneo et al. (2007) found that fondling (34.3%) and anal/vaginal penetration (33.9%) were the most common forms of sexual abuse among children examined for suspected sexual abuse. According to ISTAT (2020) data, 55% of court trials for sexual offenses against children in Italy end with the conviction of the accused.

Despite the important efforts made by child protection authorities and experts involved in clinical, forensic, and research studies, a large proportion of cases are likely to remain submerged (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Prino et al., 2018). From the narratives of sexual abuse by victims in clinical and forensic contexts, there are some suggestions that, in the stories of children and adults who have suffered sexual victimization in childhood, there are not infrequently suggestions of activities that exploit images of abuse by the abuser, and especially in these circumstances emerge rather perverse, bizarre, or sadistic details, which nevertheless tend to recur in the course of the narratives of different victims.

It is difficult to estimate the prevalence of fantastic, bizarre, unusual or improbable elements in allegations of child sexual abuse. Dalenberg's (1996) study estimated that 3% of initial allegations of child abuse reported by children aged 3–17 years reported fantastic or unusual elements. The highest number of fantastic elements was found in the reports of children aged 4–9 years (Dalenberg, 1996). Very interesting, is the fact that 15% of the ascertained cases of sexual abuse contained fantastic elements, against 1.5% of the “questionable cases” (Dalenberg, 1996). The literature on the prevalence and possible risk factors associated with fantastic, bizarre, and unusual elements in allegations of child sexual abuse is almost absent; however, it appears that younger children (under 9 years of age) and those who have experienced more severe abuse (e.g., penetration or repeated sexual abuse) may be more likely to report fantastic elements in their allegations (Dalenberg, 1996; Everson, 1997).

There are several mechanisms that could explain why fantastic and unusual material emerges in the stories of victimized children (Dalenberg et al., 2002; Everson, 1997) and it could be that children exposed to greater victimization report their stories in a less accurate and straight-forward way (Everson, 1997). However, it is undeniable that the presence of fantastic, bizarre, sadistic, and unusual elements touches on the issue of children's credibility, and the evaluation of an allegation of child sexual abuse containing these types of elements in children's statements is a clinical and forensic challenge. Unusual elements are aspects that weigh in the assessment of the statements of children suspected to have been sexually abused, not infrequently raising doubts about their

reliability, and therefore deserve attention (K. A. Peace et al., 2015; Dalenberg et al., 2002). The presence of unusual details, such as of people, objects, or events that are unique, unexpected, or surprising, but meaningful in the context, are part of several assessment protocols on the credibility of the child, including the CBCA (Criteria Based Content Analysis) (Dalenberg et al., 2002; KA Peace et al., 2012; K. A. Peace et al., 2015). It is possible that the presence of this details may lead the expert to believe that the abuse is unlikely to have occurred or lead him or her to assume problems with the reality check in the child. This could then affect the overall assessment of the child's credibility, with significant reverberations on child protection and clinical intervention. If a child's allegation is not deemed credible, it is difficult for adequate protective measures to be taken. The child may be then exposed to repeated sexual victimization with consequences for his or her psychophysical development and safety. Adults who work with children (e.g., teachers and educators) may be less willing to pass on a child's report of abuse to the judicial authorities if the allegation contains bizarre content, thus making it difficult to investigate.

In the Italian legal system, the credibility of the child in the prosecution of child sexual abuse is a critical element. In judicial proceedings, the magistrate may order expert assessments from mental health professionals with experience in forensics, such as psychologists and neuropsychiatrists. The assessments aim to provide an overall evaluation of the child – in particular, they aim to identify any psychopathological disorders that may interfere with the child's ability to perceive reality and accurately report his/her experiences, as well as situations that could lead to strong suggestibility in the child. The credibility of the minor appears to be a key element of the judicial procedure and could influence the magistrate's decision. In assessment of the child's accounts by the magistrate and mental health specialists, the presence of bizarre and unusual elements may be considered evidence of low credibility of the child (Biscione & Pingitore, 2012; Gulotta, 2011).

While considering the different factors that can intervene in shaping the traumatic memory of sexual abuse (Malacrea & Lorenzini, 2002) and taking into account the possible implications of the emergence of these stories during a psychotherapeutic journey (Dettore & Fuligni, 1999; Epstein & Bottoms, 1998), the suggestion resulting from such narratives concerns the fact that children report certain sequences of events, actions, and types of sexual exploitation games that seem to refer to what we might hypothesize as "abuse scripts." That is, in their stories of sexual victimization some children report narratives that seem to organize themselves along scripts or thematic tracks. These scripts can be characterized by particular places, the use of particular clothing or objects, interaction

with substances, the involvement of animals and adults in sexual practices, bloody and sadistic practices, or impersonation of certain characters that feed the script.

