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The Sexual Grooming Scale – Victim Version: The Development and Pilot Testing of a Measure to Assess the Nature and Extent of Child Sexual Grooming

Georgia M. Winters[a] and Elizabeth L. Jeglic[b]

[a]School of Psychology, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, New Jersey, USA; [b]Psychology Department, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Sexual grooming has been deemed an integral component of child sexual abuse (CSA). However, the nature and extent of sexual grooming remains understudied in large part because an empirically-validated scale for child sexual grooming has yet to be developed. We developed the *Sexual Grooming Scale – Victim Version* (*SGS-V*) to assess the stages and behaviors described in the content-validated Sexual Grooming Model from a victim's perspective. The *SGS-V* was pilot tested with 115 adult victims of CSA. Overall, results supported the feasibility in terms of implementation and its limited-efficacy. The implications for prevention, investigation, treatment, and research are discussed.

Sexual grooming is a considered to be a core component of child sexual abuse (CSA) (Canter et al., 1998; Elliott et al., 1995; Williams, 2015). Sexual grooming has been implicated in CSA cases in religious settings [e.g., Catholic Church; Spraitz & Bowen, 2019; Tallon & Terry, 2008; Winters et al., 2021a], sports (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018), youth organizations (e.g., Boy Scouts of America; Shon & Tewksbury, 2020) and educational environments (Moulden et al., 2010), among others. Despite the significance of sexual grooming in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of CSA cases, there remains a dearth of empirical literature on the subject. Of utmost importance, there has yet to be a comprehensive measure for the construct to examine the extent and types of tactics used in the sexual grooming process. To this end, the present study sought to first develop a self-report measure to assess for adult CSA victims' experiences with sexual grooming based on a content-validated model (Winters et al., 2020), the *Sexual Grooming Scale – Victim Version* (*SGS-V*). Then, we piloted the *SGS-V* on a sample of adults who experienced CSA to investigate the feasibility of this newly proposed measure.

In-person sexual grooming

While CSA in general has been well studied, the research on sexual grooming has largely been theoretical or based upon case study (e.g., Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Craven et al., 2006). The few empirical studies on in-person sexual grooming focus on examining perpetrators (e.g., Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Conte et al., 1989; Elliott et al., 1995) or victims of CSA (e.g., Berliner & Conte, 1990); however, these studies tend to be outdated and utilized idiosyncratic

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operational definitions of the construct of sexual grooming. One reason for this is that, until recently, there was a lack of consensus about the tactics and behaviors that encompass the construct of sexual grooming. Further, there was no universally agreed upon definition which is needed in order to measure a construct (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014).

In an effort to overcome some of these limitations, in 2017, Winters and Jeglic 2017 proposed four overarching stages of the sexual grooming process, including victim selection, gaining access and isolation, trust development, and desensitization to sexual content and physical contact. Then in 2020, Winters and colleagues further expanded the proposed Sexual Grooming Model (SGM) to incorporate fifth post-abuse maintenance stage (see Table 1 for the SGM stages). A two-part study by Winters et al. (2020) established content validity for the SGM using experts in the field. In part one, they conducted a comprehensive literature review using the terms sex* groom* and child* groom* from four main academic databases yielding 1,363 English language, peer-reviewed sources. After reviewing these sources, 51 articles and books were identified that included a description of sexual grooming behaviors enacted by in-person child sexual abusers. These behaviors were then coded which generated 77 possible sexual grooming behaviors. In part two of the study, a list of content experts who published the identified articles and books (see Winters et al., 2020) and who had valid e-mail addresses (n = 44) were asked to participate in an expert review survey where they rated the relevance of the five stages of the SGM to the sexual grooming process. Next, they were asked to rate how relevant each of the 77 behaviors was and which stage(s) of the SGM the behavior fell under. Eighteen experts completed the survey and using the Content Validation Index (CVI; Lynn, 1986), all five stages of the SGM were deemed relevant to the sexual grooming process (Winters et al., 2020). Further, of the original 77 behaviors, 42 (54.5%) were deemed relevant to the construct of sexual grooming, and each behavior was placed in the sexual grooming stage that was deemed most relevant by experts (see Table 1 for the SGM behaviors).

The next step toward advancing the field of sexual grooming was establishing a definition of the construct. Until recently, there were at least 13 proposed definitions using various terms and they were often too narrow or did not adequately capture the sexual grooming process (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Craven et al., 2006; Winters et al., 2021b). In an effort to bring further cohesion to the field, Winters and colleagues (2021b) attempted to address the limitations of previous definitions and proposed a definition of child sexual grooming based upon the SGM as follows:

> "The deceptive process by which a would-be abuser, prior to the commission of the child sexual abuse, selects a victim, gains access to and isolates the minor, develops trust with the minor and often other adults in the minor's life, and desensitizes the minor to sexual content and physical contact. Post-abuse, the offender may use maintenance strategies on the victim following the sexual contact in order to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure" (Winters et al., 2021b, p.17).

Measuring sexual grooming

The final step needed to study sexual grooming empirically is the development of a validated measurement instrument. Understanding grooming patterns is integral to the detection, prevention, and treatment of CSA, but this is not possible without some way to assess for these behaviors. While some studies have coded sexual grooming behaviors from transcripts or

Table 1. Description of each stage and associated behaviors of the sexual grooming model.

