

# Conceptualizing “grooming” in child sexual abuse: A scoping review of Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian research

Émilie Pascale Bloin Helgheim

*SAM – Faculty of Social Sciences, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway*

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1114-6007>

Lars Roar Frøyland

*NOVA – Norwegian Social Research, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway*

[lfroy@oslomet.no](mailto:lfroy@oslomet.no)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3681-4183>

## Abstract

Recent decades have seen an upsurge in research on child sexual abuse (CSA). Although important empirical knowledge has been derived, theoretical understandings of vital concepts are lacking, particularly from parts of the world where CSA research is still in its infancy. In this study, we conducted a scoping review of conceptualizations of “grooming” in CSA research from 56 peer-reviewed studies from 2010 to 2023 to contrast contemporary understandings of grooming in Scandinavian research with those from non-Scandinavian research. The results showed that descriptions of the manipulative stages of grooming and contexts outside the internet were lacking in Scandinavian texts compared with non-Scandinavian texts, indicating a restricted understanding of grooming in Scandinavian CSA studies. These findings indicate narrow pathways to CSA victimhood for Scandinavian children as well as a lack of attention to the importance of the victims’ environment in CSA prevention efforts, potentially negatively affecting children’s ability to disclose their experiences. Further studies on grooming in CSA in Scandinavia are suggested.

## Keywords

child sexual abuse, grooming, scoping review, abuse prevention, Scandinavia

## Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global public health problem and associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes (Hailes et al., 2019). In recent decades, considerable efforts have been made in Scandinavian countries to prevent violence and abuse. Simultaneously, the concept of “grooming” in CSA has entered the public discussion. When mentioned in Scandinavian policy documents, grooming predominantly describes certain forms of online solicitations, such as requests for nude photos or videos from predatory adults who contact children on the internet (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2021; Justitiedepartementet, 2022; Justitsministeriet, 2022). This contrasts with the consensus in scientific studies on the topic, in which grooming is not limited to, or mainly facilitated by, the specifics of the internet. Instead, it is conceptualized as a collective term for a process

involving various manipulative strategies employed by adults attempting to sexualize an adult-child relationship by gaining the trust of children and their surroundings in different contexts (Winters et al., 2020).

Knowledge of the characteristics and risks of CSA is particularly important for designing help services and policies (Winters et al., 2022b), such as proactively informing both children and adults about CSA to increase their ability to identify, and subsequently hinder, various pathways to abuse. As conceptualization is a tool that can both illuminate and conceal parts of the reality that we seek to understand (Conte, 2018), studying how a term is used in research may help identify potential research gaps. In this article, we present the findings of a scoping review of conceptualizations of grooming in Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian research and discuss its possible implications for Scandinavian CSA prevention.

### Understanding grooming in scientific research

The concept of grooming—often used interchangeably with the term “seduction” in the past—pre-dated the internet and emerged in the academic field of violence and abuse in the 1980 s (Lanning, 2018), together with a growing recognition of violence occurring in close relationships. Grooming is generally understood as a manipulative process of misusing trust-based relationships that can lead to a child’s sexual abuse (Lanning, 2018). While a general description of grooming is largely agreed upon today (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2014; Craven et al., 2006; Winters et al., 2022b), the nature of a groomer’s behavior and tactics when seeking to befriend a child to uphold secrecy and remain undetected in various contexts is ambiguous (Craven et al., 2006). This complicates the process of conceptualizing exactly which acts constitute grooming and which do not. The process of grooming can involve different targets: the child victim (grooming of the child), the child’s environment, closest peers, and family to establish trust and gain access to the child without attracting suspicion (grooming of the community), and the intrapersonal process of the groomer attempting to justify their interests, behaviors, and actions by psychologically attempting to decrease their own self-doubt and guilt—also described as *self-grooming* (Craven et al., 2006). However, not all grooming cases are motivated by the desire to physically abuse the child. For example, some groomers might gain sexual pleasure from grooming alone (Lanning, 2018) or be more fantasy-driven (Broome et al., 2018). The threat of harm caused by the grooming process is still found to be a strong predictor of trauma symptom severity in CSA victims (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019).

Winters et al. (2020) developed a conceptual model of grooming, the “sexual grooming model” (SGM), based on a large-scale review of the existing scientific literature on the grooming process. The model includes 77 identified grooming behaviors within five overarching stages of the grooming process: 1) victim selection, 2) gaining access and isolating a child, 3) trust development, 4) desensitization to sexual content and physical contact, and 5) maintenance following abuse. The model describes how a groomer typically selects a vulnerable child whose lack of supervision or need for support creates the perfect opportunity to establish an inappropriate sexual relationship (1). Access (2) is often granted through various positions or roles near children, such as in childcare, children’s healthcare, schools, or other juvenile institutions, which enable the groomer to pose as someone who cares about children while avoiding suspicion. It could also be facilitated by being close to the child through family ties, such as in cases of intrafamilial abuse. In the “trust development” stage (3), the groomer often attempts to facilitate emotional dependency in the child through various socialization strategies, easing

greater access to them while increasing the chances of secrecy and cooperation. Thereafter, emotional dependency is used for a gradual sexualizing of communication and contact, both physically and psychologically (4). When such boundaries are crossed, post-abuse maintenance strategies (5) may be applied to uphold secrecy and continue further access to the child, often by naturalizing the relationship, shaming the child, or using various forms of threats or bribes. Therefore, tactics otherwise often described as abuse acts, such as violent threats or the use of physical harm, may also constitute grooming when involved in an ongoing process performed to uphold an exploitive relationship.

The order and presence of the above-mentioned stages vary depending on the characteristics of the victim and groomer and the specific context in which they occur. Groomers may use many of the same manipulative practices online as those used in in-person grooming, while offender characteristics are more varied (Ioannou et al., 2018). For example, online groomers can be first-time offenders who possess fewer skills in socially manipulative behaviors but still reap the benefits of the internet to approach many children simultaneously. “Sexual solicitation” is a term used to describe the less gradual, sexually harassing events that occur online and do not encompass the ongoing manipulative process of grooming (Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020).

As Winters et al.’s (2020) five overarching stages in grooming and Craven et al.’s (2006) three types of grooming cover a large variety of possible strategies and tactics in the process, both were included to structure the findings of this paper’s review.