The impression resulting from the perceived recurrences in the narratives of some children who are victims of sexual abuse is that minors may be involved in some sort of script, the “abuse scripts,” drawn by and for the abuser or abusers, since it is that particular script that appeases the deviant and paraphilic fantasies of the pedophile or the sexual aggressor of minors. It is as if the child were involved in the scene of abuse to unknowingly act a part, both real and perverse, in which it is no longer only characterized by the interaction with the actual abuser but also an audience of possible “likers,” which in turn can orient the ways in which abusers act in reality, just as it happens with the “influencer” on the internet. It is intuitive to infer a particular difficulty for children involved in obtaining protection: those themes, which are therefore reenacted in the stories of children who have come into contact with these realities, contain boundary elements that can pollute the credibility of their stories.

Elements that are not only unusual, but also degrading, cruel, and terrifying, may characterize these scripts. An extreme example of a script relating to abuse could be well exemplified by ritualistic abuses, particularly satanic abuses (Kelley, 1988, 1989). In Satanic ritualistic abuse, sexual violence is accompanied by physical and psychological violence, and survivors’ accounts report elements such as ingestion of human excrement, seminal fluid, or blood; cannibalism; ceremonies incorporating the torture or killing of animals or human beings (including children), the invocation of the devil or supernatural forces; taking drugs or “magic potions,” the presence of satanic symbols and songs, or disguises that impersonate the devil during the ceremony (Bottoms et al., 1996; Kelley, 1988, 1989).

Estimating the prevalence of such forms of abuse is complex and difficult, although they may be less rare than suspected (Finkelhor et al., 1988; Madu, 2001). It is understandable that narratives of abuse of this kind can evoke negative emotional responses and rejection in the operators, which could be led to disavowing the abuse, underestimating it, and prejudicially considering the bizarreness an exaggeration on the part of the child, when a careful and thorough evaluation is still necessary (Goodman et al., 1997; Nursten, Smith, 1996).

### **Child Pornography and the Dark Web**

If these abuse scripts characterized by bizarre, sadistic, or perverse, and therefore uncommon, elements can be linked to actual events enacted to satisfy the abusers’ fantasies, we should expect to find them reflected in child pornography material.

With the development of new technologies and the structure of the “dark web,” the possibilities of contact between sexual abusers of minors have increased, who can thereby discuss their tastes and experiences, but in particular exchange child pornography (Garrington et al., 2018; Macilotti, 2011). The “dark web” has created a marketplace for child pornography that brings producers and consumers together, even more securely and efficiently than in the 1990s, also increasing its volume (Macilotti, 2011, p. 201). According to an Italian survey (Macilotti, 2011), the majority of illicit content concerns prepubescent minors (86.2%), with a significant increase in representations of both children between 3 and 5 years (28.7%), and very young minors (10.1%).

In the literature there is (as far as we know) a lack of detailed classification of types of child pornography, which would enable the most frequent scripts to be detected, including those potentially associated with bizarre statements, and allow us to compare the repetitive salient elements in children’s narratives in more detail with the witness evidence represented by the images of the perpetrated abuse spread online. An attempt in this direction is represented by Taylor and colleagues (2001), who proposed a typology of pedophilic images based on the type of content. They identify 10 types, including images characterized by explicit erotic posing, others in which sex between children without adults (explicit sexual activity) is represented up to images containing adults engaging in sexual acts with (gross sexual assault) or without (sexual assault) penetration, and finally images containing sexual intercourse characterized by sadism and/or bestiality. According to an Italian survey (Macilotti, 2011) the majority of child pornography observed relates to secondary adult-minor sexual interactions (69%) and a lower proportion of children are affected by sadistic/bestial content (3%). Although not exhaustive, this classification (Taylor et al., 2001) may suggest that the perpetrator of sexual offenses toward minors can search for different materials on the web, even according to his specific fantasies, and share them with other attackers by spreading certain scripts.

Some of these scripts can therefore be characterized by uncommon elements, perceived as bizarre and extravagant, and thus become parts of abused minors’ narratives. Such scripts could also influence the abuser by increasing the search for these materials or influencing the ways in which abusive acts are carried out in the real world.