SGM stage	Key characteristics and behaviors
(1) Victim selection	• Compliant/trusting of adults • Lacks confidence/low self-esteem • Lonely/isolated • Troubled • Needy • Unwanted/unloved • Not close to parents/parents are not resources for them • Single mothers/need of "father figure" • Lack of supervision
(2) Gaining access and isolation	• Involvement in youth-serving organizations • Manipulating family to gain access to child • Activities alone with children/excludes adults • Overnight stays/outings • Separate child from peers and family
(3) Trust development	• Charming/nice/likeable • Insider status/good reputation/ "pillar of the community" • Affectionate/loving • Giving the child attention • Favoritism/ "special relationship" • Compliments • Spending time with child/communicating often • Engage in childlike activities (e.g., stories, games, sports, music) • Rewards/privileges (e.g., gifts, toys, treats, money, trips) • Provide drugs and/or alcohol
(4) Desensitization to sexual content and physical contact	• Asking questions about child's sexual experiences/relationships • Talk about sexual things they themselves had done • Inappropriate sexual language/dirty jokes • Teach child sexual education • Use of accidental touching/distraction while touching • Watch the child undressing • Exposing naked body • Show child pornography magazines/vides • Seemingly innocent/non-sexual contact • Desensitize to touch/increasing sexual touching
(5) Post-abuse maintenance	• Told not to tell anyone what happened • Encouraging secrets • "I love you/you're special" • Rewards/bribes/avoid punishment • Persuade the child it was acceptable/normal behavior • Misstated moral standards regarding touch • Victim made to feel responsible • Threats of abandonment/rejection/family breaking up

records (Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2021b) or interviews (Whittle et al., 2015; Williams, 2015), to date there has yet to be a well-established, comprehensive, and empirically-validated measure of the sexual grooming process (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014).

The first measure used to assess for the behaviors an offender may use in the CSA process (*modus operandi*) was proposed by Kaufman in 1994. The *Modus Operandi Questionnaire* (*MOQ*) is a 339-item self-report measure to examine various components of offender/victim interactions. The *MOQ* gathers offender's self-reported strategies used to gain access to a victim, develop the victim's trust, gain the victim's compliance, and maintain the victim's silence post-abuse. The *MOQ* has been shown to have adequate

internal consistency (.78-.93; Kaufman et al., 1998, 1997) and test-retest reliability (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000). While the measure is beneficial in exploring the various behaviors a child sexual abuser may employ, the *MOQ* does not explicitly examine the stages of selecting a victim and desensitizing the child to sexual content and physical touch, both of which appear to be important aspects of the grooming process. Additionally, this measure gathers an offender's perspective, rather than a victim's view of the behaviors, which may be impacted by social desirability or lack of insight/ denial in responding.

Wolf et al. (2018) were the first to attempt to measure sexual grooming empirically from a victim's perspective using 14 items from the *Computer Assisted Maltreatment Inventory* (*CAMI*; DiLillo et al., 2010). The *CAMI* is an online survey designed to retrospectively measure maltreatment in childhood including physical, emotional, sexual, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence. Of the 30 items that measure CSA, 14 items were designed to assess perpetrator sexual grooming behaviors from the perspective of the victim and comprise the Grooming Subscale (Wolf et al., 2018). Using a sample of adults who experienced CSA (n = 295), Wolf and colleagues first conducted an exploratory factor analysis with half the sample yielding three factors of the Grooming Subscale, which produced acceptable fit indices, with the second half of the sample being used for a confirmatory factor analysis (see Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

The Wolf et al. (2018) study represented a big step forward in terms of empirically measuring sexual grooming, however it was not without limitations. While the 14 items from the *CAMI* may reflect some sexual grooming behaviors, they were not designed to measure the entire grooming process and the three factors that emerged (i.e., verbal coercion, grooming that used drugs and/or alcohol, and grooming that used threats and/or violence) is not generally consistent with the models of sexual grooming (see Winters et al., 2020). Further most of items reflect behaviors from stages immediately preceding the abuse (i.e., developing trust tactics include verbal coercion or provision of drugs/alcohol) or after the abuse (i.e., post-abuse maintenance includes the possible use of threats) which significantly limits the measure's utility, as it is not comprehensively capturing the sexual grooming stages and behaviors. For example, 3 of the 14 items deal with sexual grooming using drugs and alcohol, which may not be used as much with younger victims and only represents one single sexual grooming tactic of many.

Given the limitations of the *MOQ* and *CAMI* Grooming Subscale, it is clear that a measure specifically designed to assess the entire construct of sexual grooming is needed. This is necessary to further the empirical literature on sexual grooming, in order to understand the frequency and types of behaviors used in the process. A measure can also be useful for numerous practical settings, such as in clinical work, law enforcement and the courts, and prevention programs. As such, the goal of the present study was twofold. First, we developed a new self-report measure to assess the nature and extent of sexual grooming from the perspective of victims of CSA, the *Sexual Grooming Scale – Victim Version* (*SGS-V*), based upon the content-validated SGM. Second, we conducted a pilot study of the *SGS-V* to examine feasibility of implementation and limited efficacy testing using a sample of adults who experienced CSA.

Method

Participants and procedure

The participants in the *SGS-V* pilot study were undergraduate students from a large urban university in Northeast United States who endorsed experiencing sexual abuse prior to the age of 18. The participants completed a larger study regarding current and past sexual behaviors of undergraduate students that was administered via an online survey. Following completion of an online informed consent form, all of the participants in the larger study completed demographic questions (sex, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation). If a person endorsed having been sexually abused prior to the age of 18, they were asked to complete a sub-set of questions related to their experience of CSA. Of the 483 participants in the larger study, there were 127 (26.3%) who endorsed experiencing CSA who completed these questions. Twelve of these 127 responses (9.4%) were removed from the final dataset due to incomplete data (i.e., they exited out of the survey before completing the *SGS-V* questions in full; $n = 6$) or they reported the age the sexual abuse began as age 18 or older ($n = 6$); thus, the final sample for the pilot study consisted of 115 participants. These participants first responded to a series of questions related to the characteristics of the CSA (e.g., number of offenders, age abuse began and ended, duration of abuse, types of unwanted sexual contact) and the offender (e.g., sex, age, relationship to victim). Then, they completed the *SGS-V* (described below) which asked if they experienced any of the 42 SGM sexual grooming behaviors (yes/no) and if they did, to qualitatively describe the behavior. Upon completion of the larger survey, the participants were thanked and provided a debriefing form. Participants received course credit in exchange for completing the research study.