### Grooming in the Scandinavian context

The Nordic countries are widely recognized for their high standards of social, gender, and economic equality, factors frequently referred to when examining how women and children are treated in societies. For instance, lower levels of economic development can sustain patriarchal structures and rigid gender roles that limit women’s and girls’ bodily autonomy, placing them in subordinate positions that increase their vulnerability to victimization (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015). Despite these advancements, however, the Nordic countries continue to experience relatively high rates of gender-based violence and abuse, a phenomenon often referred to as the Nordic paradox (Wemrell et al., 2019), making the region an interesting case for studying sexual violence and abuse.

While sexual abuse is a commonly thematized topic in Scandinavian policy documents and research, references to the specific act of grooming seem scarce (Ottosen & Henze-Pedersen, 2021). More research on the subject has been requested, but mainly in terms of online grooming (Staksrud, 2013). Scandinavian studies of CSA also increasingly address the need to develop greater knowledge on the various pathways to abuse as a form of preventive strategy (Ottosen & Henze-Pedersen, 2021). Examples include highlighting how knowledge of the warning signs of abuse is important to be receptive to children’s efforts at expressing their experiences and educating children and young people on healthy boundary setting in relationships and how to talk about unwanted sexual situations.

Descriptions of the manipulative processes of grooming in CSA are also lacking in Scandinavian policy documents, with definitions starkly differing from the consensus in international research. Grooming is often conceptualized as a type of “internet phenomenon,” defined as a form of “digital harassment” (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2021; Justitiedepartementet, 2022; Justitsministeriet, 2022). Another example is how the Norwegian and Swedish branches of the advocacy organization “Save the Children” provide learning material on sexual abuse in public schools and define grooming as follows: “gaining and abuse of children’s trust online by adults for their own sexual

gratification, including requests for sexual images and videos, compliments or explicit sexual talk online, or requests for a meeting in-person” (Rädda Barnen, n.d; Redd Barna, 2021, pp. 23–37). The descriptions of grooming encompass only certain forms of online abusive behaviors (e.g., the transmission of sexual videos or images online), while leaving out the underlying manipulative processes characterizing grooming. Thus, a review of Scandinavian scientific research on grooming is warranted, to study the application and understanding of this term in CSA research and uncover potential research gaps.

### The present study

This study presents a scoping review of contemporary conceptualizations of grooming in CSA in scientific research, including their reference to any of the five stages of grooming identified in the SGM (Winters et al., 2020) and the three types of grooming (Craven et al., 2006). The aim was to provide insights into the understanding of grooming in scientific research by reviewing Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian studies in English in terms of their application of the concept, thereby identifying possible research gaps and implications for Scandinavian CSA prevention. Specifically, we asked what types of behaviors, experiences, and contexts are included in the conceptualizations of grooming in the two text corpuses.

## Methods

Owing to their explorative and iterative methodology, scoping reviews are considered suitable for studying emerging evidence bases when exploring the extent and range of an emerging subject or phenomenon (Tricco et al., 2016). The scoping review was conducted using the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) checklist (Tricco et al., 2018) and comprised 56 texts: 12 Scandinavian and 44 non-Scandinavian.

### Operationalization of core concepts

This review aimed to discuss the conceptualizations of grooming in existing research; thus, no pre-defined operationalization of “grooming” was formulated in the study apart from it appearing in the context of CSA. Studies were included regardless of potential inconsistencies with internationally acknowledged definitions of grooming. The combination of the characteristics mentioned in the SGM (Winters et al., 2020) and the three types of grooming (Craven et al., 2006) resulted in the documentation of a broad set of possible grooming characteristics and reduced the bias of relying on the authors’ familiarity with the subject. “Children” were conceptualized as those below the age of 18, excluding babies and infants whose abuse does not encompass the manipulative strategies necessary for conceptualizing the act as grooming.

### Search strategy

A systematic search strategy was developed in consultation with the Oslo Metropolitan University Library. The search words comprised three overarching themes:

1. the term “grooming” or “groom” in the title, abstract, or full text;
2. words and/or synonyms related to sexual violence; and

### 3. words and/or synonyms related to children and young people.

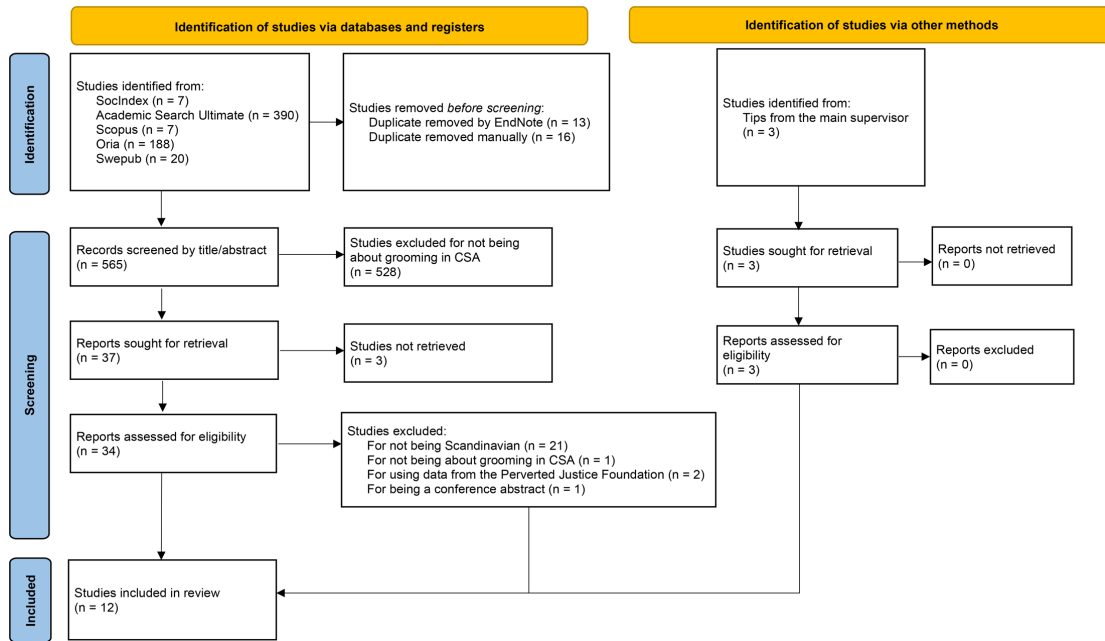
The search terms were combined using a Boolean AND operator when searching for non-Scandinavian literature to exclude texts on grooming in contexts other than CSA, such as animals. The Scandinavian searches were limited to combining search terms 1 and 3, as the term grooming is not used in contexts other than CSA. Thereafter, five databases (Academic Search Ultimate, SocINDEX, Scopus, Oria, and SwePub) were searched for texts on grooming in English or Scandinavian languages (due to language proficiency), with “peer reviewed” status when allowed by the search database or the sample size of the corpus. After the initial search for Scandinavian literature, an inclusion criterion for publication dates for all texts was set to 2010–2023 to match the earliest available literature from Scandinavia. Additional reference lists and hand searches were conducted for the Scandinavian texts because of the limited number of studies identified in the initial searches, but no further studies were added. The initial search for non-Scandinavian literature was considered to provide a sufficiently broad corpus of texts to completely unpack the conceptualization of grooming; thus, no further searches were conducted. Tables S1 and S2 in the supplementary material present an overview of the systematic search history and search words.

