

BEHAVIORAL CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL MARKETING: PREVENTION OF OFFENSES AGAINST CHILDREN IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The number of Internet-connected devices, social media platforms, and generative AI has significantly increased the scope and nature of offenses involving children, including online grooming, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), sextortion of children, live-streamed abuse, and imagery generated through manipulation. Criminal law, which relies on the pillars of detection, prosecution, and punishment, enters the scene most of the time after harm has been committed, or it grapples with jurisdictions, encryption, anonymity, and underreporting issues. This paper considers the potential of social marketing—the intentional use of commercial marketing techniques to create a socially desirable behavioral shift among children regarding certain activities—as an additional deterrent and protective measure to complement the work of criminal law in preventing offenses against children in the online environment. Based on the doctrinal methodology of charting the legislation and judicial framework across four jurisdictions—India, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union—and a case study examination of prevention programs including Stop It Now!, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation's deterrence work, POCSO e-Box, the framework adopted in India, and WeProtect Global Alliance's Model National Response and the Nudge framework, the paper suggests that social marketing is most helpful when used in tandem as a “primary prevention” complement to law—to change social norms among potential offenders; to give children and caregivers social skills of “protective behaviors”; and to nudge technology platforms to make them safer. The paper argues that legal reform and social marketing are complementary, not alternative, tools and sets forth an integrated statutory-behavioral approach to prevention in the digital era.

Keywords: Social Marketing, Child Sexual Abuse, Online Grooming, POCSO Act, Behavior Change Communication, Digital Child Protection, Doctrinal Research

INTRODUCTION

Children today are “digital natives” whose cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional developmental milestones are often defined and influenced by smartphone culture, social media, messaging services, and networked games. It has been easy to see how this connectivity has benefited education, socialization, and the dissemination of information, but it has equally opened up an unprecedented platform for childhood sexual exploitation, grooming, extortion, and harm. There has been a significant increase in child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) cases involving technology in recent years, with the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reporting more than 300% growth in 2023, as well as the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) and UNICEF's Disrupting Harm project. The Internet Watch

Foundation (IWF), the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), and UNICEF's Disrupting Harm project have reported a surge in child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) cases involving technology since 2021, with over a 300% increase since then. (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026; Internet Safety 101 Academy, 2026) One in six internet-using children aged between 12 and 17 years old reported increased exposure to at least one of the six forms of TF-CSEA (Technology mediation in child sexual exploitation and abuse in Africa and Asia, 2026). A nationally representative survey of young adults who recalled their childhood experiences in the United States identified that 15.6% reported online child sexual abuse (OCSA), 11.0% reported image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and 3.5% reported sextortion (Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2022).

In response to this level of injury, the conventional legal solution of incarceration, investigation, prosecution, and criminalization can no longer be overlooked but is still on the reactive end of the spectrum. Offenses typically are not detected until after a child has been harmed and are generally charged and convicted at far lower rates than the actual prevalence of abuse as a result of the limits of jurisdictional reach, encrypted communications, and lack of identification by the end users (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2024; Kim & Ferraresso, 2023). In this context, public health and criminological research have focused on efforts to prevent (primary prevention) abuse from happening or to lessen the burden that abuse currently places almost entirely on the criminal justice system. Social marketing is one such strategy, formed from the application of commercial marketing practices to the promotion of voluntary behavior that may be beneficial to individuals and society (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971) and successfully applied to encourage protective behavior by children and parents, change offending or pre-offending behavior by adults, and promote a change in the norms for the design of platforms.

The analysis of this literature produces an offender profile that makes it difficult to restate that deterrence-thru-punishment will be enough. Research from across the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom revealed that offenders using technology were significantly more likely than other offenders to be employed, married or cohabiting, tertiary educated, and living with their own child and between two and three and a half times more likely to work in a child-facing occupation as offline offenders (Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2022). Meta-analytic research also indicates that the “stranger danger” message that is often communicated to the public is not supported by the evidence: by-products of many cases of online-facilitated child sexual abuse are child-to-child transfers, where the perpetrator is usually known to the child, and identity concealment is a more significant risk factor in OFA cases than physical distance (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2024). These findings have implications for both doctrine and the public dosing of products: legal frameworks and public messaging concerning strangers and offenders both may be moving the protection spotlight away from the environments—in the home, schooling, sports, and online—in which risk is really occurring.

