




Adult Sexual Grooming: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Grooming is the manipulation and intimidation of people into acts that may appear consensual but are in fact exploitative and harmful, activities they would not have chosen otherwise. Different legal definitions and shifting social perspectives on consent complicate efforts to determine whether a given behavior is a result of informed consent or a response to grooming behaviors. Most studies on grooming and sexual assault focus on adults grooming and abusing children—research on adults grooming other adults is scarce. Therefore, the purpose of our study is to conduct a systematic review of current research on the grooming of adults. We used the PRISMA guidelines for our review and revised AMSTAR to rate the quality of each study, with the rating mean ranging from 1 to 4.2 for the studies on a 0–5 scale. The initial search yielded 569 studies; after screening and review, we found five studies that met our inclusion criteria, but only one that specifically researched adult sexual grooming. We address the current gaps in the literature and discuss the implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: *adult sexual grooming, grooming, sexual assault, systematic review*

Date Submitted: November 19, 2024 | **Date Published:** March 3, 2025

Recommended Citation

Aletky, C., Sharma, B., Carbajal, J., & Eubank, T. (2025). Adult sexual grooming: A systematic review. *Journal of Social Work in the Global Community*, 9, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JSWGC.2025.9.1068>

Note: We would like to thank the MSW students for conducting the initial article search. The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest. The authors received no financial support for this study.

Introduction

Most research into grooming and sexual assault has focused on the abuse of children. While that is essential scholarship, notable differences in emotional and cognitive maturity between children and adults indicate the need for adult-specific research. Our systematic review seeks to describe the current state of research on adult sexual grooming (ASG) and related concepts as a starting point for future research. Since research on this topic is extremely limited (Winters & Jeglic, 2022), it is important to define ASG and explore its underlying processes. We also discuss the current research on consent and its relation to adult sexual grooming, as there might be an association between consent and underreporting.

Raine (2021) characterizes ASG as any situation wherein an adult is susceptible to abuse or exploitation for sexual satisfaction through emotional and psychological manipulation tactics. While this definition may sound straightforward, grooming is an ambiguous and nuanced subject that requires further study. It is a form of abuse with multiple layers, and it is not easily recognizable during the abusive relationship or after it has ended. Moreover, a distinctive and worrisome characteristic of ASG is the psychological and emotional burden carried by victims who come to realize, at a later stage, the extensive duration of their abuse before they recognized it.

During the early stages of grooming, the relationship between the individuals may appear to be that of two consenting adults trying to build a connection (Sinnamon, 2017). The early stages of grooming are one of the areas of ambiguity and nuance mentioned previously. The groomer establishes trust with an individual and develops what appears to be a direct connection. While the perpetrator's actions may resemble the harmless behavior of a typical adult relationship, they can nevertheless indicate grooming for sexual abuse or exploitation. Abusers frequently hold essential roles in the lives of their victims, and they take advantage of this familiarity and trust while using "charm, ingratiation, and manipulation" (Sinnamon, 2017, p. 463) for the purpose of achieving their objectives (Raine, 2021; Winters & Jeglic, 2022). It can be more difficult for the victim to report abuse when the perpetrator holds a significant position in their life; this is undoubtedly true if the perpetrators are clerical figures, teachers, coaches, supervisors, and mentors. According to Sinnamon (2017), "For the predator, power will be used either through covert manipulation via personality and circumstantial factors that influence the relational dynamics or through overt coercion using fear and intimidation" (p. 466). This includes sexual coercion, a common tactic used to forcefully obtain sexual contact with a target. Coercive tactics may include pressure, guilt, shame, badgering, lies, verbal threats, emotional blackmail, ignoring requests to stop sexual activity, and using alcohol and drugs to reduce inhibitions (Barnes et al., 2022; DeGue & DeLillo, 2004, as cited in Winters & Jeglic, 2022). When a perpetrator exploits the target's vulnerabilities to maintain control and prevent exposure, they also use coercive control in grooming (Winters & Jeglic, 2022). The perpetrator uses manipulation and coercion to influence and corrupt the target's morals, personal ethics, and social interactions with family and friends. This can lead to isolation, which further solidifies a perpetrator's ability to control the victim.

Sinnamon's Model

Grant Sinnamon (2017) developed a model that outlines seven stages through which grooming perpetrators condition and abuse their victims. Sinnamon describes grooming as "any situation in which an adult is primed to permit themselves to be abused and/or exploited for [the] sexual gratification of another." He goes on to assert that "the grooming process used by sexual predators on children and adults is essentially the same, focusing on emotional and psychological manipulation tactics" (p. 462). Sinnamon references Petherick and Sinnamon's chapter in *Profiling and Serial Crime: Theoretical and Practical Issues* (2009), which explores the motivations of those who engage in grooming behaviors; however, this does little to support the validity of the assertion that the grooming process for adults and children is

essentially the same. It also does not explain the rationale or theoretical underpinnings of Sinnamon's seven stages. While Sinnamon's assertions appear plausible, we cannot find any scholarly, peer-reviewed studies to support them, except for one limited case study (Jeglic & Winters, 2023). We present Sinnamon's model here as a starting point for further inquiry.