The final sample of 115 participants is above the recommended sample size for piloting a new measure (i.e., approximately 30–50; Perneger et al., 2015). The sample consisted of 102 (88.7%) females, 10 (8.7%) males, and 3 (2.6%) individuals who identified their sex as "other." The average age of participants was 20.18 years (range = 17– 51); one respondent did not provide their current age. Participants reported a range of ethnic/racial backgrounds, including Latinx ($n = 61$; 53.0%), Black ($n = 17$; 14.8%), Asian ($n = 13$; 11.3%), White ($n = 12$; 10.4%), biracial ($n = 4$; 3.5%), multiracial ($n = 3$; 2.6%), and "other" ($n = 5$; 4.3%). They identified primarily as heterosexual ($n = 64$; 55.7%), with 38 (33.0%) identifying as bisexual, 7 (6.1%) as homosexual, 3 (2.6%) as pansexual, and 3 (2.6%) as "other."

The characteristics of the participants' CSA experiences are presented in Table 2. Most victims experienced abuse by one perpetrator ($n = 70$; 60.9%), and the abuse most often lasted less than one month ($n = 53$; 46.1%) and occurred one time ($n = 40$; 34.8%). A range of sexual contact was reported, with the most frequently endorsed behavior being fondling/kissing ($n = 78$; 67.8%) and digital/finger penetration ($n = 46$; 40.0%). Most offenders were male ($n = 101$; 87.8%), and there was a wide range of relationships the offender had with the victim (e.g., friend, romantic partner, extended family member). Of the participants who reported their age of abuse ($n = 103$), the average age the CSA began and ended was 12.12 (range = 3–17) and 13.65 (range = 3– 21), respectively.[1] Participants also reported the age of the perpetrator when the abuse began, with an average age around 20.90 (range = 6–52).

Table 2. Characteristics of victims' CSA experiences.

Variable	Response options	n (%)
Number of abusers[a]	One	70 (60.9)
	Two	31 (27.0)
	Three	8 (7.0)
	Four or more	6 (5.2)
Duration of abuse	Less than one month	53 (46.1)
	One to six months	18 (15.7)
	Six months to one year	7 (6.1)
	One year to two years	13 (11.3)
	Three years to five years	18 (15.7)
	Five years or more	5 (4.3)
	Declined to respond	1 (0.9)
Number of abusive incidents	Once	40 (34.8)
	Two to three times	22 (19.1)
	Four to five times	18 (15.7)
	6 to 10 times	17 (6.1)
	11 to 20 times	8 (7.0)
	21 to 50 times	9 (7.8)
	More than 50 times	11 (9.6)
Type of contact[b]	Fondling/kissing	78 (67.8)
	Digital/finger penetration	46 (40.0)
	Oral sex performed on victim	27 (23.5)
	Oral sex performed on offender	32 (27.8)
	Vaginal sex	37 (32.2)
	Anal sex	7 (6.1)
	Other	12 (10.4)
Offender's sex	Male	101 (87.8)
	Female	12 (10.4)
	Other	2 (1.7)
Offender's relationship to victim	Friend	21 (18.3)
	Extended family member	20 (17.4)
	Romantic partner or ex-partner	17 (14.8)
	Friend of a family member or friend	13 (11.3)
	Stranger (knew less than 24 hours)	10 (8.7)
	Acquaintance	7 (6.1)
	Step-parent	6 (5.2)
	Biological sibling	4 (3.5)
	Step-sibling	2 (1.7)
	Community member	2 (1.7)
	Parent	1 (0.9%)
	Grandparent	1 (0.9%)
	Declined to respond	11 (9.6%)

[a]If a person experienced abuse by more than one person, they were asked to complete the remaining CSA questions about the individual with whom they had the "most interpersonal contact" with.
[b]Participants could report more than one type of contact; thus, each frequency and percentage are based on the total sample size.

Materials

Sexual grooming scale – victim version (SGS-V)

The *SGS-V* is a measure developed based on the Sexual Grooming Model (SGM; Winters et al., 2020). The SGM is a content-validated model of in-person sexual grooming behaviors which includes five overarching stages of the process (victim selection, gaining access and isolation, trust development, desensitization to sexual content and physical contact, and post-abuse maintenance), as well as 42 specific sexual grooming behaviors that fall within each of these stages (see Table 1). The *SGS-V* gathers self-report data from respondents who endorsed

CSA victimization related to their experiences of these sexual grooming behaviors. The respondent is asked to select all of the behaviors they believed the offender used within each of the five stages (responding "yes" or "no" for each item). If they endorsed a particular behavior, they were then asked to qualitatively describe their experience. At the end of the inquires for each stage, respondents were also provided the opportunity to indicate if they experienced any other behaviors not previously listed and if so, to describe. Thus, there are a total of 47 sexual grooming items included in the *SGS-V* (i.e., 42 specific sexual grooming behavior items and 5 "other" items). See Appendix A for the *SGS-V*.