Two interwoven methodologies are here used to interrogate what the legal framework and behavioral system of child protection looks like in the digital age. First, it engages in a doctrinal examination of the legal and judicial landscape relevant to offenses against the child, including India's Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012; the Information Technology Act 2000 with the (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023) and in comparative perspective with the United Kingdom's Sexual Offences Act 2003 and Online Safety Act 2023; the United States' PROTECT Act; and the proposed European Union regulation on the fight against child sexual abuse (Child Sexual Abuse Regulation). Second, it takes an approach of a ‘case study’ and explores actual social marketing interventions that are documented, such as Stop It Now! The Lucy Faithfull Foundation's "Stop It Now" and deterrence-messaging campaigns in the United Kingdom, NCMEC's Take It Down initiative, INHOPE's hotline network, and the WeProtect Global Alliance's Model National Response were chosen to explore the nature, evidence base,

and efficacy of behavior-change-based prevention mechanisms. The core of the challenge of the paper is that the social marketing approach is not a replacement for a solid legal regime but that it is a gap that criminal law, in its doctrine, is not able to fill: influencing the behavior before it turns into a criminal act.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The paper has three objectives: (i) (i) to doctrinally map into the existing idea of conceptualization and criminalization of digital offenses against children in the current legal frameworks and the limits of the pure punishment framework; (ii) to consider, using case studies, operationalizations of social marketing theory in the context of child protection campaigns and ascertain whether the research has produced an evidenced effect; and (iii) to present a framework that combines components of statutory change with ones from behavior-changing communication theory.

Methodologically, the paper follows a doctrinal approach, using primary law sources (statutes, delegated legislation, and judicial decisions) and secondary law sources (Legal Service India, 2026) The POCSO Act, 2026, rules about child protection have been expounded, systematized, and critically evaluated. In addition, it employs a case study approach that is prevalent in socio-legal and public health research and in which programs are analyzed based on their guidelines, theoretical underpinnings, child implementation, and—if pertinent—outcome assessment data (Digital Defenses, 2026). This deliberate, doctrinal method does not show whether the law "works"—at a behavioral level—and case studies of communication campaigns are not the same as measures that could normalize the frames in which such campaigns should be conducted. When read together, they ask not only "What is being prohibited by the law?" but also "What makes some people comply, and what makes some avoid complying even when the law is not enforced?"

Theoretical Framework: Social Marketing and Voluntary Behaviour Change

Social marketing as a concept was first defined by (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971) as "the design, implementation, and control of programs that are intended to influence the acceptability of social ideas using the four business marketing methods: product, price, place, and promotion." (Andreasen, 1994) modified this definition to highlight the emphasis on promoting voluntary behavior change to help people and society, rather than coercive regulation. Other research then expanded social marketing to health and safety areas: (Lefebvre & Flor, 1988) applied their interpretation of social marketing to activities promoting national heart health; McKenzie-Mohr's community-based social marketing focused on eliminating situational obstacles to behavior change, and (Grier & Bryant, 2005) tracked the growth of social marketing in public health more broadly.

There are two features of this literature that are immediately pertinent to child protection. Social marketing first acknowledges that various audiences will need different "products"—the product for a child might be an awareness about recognizing and reporting grooming, whereas the product for a parent could be becoming familiar with parental-control tools, for a potential offender, contact with a helpline prior to offending; and so on for a technology platform—adoption of features that make technology safe. A direct application, with regard to app-based and web-based child-safety interventions, was (Cugelman, Thelwall, & Dawes, 2011) meta-study of online social-marketing health interventions, which revealed that psychological "hooks" (self-monitoring, feedback, and social support) were effective in increasing adherence and behavior outcomes. Second, because social marketing says that change is to be effected voluntarily, it makes it a tool available upstream of and separate from

criminal sanction; it can reach populations, including, most importantly, potential criminals who have not yet committed a chargeable act, and even children who may not even realize they are being victimized, which the criminal law cannot at present reach.