According to Sinnamon (2017), the first stage in target selection starts with vulnerability, cues for which have been linked to body language (Book et al., 2013). The setting also contributes to vulnerability. Often, perpetrators establish themselves in environments in which they are perceived as respectable and trustworthy. Sinnamon notes that perpetrators of ASG may be more prevalent among helping professions, due to the authority and trust bestowed on these professionals. This authority and trust add to the potential targets' vulnerability, which allows for the beginning of Stage 2 of the grooming process.

Stage 2 of the perpetrator's grooming process is gathering information about the target. The perpetrator will use their position to gather as much information as possible about the individual's needs and vulnerabilities. To achieve this, the perpetrator tries to build trust and provide help to show the target that the perpetrator is dependable. Sinnamon states that once the predator has this information, they will exploit the target's vulnerabilities by helping the target with their needs. During this stage, the abuser will begin to position themselves in the target's family and friend group to observe their support system.

In Stage 3, after gathering information, the groomer will move on to developing a closer relationship with the target and begin drawing them away from their support system. Stage 3 is when the abuser gains personal connections by creating a false sense of intimacy. Sharing secrets with the target is one common tactic. This creates a feeling of specialness and continues to blur the boundaries of the relationship. The abuser will often endear themselves to the target's support network. Then, if the target attempts to set boundaries or resists the abusers' efforts, Sinnamon (2017) says, "The target's network will side with the predator and blame the target" (pp. 477–478).

In the next step of the grooming process, the groomer further infiltrates the target's life. The groomer exploits unfulfilled needs, which leads to feelings of trust. The groomer may assist with the target's physical, emotional, financial, or spiritual needs. Friends and family members typically feel relieved when they are no longer required to provide such support to the target. Sinnamon states that this stage is vital to the predator's plans. If the groomer can get past this stage, they have successfully manipulated the target. Only an objective outsider is typically able to recognize these predatory behaviors.

In the fifth of Sinnamon's seven stages, the abuser creates emotional dependency and isolates the target. Because the predator establishes credibility before this stage, they can more easily manipulate the target into isolating themselves from anyone who might threaten the grooming plan, such as family and friends. The predator then lowers the target's self-consciousness, desensitizes them to pressure, and increases sexual intimacy. The target's reservations begin to subside, and the predator begins to acclimate the target to increasingly inappropriate sexual behavior. At this point, friends and family may start to question the predator, but the groomer will skillfully manipulate the victim's environment and assure friends that their actions are innocent and that they have the victim's best interests at heart.

In the sixth stage, the perpetrator feels the target is under their control and begins to pursue sexual contact. The target has been primed completely. The target becomes the victim (Sinnamon, 2017). In this stage, a perpetrator will use routine or romantic contexts to try and coerce a victim into sexual contact. The abuser manipulates the victim by making them believe that they are doing random and fun things in order to initiate sexual contact with them. The perpetrator's behavior convinces the victim that sexual contact is mutual and innocent between them. This leads to the final stage—controlling the target.

At this point, the target is already entirely dependent on the groomer. While it would be difficult to determine a specific point at which each target becomes a victim, any target who reaches Stage 6 has become a victim of grooming and sexual assault. To maintain this exploitative relationship, the predator will apply sexual coercion and exercise coercive control over the victim and their environment, employing secrecy, guilt, blame, threats, bribery, and promises of a reward. By this time, the victim recognizes the abuse is occurring and is ashamed, humiliated, and embarrassed (Sinnamon, 2017). The predator will continue to escalate sexual acts to further control and humiliate the victim, telling them that because of this deviant behavior, their friends and family will no longer accept them. The groomer's control over the victim will be proportional to the amount of isolation and self-loathing the victim feels.

Sinnamon's model appears to be congruent with current child abuse literature (Winters et al., 2020), but applying this model to ASG assumes similar underlying mechanisms regarding agency, power differentials, and consent for children and adults. There is very little research that validates such assumptions (Winters & Jeglic, 2022).

Consent

Understanding the phenomenon of adult grooming first requires a clear understanding of consent. Grooming is a process that, by its nature, obfuscates or precludes consent due to the power dynamics involved. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (n.d.), consent is an agreement wherein two or more individuals engage in sexual activities and wherein all parties are free to say no or withdraw consent to sexual activity without the influence of power dynamics, chemical substances, or intimidation.

Understanding power dynamics and consent is crucial in understanding ASG. Much of the literature reviewed for our study addresses unequal power dynamics. In a qualitative study, Bull and Page (2021, p. 1067) reported that a participant, Alice, described a "weird" environment with her PhD supervisor, where her supervisor held ultimate control over her academic success or failure but never made any overt threats against her if she refused a sexual relationship. According to Cowan (2007), genuine consent has three main prongs: (1) the act of consenting must be consistent with what the consenting person wants; (2) all parties must understand the behaviors to which they are consenting, and this should include "minimum standards of communication" (p. 53); and (3) the person giving consent must believe that they have genuine options, including not consenting. Given these three criteria, it is unclear whether a person in Alice's position has genuine options, including not consenting. Socioenvironmental forces, such as power dynamics within rigid power structures typically found in religious institutions, sports, academia, the military, and paramilitary organizations, must be considered in any model of consent to sexual activity.