### Selection of sources of evidence

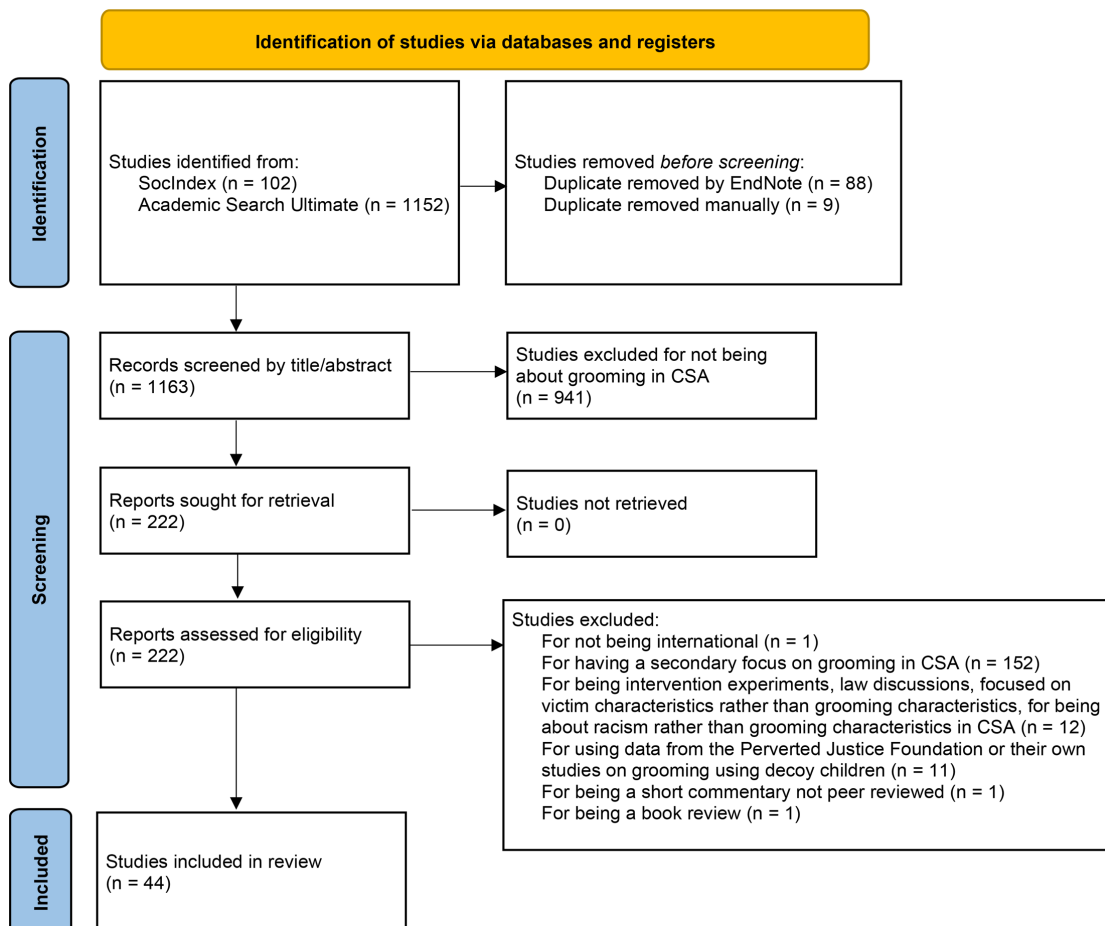
The initial search resulted in a sample of 615 Scandinavian texts and 1,260 non-Scandinavian texts for screening ( $N = 1,875$ ). The sample was screened electronically and manually in Endnote to remove duplicates ( $n = 144$ ). Titles and abstracts of the remaining texts were then screened for their relation to CSA and their research focus on grooming. The inclusion criterion was to have a thematic focus on grooming in CSA using either empirical data on real children or theoretical reasoning. The main exclusion criteria were not being about grooming in CSA ( $n = 1,470$ ), having a secondary focus on grooming in CSA ( $n = 152$ ), and using data from the Perverted Justice Foundation on “decoy children” instead of real grooming processes ( $n = 13$ ). One exception to this exclusion criterion was a Scandinavian text that also included other empirical sources documenting grooming (Joleby et al., 2021). Texts not subjected to peer review were also excluded. However, due to the limited availability of Scandinavian texts studying grooming, all texts examining CSA were considered, irrespectively of whether grooming was a primary or secondary focus of the text and their peer review status (the latter resulted in the inclusion of two conference proceedings that were not peer reviewed). This resulted in a final sample of 12 Scandinavian texts and 44 non-Scandinavian texts included in the review. One text with both Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian affiliations was labeled “Scandinavian” (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011). Accordingly, the two samples differed in a few aspects, including their thematic focus on grooming and peer-reviewed status. The screening process and details on the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the two text corpuses are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