Results

Feasibility of a measure can be examined in numerous ways (Bowen et al., 2009). For the purposes of the present pilot study, we examined two areas deemed most applicable to the *SGS-V*. Specifically, we examined feasibility as it relates to *implementation* (i.e., the measure can be feasibly used to gather self-report data from victims about their experiences of sexual grooming) and *limited-efficacy testing* (i.e., whether the *SGS-V* pilot data produced the desired outcome data; Bowen et al., 2009). Regarding implementation, the *SGS-V* was easily administered using the self-report survey in the online setting. That is, we had 115 participants complete the *SGS-V* with very few incidents of participants declining to respond.[2] Of the 47 items of the *SGS-V*, there were 39 (83.0%) questions that had 115 (100%) responses, with only 4 (8.5%) having 114 (99.1%) responses and 4 (8.5%) having 113 responses (99.1%). Put differently, 111 of 115 (96.5%) participants completed all 47 items of the *SGS-V*. As noted previously, there were 6 respondents of the 127 of endorsed CSA who exited out of the survey before completing the *SGS-V* in full. Of these 6 individuals, 3 had exited out of the survey before the *SGS-V* questions; therefore, only 3 of 127 (2.4%) respondents began the *SGS-V* before closing the survey, suggesting that the vast majority of people were willing and able to complete the *SGS-V* in full once presented with the measure.

Second, we examined the pilot data for limited-efficacy testing in terms of: a) the level of endorsement for each sexual grooming item (i.e., to ensure variability within each sexual grooming item, as well as variability in the endorsement across different items), and b) the content included in the qualitative responses (i.e., to ensure the respondents were interpreting the sexual grooming items correctly). The level of endorsement of each of the 47 items of the *SGS-V* are presented in Table 3. The level of endorsement of the 42 items specific to the SGM (i.e., not including the "other" items) ranged from 6.1% ($n = 7$; i.e., "They were involved in youth-serving organizations") to 67.8% ($n = 78$; i.e., "They were charming, nice, and/or likeable"), suggesting appropriate variability in responding for items. There was no observed ceiling or floor effects for the *SGS-V* items, except in the case the item would be theoretically expected to have a low level of endorsement (e.g., a small subset of participants would be expected to report the offender was involved in youth-serving organizations; e.g., McAlinden, 2006; Turner & Briken, 2015).

In order to examine the ranges across each SGM stage, we summed the number of items endorsed within each stage for a total score for each stage and created an overall score across all items of the *SGS-V*.[3] See Table 4. As demonstrated in the table, there was a range of observed scores for each scale and the total score. Moreover, as would be expected, the mean

Table 3. SGS-V item endorsement and qualitative examples.

	Valid N	n (%)	Qualitative examples
Victim Selection			
I was compliant and/or trusting of adults.	114	65 (57.0)	• I was young and I trusted the people I lived with because they were family. • I am too trusting in people and I used to be quite of a naive person, especially because I thought this person was actually interested in me. • I was a quiet kid that followed rules led by any adult, I was raised into that mentality and so I feel like I was an easy target.
I lacked confidence and/or had low self-esteem.	115	58 (50.4)	• I was very insecure my entire life because of my family's comments on my appearance and bullying in middle school. • I had been bullied in school, had very few friends, poor relationship with my own family. • I was very unsure of myself as most teens are and I was having a hard time believing in myself. I never told anyone about the abuse because I thought they wouldn't listen and if they did, they wouldn't care because I deserved it somehow.
I was lonely and/or isolated.	115	54 (47.0)	• I did not have many friends and was the "weird" kid in school most of my life. • Would isolate myself and spend all day in my room. • Parents were getting divorced. My sister and my brother were way older than me, so we never played together. I had no one.
I felt unwanted or unloved by others.	115	47 (40.9)	• I spent a lot of time alone so I thought nobody wanted to be with me or wanted me around at all. • Boys never paid attention to me and I was never considered the "pretty girl." • I did not receive the love I desired growing up and it hurt so I sought it out in others.
I was not close to my parents and/or they were not resources for me.	115	42 (36.5)	• My dad left and was an addict most of my life and my mom was distant emotionally. • My mother was always working at the time since she was a single parent taking care of me and my brothers so she was hardly ever home. • I argued constantly with my parents and often preferred to hang out with friends rather than staying home.
I lacked adult supervision.	115	33 (28.7)	• My mom was strict but she worked two jobs and was out of the house every day from 5a.m. to 11p.m. • I was allowed to do whatever I want since I was 14 as long as I had good grades in school. • During the day my mom was usually at work and my 2 older brothers were either still in school or were out partying, so I was often at home by myself after I got back from school.
I had a single mother and/or was in need of a "father figure."	115	27 (23.5)	• My dad left at a young age and all I had was my mother but even then she was working and when she wasn't, it felt like she was paying attention to everyone except me. • My father isn't very present in my life, so for the most part my mother raised me on her own and there's no other male figures in my house. • My mom was always working and my step dad was a terrible father figure.

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Valid N	n (%)	Qualitative examples
I was a troubled child/teen.	115	25 (21.7)	• I was rebellious and liked doing things other people/kids didn't dare to do. • I would always get into fights growing up and my grades would slip while I was a child. • I was going through depression and anxiety.
Other reason not listed.	115	21 (18.3)	• I was physically very small, and available to them for long periods of time. I also suspect they may have suffered their own abuse, as it is unlikely children would do such things of their own accord. • I was always high so I was easy to take advantage of. • I was naive and new to relationships. I thought the abuse was normal.
I was a needy child/teen.	115	16 (13.9)	• Wanted affection and validation that I didn't get from my parents. • I craved attention. Always needed someone to tell me they loved me. • I was so desperate for the attention that I lacked from my parents that I was grateful for the sexual attention.
Gaining Access and Isolation			
They did activities alone with me without other adults.	115	52 (45.2)	• He would call me in his room to help him with a task. He would sneak into the bathroom when I am inside. Whenever his family was going out together and he knew I was going to stay home, he would tell them he is not well or does not wish to go with them. • He would invite me to watch movies and play video games in his room with only him while my family would be asleep or left for the night. • He babysat me and would take me on bike rides.
They separated or isolated me from friends, other kids, and/or family.	114	40 (35.1)	• He would often talk about my friends and manipulate me into believing they were talking about me behind my back and they didn't really want much to do with me. • He made sure he got me in a room where we were alone just the two of us. • They took me to isolated places to have conversations by ourselves so no one will see him talking to me because I was young.
They manipulated my family to gain access to me.	115	23 (20.0)	• He was dating my mother, so she trusted him with me. • He made everyone in my family believe he was this good guy. • He got close to my dad's side of the family and my brothers …
Other reason not listed.	113	12 (10.6)	• He lived with me. • They did in public places in which it was dark like the movie theater. • He went up to me because I was walking alone.
They took me on overnight stays or outings.	115	9 (7.8)	• He stayed with me while my parents spent the night out. • I stayed over their house. • We used to go to the park that was located two or three blocks away from my home.
They were involved in youth-serving organizations	115	7 (6.1)	• Camp Worker • Teacher • Junior Reserved Officer Training Corps