As noted previously, "minimum standards of communication" (Cowan, 2007, p. 53) are part of a strong understanding of consent. For consent to be effective, there must be open communication. A concerning approach to consent is the use of nonverbal cues to indicate consent where no verbal communication takes place; this is particularly popular with teenagers and young adults. One study surveyed 150 young people (14- to 24-year-olds) and found that approximately 50% of those surveyed felt comfortable indicating consent with "no response" (Richards et al., 2022, p. 919). The prevailing acceptance of nonverbal consent as legitimate may afford those who engage in ASG legal and societal defense because the victim *did not say no*. Using nonverbal communication as an acceptable way to give consent, absent previous overt conversations about consent, potentially leads to confusion and nonconsensual sexual activity.

To counteract the blurred lines of nonverbal consent and advance understanding of consent in sexual situations, legislators, educational officials, and administrative authorities advocate for an affirmative sexual consent model (Dowds, 2022). This method of obtaining consent requires that both parties

verbally request consent for any sexual activity. Despite government and academic interest in affirmative consent, nonverbal consent appears to be more prevalent in society for a variety of reasons. Jeffrey D. Fisher and William A. Fisher (1992) developed the information, motivation, and behavioral skills model (IMB), which has been modified to promote an affirmative consent model (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020). The IMB model states that obtaining affirmative consent requires three factors: (1) information on affirmative sexual consent, (2) motivation to gain affirmative consent prior to sexual interactions, and (3) the behavioral skills necessary to elicit and obtain affirmative consent. Shumlich and Fisher (2020) found in their study that participants appeared to have reliable information on affirmative consent and appeared motivated to obtain it. However, the behavioral skills necessary to ask for and give explicit consent were lacking, and some participants noted that overtly asking if a person wants to engage in sexual behavior is uncomfortable for them. This is not surprising, given that implied consent is much more common. Jozkowski et al. (2019) conducted an analysis of 50 mainstream movies to understand the handling of sexual consent; they examined 486 sexual behaviors across all movies. Of those behaviors, 77% included nonverbal consent. These findings suggest the social normalization of nonverbal consent to sexual activity, which increases vulnerability to coercive tactics.

Rape culture further exacerbates the problematic nature of implied consent. Rape culture is characterized by normalizing and desensitizing members of a society to accept and justify sexual violence against women; media and popular culture validate and perpetuate toxic and predatory behaviors (Kippert & Craig, 2022). The definition of sexual violence is analogous to sexual assault, defined as “sexual activity when consent is not obtained or freely given,” which “can occur in person, online, or through technology,” such as “posting or sharing sexual pictures of someone without their consent, or non-consensual sexting” (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024, paras. 1 and 2). Rates of sexual violence, including physical contact, are estimated to be more than one in two for women and almost one in three for men (CDC, 2024).

Rape myths go hand in hand with rape culture; the term refers to the erroneous beliefs and attitudes about sexual assault held by both men and women (O’Connor, 2021). This could include misconceptions, such as sexual assault not counting unless there is an injury, the idea that most assaults will be perpetrated by a stranger, and the idea that a perpetrator should not be held accountable if they are intoxicated. O’Connor (2021) found that rape myth adherence by college-aged men had a causal relationship to rape proclivity or the self-reported idea that a person would commit rape if they were certain they would get away with it. Due in part to these and other myths and misconceptions, Tidmarsh and Hamilton (2020) note that only about 14% of sexual assaults in countries such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom receive full prosecutions. These myths and misconceptions include ideas about consent, a concept at the heart of ASG, and they serve to further obfuscate consent.

In cultural environments in which sexual violence against women is normalized, grooming behaviors are not well understood, and nonverbal consent is considered acceptable, we can expect to see systemic societal barriers that inhibit or completely prevent reporting. According to estimates, only 4%–8% of adults in Australia, Asia, North America, and Europe who experience sexual grooming abuse report it, because of feelings of shame and guilt; fear of their abuser; or apprehensions about harm to their family, friends, or other members of their social community (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2020). According to Baum et al. (2018), media depictions of rape culture predict both the prevalence of rape and its investigation by the local criminal legal system. Jurisdiction also significantly influences rape prosecution; in more authoritarian jurisdictions, the likelihood of reporting, investigating, or prosecuting sexual assault reports is lower (Baum et al., 2018). It is possible that within this cultural context, ASG is more accepted and harder to prevent or correctly identify. The lack of research suggests that adult grooming is not a part of our collective cultural discourse. A survivor of ASG may not even be aware of it as a phenomenon.