Doctrinal Mapping: Offenses Against Children in the Digital Age

India

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 is the key piece of legislation for offences against children, clarifying the definitions of sexual assault, non-penetrative sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the use of children for pornography, and providing gender-independent and victim-friendly reporting obligations for CSECPOs and special courts. The breadth of language in section 11 of the Act can, however, be read as extending to include some forms of online sexual offending, albeit there are no expressly defined 'offences' of online child sexual abuse or of 'grooming' or of 'sextortion' (Beyond the Screen, 2025). Therefore, in recent years, courts and commentators have had to refer to POCSO and also to the Information Technology Act, 2000, wherein Section 67B criminalises the publishing or transmitting of a material which depicts any child in sexually explicit acts, as well as the (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023) that superseded the Indian Penal Code (Legal Service India, 2026) since 2024. Empirical and doctrinal commentary has recognized a massive enforcement gap—between 2017 and 2018 alone, the National Crime Records Bureau received reports of 23% growth child sexual harassment and only a small percentage of online child sexual abuse cases are estimated to be reported to authorities, with ChildLine India reporting approximately 300,000 cases and 92,000 SOS calls during the lockdown in 2020 (Beyond the Screen, 2025). Doctrinal-empirical analysis of POCSO has revealed that the law has enhanced investigative and procedural safeguards but simultaneously experienced increasing overall lapses in implementation, stagnant proceedings in cases, infrequent monitoring of repeat offenders, and the absence of a clearly defined definition of "online" offenses (Legal Service India, 2026; The POCSO Act, 2026).

The Independent Thought v. Union of India, (2017) 10 SCC 800, is doctrinally important not just for the ruling on the marital-rape exception but because the court entrenched its approach to statutory interpretation, which has a child-welfare focus and considers the purpose of statutes as paramount, in all future cases involving ambiguous provisions regarding "sexual assault" and "sexual harassment" under POCSO in digital contexts. This exegesis has resulted in courts imposing a substantive meaning on the existing since the phrase "with sexual intent" has been read into the specific conduct of exposing a child via photographs and videos, without any specific written "online offense" provision in the statute (Legal Service India, 2026; The POCSO Act, 2026). There are no separate offenses of grooming as defined in the UK's Sexual Offences Act 2003, s. 15, and therefore preparatory online behavior before 'grooming' is not a crime in India except under the blanket provision on sexual harassment (SH) in the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 1998 and through offenses of exploitation under general provisions of the (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023), which were not drafted with the online grooming dynamics in mind.

United Kingdom

Some of the offenses of sex crimes against children were introduced by the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (the act) (s.15), which made it illegal to meet a child after acting in a manner that is sexual grooming but was later extended to grooming communications (s.27), and the Protection of Children Act 1978 criminalized the making, distributing, and possessing indecent images of children. The Online Safety Act 2023 establishes a statutory duty of care on

platforms to actively seek and remove CSAM and grooming content, moving beyond the concept of intermediary liability to placate law enforcement and take greater responsibility for addressing such activities. Between 2017/18 and 2020/21, there was a 70% rise in reported incidents of online grooming offenses in England and Wales (Understanding and Deterring Online Child Grooming, 2025), with these incidents reaching an all-time high during COVID-19 lockdowns. Moreover, the same research, dating back to 2015, records that such campaigns to deter offenders have been a parallel strand of the UK response, alongside non-punitive measures and alongside the Lucy Faithfull Foundation (Understanding and Deterring Online Child Grooming, 2025) that forms part of the focus throughout Section 5.

United States

As produced by synthetic generative AI, CSAM has become more common and is becoming increasingly salient given the doctrinal differences between protected speech and the unlawful “virtual” or “pandering” child pornography established by *Ashcroft v. Free-Speech Coalition*, 535

U.S. 234 (2002), and *United States v. Williams*, 553 U.S. 285 (2008), through federal statutes and the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026). Additionally, federal law requires E-solution providers to report to NCMEC's CyberTipline, and NCMEC reported more than 1.4m in one recent year (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026). The groundbreaking work of prevalence researchers at the Crimes Against Children Research Center, such as their research finding that online offenders and offline predators differ from one another and are even in some respects more socially connected, has contributed to their current paradigm of online offenders as more socially grounded than their offline counterparts and therefore more difficult to deter (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008; Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2022).

European Union and International Instruments

The Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest, 2001), along with the Lanzarote Convention (2007) of the Council of Europe, requires the countries that have ratified them to make CSAM and grooming crimes and to take measures to prevent such crimes and support victims. Now the proposed European Commission Regulation to prevent and fight child sexual abuse (the "Chat Control" proposal) has brought sustained doctrinal discussion on the compatibility of the mandatory nature of the content-scanning obligations with the right to privacy under the Charter of Fundamental Rights, highlighting the clash between detection-based enforcement and rights-protecting design. Internationally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article 34 and the Model National Response by the WeProtect Global Alliance, which defines prevention as a state obligation, explicitly state the importance of public awareness and behavior-change communication as pillars of an effective national response (Digital Defenses, 2026).