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Valid N	n (%)	Qualitative examples
They provided me with drugs and/or alcohol.	115	12 (11.3)	• Cigarettes and alcohol at 16 years old. • I was once curious how alcohol tasted like and he provided me with a shot of tequila. • We smoked weed together.
Other reason not listed.	113	3 (2.6)	• Listen[ed] to me. • They were drinking or consuming drugs.
Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Contact			
They used seemingly innocent and/or non-sexual touching.	115	63 (54.8)	• The person would want to play fight. Also would give lots of hugs. • Mainly hugging, tickling, oftentimes he would pretend to give me a massage. • He initially started with long hugs and constant tickling when no one was around.
They gradually increased the amount of sexual touching over time.	115	62 (53.9)	• He went from rubbing against me to grabbing and then actually touching me full on. • She stated with touching me pretending it was a mistake and then do it more and more and go further and further over time. • At first it was small touches anywhere then touching me in private places with clothes on and then he started touching me without clothes on.
They used accidental touching and/or distracted me while touching me.	115	62 (53.9)	• Would touch me while I was playing games on computer. • He'd rub himself on me and say that he's sorry that there just wasn't enough space or he'd touch me and say that he was just trying to take off some pressure from my shoulders but that his hand slipped. • He often stated "opps I didn't know what I was touching" or would hold a normal conversation to distract what he was doing.
They used inappropriate sexual language and/or told dirty jokes.	115	56 (48.7)	• Typical dirty teenage perverted jokes. • He would use words I never heard of before and some things I didn't understand what he meant. I only realized what he meant when the school would start to implement sexual education. • Was very vulgar, joked about what he'd do to me.
They exposed their naked body to me.	115	53 (46.1)	• Took off all his clothes in the bathroom and called me to come look at him. • In the mornings after I showered he would be in the living room pretending to put up his boxers the minute I passed so I can see his penis. • He left the bathroom door open while and after showering.
They asked questions about my sexual experiences and/or relationships.	115	47 (40.9)	• Asked if I was a virgin, didn't 100% believe that I was, but eventually thought It was a turn on, to be untouched. • They asked me if I have ever "done things" before and asked if they could "teach me." • He would ask me if I had ever kissed a boy before or if I had a boyfriend.
They talked about sexual things they had done.	115	44 (38.3)	• He talked about his various partners and all the positions he had tried. • She talked about how she masturbated. • He would tell me how he gives oral sex and how many females he's given an orgasm to.

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Valid N	n (%)	Qualitative examples
They watched me undressing.	115	33 (28.7)	• I caught him peeping under my door with his camera. • Would spy on me while I changed. sat in bathroom with me while I shower. • He would enter my room and stand at the entrance watching me while I changed.
They educated me about sexual behavior.	115	31 (27.0)	• Tried 'teaching' me about sex by demonstrating it on me and it on them. • They told me what to do and demonstrated it for the "game." • We had "lessons" about sex ed.
They showed me pornography photographs or videos.	114	22 (19.3)	• He made me a Pornhub account because he was trying to be "nice" cause he paid for it. • He had a ton of pornographic videos on his console, PC, and laptop and he would often show it to me or sometimes when I would use his computer he was not very discrete in hiding his videos. • Would print out pictures and show me videos and pictures on the internet.
Other reason not listed.	113	3 (2.6)	• Kissed me in the staircase unwillingly. • Showed me his penis, grabbed my butt.
Post-Abuse Maintenance			
They told me not to tell anyone what happened.	115	58 (50.4)	• They told me not to tell anybody cause they said they could get in trouble. • They told me not to tell anyone what we did or else it could have severe consequences for everyone. • Told me to keep our relationship a secret.
They convinced me it was acceptable and/or normal behavior.	115	52 (45.2)	• I thought this was normal and he was just not ready to tell others of our relationship. • "I do this (with my other friend) too, it's how I play around." • He just told me that it was normal to have this kind of "bond" with him since we were "close."
They encouraged secrets.	115	51 (44.3)	• He said that keeping it a secret and sneaking around is fun. • They made me tell my secrets to her so she could use it to create this space of secrecy between us. • All my secrets went to him only.
They told me they loved me and/or that I was special.	115	44 (38.3)	• They told me I was pretty and that I was special. • Every time I asked why me he would say because he loves me and has never felt this way for someone before. • He always told me that he loved me that's why he did what he did and that I was the only one he wanted to be with.
They made me feel responsible for the abuse.	115	43 (37.4)	• I was told that I "liked" what had happened and therefore there was no wrongdoing. • Told me that I shouldn't have been an easy victim. "Comfort comes with a price." • She said things like, "you are the reason I have to do this to you," or "you deserve what is happening to you."