### Data abstraction

A charting form was developed to document the conceptualizations of grooming in each text (Table S3 in the supplementary material). The form was inspired by the five stages of grooming identified in the SGM (Winters et al., 2020), which enabled the review of a broad array of possible grooming strategies, as well as the three types of grooming (Craven et al.,



**Figure 1.** The PRISMA flow diagram for the Scandinavian text corpus



**Figure 2.** The PRISMA flow diagram for the non-Scandinavian text corpus

2006), allowing the review of descriptions of addressees of grooming other than the victim. Given the comprehensive framework of grooming used in the analyses, no studies were

identified that contained extensive descriptions of grooming not aligning with examples in the charting form. The purpose of each text was also charted to highlight the differences in the two samples' academic focus on grooming, the year of publication, and the country of origin of each text. The review of all texts was conducted by the first author, and all uncertainties were discussed with the second author. All findings were then thematized and numbered by their specific reference to the elements of the charting form. Table 1 illustrates how the texts in the two corpuses refer to the main charting elements. To avoid long strings of references in the text, larger bulks of studies referring to a specific element of the charting form were assigned a number referring to this string of references (e.g., 9.1 for Scandinavian studies of online grooming), as shown in Table 2.

**Table 1.** The Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian texts' references to the elements of grooming.

	Scandinavian corpus (N = 12)	Non-Scandinavian corpus (N = 44)
Charting elements	Number of texts (%)	Number of texts (%)
Grooming of the victim	12 (100%)	44 (100%)
Grooming of the self	0 (0%)	10 (23%)
Grooming of the community	1 (8%)	36 (82%)
Victim selection	1 (8%)	35 (80%)
Access and isolation	1 (8%)	43 (98%)
Trust, bonding, befriending	6 (50%)	44 (100%)
Desensitization to sexual content/contact	3 (25%)	44 (100%)
Post-abuse maintenance	2 (17%)	31 (70%)

## Results

Of the 12 studies in the Scandinavian text corpus, six originate from Sweden, five from Norway, and one from Denmark. The non-Scandinavian text corpus is mainly from the Anglosphere and other Western countries, with 24 of 44 studies originating in the United States (55%), eight in the United Kingdom (18%), seven in other English-speaking countries (16%), and five from other European countries (11%). Twenty-three of the 56 reviewed texts are theoretical papers, commentaries, or review studies (52%), 21 are based on quantitative data (38%), and 12 are based on case studies, court proceedings, or qualitative interviews (21%). See Tables S4 and S5 in the supplementary material for details on the studies included in the final review.

### Grooming of the victim

All texts in both corpuses mention the grooming of the victim (1.1). In the Scandinavian corpus, eight texts (67%) define it exclusively as an online phenomenon (1.2). Examples are as sexual approaches online from unknown adults asking for nude photos (Fransson et al., 2019; Jonsson et al., 2019; Ugelvik, 2022) or adults pretending to be children who flirt (Jonsson et al., 2015) or asking for sexual content, which can be used as blackmail to attain more content or an in-person meeting (Staksrud, 2013). Two texts refer to the offline setting by mentioning both the victim and their parents as possible targets (Eneman et al., 2010) and to "traditional" grooming occurring in public spaces such as schools, malls, sporting events, or children's clubs (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011). Two texts do not

**Table 2.** References of the thematized data sources.

<b>1. Grooming of the victim</b>	
1.1	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Dunkels, 2010; Elklit, 2015; Eneman et al., 2010; Fransson et al., 2019; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018, 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Joleby et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2015, 2019; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022b; Staksrud, 2013; Stige et al., 2022; Susi et al., 2019; Ugelvik, 2022; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Wachs et al., 2012, 2016; Whittle et al., 2013; 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
1.2	Dunkels, 2010; Fransson et al., 2019; Joleby et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2015; Jonsson et al., 2019; Staksrud, 2013; Susi et al., 2019; Ugelvik, 2022
1.3	Dunkels, 2010; Joleby et al., 2021; Staksrud, 2013; Susi et al., 2019
<b>2. Grooming of the self</b>	
2.1	Hui et al., 2015; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kloess et al., 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Raine & Kent, 2019; Whittle et al., 2013; Whittle et al., 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a
2.2	Jülich & Oak, 2016; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Whittle et al., 2015
<b>3. Grooming of the community</b>	
3.1	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022b; Whittle et al., 2013, 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
3.2	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020; Collings, 2020; Dietz, 2018; Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; McElvaney, 2019; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Spenard & Cash, 2022a; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
3.3	Berliner, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
<b>4. Victim selection</b>	
4.1	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Spenard & Cash, 2022b; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Wachs et al., 2012, 2016; Whittle et al., 2013; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
4.2	Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Plummer, 2018; Whittle et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2020; Winters & Jeglic, 2016
4.3	de Santisteban et al., 2018; Knoll, 2010; Wachs et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2013
4.4	Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Winters et al., 2022a; Winters & Jeglic, 2022
<b>5. Access and isolation</b>	



**Table 2.** (Continued)

5.1	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018, 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022b; Wachs et al., 2012, 2016; Whittle et al., 2013, 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022, Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
5.2	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Plummer, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022b; Whittle et al., 2013; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020; 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
5.3	Kaylor et al., 2022a; McElvaney, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Whittle et al., 2013
5.4	Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2022c; Wolf et al., 2018
<b>6. Trust, bonding, befriending</b>	
6.1	Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Dunkels, 2010; Eneman et al., 2010; Joleby et al., 2021; Susi et al., 2019; Staksrud, 2013
6.2	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018, 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Kaylor et al., 2022b; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022b; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Wachs et al., 2012, 2016; Whittle et al., 2013, 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters and Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
6.3	de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Whittle et al., 2013; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2022b, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2022
6.4	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; Dietz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018); Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021); Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022b; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Wachs et al., 2012; 2016; Whittle et al., 2013; 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
6.5	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; 2020; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; Dietz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018, 2021; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Plummer, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019; Spenard & Cash 2022a; Whittle et al., 2013; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022b, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
<b>7. Desensitization to sexual content/contact</b>	
7.1	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018, 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo and Van Hout (2021); Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020;