Generative Artificial Intelligence: An Emerging Doctrinal Gap

One cross-cutting challenge to all four jurisdictions is the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) that can create entirely fictional CSAM, “nudify” a regular image of a real child, and synthesize realistic grooming scripts at scale (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026). Contemporary “nudify” tools, which involve using a real and identifiable child's image as an input, even if the output is technically synthetic, challenge the U.S. Supreme Court's holding in (*Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U.S. 234, 2002), that purely virtual, non-record-based child pornography is entitled to a degree of First Amendment protection; the U.S. Supreme Court's decision *United States v. Williams*, 553 U.S. 285 (2008), upholding the “pandering”

provisions of the PROTECT Act, provides a partial doctrinal avenue around that gap, prohibiting merely “the offer or solicitation of material that the offeror or an observer knows, or has reason to know, is likely to be child pornography,” but this approach has not yet been fully tested against AI-generated material. The POCSO Act or Section 67B of the IT Act does not explicitly refer to synthetic images or AI-manipulated content, resulting in a situation similar to that before the U.S. courts: one where existing provisions in old laws were extended to meet a novel harm. This vacuum is the very type of rapid threat that social marketing can fill in the meantime—even before anyone can legislate in response—by raising awareness of the problem by cautioning children, parents, and platforms about nudification tools and AI-mediated grooming (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026).

The Doctrinal Limit: Why Law Alone Is Insufficient

It is clear from reading these frameworks together that criminal law is activated by an ACTION (grooming communication, production, or possession of CSAM, solicitation) that is already completed and that deterrence depends on the probability of detection and punishment—which empirical research has shown is low and is likely to be perceived as such, particularly if anonymous technologies are allowed and is hosted overseas (Kim & Ferrareso, 2023; Sutton & Finkelhor, 2024). It's doctrinally not a flaw a draft could fix: criminal law is based on the idea that the person is criminal; it is not the person's disposition that's criminal. That is where social marketing, targetting to voluntary action to change behavior before the crime occurs, fits in.

Case Studies in Social Marketing for Child Protection

Stop It Now!

Stop It Now! was originally developed in Vermont in the early 1990s and subsequently replicated in Philadelphia as a public-health-oriented campaign purposefully designed as a social marketing initiative targeting not just children and parents but adults who may be the targets of offense or suspect that behavior by a person they know may be problematic (Nonprofit Quarterly, 2015). It changed the No Child Left Behind terminology to talk about how it is a "preventable problem" and not a "criminal event" that is dealt with after the fact by police and other law enforcement officials. In this area, awareness indicators (no fewer than 900 tracked media mentions and helpline calls) were measurable; however, turning awareness into concrete prevention statistics was a challenge, and one of the program's evaluators recognized it as such (Nonprofit Quarterly, 2015). There are deterrence campaigns being carried out by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation conducts deterrence campaigns.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation's Deterrence Campaigns

Since 2015, the UK's Lucy Faithfull Foundation has operated offender-directed deterrence campaigns with an emphasis on a deterrence message. They developed in 2025, reporting on qualitative interviews with a sample of men who had accessed indecent images of children. A subsequent qualitative study specifically tailored its methodology to online grooming behavior and found that there was a need to increase awareness and education alongside situational measures like monitoring and in-platform warning messages to reduce first-time and repeat offending (Understanding and Deterring Online Child Grooming, 2025). This case study is also of doctrinal interest, because it reveals a social marketing action that is not doctrinally reachable by criminal law, as explained in the commentary on section 4.5, by

changing the nature of the “product” being marketed from a consumer product to being a help-seeking behavior (Henry, Flynn & Powell, 2020).

NCMEC, INHOPE, and Platform-Directed Behavior Change

The social marketing ‘audience’ for NCMEC’s CyberTipline and the ‘Take It Down’ tool consists of technology platforms and the children/families who upload imagery, who do not receive compensation for deleting non-consensual imagery, and who are encouraged to report images without applying any pressure (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026; Internet Safety 101 Academy, 2026). The International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), on the other hand, develops a worldwide reporting system that relies on public awareness campaigns to spur “ordinary users” to report suspected CSAM—an archetypal case of social marketing’s “promotion” feature, which serves legal reporting mechanisms. There is also increasing focus on the grooming techniques used to create CSAM, as opposed to the CSAM itself, given that a greater proportion of self-generated CSAM consists of images created under grooming pressure by the child themselves (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026).