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Valid N	n (%)	Qualitative examples
They misstated the moral standards regarding touch.	115	36 (31.3)	• They told me that everyone does this, and that it's okay because we're close and it's only to help teach me so I'm ready for whoever I get with later in life. • He often said it was ok to do certain things like tickling in my private parts there was nothing wrong with playing like that. • He made it seem like these activities were something all siblings did.
They gave me rewards, bribes, or allowed me to avoid punishment.	115	20 (17.4)	• Gave me videogames, food, things that would help shut me up or keep me from spilling the truth. • I got trips, money, toys, food, practically every day every time we spent the day together. • I didn't have to do my homework.
They threatened abandonment, rejection, or my family breaking up.	115	19 (16.5)	• They threatened that it would destroy my family and that I had no choice but to keep it a secret. • He threatened that my mom would to jail because of me [and] that my family would abandon me if I told anyone. • Threatened with killing himself.
Other reason not listed.	113	6 (5.3)	• Since he made me stop talking to my friends all the time I had no one to talk to about it. • She threatened my family especially my younger brother and said that if I didn't do something she would kill him at school. • Attempted to tell one time [I] got hit in the face.

Table 4. *SGS-V* stages and total scores.

SGM stage	Valid N	Number of *SGS-V* items	Range of observed scores	Mean score	Endorsed at least One item (%)
Victim selection	114	9	0–9	3.2	91.2
Gaining access and isolation	114	5	0–4	1.1	64.9
Trust development	114	10	0–9	4.3	93.9
Desensitization to sexual content and physical contact	114	10	0–10	4.1	93.0
Post-abuse maintenance	115	8	0–8	2.8	82.6
Total	**111**	**42**	**0–37**	**15.3**	**99.1**

scores typically fell in the lower-middle end of each range. Lastly, the findings showed that majority of participants endorsed at least one item from each of the five stages, and nearly all participant (99.1%) reported experiencing at least one of the 42 sexual grooming behaviors.

Next, we reviewed the qualitative responses for the *SGS-V* items. A sample of the qualitative responses for each question is included in Table 3. The participants appeared to be understanding the quantitative items of the *SGS-V* questions, as their qualitative descriptions were in line with the intention of the item. Based feedback and consultation, as well as the qualitative responses from the pilot data, one *SGS-V* item was modified in the final version presented in Appendix A. We revised the item (i.e., "They manipulated my family to gain access to me [for example, they got close to my family])") to reflect an observable behavior, rather than focus on the offender's intent ("They spent time with my family to gain access to me [for example, they got close to my family]"). Overall, based on the pilot data, the *SGS-V* can be feasibility implemented, and the findings supported its limited-efficacy.

Discussion

The present study sought to develop and pilot a self-report measure for victims regarding the sexual grooming behaviors they experienced during their CSA victimization. The *Sexual Grooming Scale – Victim Version* (*SGS-V*) was developed based on the content-validated Sexual Grooming Model (SGM; Winters et al., 2020), including the five overarching stages involved in the process and 42 specific sexual grooming tactics. Using a sample of 115 adults who reported experiencing CSA prior to the age of 18, we examined the feasibility of the *SGS-V* in terms of implementation and limited-efficacy testing. The results from the pilot data suggested the *SGS-V* is a self-report measure that can be feasibly implemented via an online survey. Moreover, the preliminary data showed variability in the level of endorsement for *SGS-V* items, and that respondents were appropriately interpreting the items based on their qualitative description of their experiences. We hope that the proposed *SGS-V* can be useful in both research and practical settings to better understand victims' experiences of sexual grooming behaviors.

Practical implications

While the *SGS-V* requires further psychometric support, as described below, we believe the *SGS-V* has the potential to be helpful in a range of practical settings. First, clinicians can use the *SGS-V* to gather information about client's experiences of sexual grooming if the person

endorsed CSA. This can be used during clinical evaluations to collect quantitative and qualitative information about the victim's experiences with sexual grooming, Moreover, in a treatment setting, victims of sexual assault often experience feelings of responsibility and self-blame (Plummer, 2018); thus, the *SGS-V* can help clinicians learn about sexual grooming experienced by the client in order to provide psychoeducation and explain how these manipulative behaviors may impact their response to the abuse. Second, law enforcement or prosecutors working with victims of CSA can use the *SGS-V* to gather evidence of potential sexual grooming behaviors in CSA cases. Although further empirical support is needed for the *SGS-V* before the measure is appropriate to enter the courtroom, the tool can nonetheless guide the questioning of victims or the gathering of evidence during investigations or prosecutions. For example, if a perpetrator has had multiple victims, the *SGS-V* can be used to establish a common pattern of behavior or *modus operandi*. Third, the content of the *SGS-V* and empirical findings regarding prevalence will help inform CSA prevention efforts. Once we have more information as to what sexual grooming behaviors are commonly used, this can be integrated into educational materials for parents, caregivers, community members, and those who work closely with children (e.g., pediatricians, teachers, coaches, church-members). The community can be better equipped to recognize potentially predatory behaviors and subsequently intervene if there are appropriate concerns (e.g., observed sexual grooming behaviors that are occurring at high frequency or severity).

Future research directions

For future research endeavors, it would be beneficial to continue to explore the psychometric properties of the *SGS-V*. For example, different types of reliability (e.g., test-retest) and validity (e.g., convergent and divergent) could provide further support for the use of this measure. Moreover, as the next phase in this project, we plan to collect data from a large sample of adult victims of CSA to better understand the prevalence of sexual grooming behaviors in the offense process. This information can help shed light on the frequency at which these behaviors occur, as much of the prevalence data is based on only offender's perspectives and do not comprehensively examine a range of behaviors based on a content-validated model (e.g., Canter et al., 1998; Groth & Birnbaum, 1978).