**Table 2.** (Continued)

	Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Wachs et al., 2012; 2016; Whittle et al., 2013, 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
7.2	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Collings, 2020; Dietz, 2018; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019; Spenard & Cash, 2022a, 2022b; Williams, 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2022, Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
7.3	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Collings, 2020; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Wachs et al., 2012; Whittle et al., 2013, 2015; Williams, 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
7.4	Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Winters et al., 2020, 2022c; Winters & Jeglic, 2022
7.5	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Collings, 2020; Dietz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Hui et al., 2015; Jülich & Oak, 2016; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Whittle et al., 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2022b, 2022c; Winters & Jeglic, 2016; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
7.6	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kloess et al., 2019; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Raine & Kent, 2019; Spenard & Cash, 2022a; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Whittle et al., 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2023; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
<b>8. Post-abuse maintenance</b>	
8.1	Eneman et al., 2010; Susi et al., 2019
8.2	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; 2021; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Plummer, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022b; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Whittle et al., 2013; Whittle et al., 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
8.3	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kloess et al., 2019; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Plummer, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019; Winters et al., 2022b, 2022c; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
8.4	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Raine & Kent, 2019; Whittle et al., 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022c; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
8.5	Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Winters et al., 2020, 2022c; Winters & Jeglic, 2022
8.6	Collings, 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; 2022b; Knoll, 2010; Ringenberg et al., 2022, 2022b; Whittle et al., 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022c; Winters & Jeglic, 2022
8.7	Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Kloess et al., 2019; Plummer, 2018; Winters et al., 2022a, 2022b; Winters & Jeglic, 2022
8.8	Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018; Jeglic et al., 2023; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022c; Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019

**Table 2.** (Continued)

8.9	Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Hui et al., 2015; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a, 2022b; McElvaney, 2019; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Plummer, 2018; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022b; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Whittle et al., 2013, 2015; Winters et al., 2020, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
<b>9. Purpose of the study/text</b>	
9.1	Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011; Eneman et al., 2010; Joleby et al., 2021; Staksrud, 2013; Susi et al., 2019
9.2	Dunkels, 2010; Elklit, 2015; Fransson et al., 2019; Jonsson et al., 2015; 2019; Stige et al., 2022; Ugelvik, 2022
9.3	Bennett and O'Donohue, 2014, 2020; Berliner, 2018; Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Collings, 2020; Dietz, 2018; Jeglic et al., 2023; Jülich & Oak, 2016; Kaylor et al., 2022a; Knoll, 2010; McElvaney, 2019; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Plummer, 2018; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Raine & Kent, 2019; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Spenard & Cash, 2022b; Van de Vijver & Harvey, 2019; Whittle et al., 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams & Hudson, 2013; Winters et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023; Winters & Jeglic, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019
9.4	de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018, 2021; Greene-Colozzi et al., 2020; Hui et al., 2015; Kloess et al., 2019; Wachs et al., 2012, 2016; Whittle et al., 2013

include any description of the context of grooming (Elklit, 2015; Stige et al., 2022), while four texts mention establishing a “personal bond,” but all examples are restricted to the online context (1.3). Conversely, only two non-Scandinavian texts (5%) refer exclusively to the online context and requests for sexual content when defining the grooming of the victim (de Santisteban et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018). The remaining non-Scandinavian texts emphasize trust-building processes occurring in various settings and relationships through accounts of the other elements of the grooming process presented in the following sections.

### Grooming of the self

No Scandinavian texts mention anything related to self-grooming. Conversely, ten (23%) non-Scandinavian texts describe self-grooming by explaining the groomer's ability to overcome internal inhibitors through justification, excuses, and normalization of their own desires (2.1). Examples include excusing their actions as “uncontrollable urges,” labeling any lack of reactions as “acceptance” (Jülich & Oak, 2016) or using “cognitive distortions” (Jülich & Oak, 2016; Whittle et al., 2013; 2015) such as picturing the child as a “sexual being” who enjoys the contact, thus relieving themselves of shame and guilt (2.2). Online, self-grooming can be heightened through anonymity by pretending that the actions are less “real” (Kloess et al., 2019) or by engaging in forums in which distortions are shared and reinforced collectively (Jülich & Oak, 2016; Mooney & Ost, 2013).

### Grooming of the community

One Scandinavian text (8%) mentions that a groomer may attempt to gain the trust of the community and/or parents of the child to ease their access to their chosen victim (Eneman et al., 2010). However, there is little description of how this is attained in praxis other than mentioning that certain situations allow abuse to be more easily concealed. In comparison, 35 non-Scandinavian texts (80%) emphasize a groomer's attempt to appear likable in front of the child's environment as a form of risk assessment and access strategy (3.1). Examples

include engaging in seemingly normal adult–child interactions in front of the child’s peers (3.2) or attaining roles/positions that grant the groomer authority and a good reputation in relation to children, such as working in childcare, schools, and youth organizations (3.3).

### Victim selection

One Scandinavian text (8%) mentions a groomer who strategically seeks out children revealing vulnerabilities online, such as being bullied or lacking parental control, where they appear as the child’s support figure (Dunkels, 2010). However, no further explanation or examples of how such vulnerabilities are identified and exploited are included. Conversely, 35 non-Scandinavian texts (80%) mention various characteristics of victim selection, such as choosing victims who lack support, attention, or affection; have poor health or family circumstances; or are troubled, lonely, or lack self-esteem. These characteristics are strategically exploited by the groomer, who poses as a support figure and establishes a bond that is misused to gradually sexualize the contact (4.1). Some texts also include the preferred physical characteristics of a victim, such as “physical attractiveness” or a “young-looking” appearance (4.2). Others mention behavioral aspects that can be exploited, such as behaving in a sexually curious manner (4.3), being risk-taking (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2014; Collings, 2020), or being more compliant and trusting toward adults (4.4). Geographical proximity may also be part of the selection process (Mooney & Ost, 2013; Plummer, 2018).

### Access and isolation

One Scandinavian text (8%) refers to online grooming by establishing a private conversation with a child, which indicates some element of access and isolation (Staksrud, 2013). However, no further descriptions of the techniques besides being online are included. By contrast, 43 non-Scandinavian texts (98%) describe the physical and psychological elements of access and isolation (5.1). The texts emphasize that groomers may position themselves in roles that grant them access to children, in which extra attention and “care” can facilitate the isolation of a child (5.2). Psychologically, a child can be isolated by the groomer by increasingly occupying their leisure time or sometimes discouraging them from having other close relationships (5.3). Online, disguising one’s age and gender or pretending to share the child’s hobbies and interests can facilitate their isolation by establishing a closer bond, granting the groomer emotional access, which facilitates control (5.4).