### **Aims of This Study**

Recognizing in the accounts of minors elements that may refer to a potentially real event, even when events and scenes can be perceived as bizarre and unrealistic, can have implications for both forensic evaluation and clinical

intervention. Finding scripts that recur in children's stories could also help with criminal investigations. The aim of this work is to identify categories of recurring unusual or bizarre scripts in the accounts of sexually abused children, and to check their actual presence in online child pornography. Two studies were undertaken to achieve these aims. The goal of the first study (Study 1) was to develop a list of categories of abuse-related scripts characterized by bizarre and unusual elements, and to study their prevalence in the children's accounts. This was done by collecting and qualitatively analyzing uncommon or bizarre statements produced by children in relation to suspected or verified experiences of sexual abuse.

The objective of the second study (Study 2) was to support the content validity of the list of abuse-related categories developed in Study 1. The categories identified in Study 1 were presented to two groups of adults with experience related to child pornography: police officers in charge of investigative activities in the fight against child pornography, and sex offenders convicted of crimes related to the production or consumption of child pornography. The participants answered how frequently, if at all, they had observed each of the types of scripts included in the list (see [Table 1](#)). The study 2's aim is to validate the list. If the content validity of the list of abuse-related categories is supported, it has implications for the assessment of accounts given by children. Specifically, it would suggest that even if unusual, children's accounts must be taken seriously in forensic and clinical fields, and the bizarreness of the scenes described by the children should not be considered evidence of low credibility. Study 2 allows us to assess the likelihood that the unusual and bizarre elements reported by children in their accounts are related to events actually experienced, and not imagined or fantasized by the child.

## **Study 1 Method**

### ***Participants and Procedure***

The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Italian Center for Mediation Promotion (CIPM). We identified 21 clinical experts on child abuse (child psychiatrists and psychotherapists). They were asked to make available for analysis the accounts of 162 children involved as victims in trials on suspicion of sexual abuse. From these cases, 409 descriptions of the sexual events of which they were allegedly victims were extracted.

In order to identify unusual or bizarre statements in the children's accounts, we relied on previous research into the fantastic, unrealistic, and paraphilic elements contained in the accounts of child victims of sexual abuse (Dalenberg, 1996; Dalenberg et al., 2002; DSM-5, 2013; Everson, 1997;

**Table 1.** List of Unusual Scripts in Child Sexual Abuse (LUSCSA).

Uncommon script of child. boy/girl	Description	Examples
Recital	The child is involved in acting scenes depicting fantastical stories, fairy tales, folk narratives or literature. Children may be required to impersonate, even disguised, some characters from the narrative and fairy-tale world.	M6: A wolf named Giovanni would go to the cellar where there was a good she-wolf that they wanted to hurt and he would run away; Franca would hold him and take him away; I had to cuddle the male wolf and they were cuddles that a woman usually does to a man F6: Father Christmas would put his thing inside my 'gyna. and then his willy in my mouth and I was about to throw up
Fantastic characters	There are characters from the fantasy world, and therefore fairy tales (e.g., Little Red Riding Hood; the Wolf; The Witch), Animated Cartoons (e.g., Aladdin; The Little Mermaid; Super-heroes like Spiderman or Batman), or mythology and folklore (e.g., the Befana; Santa Claus. The Pagliacci, etc.). Such characters can be animated (children or adults) or inanimate (e.g., photos, billboards, statues, dolls/effigies representing them).	M3: Dad would wear makeup, put on a wig, get dressed as a woman and make love with me M5: They would put handcuffs on me, they were dressed as cops, they made me kiss their willy
Adult Sexual Disguise	Presence of Adults disguised as people of the opposite sex	
Adult Non-Sexual Disguise	Presence of adults disguised as characters of the fantasy world (e.g., superheroes, cartoon characters), mythological (e.g., ancient deities), folkloric (e.g., Santa Claus, Pagliacci), and animal (adults disguised as animals or wearing animal masks). Adults disguised as elements of civil society (e.g., adults wearing medical uniforms) or military (e.g., adults wearing camouflage uniforms or calling up law enforcement) are also included.	
Child Sexual Disguise	Children who wear clothes of the opposite sex or who are styled as adults of the opposite sex.	M7: Mom would dress me up as a girl, with long hair, she would put nail polish on my nails
Group Sexual Scenes	The child observes (look) or is involved in group sexual scenes, i.e. sexual situations involving groups of minors, groups of adults, or groups of children and adults.	F8: Dad would keep me still, without a word; I remember different men who touched me and penetrated me; I remember that at the beginning it was all dark and then there was a tiny light in the darkness. F10: He would have me see dogs making love, he would have me put my dog's penis inside me and watch
Animal sexual interactions	The child observes (look) or is involved with animal sexual.	F7: When I had my period, my father would stick it in my butt and in the front he would stick a sausage
Sexual interactions with food or commonly used objects not usually used in sexual practices.	The child is involved in sexual activities involving the use of food (e.g., vegetables, fruits, sausages) or everyday items (e.g., pens, kitchen tools, etc.).	F4: They would say to me "Dumb fuck off shut up dumb" uncle would tie me naked to a pole, and would put an iron stick in my vagina
Use of violence	The child is involved in sexual activities involving the use of physical violence (e.g., kicks, punches, blunt objects, etc.) and psychological violence (e.g., denigration, humiliation, use of offensive words), coercion (e.g., laces, belts, handcuffs) or fear-inducing actions (e.g., threats, screams, lights).	