The aforementioned prevalence data can begin to fill in numerous gaps within the sexual grooming literature. It has been suggested that there may be differences in the types of tactics, number of behaviors, or time spent grooming depending victim or offender characteristics (Kaufman et al., 2006). For example, it is possible sexual grooming is different based on age, sex, or race/ethnicity of the victim and offender (Kaufman et al., 2006); however, no study has empirically examined this notion. Similarly, it is likely that sexual grooming behavior will vary based on the relationship between the victim and offender (Craven et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2006), but there is no empirical evidence for this supposition. The *SGS-V* can also be used to gather information on the relationship between the extent sexual grooming is used and subsequent mental health consequences (e.g., posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, or feelings of guilt or shame), as it has been suggested grooming may be related to poorer outcomes (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). It is possible that sexual grooming impacts likelihood CSA is disclosed or reported, as the goals of these tactics are to decrease victim disclosure, avoid detection from those around the victim/offender, and increase the

likelihood that a disclosure would not be believed or taken seriously (Lanning & Dietz, 2014). Studies should investigate whether the use of sexual grooming behaviors, such as involvement in youth-serving organizations, presenting as charming and likeable, or gaining a good reputation in the community, impedes the disclosure or reporting process. Also of note, the *SGS-V* uses a dichotomous scale for respondents to indicate whether or not they experienced each sexual grooming behavior; this was intended to gather baseline prevalence rates for each item to better understand how commonly these behaviors are used. In future studies, it may be beneficial to include the frequency (e.g., number of times) at which the respondent experienced these behaviors if they endorsed a particular item. Taken together, the *SGS-V* can be used in research studies to examine various empirical questions that can expand our understanding of the sexual grooming behaviors of child sexual abusers.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study. First, the data collected during the pilot study only represents a small sample size (*n* = 115). While this exceeds the number of participants recommended for a pilot study (approximately 30–50; Perneger et al., 2015), the findings represent a relatively small sample size. As noted, the participants for this study were majority undergraduate females who were racially/ ethnically diverse (e.g., 53.0% identified as Latinx). A larger and more diverse sample size will help improve the generalizability of the findings; thus, we plan in the next phase of this project to collect data using the *SGS-V* on a larger sample of adults who experienced CSA.

Second, the *SGS-V* was developed as a measure for retrospective self-report for adult victims of CSA; thus, the content and language included in the measure may not be easily understood by younger child victims. Future iterations of the *SGS-V* could be adapted to fit the reading and comprehension abilities of younger CSA victims. Another limitation related to the measure itself is that the *SGS-V* was developed to be a self-report measure that can be used in research and practical settings. However, it is likely there are instances in which an interview-based measure of sexual grooming may be more appropriate; for example, a clinician using the measure in treatment settings or a law enforcement officer gathering information for an investigation may want to adapt the *SGS-V* with an in-person interview format. We argue the *SGS-V* could easily be adapted to be a semi-structured interview format by reading the items to the respondent, but we have not yet piloted the measure in this format. We plan to further investigate the use of the *SGS-V* as an interview-based tool in future studies.

Third, while the pilot data helped establish preliminary feasibility for the *SGS-V*, as noted above, there are other psychometric properties that need to be examined in order to provide additional support for the use of the *SGS-V* in research and practice. For example, other aspects of feasibility could be explored, including acceptability (e.g., how the victims reacted to the *SGS-V*) or adaptation (e.g., implementing the *SGS-V* in a different format, such as an in-person interview; Bowen et al., 2009). Moreover, areas of reliability and validity could be examined in future studies, especially test-retest reliability and convergent and discriminant validity.

Finally, the scale and the grooming literature in general will always be limited by the fact that many of the 42 identified grooming behaviors mirror normal adult-child interactions, and in and of themselves are not indicative of potential abuse unless the intention behind

them is deviant. Thus, it is unlikely that the *SGS-V* – or any measure of sexual grooming for that matter – can ever be used to conclusively "prove" that sexual grooming took place. However, Winters and colleagues (2020) argue that suspicion should be raised if "clusters, high frequency use, or the most severe of these potentially worrisome behaviors are present in a person spending time with children." (p. 14).

Conclusion

The *SGS-V* is the first and only measure of sexual grooming behaviors experienced by victims that is based on the content-validated SGM. The pilot data collected using the *SGS-V* shows promising results in terms of the feasibility of implementation and its limited-efficacy. Future research can provide further support for the psychometric properties of the *SGS-V* and shed light on the numerous gaps in the sexual grooming literature. This measure, as well as the associated empirical findings, will be useful in numerous practical settings. The construct of sexual grooming is necessary to better understand clinical work, law enforcement investigations and prosecution, and community prevention efforts of CSA cases.

Notes

1. For the questions related to age of victim and offender, if the participant listed an age range (e.g., 11–12 years old) the lowest identified number was used. If a vague age range was reported (e.g., mid-thirties), the number closest to the age range by an interval of five was used (e.g., mid-thirties was coded as 35).
2. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the *SGS-V* permits the respondents to decline to respond to any given item.
3. The following analyses are conducted without the "Other" categories included given that is not an item in the original SGM.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A: Sexual Grooming Scale – Victim Version

Victim Selection

There are many reasons that an individual may **select** a victim for their sexually abusive behavior. Please select **all** the reasons you believe the individual who abused you may have selected you:

(1) I was compliant and/or trusting of adults. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I was compliant and/or trusting of adults." Please describe.
(2) I lacked confidence and/or had low self-esteem. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I lacked confidence and/or had low self-esteem." Please describe.
(3) I was lonely and/or isolated. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I was lonely and/or isolated." Please describe.
(4) I was a troubled child/teen. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I was a troubled child/teen." Please describe.
(5) I was a needy child/teen. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I was a needy child/teen." Please describe.
(6) I felt unwanted or unloved by others. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I felt unwanted or unloved by others." Please describe.
(7) I was not close to my parents and/or they were not resources for me. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I was not close to my parents and/or they were not resources for me." Please describe.
(8) I had a single mother and/or was in need of a "father figure." (Yes/No)
  • You Selected "I had a single mother and/or was in need of a 'father figure.'" Please describe.
(9) I lacked adult supervision. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "I lacked adult supervision." Please describe.