### Trust, bonding, and befriending

Six Scandinavian texts (50%) refer to individual elements of trust, bonding, and befriending (6.1). Although one of these texts describes the strategic sharing of the child’s interests before sexualizing the contact, it also states that this is less common online, in which contact seems more explicitly sexual and less concealed (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011). The other five texts mention pretending to be a child (Eneman et al., 2010), becoming the child’s support figure (Dunkels, 2010), rapport building and showing affection (Joleby et al., 2021), using flattery or bribes (Susi et al., 2019), and establishing a private conversation (Staksrud, 2013). How these strategies work and can lead to the realization of abuse and how they can be distinguished from normal adult-child interactions or sexual solicitations rather than grooming processes are not further discussed. Conversely, all non-Scandinavian texts highlight attempts to identify vulnerabilities and build a bond of

trust and support with the child to conceal the inappropriateness of the relationship and make non-sexual and sexual acts harder to stop or identify as worrisome (6.2). Examples include adopting the child's interests or engaging in child-like activities (6.3), showing great interest in the child's life by being a figure of support, nurturer, or mentor (6.4), or displaying favoritism and special privilege (6.5).

#### Desensitizing to sexual content and/or contact

Three Scandinavian texts (25%) describe how communicating with a child online can be misused for sexualization of the contact (Eneman et al., 2010; Joleby et al., 2021; Susi et al., 2019). Examples include bringing up sexual matters in chats (Eneman et al., 2010), showing flattery or affection and creating a "boyfriend/girlfriend" relationship (Eneman et al., 2010; Joleby et al., 2021; Susi et al., 2019), or sending direct requests for sexual content through bribes or threats (Eneman et al., 2010; Susi et al., 2019). Descriptions of how such contact is facilitated and through which social techniques other than the use of anonymity, direct pressure, or sexualized communication are not provided. In comparison, all non-Scandinavian texts describe desensitization as attempts to identify vulnerabilities and establish a bond of closeness, support, and intimacy misused to facilitate a gradual sexualization of contact (7.1). References to explicit sexualization include a gradual increase in physical touch ("accidental touch," hugging, tickling, etc.) (7.2), an increase in sexual topics in conversations (sex "education," jokes, compliments, etc.) (7.3), watching the child undress (7.4), or professing their love and romanticizing the relationship (7.5). Normalization of sexual contact is also described as facilitated by altering between such sexual and non-sexual interactions (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Ringenberget al., 2022). Some also indicate the use of bribes in exchange for sexual content or contact (7.6).

#### Post-abuse maintenance

Two Scandinavian texts (17%) mention how threats of blackmail of sexual content of the child are used online by groomers to attain more sexual content or an in-person meeting (Eneman et al., 2010; Susi et al., 2019). In comparison, 31 non-Scandinavian texts (70%) describe psychological and physical tactics applied to hinder the child from disclosing and upholding abusive contact (8.2). Examples include continuing an exclusive emotional bond to uphold the contact (8.3), misrepresenting what happened as "normal" (8.4), or making the child believe that what happened was due to them being "special" or an act of "love" (8.5), or something that was their own fault and that others would blame them (8.6). Others mention the general encouragement of secrecy (8.7) and the use of bribes or the withholding of bribes in exchange for the child's silence (8.8). Some also describe the use of coercion, such as threats of punishment, abandonment, or blackmail (8.9), or physically harming the child into silence (Burgess & Hartman, 2018; Plummer, 2018; Ringenberget al., 2022).

#### Purpose of the study

In the Scandinavian corpus, five texts (42%) represent studies of grooming in an online context (9.1), while seven (58%) represent studies of CSA (9.2), of which three are studies of online CSA (Dunkels, 2010; Jonsson et al., 2015; 2019). The non-Scandinavian corpus includes 35 studies (80%) of in-person grooming (9.3), in which two studies combine in-person and online grooming (Ringenberget al., 2022; Williams & Hudson, 2013). The remaining nine (20%) are studies on online grooming (9.4).

### Summary of findings

Most non-Scandinavian texts include a combination of all phases of the grooming process and aspects related to the grooming of the victim and community. The Scandinavian texts mention significantly fewer of these elements in their conceptualizations of grooming, with examples of the grooming process mostly restricted to the online context. Explicit sexual acts are more commonly described, such as sending or receiving sexual images and videos, sexually suggestive messages, or direct threats, while descriptions of the gradual buildup of a manipulative grooming relationship, trust-building processes, and isolation techniques are scarce. The Scandinavian texts also do not differentiate between “sexual solicitations” and “sexual grooming.” Furthermore, grooming is conceptualized as a threat mainly to the child victim, while descriptions of the victim’s environment and its relationship with CSA victimhood are rarely included. Overall, the conceptualizations of grooming in the Scandinavian texts starkly contrast with the non-Scandinavian ones, which refer to the manipulative processes of gaining emotional control over a victim through various strategies in different contexts rather than representing a smaller set of explicitly sexualized behaviors online.

### Discussion

This review of non-Scandinavian and Scandinavian scientific literature on grooming in CSA identifies significantly different conceptualizations of grooming in the two text corpuses and a lack of Scandinavian studies devoted to in-person grooming. The presentation of grooming in Scandinavian research appears more comparable with online sexual solicitation in the broader scientific literature, something that may hinder the design of appropriate preventive efforts and help services for Scandinavian CSA victims. Three overarching themes are arguably crucial in shaping the corpuses’ conceptualizations of grooming in relation to CSA prevention: “the definitions of grooming,” “the included and excluded examples of grooming acts,” and “the contexts and recipients of grooming.”

#### Definitions: Assisting or restricting future findings

Reviewing the definitions of concepts in health and social work-related research, such as grooming in CSA, can provide relevant insights into which parts of the phenomenon are currently identified and which remain excluded, undiscussed, or somewhat “unseen” (Conte, 2018). For example, when feminist scholars in the 1970 s rebranded actions previously referred to as “house trouble” to domestic violence, the result was a new understanding of “violence”—one that acknowledged previously obscured elements of the interpersonal setting such as psychological forms of control and abuse, contributing to a broader set of actions, situations, and relationships to become associated with the term “violence” (Whittier, 2009).