(Continued)



**Table 1.** (Continued).

Uncommon script of child. boy/girl	Description	Examples
Use of Narcotics and other substances	The child is involved in sexual activity with the use of narcotics or other substances, such as alcohol and drugs, aimed at altering the child's state of consciousness.	F4: They would me give candies so I could better pretend that I was dead, to take better pictures, to make me sleep
Sexual interactions with excrement	The child is involved in sexual activities involving the contact or ingestion of own or other excrement.	F4: They made me drink pee and eat poo and drink it when the men did a wee in my mouth. The women kept me still, they would stick me to the butt and the willy of the men (which was still, then the pee would come out from the willy) and I was stuck with the mouth; all I had to do was eat the wee and the poo, while everyone laughed but I did not laugh nor talk.
Representations of medical environments	The child is involved in sexual activity in medical settings (e.g., medical practices, the presence of people dressed as a doctor or nurse; genital inspections as if they were specialist visits, or use of tools commonly used in the medical field).	F7: In the house of the squatters where my nanny would take me to they touched my 'gyna there was a female doctor, in a lab coat who did it to other people, men and women. A. was also there
Representations of religious or occult-related environments	The child is conducted in sexual activities in settings that evoke religious themes or related to occultism. Therefore, environments (churches, cemeteries, altars), objects and symbols (e.g., crucifix), activities (e.g., prayers; invocations, sacrifices, magical rites) and characters (e.g., presence of the devil or devil) that refer to religion or the occult, such as Satanism.	F4: They touched my private parts with a cross
Death and torture	The child is involved in sexual activities that are characterized by the death or torture (real or simulated) of another individual, both adult and minor. The child may be forced to witness or engage in physical violence (and killing) on the other.	M10: They beat up the little girl because she did not want to do those things: they killed her, she stopped breathing, she had blood on her face and on her legs, they put her inside a hole in the garden of one of my father's friends. There was also a baby in the kitchen cupboard, he was dead. They also put him in a hole in the garden with trash on top. F3: When he showed us that he killed a doll we thought that it was a real girl
Vampirism	Blood is the central theme of sexual interaction in which the child is involved. Or, the presence of people who personify vampires or behave as such, for example, by procuring their own or others' blood leakage and/or ingesting blood.	F10: Men who had sex with me in a group. At times, one of them would cut himself and blood would come out of his arm and then he would get me dirty with it
Sexualization of "playful activities"	The child is involved in sexual activities that are proposed as "playful activities" (playing), but which involve manipulating the genitals of the adult.	F5: Then we would play with puppets, the father would peak his willy out from behind the sofa and I had to catch it M6: The snow game. "to make snow": I had to spread a cream all over his body and a foam on his willy.

Malacrea & Cancrini, 2021). We considered a statement unusual or bizarre when it (1) referred to fantastic or bizarre elements, and/or (2) described the implementation of paraphilic or deviant behaviors.

The statements were extracted from expert reports, protected hearings, and chair excerpts from psychotherapy reported by professionals who treated children with suspected or proven sexual abuse. All content collected was qualitatively analyzed (i.e., read and annotated) by 2 experts experienced in the area of child abuse, both in scientific research and clinical or forensic interventions. Based on the definition above, they were asked to identify unusual or bizarre elements in the reports of abuse events in children from 2 to 12 years of age. They analyzed the material and independently identified unusual or bizarre elements. Results of these independent analyses were compared and discussed until a consensus was reached regarding the identification of unusual and bizarre elements.

The descriptions that were identified as bizarre were further analyzed by three researchers (coauthors of this paper and experts in the field of research on child sexual abuse), who each developed a set of unusual abuse script categories based on the examined accounts. The three sets of script categories were then compared, and discrepancies resolved through extensive discussion among the researchers, to arrive at a classification of a limited number of categories. Each list item has been therefore described in its characteristics and represents a script related to unusual or bizarre statements reported by minors. Each script indicates a scenario, situation, or mode in which the child might be involved during sexual abuse.