Digital Literacy and School-Based Programs

The education of digital literacy is mentioned in both systematic and scoping reviews as one of the most widely recommended, although not consistently assessed, needs in prevention (Digital Defenses, 2026; Understanding Cyber Grooming in Children and Adolescents, 2026). The reviews conclude that adolescents who are more likely to be engaged in online activities, less able to navigate digital literacy, less supervised by their parents in the offline environment, and less able to support one another in an online environment are more at risk of being groomed online, and that programs aimed at teaching users technical safety skills coupled with the development of resilience and peer support are more effective than narrowly technical “stranger danger” messages (Understanding cyber grooming in children and adolescents, 2026). This is consistent with the overall study by (Cugelman, Thelwall & Dawes, 2011) that behavior-change interventions with the social support and self-efficacy components perform better than information-provision interventions (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020).

WeProtect Global Alliance's Model National Response

The WeProtect Global Alliance's approach to national child-protection strategies is built around the idea of capable guardianship, legislation, and—crucially—a strong “prevention” arm, which includes public communication campaigns to parents, children, and industry, including Digital Defenses, 2026. It is manifested in India's own e-Box Complaint Procedure to be utilized by the citizens under POCSO to make any complaint, which operates as an online reporting channel and also as a product of social marketing whose activities require regular public awareness created in schools and media (De Santisteban et al., 2018).

Analysis: Integrating Law and Social Marketing

There are at least three working functions of social marketing that were found from the case studies above and will be discussed here following the mapping of the legal framework in Section 4. First, it is a pre-offense deterrence supplement; it reaches potential offenders either before their behavior meets the requirements of a statutory offense or before they become “legally invisible” (Understanding and Deterring Online Child Grooming, 2025). Second, it acts as a detection multiplier, generating more and higher-quality reporting that ultimately accelerates reports through the enforcement pipeline required by statutes like the mandatory reporting provisions of POCSO or the Cybertipline requirements set by the U.S government (Blue Ribbon Project, 2026). Third, it is a tool for developing resilience in children beyond the

scope of the state's protective responsibilities as conveyed in instruments like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 34, which creates a role for the child to identify grooming tactics and report experiences, something they are more likely to do to peers than to formal actors (Technology mediation in child sexual exploitation and abuse in Africa and Asia, 2026; Hong et al., 2020).

This tripartite function of social marketing suggests it is not a paradigm that competes with criminal law, but it is a paradigm that is in association with criminal law: law provides the norm and the coercive stoppage mechanisms; social marketing provides the behavior-shaping aspect of the norm. This "doctrinal heuristic" (Rothschild 1999) suggests selecting between "marketing" (helplines, anonymous support, and peer-framed messaging) and "education" (educative programs, media campaigns, and social outreach) and "law" (criminal sanctions) strategies, based on the motivation and ability of an audience (e.g., a first-time potential offender, a scared teenager, etc.). This heuristic can be mapped directly onto the four-jurisdiction doctrinal survey in Section 4. If social marketing is given a declaration of an already well-established set of definitions, like those of UK grooming-type offenses under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, s. 15, the challenge is relatively limited: to raise awareness of an already codified prohibition and direct potential offenders towards a help-seeking pathway, a strategy that the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has followed. Social marketing has to rely a lot more on the shoulders of the social marketing interpreter where the legal definition is absent or confused, such as India not having a law on grooming or the near-universal absence of provisions on AI-generated CSAM. This is a delicate balancing act: The language used in campaign messages could be interpreted as going too far, overchilling what is allowed, or not going far enough so that what is not covered would still be committed. Therefore, the doctrinal recommendation which follows, in the form of the codification of online-specific offenses, is not to be seen as a mere convenient way of making the prosecution easier but as a prerequisite for a socially oriented marketing campaign to be coherent and communicatively precise. Another major place of integration is institutional design. (Lefebvre & Flora, 1988) focus in their story on national heart health social marketing on the fact that behavior change will not occur if only one sector of the population is asked to change, for example, without any action by the media, any community organization, or any health system. The Model National Response is the same in the WeProtect Global Alliance, which treats the three other building blocks of a national strategy: legislative reform, law enforcement capacity, industry engagement, and public communication, not as separate elements but as intertwining facets of a national strategy (Digital Defenses, 2026). An investment in just one pillar—say fines or other penalties in POCSO—but no investment in prevention communication in the public domain will, on this model, have a modest impact on prevalence rates based on the assumption that crime detection and reporting—and hence prosecution—continue to be strongly linked to the varying degrees of public awareness and underreporting to law enforcement agencies (Beyond the Screen, 2025; Briggs, Simon & Simonsen, 2011).