Similarly, when grooming in non-Scandinavian texts is defined with reference to its overarching structures of manipulation, such as the stages often present in the exploitation of trust-building processes between adults and children (e.g., Conte, 2018; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021; Winters et al., 2022b), a comprehensive conception of what grooming may entail is established. For example, when Wachs et al. (2012) defined “cyber grooming” as a form of grooming using information and communication technologies that incorporates repetition, misuse of trust, and the establishment of a trust-based relationship, grooming is presented as a process involving a potential variety of actions and situations derived from the identified structures.

Most Scandinavian texts define grooming through online examples, such as an adult sending or asking for sexual content online (Fransson et al., 2019; Jonsson et al., 2019) prior to a request for an in-person meeting (Staksrud, 2013; Ugelvik, 2022), making the term “grooming” more limited in its applicability. Eneman et al. (2010) define grooming as an approach to facilitate abuse in which the adult “induces the child to take part in sexual conversations, sending sexual images, posing in front of a web cam and/or carrying out sexual activities in front of a web cam” (p. 2). Here, little is mentioned about the contents of the inducement, which is the psychological aspect of grooming representing various actions, situations, and relationships; instead, more about a specific set of examples of some of its potential outcomes is indicated, albeit limited to the online world.

To prevent grooming and abuse from occurring, addressing characteristics that can identify relevant risk factors is considered key (Ioannou et al., 2018). Therefore, the ability to imagine situations, relationships, and actions in grooming that lack identification and discussion in current research is important in relation to prevention work. As online socialization will always have a connection to the offline world, an understanding of social interactions that transcends the specifics of the internet is needed. This requires a theoretical understanding of the driving forces in grooming, superseding the specific examples and contexts already accounted for. By conceptualizing grooming as a limited set of actions occurring online and without references to its overarching structures, tactics, and contents, one may contribute to a less fruitful understanding of the scope and character of the issue. However, to disseminate this further and determine what this signifies for prevention work, one must look more closely at the two text corpuses’ descriptions of various grooming acts.

#### Actions: Identifying and addressing non-explicit sexual grooming acts

What clearly separates the two text corpuses when accounting for grooming actions are descriptions of explicit and non-explicit sexual grooming acts. In the non-Scandinavian texts, grooming is mostly referred to as a form of manipulation that thrives on its ability to confuse and remain undetected. When describing everything from victim selection to befriending, desensitization, and post-abuse maintenance, both physical and non-physical forms of contact are included to explain what facilitates gradual sexualization of a relationship, mostly by referring to the psychological effect they have on the victim and their surroundings (e.g., Berliner, 2018; Collings, 2020; de Santisteban et al., 2018; Dietz, 2018). It is also highlighted how difficult it is to discern grooming from normative trust-building behavior. For example, when Knoll (2010) described a teacher grooming a child, the emphasis was on how the role of being a teacher secures the groomer the opportunity to appear as someone simply supporting a struggling student—granting them greater emotional control over the child in need, whose emotional dependency and confusion result in fewer obstacles to gradually crossing the child’s boundaries, both physically and emotionally.

In the Scandinavian texts, however, specific examples of grooming acts are often explicitly sexual or inappropriate actions of adults flirting or sending requests or bribes for sexual videos or photos from children online (e.g., Eneman et al., 2010; Joleby et al., 2021; Susi et al., 2019), which is more similar to what is described as sexual solicitation in international literature. In texts in which the explicitly sexual examples are less prominent, little emphasis is placed on explaining what constitutes or facilitates vulnerability to victimization. An example is Dunkels’ (2010, p. 78) study, which summarized the

grooming process as follows: “The first few contact attempts usually concern everyday topics that anyone could talk about. When this process of preparing for a crime – grooming – is completed, the potential victim often readily travels to meet the predator with whom they think they have a parent-child or friendly relationship or even romantic involvement.” Although “talks of everyday topics” are included, and could represent an element of befriending, the psychological effect this can have on the victim, and how this is eloquently misused to increase a romanticization or sexualization of the contact, are not included. When the effect this has on the victim is not theorized, it becomes difficult to distinguish “normative” trust-building processes from grooming. Similarly, when Joleby et al. (2021) discussed the tactic of becoming the child’s support figure, the victim’s vulnerabilities and how they are misused were not discussed. Thus, the texts present grooming as a risk created by being present on online social platforms and receiving contact requests for sexual material or a meeting in person, without explaining how these contacts are successfully established and misused for sexual purposes.

By leaving out much of grooming’s less tangible content, these descriptions reflect what the penal law against grooming in Norway is currently criminalizing: the act of requesting a meeting with a child with the intent of engaging in sexual contact (Staksrud, 2013). This differs from the penal law in Sweden, where contact with the intent of committing sexual abuse is criminalized (Curri & Shabani, 2025), and in Denmark, where systematically manipulating and exploiting trust to build a relationship with a child is now criminalized (Justitsministeriet, 2022). By only criminalizing cases in which there is evidence of a clear and specific request for a physical meeting, such as in Norway, the gradual forms of sexualization thriving on their ability to remain undetected, unformulated, and misunderstood (Winters et al., 2020) are not addressed or prevented. While identifying these non-explicitly sexual grooming acts in the criminal law and in other contexts might involve confusion as to which adult-child contact situations should be regarded as troublesome and which should not (Craven et al., 2006), failing to address it can be detrimental to children, as their families, adults in various professions working with children, and other people around them lose the ability to properly identify it and stop it. A lack of understanding of the grooming process may also be harmful to the children themselves, who may not be believed or understood if they disclose, which is crucial in inhibiting their risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (Charuvastra and Cloitre, 2008), while people with ill intent may continue to exploit various settings to groom and abuse them. This brings us closer to the question of agency in CSA prevention and how descriptions of the contexts and recipients of various grooming tactics can guide toward different perceptions of preventive responsibility.