### ***Descriptive Data and Interrater Reliability***

A fourth coauthor of the paper (not involved in the development of the list) was preliminarily trained on how to recognize each script category by the authors who developed the list. Using the LUSCSA, the researcher examined the accounts to determine the percentage of children who reported each script in their accounts.

In order to assess the reliability of the researcher's use of the list in the classification of the children accounts, a second coder (who also was not involved in the development of the list items) independently used the list to examine a set of 100 accounts. We then determined the agreement rate between the two coders by computing Cohen's Kappa for each of the categories included in the list. Results were very good, with Kappa values ranging from .83 (for the item "narcotics or other substances") to .96 (for the item "sexual acts with animals").

## Study 1 Results

The experts analyzed all of the elements identified as unusual or bizarre by the coders to reach consensus about their status (i.e., common or unusual/bizarre descriptions). Of all these descriptions ( $N = 410$ ), 225 were identified as unusual or bizarre by the expert evaluators. A total of 117 children (72.2%) reported at least one unusual description in their accounts (F:  $N = 67$ , mean age = 6.08,  $SD = 2.34$ ).

In total, the researchers identified 27 different scripts (18, 16, and 20 scripts identified by the three researchers, respectively). The identified scripts were then compared with each other in order to reach a consensus about each category. Following this procedure, the total of 27 scripts was then reduced to 16 after overlapping scripts were collapsed. The researchers also reached an agreement with respect to the name and description of each category. This final list of 16 scripts was used to create a List of Unusual Scripts in Child Sexual Abuse (LUSCSA; see Table 1). It is worth noting that to develop the classification, we considered all reported accounts of child sexual abuse, not only those considered credible by the courts. The content validity of LUSCSA was analyzed in Study 2.

Table 2 reports the frequency and the mean age of children who reported at least once each of the identified unusual scripts in their testimonies, for the whole sample and differentiating by gender.

## Study 2 Method

### Participants

For study 2, two different groups were recruited, the first consisting of 52 agents of the Italian Postal Police working against online child exploitation. Most of them were males ( $n = 42$ , 81%) and their age ranged from 26 to 60, with a majority (75%) of individuals in the 46–60 year range. The second subsample consisted of 28 individuals convicted for offenses relating to the production and/or consumption of child pornography. Most of them were male ( $N = 21$ , 75%) with age ranging from 18 to 65 with 60% of them in the 41–60 year range. The response rate for the two subsamples was high: 85% and 92% respectively for police officers and convicted sex offenders.

### Procedure

The research was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and following the AIP (Italian Association of Psychology) ethical research guidelines. Prior to conducting the study, we obtained approval from the management of the Italian Postal Police, who participated as a research partner.

**Table 2.** Frequency of unusual scripts in the sample used for the development of the list.

Script category	N	Mean age	Female (%)	Male (%)	Mean age (F)	Mean age (M)
Recital	3	5.0	67	33	4.5	6.0
Fantastic characters	6	4.5	83	17	4.2	6.0
Adult Sexual Disguise	8	5.0	75	25	5.3	4.0
Adult Non-Sexual Disguise	8	5.3	75	25	5.0	6.0
Child Sexual Disguise	3	5.0	33	67	5.0	5.0
Group Sexual Scenes	52	7.2	60	40	6.9	7.5
Animal sexual interactions	15	5.8	73	27	5.2	7.5
Sexual interactions with food or commonly used objects not usually used in sexual practices.	10	7.3	70	30	7.0	8.0
Use of violence	27	5.9	67	33	6.3	5.1
Use of Narcotics and other substances	14	6.7	64	36	5.7	8.6
Sexual interactions with excrement	13	4.8	54	46	3.9	6.0
Representations of medical environments	4	6.3	75	25	5.0	10.0
Representations of religious or occult-related environments	15	5.9	73	27	5.5	7.0
Death and torture	12	6.8	67	33	6.4	7.5
Vampirism	3	6.3	67	33	7.0	5.0
Sexualization of "playful activities"	8	6.3	88	13	6.0	8.0

The participants were invited to take part in the research and asked to sign an informed consent. Individuals who agreed to participate were sent a web link to fill in an online questionnaire. The link allowed the questionnaire to be compiled anonymously on the SurveyMonkey platform. This platform was selected because it allows researchers to collect information without registering the IP of the respondent, thus guaranteeing anonymity. Half of the sex offender subsample (N = 15) were not allowed to fill out the online questionnaire and filled out a paper-and-pencil version of the same questionnaire instead.