In October 2017, the #MeToo movement began a cultural conversation around consent in America, which then spread around the world. This movement initiated broad discourse on the definition of consent and the potential pitfalls that arise when it lacks clear legal and social definitions. In addition to providing a framework for women to disclose encounters that were not consensual, #MeToo amplified the conversation around so-called *gray* interactions, predominantly in heteronormative situations, wherein consent is blurred by the complicated sociocultural norms women struggle with in navigating a society systemically built on female oppression (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015).

Purpose of Our Study

Research on the dynamics of grooming relationships and their impact on delayed disclosure and reporting of sexual abuse to appropriate authorities is still lacking (Arnold & Jeglic, 2024; CDC, 2024; Winters et al., 2020). Victims often feel shame, humiliation, and embarrassment when they realize that abuse has been taking place (Sinnamon, 2017). These feelings and fear of not being believed can be a barrier to reporting. When victims choose to report, authorities can gather information about grooming directly from the victim, creating a primary source record that is invaluable to multiple macro-level stakeholders. Such information is crucial for legislators, law enforcement officers, and mental health specialists to guide clinical interventions and ensure appropriate responses to victims (McElvaney, 2018). At present, ASG reporting may meet with limited mechanisms by which perpetrators can be held accountable, but reporting provides the necessary data to establish future mechanisms for accountability. Our systematic review aims to synthesize current research on ASG, and the findings could aid in identifying strategies for preventing or reducing ASG.

Methods

Our research study's design is a systematic literature review guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and Assessment of Multiple Systematic Reviews (AMSTAR; see Figure 1 and Table 1). PRISMA, a 27-item checklist and flow chart, assists researchers in accurately reporting various methods of knowledge synthesis while ensuring transparent reporting of all aspects of this type of research (Moher et al., 2015; Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). AMSTAR is a 16-item tool to measure the quality of systematic reviews (Shea et al., 2017). For the nonsystematic reviews, we used a revised AMSTAR tool, which includes only five questions from the original 16-item AMSTAR tool (Mohr et al., 2019), with higher scores indicating the quality and reliability of the study. These tools have demonstrated that they are suitable to evaluate evidence (Pollock et al., 2017). The databases we used to retrieve the studies were the American Psychological Association, PsychInfo, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and SocINDEX.

Data Collection

Inclusion Criteria

The search terms were adult, grooming, and sexual assault. We filtered for 19 years' worth of studies (published 2004–2023). Additional data collection filters eliminated non-English results. We included only primary and secondary data results. The research focuses on adults grooming adults; anyone 18 or older is considered an adult. We included *sexual assault* as one search term rather than two because it is a widely used term for nonconsensual sexual activity, and splitting two words yields less relevant data.

Exclusion Criteria

Exclusion criteria included theoretical papers and primary data not related to adult grooming and sexual assault. For instance, we excluded studies that included persons under 18 years of age from child-centered research.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart

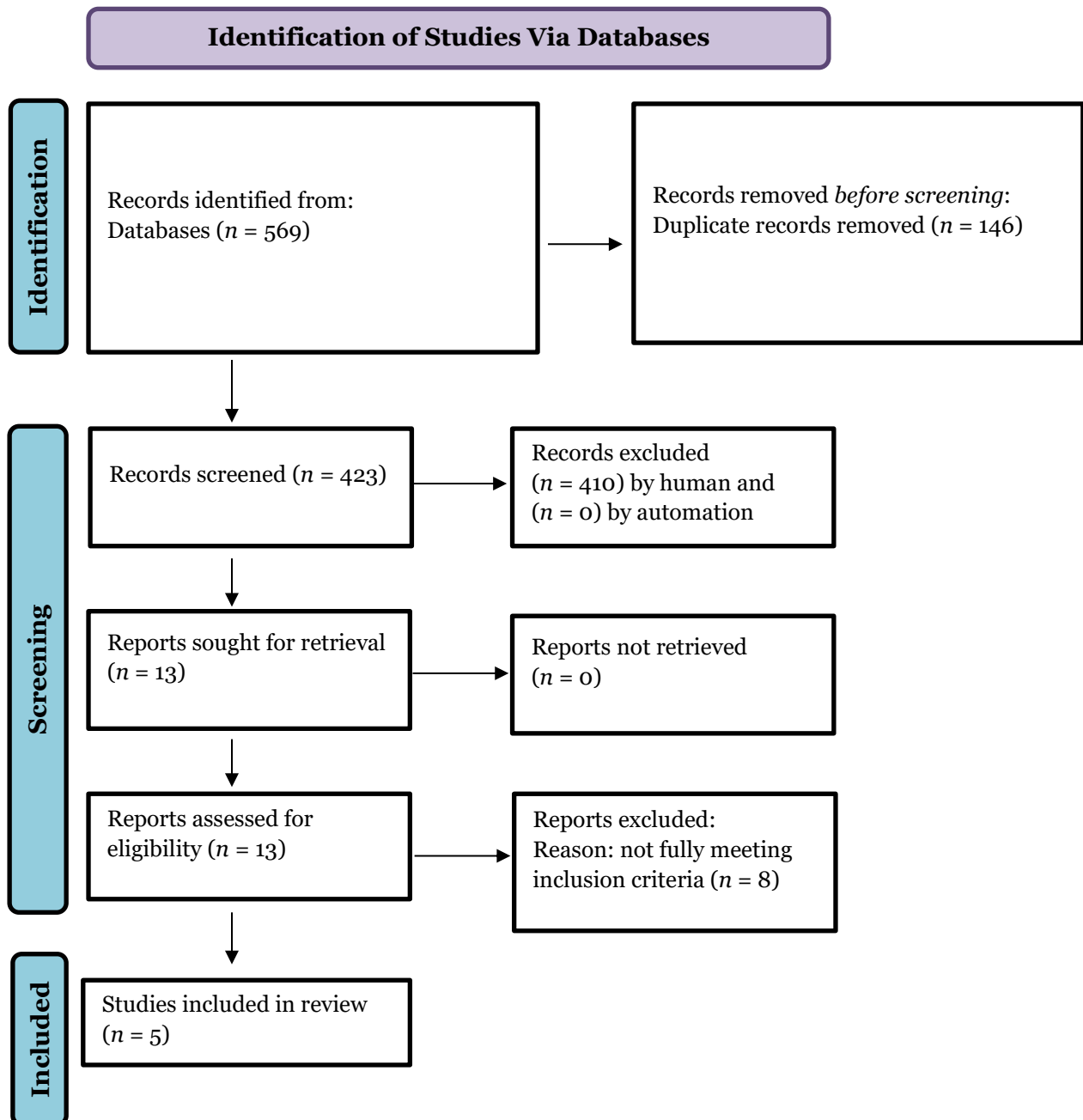


Table 1. *Characteristics of Included Studies*

Author(s)	Review type	AMSTAR score	Design	Sample	Aim	Measure	Outcome
Bull and Page (2021)	Qualitative research method	2.9	Feminist approach	Two narratives were chosen from a larger sample of 15 students who attempted to report sexual misconduct by university staff.	To analyze how power imbalances enabled grooming of students by university faculty and staff	Semistructured questionnaire	Describes grooming and boundary-blurring behaviors along with power imbalances that lead to sexually abusive interactions between staff and students
Flynn (2008)	Qualitative research method	1	Feminist Approach	Study identified 25 women as victims of clergy sexual abuse, 18 of whom were victims of abuse as adults.	To examine how women abused by clergy experience PTSD/complex PTSD symptoms	Semistructured interview	Describes women's narrative symptoms of PTSD/complex PTSD. Outlines factors of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse derived from the interviews with survivors
Garland and Argueta (2010)	Qualitative research method	3.2	Thematic	Clergy directly offended 46 individuals.	To discover the social systemic conditions that allow for clergy sexual misconduct	Unstructured interview	Identified five common contexts and situations that allow clergy sexual misconduct to take place
Jeglic and Winters (2023)	Qualitative research method	3.5	Case study	One cisgender woman	To examine and describe the sexual grooming process of an adult who experienced sexual abuse	A self-report qualitative narrative	Provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of the tactics used by perpetrators and the impact of grooming behavior on victims
Wood and Wheatcroft (2020)	Qualitative research method	4.2	Thematic	Young adults aged 18–23, $N = 10$	To explore young adults' understanding of risk and grooming behaviors within online contexts	Semistructured interview	Three superordinate themes, including grooming as a concept, virtual lives, and risk perception

Note: Revised AMSTAR = Tool for Assessment of Multiple Systematic Reviews; AMSTAR maximum score is 5; 0–1 is low quality, 2–3 is moderate quality, and 4–5 is high quality.

Results

Characteristics of Studies

The total number of articles scanned was 569. However, after the initial screening, 146 were removed because they did not meet the criteria, and, after removing duplicates, only 423 studies were screened, of which 418 were excluded, and only five studies fully met the inclusion criteria. All five of the studies used primary data: Bull and Page (2021), AMSTAR score $M = 2.9$; Flynn (2008), AMSTAR score $M = 1$; Garland and Argueta (2010), AMSTAR score $M = 3.2$; Jeglic and Winters (2023), AMSTAR score $M = 3.5$; Wood and Wheatcroft (2020), AMSTAR score $M = 4.2$ (see Table 1). Two studies were regarding clergy sexual abuse (Flynn, 2008) and clergy sexual misconduct (Garland & Argueta, 2010); one study was about internet grooming and communication (Wood & Wheatcroft, 2020); and two studies were more specifically about ASG (Bull & Page, 2021; Jeglic & Winters, 2023).

Potential ASG Contexts

The five studies included in our review shed light on the contexts in which ASG seems more likely to occur. Four of the five describe obvious power imbalances. Flynn (2008) notes that the hierarchical nature of the relationship exacerbated trauma symptoms among study participants. Garland and Argueta (2010) found that perpetrators of clergy sexual abuse often lacked accountability throughout the grooming process because they were the ultimate authority within their congregations. They did not have to account for their time, decisions, or relationships. Bull and Page (2021) discuss the power that two female graduate students' supervisors had over their academic success and, ultimately, their entry into their chosen professions. Their supervisors determined which conferences they could attend, with whom they shared their work, and whether they finished their PhDs. Jeglic and Winters (2023) discuss a relationship that increased in power imbalance as it went along, in that the perpetrator became the survivor's boss and ultimately controlled her professional, social, and financial life.