Challenges and Critique

There are some restrictions to consider when unconditionally approving social marketing in this space. But evaluative evidence is limited: just as the Stop It Now! Based on Philadelphia experience, awareness is relatively easy to measure, but the actual prevention of abuse is not (Nonprofit Quarterly, 2015), and a review of the digital intervention literature reveals that few of the documented school- and organization-based practices have been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness (Review of Policies and Practices to Prevent Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse, 2024). Second, there is the danger of 'responsibilization,' which involves adopting policies promoting awareness to parents and

children to protect children from online harms but with insufficient focus on promoting platform accountability and law enforcement capacity, especially since research indicates that parents view exposure to risk online as not a major concern for their own children (ScienceDaily, 2016). Third, in regard to potential offenders, there are questions about scope and framing in social marketing campaigns—while potential offenders can be sensationalized for the purposes of warning, a crucial balancing also needs to be struck with making help-seeking tractable for potential offenders, which the Lucy Faithfull Foundation's iterative, interview-based approach gets closer to but does not perfectly align with (U and DOcG, 2025).

Lastly, the current social marketing messaging is mostly geared towards human-to-human grooming interactions and activities, rather than digitally mediated exploitation with AI, as is the case with generative AI manipulation that can create “nudification” images, “nudification” scripts for grooming, and synthetic CSAM (Foster, 2025; Blue Ribbon Project, 2026).

Recommendations

Based on the doctrinal and case study analysis above, this paper proposes: (i) statutory codification, particularly under POCSO and comparable regimes, of discrete online offenses—grooming, sextortion, and AI-generated CSAM—so that social marketing messaging can be anchored to clear legal definitions rather than analogized in offline provisions (Beyond the Screen, 2025); (ii) mandatory outcome evaluation requirements attached to publicly funded prevention campaigns, adopting the meta-analytic evaluation architecture used in health social marketing (Cugelman, Thelwall & Dawes, 2011); (iii) expansion of offender-directed deterrence messaging of the kind pioneered by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation into jurisdictions, including India, that currently rely almost exclusively on punitive deterrence; (iv) integration of digital literacy and disclosure-encouraging curricula into school systems, informed by evidence that children disclose preferentially to peers, meaning peer-to-peer “ambassador” models may outperform adult-led messaging (Technology mediation in child sexual exploitation and abuse in Africa and Asia, 2026); and (v) statutory safety-by-design obligations for platforms, paired with social marketing campaigns directed at industry norms, rather than campaigns addressed solely to children and parents; and (vi) recalibration of campaign framing away from the empirically inaccurate “stranger danger” archetype and toward the documented reality that offenders are frequently known to the child and that risk concentrates in trusted environments, so that both legal drafting and public messaging target the actual, rather than the assumed, topology of risk (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2024; Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The digital age hasn't invented a new concept of harm—quite the contrary, it's given it unprecedented power, scale, and anonymity to those who would exploit children—and introduced a new element of doctrinal limits to a criminal justice system designed for reactive, individualized enforcement. The doctrinal analysis undertaken in this paper of the relevant Indian laws, notably the POCSO and IT Act, and the corresponding laws in the UK, US, and EU, reveals that well-drafted laws of whatever type are incapable of addressing conduct occurring prior to a crime. Stop It Now!, the deterrence campaigns conducted by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, NCMEC's reporting infrastructure, and WeProtect's Model National Response demonstrate that social marketing, based on (Kotler & Zaltman's, 1971) originality of the insight that ‘any behaviour can be made voluntary, if it is made to feel right in the wrong’ by appropriate design’, can effectively fill that pre-offense void. While there is by no means a uniform and convincing body of evidence, the overall doctrinal and empirical picture points to

the need for a statutory-behavioral framework that sets out a compulsory framework of basic enforceability that has to be complemented by a voluntary compliance framework created through social marketing.

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