Participants were asked to read the questionnaire and answer based on their prior experiences, i.e., experiences accumulated during their work (for police officers) or while committing sexual offenses (for the convicted individuals).

### **Instruments**

***Unusual Scripts in Child Sexual Abuse Checklist.*** The LUSCSA provides 16 scripts referring to types of uncommon statements reported by suspects or victims of sexual abuse. The scripts represent possible scenarios of sexual abuse experiences with uncommon or bizarre characteristics reported by children. For each item, the respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they recognized this script in the child pornography they had observed, using a response scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Almost Always/Always)

***Sociodemographic data.*** We collected data about gender, and age range.

## Study 2 Results

Table 3 shows the frequencies with which postal police officers and sex offenders report observing each of the scripts included in the list. It can be seen that none of the scripts were unknown to all respondents. Of the 16 scripts included in the instrument, only Vampirism was observed by less than 10% of the subjects in both groups. For most of the categories considered, the frequency of observation was higher for officers than for sex offenders. To determine whether the frequency of observation of different scripts by agents and sex offenders was significantly different, we conducted chi-square tests for independent samples. We found significant differences only with respect to two scripts: group sex scenes (chi-square (4) = 10.5,  $p = .03$ , more frequently observed by agents) and representation of medical environments (chi-square (3) = 10.20,  $p = .02$ , more frequently observed by sex offenders).

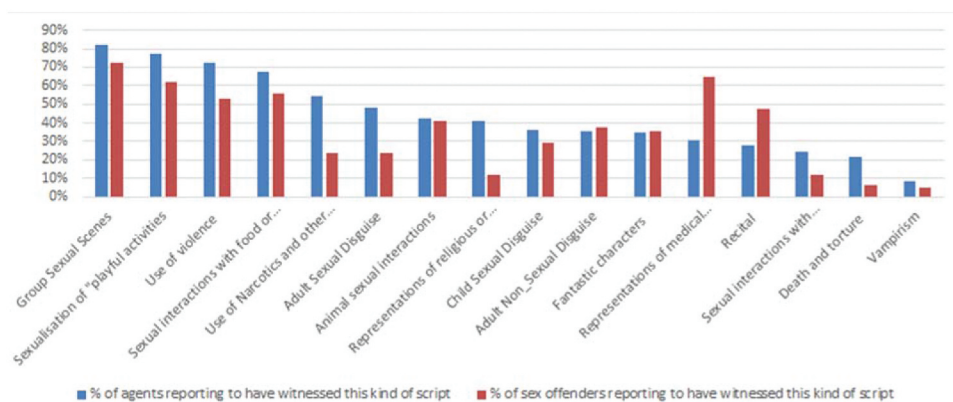
Figure 1 summarizes the data collected, highlighting for each script considered the frequency of respondents who stated that they had observed that script at all.

## Discussion

The aim of this work was to identify abuse-related scripts characterized by bizarre and unusual elements derived from the statements of suspected minor (up to 12 years old) victims of sexual abuse made in court or during psychotherapy to mental health professionals. Through a process of qualitative content analysis, 16 scripts characterized by unusual, bizarre, sadistic, and perverse aspects were identified (see Table 1). The evaluation of the credibility of the statements of suspected minor victims of sexual abuse is a complex aspect and unusual, bizarre, or perverse elements could lead the expert to judge the statements of the child as not credible and, more generally, could constitute a deterrent to reporting by adults who work with children to competent judicial bodies. This constitutes a critical issue for the child protection and development and the prosecution of offenders. We did not examine the credibility of the juveniles with respect to the identified scripts. The discrepancy in percentage of convictions between national statistics and this study may reflect the perceived lower credibility of the children in this study. While nationally it is estimated that approximately 55% of child sexual abuse prosecutions result in the conviction of the defendant, only 22% of the cases in our sample resulted in conviction. There are several mechanisms that can explain the inclusion of fantastic or bizarre material in juvenile accounts (Everson et al., 1997), and more research needs to be done in this area. The finding suggests that children's abuse stories characterized by unusual and

**Table 3.** Frequency of observation of uncommon/unusual scripts in child pornography as reported by police officers and child sex offenders.