Men targeted women in all four of these studies that portray power imbalances. Bull and Page (2021) point out that gender can yield power imbalance in male-dominated fields. It can be difficult to determine if behaviors are normal or not when one cannot compare one's experiences with those of similarly situated colleagues. Furthermore, in our society, the socialization of girls and women often prioritizes the comfort of others over the right to set appropriate boundaries. Of course, ASG extends beyond male perpetrators and female survivors. The U.K.'s National Union of Students conducted a study in 2018 and found that, of the students who had experienced inappropriate sexual behavior by faculty or staff, 17% said women were the perpetrators (Bull & Rye, 2018 as cited in Bull & Page, 2021).

Similar to female socialization, prioritizing the comfort of others is what Garland and Argueta (2010) refer to as a "culture of niceness" (p. 15). When clergy engaged in boundary-blurring behaviors, this culture of niceness resulted in inaction by the broader community. The lack of community response may normalize boundary-blurring behaviors as they are happening, making discernment for the victim even more difficult (Flynn, 2008). Fear of offending the perpetrator seems to have a silencing effect. One of the participants in the study by Bull and Page (2021), who feared offending her mentor or "making him uncomfortable," also described this dynamic (p. 1063). This culture of niceness led to ignoring boundary-blurring behaviors even when they were in direct conflict with stated policies. Garland and Argueta (2010) noted pastors meeting with female congregants alone, despite written policies prohibiting the practice. Bull and Page (2021) discussed how faculty members facilitated relationships between students and perpetrators by helping them to subvert university policies and normalizing these relationships when students reported them.

Lack of Understanding of ASG

Several studies point to a lack of clear understanding about what grooming is on the part of those who experience it and on the part of the community at large. Wood and Wheatcroft (2020) used semistructured interviews to better recognize 10 young adults' (18 to 23 years old) understanding of grooming as it pertained to online behaviors. Their study suggested that participants were often confused or misinformed about the nature of grooming. Flynn (2008) noted that 88% of the participants did not immediately recognize their experience as abuse. Bull and Page (2021) discussed boundary-blurring behaviors that continuously reset the bar for what constituted normal behavior, slowly moving toward more and more isolation and intimacy, with each iteration feeling too slight to require setting boundaries. The slow and iterative nature of these behaviors makes it difficult to recognize them as part of a larger pattern. A lack of understanding and acceptance of ASG as a phenomenon exacerbates community inaction, which is already enabled by the aforementioned culture of niceness (Flynn, 2008; Garland & Argueta, 2010).

Characteristics of Victims

The included studies identified a number of vulnerabilities. Garland and Argueta (2010) note that the grooming process for many of the participants began when they sought help from clergy after suffering a major loss or when struggling with their mental health. The victim seeking out spiritual counseling allowed the perpetrator to be alone with the victim and glean information about their vulnerabilities. The participant in the study by Jeglic and Winters (2023) had a severe trauma history and had previously struggled with her mental health. Additionally, she had a contentious relationship with her spouse and family, which increased her isolation. One student described her academic supervisor as requiring that she complete all her work under his sole supervision, despite stated policies to the contrary (Bull & Page, 2021). Further exacerbating her vulnerability were the student's disability and her status as the first in her family to attend college.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Protective Factors

Flynn's (2008) study outlines how, in describing their experience, many survivors are describing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD. The trauma dialectic, the desire to tell what happened combined with the fear of not being believed, also comes into play (Flynn, 2008). This is further exacerbated by victim blaming. One participant noted, "I was the victim of the perpetrator. Then, when I told, the church became the perpetrator" (Flynn, 2008, p. 232). Factors that appear to mitigate the severity of PTSD symptoms include public acknowledgment of the abuse and the removal of the person who perpetrated it (Flynn, 2008).

Notable Studies Excluded

Although five studies did not meet the full inclusion criteria, their findings are noteworthy because they contribute to the research on ASG. These are Mulvihill, 2022; Terán & Dajches, 2020; Giovannelli & Jackson, 2013; Mortensen, 2020; and de Weger & Death, 2017. Mulvihill studied grooming behaviors, but the client had experienced them since childhood, in sexual abuse by her doctor over time (2022). This study was excluded due to the timing of the onset of grooming behaviors. Nevertheless, the findings include building dependency, which is consistent with Sinnamon's (2017) model, and using professional notes with authority, even when the documenter is clearly biased or has recorded inaccurate information. When the client sought to have her abuser held accountable, the records of her other providers showed that they did not believe her or that they misconstrued her statements because the client did not have the language to describe her experience. This is an example of professionals banding together to defend each other when one is accused of misconduct; it also shows professionals using personal data, such as professional notes, DNA evidence, statements, etc., to represent the client rather than the client being able to represent herself. In this study, the client's data suggested that she was "a psychiatric patient, implicitly unreliable, and therefore mistaken about

her experience of rape” (Mulvihill, 2022, p. 6). Another instance of professionals banding together would be the enabling of an inappropriate relationship by faculty members at an institution of higher learning, despite such a relationship being explicitly prohibited by university policy, as described in Bull and Page (2021).