### Contexts and recipients: Wavering conceptions of agency in prevention

People other than the victim, such as those in their immediate environment, may also be vulnerable to groomers’ manipulation techniques, impeding their overall ability to identify what is happening to the child (Craven et al., 2006). Therefore, describing the contextual factors of the grooming process can provide greater awareness of the role that other people can play in the prevention process. In the descriptions of grooming in the non-Scandinavian texts, contextual factors are often included to describe these aspects of the process, such as the groomer’s ability to influence the child’s actions (e.g., Conte, 2018; Spenard & Cash 2022a; Winters et al., 2022b) and their own actions (e.g., Jülich & Oak, 2016; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Raine & Kent, 2019), as well as other people around the child (e.g., Knoll, 2010; Pollack & Reiser, 2020; Ringenberg et al., 2022).



For example, Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) described how the internet provides the groomer with the opportunity for anonymity, facilitating closer contact without suspicion from the child. Similarly, Jülich and Oak (2016) discussed the contextual advantage of groomers socializing anonymously with each other online, which helps reduce barriers to grooming by reinforcing each other's cognitive distortions. In the offline context, Pollack and Reiser (2020) exemplified how certain roles and settings have the contextual advantage of easy access to children without suspicion, such as working in schools and youth organizations. Kaylor et al. (2022a) described how children in tough circumstances who need extra care and attention could be more susceptible to a groomer's contact attempts. Thus, the children's circumstantial vulnerability may affect not only their response to the grooming situation but also the groomer, who finds less trouble initiating contact, and the child's environment, who may refrain from interfering because they perceive it to be a trusting and caring relationship (Kaylor et al., 2022a). Thus, such a perspective involves agency in CSA prevention relative to the actions of the child and their larger circumstances, shaping the child's probability of victimization.

In the Scandinavian texts, contextual factors are included to describe the opportunity for anonymity online and to facilitate contact without suspicion (Eneman et al., 2010) or material blackmail (Eneman et al., 2010; Susi et al., 2019). However, when bullying or lack of parental control are included to describe a child's contextual circumstances preferable for a groomer, their impact and logic for the success of the grooming process—the contents of the exploitation—are not emphasized or accounted for (Dunkels, 2010). The same is true in Eneman et al.'s (2010) study, which shows the groomer's attempts to gain the trust of the child's parents but does not elaborate on the contents of such a tactic or its subsequent effect on grooming success. Similarly, Stige et al. (2022) explained how abuse victims could refrain from disclosing due to the emotional bond they sometimes develop with their abusers. Such emotional and psychological aspects of the victim's circumstances are not described as being associated with deliberate grooming tactics. The knowledge of grooming's possible tactics and its relationship with various contextual factors is not theorized as grooming or further explained, thus leaving the victim to be described as contextually vulnerable, mainly to the anonymity and design of the online setting, with less formulation of how other circumstances in the child's life and their surroundings can affect the victimization process.

Perceiving the threat of grooming as a victim's contextual vulnerability to adults posing as children online can contribute to a preventive approach targeted at improving the regulation of adults' access to online platforms under false pretenses. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to expose adults posing as children and identify their sexualized chat conversations is among the current preventive efforts in this regard (Sunde & Sunde, 2021). However, with a high rate of false positives, AI tools focus more on explicitly sexual content, as non-explicit sexual grooming tactics are much harder to distinguish from consensual non-violent communication. Therefore, describing the contextual factors of grooming is paramount to understanding how children are vulnerable to victimization in situations not captured by such tools in offline and online settings.

### Strengths and limitations

This study consists of a comprehensive review of more than a decade of studies on grooming in CSA and highlights in particular how conceptualizations vary between Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian literature. However, this study is not without limitations. First, the number of grooming studies retrieved from Scandinavia was low,

resulting in less variability and depth in conceptualizations compared with the non-Scandinavian literature. The possibility of an alternative term for grooming in Scandinavia was considered but not identified during this study. Second, the two text corpuses differed in some respects by including two conference proceedings not subjected to peer review and studies that did not have grooming as the primary topic in the Scandinavian text corpus. Third, a limited number of databases were searched for non-Scandinavian literature, potentially introducing bias in the identified texts. Fourth, the results are only representative of the texts reviewed, as texts not retrieved, published after the study period, or in languages other than English and Scandinavian are not included. Finally, the analysis of all data findings was conducted by the first author alone in her master's project. Nevertheless, thorough reflections between the first and second authors were conducted throughout the project while using the validated SGM model (Winters et al., 2020) to structure the findings.

### Concluding remarks

This study identified significant differences in the conceptualizations of grooming in Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian scientific literature. Overall, grooming is defined as an “online threat” in Scandinavian research, with emphasis on a limited set of explicitly sexual grooming acts, rather than on gradual befriending processes, as well as little to no inclusion of various contextual risk factors to victimization. Addressing contextual factors to victimization can provide relevant knowledge on the preventive agency held by a child's environment, such as the ability of their surroundings to identify the non-explicit sexual grooming tactics and create an inclusive environment for children to disclose. It may also affect the design of preventative campaigns and training for professionals working with children, as already evidenced by how grooming in CSA is presented in Scandinavian policy documents and by non-governmental organizations.

Why the conceptualizations of grooming differ so starkly in the two text corpuses is difficult to elucidate. The historical background may be one explanation, where the concept of grooming entered scientific research in the Scandinavian countries at a time when online situations figured prominently in the public consciousness. However, this does not explain the studies' use of an already well-established term without engaging with previous conceptualizations. The Scandinavian countries are also characterized by high levels of trust (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017) and less social, gendered, and economic inequality compared with both the United States and the United Kingdom (Mogstad et al., 2025). The misuse of trust typical of grooming could challenge the Scandinavian perception of stability and safeness, and thus be a cultural explanation of why a broader understanding of the term is less prominent in Scandinavian CSA research. In such a context, properly preventing grooming in CSA requires a willingness to assess how specific features of the welfare state, often positively related to equality and stability, can also be negatively associated with certain “blind spots” for accountability.

The limited number of Scandinavian studies on grooming suggests a potential research gap in the region, which also includes knowledge of various pathways to CSA victimhood for Scandinavian children in different contexts. Further research on the use of the term “grooming” should therefore be considered, both for scholars' ability to examine the subject more comprehensively and for its potential to identify the relevant risk factors to victimization required to improve efforts in Scandinavian CSA prevention.

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