	Police officers					Sex offenders				
	0 Never	1 Rarely	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Almost always/ always	0 Never	1 Rarely	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Almost always/ always
Recital	71.7%	21.7%	6.5%	0.0%	0.0%	52.9%	35.3%	0.0%	11.8%	0.0%
Fantastic characters	65.2%	30.4%	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%	64.7%	23.5%	5.9%	5.9%	0.0%
Adult Sexual Disguise	52.2%	32.6%	15.2%	0.0%	0.0%	76.5%	11.8%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Adult Non_Sexual Disguise	64.4%	28.9%	4.4%	2.2%	0.0%	62.5%	18.8%	18.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Child Sexual Disguise	63.8%	23.4%	8.5%	4.3%	0.0%	70.6%	5.9%	17.6%	5.9%	0.0%
Group Sexual Scenes	17.8%	28.9%	42.2%	11.1%	0.0%	27.8%	44.4%	11.1%	5.6%	11.1%
Animal sexual interactions	57.8%	17.8%	15.6%	8.9%	0.0%	58.8%	23.5%	5.9%	5.9%	5.9%
Sexual interactions with food or commonly used objects not usually used in sexual practices	32.6%	37.0%	23.9%	4.3%	2.2%	44.4%	50.0%	5.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Use of violence	27.7%	44.7%	19.1%	6.4%	2.1%	47.1%	47.1%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Use of Narcotics and other substances	45.7%	34.8%	17.4%	2.2%	0.0%	76.5%	5.9%	17.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Sexual interactions with excrement	75.6%	17.8%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%	88.2%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Representations of medical environments	69.6%	23.9%	4.3%	2.2%	0.0%	35.3%	47.1%	17.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Representations of religious or occult related environments	59.2%	28.6%	12.2%	0.0%	0.0%	88.2%	5.9%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Death and torture	78.3%	13.0%	6.5%	2.2%	0.0%	93.8%	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Vampirism	91.7%	6.3%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%	95.0%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Sexualization of "playful activities	22.9%	22.9%	29.2%	22.9%	2.1%	38.1%	33.3%	14.3%	9.5%	4.8%



**Figure 1.** Frequency of policemen and child sex offenders who witnessed each type of script at least once.

bizarre scripts may be less frequently associated with sentencing than others. Further investigation will be needed to clarify the relationship between unusual scripts and juvenile credibility.

Our contribution seems to be the first, as far as we know, to attempt the creation of a list of unusual scripts of sexual abuse. Although distinguished by their rarity or oddity, these scripts tend to be repeated in the statements of presumed child victims of sexual abuse as accepted in court or during a psychotherapeutic intervention. This formed the basis of Study 2. If such unusual statements tend to recur in the stories of children suspected victims of sexual abuse, there is the question of whether they might correspond to possible episodes of actual victimization. Thus, the question arises whether such statements, deemed by experts to be uncommon, unusual, sadistic, and perverse, might actually have occurred and thus testify to episodes of actual victimization.

It is possible that sexual abuse scripts reflect the sexual interests of the child's aggressor(s), thus involving children in particular situations and activities that are seen by experts in the field of abuse and maltreatment as particularly sadistic, perverse, unusual, and uncommon. A typical example is represented by satanic ritualistic abuse (Kelley, 1988, 1989). Among the unusual scripts of abuse our research identifies one in which satanic ritualistic abuse can be framed. It is therefore possible that these unusual scripts potentially represent the child's experience and that these scripts reflect the interest of the abusers. We know that paraphilic behaviors and fantasies are quite common in sexual offenders, and the diagnosis of paraphilia tends to be even more common in child sexual offenders (Eher et al., 2019; Woodworth et al., 2013). Among the most prevalent scripts in the material investigated were "group sexual scenes." It is estimated that fantasies related to group sex or orgies interest at least 8% of the general adult population (Joyal et al., 2015).

The theme is present in adult pornography; however, we have no knowledge of the prevalence of such fantasies or sexual interests in Italian child pornography users and child sexual offenders. Although the literature is scarce on sexual abuse toward children conducted by a group of people during a single episode (gang-related sexual abuse), some data suggest that children may be victims of these violent episodes (De La Torre Laso et al., 2021). Other themes highlighted in the study include “use of violence,” followed by scripts such as “animal sexual interactions,” “use of narcotics,” and “interaction with excrements.”

Work by Woodworth et al. (2013) found that 67% of child molesters surveyed had violent sexual fantasies involving minors, while 13% had sadistic paraphilias. Sadistic fantasies may also be at the core of child sexual homicides (Chopin & Beauregard, 2020; Chopin et al., 2021). It is difficult to determine the extent of the phenomenon; however, the term “snuff movie” is used in mass media to refer to films characterized by extreme torture that may result in the death of the victim. Our study identified a script related to “death and torture,” which could represent this extreme interest in torture, humiliation, and death of the victim. Whilst our study revealed a theme of “animal sexual interactions,” we found no literature on this topic in relation to child sexual abuse. Several studies do, however, document the presence of sexual interest in animals in the general population (Bártová et al., 2021). Less common were scripts such as “vampirism,” “fantastic characters,” or “child sexual disguise.” Sexual preferences, in particular paraphilic ones, can be heterogeneous and “vampirism,” for example, comes close to the theme of satanic ritualistic abuse (Kelley, 1988, 1989). A case of paraphilia associated with blood ingestion has been reported by Sethi et al. (2013). It is possible that the scripts identified in our work may reflect the sexual interests of child sex offenders or consumers of pedo-pornographic material.