Terán and Dajches (2020) investigated how compulsive pornography exposure is associated with college students’ decreased assertiveness to refuse sex—this only occurred for individuals who perceived consent as of little importance. In another study with college students, Giovannelli and Jackson (2013) found a correlation between higher levels of ambivalent sexism and higher levels of rape myth acceptance, interpersonal violence, and authoritarianism. An important finding was that, between males and females, males were more likely to endorse rape myths. These studies were excluded because they do not specifically examine ASG, but they are of note because they may help us understand underlying contributing factors. The findings of Giovannelli and Jackson (2013) contribute to Mortensen’s (2020) study, which focused on women who had experienced digital sexual assault (the nonconsensual posting of intimate images online). The women felt responsible for the harassment, even if they recognized that the perpetrator was at fault. This shows the pervasiveness of the rape myth. Finally, de Weger and Death (2017) examined the stories of 29 survivors of clergy sexual misconduct against adults (CSMAA) from within the Roman Catholic Church. They found that clergy’s multiple roles obscure inappropriate relationships and that unmonitored behavior facilitates CSMAA. Furthermore, clergy exploited personal vulnerabilities, such as victims being young, single, and devout, rendering CSMAA unrecognizable. In other words, respectable, trusted clergy seemed unlikely to sexually assault someone, especially a parishioner. Furthermore, previous traumatic experiences, such as clergy sexual assault, significantly impacted the likelihood of their experiencing CSMAA. This study was not included because it specifically examines sexual assault but does not conceptualize ASG directly. All of these studies contribute to understanding the ASG indicators that depend on exploiting an individual’s power and vulnerability, whereby boundary violations occur to the point of sexual assault.

Discussion

Our findings have implications for further research, as well as for policy, practice, and education. Only one study focused specifically on ASG and tested the ASG model (Jeglic & Winters, 2023). Initially, Jeglic and Winters (2023) developed the sexual grooming model to describe the sexual grooming of children. Their study is the first attempt to validate the model for adults. The other studies focused more on the nuances and consequences of ASG and assault.

The societal acceptance of nonverbal consent and reduced assertiveness could further blur the boundaries between consensual sexual relationships and relationships based on power differentials. Other sexual scripts, such as consent attitudes, are important to consider when assessing the effects of compulsive pornography exposure on sexual refusal assertiveness. Increasing sexual refusal assertiveness could play a protective role for those targeted for ASG, since the sense of responsibility for not refusing leads to feelings of shame and self-blame, making it difficult for victims to seek support or report the harassment. This aligns with Sinnamon’s conceptualization of the final stages of ASG (Sinnamon, 2017), which include feelings of shame and self-blame. The study by Mortensen (2020) highlights the need for interventions that address the psychological impact of online harassment and to help victims overcome feelings of shame and self-blame. Similarly, Barnes et al. (2022) identified the importance of being heard and having access to supportive relationships as protective factors against intimate partner violence and abuse, a key finding for overcoming silence and loneliness. Considering these factors, there is a need for interventions that address perpetrators’ behaviors as well as the broader social and relational contexts in which these behaviors occur.

Implications for Policy

Policy formation begins with agreeing that ASG is a real phenomenon. Much like age-appropriate measures to educate children about bodily autonomy and appropriate forms of touch, we must develop age-appropriate curricula to help identify grooming behavior. Educational campaigns for parents and age-appropriate school curricula for students will not only help protect children from grooming when they are children but also when they reach adulthood, because having experienced grooming or sexual abuse as a child is one of the risk factors for adult grooming (de Weger & Death, 2017; Jeglic & Winters, 2023). Policy implications that would protect children would also have the added benefit of reducing risk factors for adult grooming and sexual assault.

It is also worth noting that, of the five studies we included, four showed that grooming occurred within the context of systemic power imbalances. These included grooming by an employer (Jeglic & Winters, 2023), grooming by a PhD supervisor (Bull & Page, 2021), and two studies of grooming by clergy (Flynn, 2008; Garland & Argueta, 2010). Mulvihill's (2022) paradigmatic case study would also fall into this context because it describes grooming by a trusted doctor as an imbalance of power. Systems with rigid power structures could be an important target for policy intervention because they are enforceable for all system members. This makes change within these systems less complicated at the macro level because they do not rely on social sentiment but are predicated on the needs and interests of the system itself.

Prevention efforts could benefit from a policy that acknowledges power and privilege in these settings and holds perpetrators accountable. Educating communities where power imbalances exist could also be helpful. As noted by Garland and Argueta (2010), community education could lead to a reduction in the social acceptability of grooming behaviors by those in positions of power, which could aid in prevention.