(10) Other reason not listed. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "Other reason not listed." Please describe.

Gaining Access and Isolation

There are many ways that an individual may **gain access to and isolate a victim**. Please select *all* the behaviors the individual who abused you may have done to gain access or isolate you:

(11) They were involved in youth-serving organizations (e.g., Girl and Boy Scouts, youth sports, church leader, teacher, volunteered with children). (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They were involved in youth-serving organizations (e.g., Girl and Boy Scouts, youth sports, church leader, teacher, volunteered with children)." Please describe.
(12) They spent time with my family to gain access to me (for example, they got close to my family). (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They manipulated my family to gain access to me (for example, they got close to my family)." Please describe.
(13) They did activities alone with me without other adults. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They did activities alone with me without other adults." Please describe.
(14) They took me on overnight stays or outings.
  • You selected "They took me on overnight stays or outings." Please describe.
(15) They separated or isolated me from friends, other kids, and/or family. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They separated or isolated me friends, other kids, and/or family." Please describe.
(16) Other reason not listed. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "Other reason not listed." Please describe.

Trust Development

There are many ways that an individual may **develop trust** with the victim or other people around the victim. Please select *all* the behaviors the individual who abused you may have done to develop trust with you or those around you:

(17) They were charming, nice, and/or likeable. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They were charming, nice, and/or likeable." Please describe.
(18) They had insider status, a good reputation, and/or were considered a "pillar of the community." (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They had insider status, a good reputation, and/or were considered a 'pillar of the community.'" Please describe.
(19) They were affectionate and loving toward me. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They were affectionate and loving toward me." Please describe.
(20) They gave me a lot of attention. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They gave me a lot of attention." Please describe.
(21) They showed favoritism toward me and/or formed a special relationship with me. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They showed favoritism toward me and/or formed a special relationship with me." Please describe.
(22) They gave me compliments. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They gave me compliments." Please describe.
(23) They spent a lot of time with me and/or communicated with me often. (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They spent a lot of time with me and/or communicated with me often." Please describe.
(24) They engaged in childlike activities with me (e.g., stories, games, sports, music). (Yes/No)
  • You selected "They engaged in childlike activities with me (e.g., stories, games, sports, music). Please describe.
(25) They gave me rewards and/or privileges (e.g., gifts, toys, treats, money, trips). (Yes/No)

- You selected "They gave me rewards and/or privileges (e.g., gifts, toys, treats, money, trips)." Please describe.
(26) They provided me with drugs and/or alcohol. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They provided me with drugs and/or alcohol." Please describe.
(27) Other reason not listed. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "Other reason not listed." Please describe.

Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Touch

There are many ways that an individual may try to get the victim **used to physical touch or sexual content before the abuse**. Please select *all* the behaviors the individual who abused you may have done to get you used to physical touch or sexual content:

(28) They asked questions about my sexual experiences and/or relationships. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They asked questions about my sexual experiences and/or relationships." Please describe.
(29) They talked about sexual things they had done. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They talked about sexual things they had done." Please describe.
(30) They used inappropriate sexual language and/or told dirty jokes. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They used inappropriate sexual language and/or told dirty jokes." Please describe.
(31) They educated me about sexual behavior. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They educated me about sexual behavior." Please describe.
(32) They used accidental touching and/or distracted me while touching me. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They used accidental touching and/or distracted me while touching me." Please describe.
(33) They watched me undressing. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They watched me undressing." Please describe.
(34) They exposed their naked body to me. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They exposed their naked body to me." Please describe.
(35) They showed me pornography photographs or videos. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They showed me pornography photographs or videos." Please describe.
(36) They used seemingly innocent and/or non-sexual touching (e.g., hugs/tickling). (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They used seemingly innocent and/or non-sexual touching (e.g., hugs/tickling)." Please describe.
(37) They gradually increased the amount of sexual touching over time. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They gradually increased the amount of sexual touching over time." Please describe.
(38) Other reason not listed. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "Other reason not listed." Please describe.

Post-Abuse Maintenance

There are many ways that an individual may try to **prevent the victim from disclosing the abuse or to continue the abuse over time**. Please select *all* the behaviors you believe the individual who abused you may used to try to prevent disclosure or continue the abuse:

(39) They told me not to tell anyone what happened. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They told me not to tell anyone what happened." Please describe.
(40) They encouraged secrets. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They encouraged secrets." Please describe.
(41) They told me they loved me and/or that I was special. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They told me they loved me and/or that I was special." Please describe.
(42) They gave me rewards, bribes, or allowed me to avoid punishment. (Yes/No)

- You selected "They gave me rewards, bribes, or allowed me to avoid punishment." Please describe.
(43) They convinced me it was acceptable and/or normal behavior. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They convinced me it was acceptable and/or normal behavior." Please describe.
(44) They misstated the moral standards regarding touch (e.g., they told me touching was okay or normal). (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They misstated the moral standards regarding touch (e.g., they told me touching was okay or normal)." Please describe.
(45) They made me feel responsible for the abuse. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They made me feel responsible for the abuse." Please describe.
(46) They threatened abandonment, rejection, or my family breaking up. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "They threatened abandonment, rejection, or my family breaking up." Please describe.
(47) Other reason not listed. (Yes/No)
  - You selected "Other reason not listed." Please describe.