To at least preliminarily screen this hypothesis, it was necessary to turn our attention to child pornography. If such scripts can represent sexual interests of aggressors, it is possible that the same contents are detectable in child pornographic material, since the aggressors could look for similar themes in the consumption of child pornographic material in order to satisfy their own interests or, having been exposed to such material, sexual aggressors could be induced to replicate it in real experiences with their child victims. We therefore examined two groups that, with different roles, have experience with child pornographic material: child sexual offenders and officers of the postal police.

From our data emerges a salient result: that the unusual scripts identified in the check were all detected by both samples in rather high percentages, except for vampirism. This finding is significant, as it indicates that unusual scripts are present in child pornography and therefore could represent a real lived experience of suspected child victims of sexual abuse and



correspond to a sexual interest on the part of offenders. While bizarre and uncommon, these scripts may be found in some percentage in child pornography.

The data show that postal police officers tend to detect the majority of scripts more frequently. The fact that the postal police officers recognize in a more frequent way the scripts detected by the checklist could depend on the fact that they are more exposed to child pornography materials to a higher degree, being exposed to more material and viewing different types of content. It is also possible that the sample of sexual offenders report less frequently the scripts for factors that are less socially acceptable for fear of possible legal repercussions.

Our study makes an original contribution to the international literature by offering a first classification of unusual statements made by suspected child victims of sexual abuse. Such statements, commonly considered as unusual and bizarre by psychologists and researchers experienced in the field of child witnessing and child sexual abuse, are detected in rather frequent percentages in child pornographic material, as attested by the experience of postal police operators and sexual offenders. This brings support to the hypothesis that unusual statements with respect to experiences of sexual abuse suffered, characterized by bizarre, sadistic and perverse elements, should not necessarily be dismissed as oddities or lead to consider the child not credible a priori. Although some statements of sexual abuse by the child may carry bizarre and perverse elements, it is possible that such situations actually occurred, and could potentially reflect the sexual interest of the assailants. Unusual and bizarre statements reported by suspected child victims of sexual abuse should be seriously considered and carefully evaluated. Such statements should not be ignored or underestimated by professionals who work in contact with children and who therefore preside over their protection.

From an expert perspective, it is necessary for forensic experts to assess very carefully and without bias the credibility of child sexual abuse suspects, particularly when suspected victims report experiences that may appear to be unusual, strange, bizarre, and perverse. Our study offers a first empirical cue to encourage experts and magistrates to carefully, and without prejudice, evaluate a child's narrative if it contains unusual, bizarre, or strange elements. Although our study is far from conclusive, the results highlight the importance of extending research on the influence that unusual, strange, bizarre, and perverse content has on the perceived credibility of children in judicial investigations. The results may raise the awareness of these issues among practitioners who work with children, encouraging them not to underestimate the bizarre statements made by minors, which may actually be consistent with experiences of sexual victimization experienced.

Despite the study's contribution to international research, some limitations must be considered. The Checklist was conducted on a small number of children and their statements. Although the sample seems numerically

sufficient to conduct a qualitative analysis, it is not representative of the Italian child population and this limits the generalizability of the results at the national level. The Checklist is constituted on the basis of the statements of Italian children, so we do not know if the characteristics and prevalence of scripts can be linked to cultural variables, or if other forms of scripts are detectable in similar samples but in different cultures. Finally, the prevalence of abuse-related scripts was estimated by a small group of sexual offenders and postal police officers, based on their perceived experience. In this way we have a sample that is not representative of the population of incarcerated sex offenders and postal police officers. In addition, aspects of text comprehension, memory, and social desirability may have been influential.

Further studies are needed to replicate our data in different cultural contexts and with different methodologies. Specifically, future investigations may attempt to replicate the present study in other nations in order to detect similarities and differences in the identification of unusual abuse-related scripts and their prevalence. Further investigations may also involve larger and more representative samples, or consider statements made by children in contexts other than law enforcement and treatment. The prevalence of unusual scripts could be investigated using additional sources and strategies, such as prospective observation of child pornography.

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## Ethical Standards and Informed Consent

All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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