Implications for Practice

Tidmarsh et al. (2021) evaluated training for police officers investigating sexual assault claims based on the Whole Story Framework. The Whole Story Framework, developed by Tidmarsh and colleagues (Tidmarsh et al., 2012), trains investigators to focus on the contexts in which sexual offenses take place. It recognizes grooming as an often-present element that can help explain survivors' behaviors that may first seem incongruent with sexual assault. Police officers who completed Whole Story training agreed that empathy, good communication, and open-mindedness were important for sex crime investigations, as well as for investigations into sexual and nonsexual grooming. Implementing the Whole Story framework training in job roles that work closely with vulnerable populations is a form of assistance that can save lives, a practical approach to intervening with victims and survivors (Tidmarsh et al., 2021). Like cardiopulmonary resuscitation and first aid training required during the hiring process for many jobs across the country, first responders, clinicians, teachers, and social workers will benefit from training that focuses on the Whole Story framework. In an environment that fosters trusting relationships, this approach, when combined with informed perspectives on loneliness (Barnes et al., 2022) and shame (Mortensen, 2020), would give survivors of adult grooming and sexual assault a platform through which to express and understand their experiences beyond the microcosm of pain and shame.

Our systematic review found evidence that survivors of ASG experience guilt, shame, and other mental health challenges. Many survivors display signs of sadness, anxiety, and PTSD (Flynn, 2008; Jeglic & Winters, 2023; Mortensen, 2020). Ullman and Peter-Hagene (2014) found that negative societal reactions to survivors' reports of sexual assault led to maladaptive coping, which in turn led to increased PTSD symptoms. This could include the survivor's disbelief about the abuse they experienced, a focus on protecting the perpetrator, and blaming the victim by the broader community. Along with many other symptoms, hyperarousal is a severe symptom of PTSD, where a person is constantly tense and in a state of suspense and panic. PTSD can also lead to changes in worldview, reexperiencing traumatic events, and avoidance of stimuli that remind the survivor of their abuse (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of

trauma-focused modalities as interventions for ASG survivors. To date, no studies have focused on this population or appropriate clinical interventions, likely due to ASG's rare reporting in the general population. Mortensen (2020) discusses strategies for healing from shame and notes that imaginary progressive contra-shaming, or the shift in the mind of the survivor of sexual aggression toward shaming the aggressor, can be powerful.

Assessing for risk factors for adult grooming and sexual assault and intervening to mitigate those factors is an area of practice that could prevent adult grooming and sexual assault from occurring. Research into intimate partner violence by Barnes et al. (2022) has implications for training, as they found loneliness to be a factor in a person's likelihood of suffering intimate partner violence, and those findings can be applied to risk factors for grooming, as, according to Sinnamon's model, isolation is a central element in the grooming process. Screening for loneliness and isolation and intervening to reduce or eliminate these would serve as an approach to mitigating the risk of victimization by a perpetrator of adult grooming.

Social Work Education

Social workers cannot be proactive in advocacy or intervention with issues of which they are unaware, much less not competent to address. Incorporating education about adult grooming and sexual assault into social work degree programs and required continuing education courses for social workers will aid in disseminating accurate micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level information about this little-known and poorly understood form of human exploitation. Unfortunately, the early stages of the grooming process can and often do look like the types of engagement and trust building that occur in the establishment of healthy relationships (Garland & Argueta, 2010; Sinnamon, 2017; Winters & Jeglic, 2022). This means that identifying grooming and intervening to stop it will commonly happen once a victim has experienced significant emotional and psychological trauma and, possibly, sexual assault. Intervening at this stage is vital, as it prevents further harm to the victim, but intervening to prevent grooming in the first place must begin with individuals, groups, and communities to reduce factors that have been shown to increase a person's risk of becoming a victim.

Further Research

While other studies satisfied our inclusion criteria, the work of Jeglic and Winters (2023) was the only research explicitly aiming to generate original data on ASG. This provides evidence for the need to conduct more research on the topic. Our review revealed a variety of sources, including limited gray data on approaches to studying and theorizing adult grooming and sexual assault. Multiple hierarchical organizations, such as those with religious and militaristic traditions, have acknowledged the problems of abuse, trauma, and inappropriate relationships. They have not placed these problems under the appropriate umbrella term of adult grooming. Well-defined terms are essential for conceptualizing and addressing research problems. Therefore, future research should focus on determining the extent to which ASG occurs and whether there is a greater degree of moral injury when adult grooming and sexual assault occur in religious or spiritual settings. For example, reports acknowledged the problem of unequal power dynamics and their impact on consent, suggesting the presence of added trauma due to the religious component of the abuse (de Weger & Death, 2017; Garland & Argueta, 2010). Further research is needed to ascertain whether this is true and, if so, it could have real implications for the guidelines and programs implemented by faith communities to keep their members safe.

Another area of inquiry would be rigid power structures, such as the military or paramilitary organizations, for example, law enforcement, academic institutions, and professional associations. The possible parallels between ASG and clerical sexual grooming may point to a lack of agency as a common denominator. Adults in rigid power structures do not have the same kind of agency that adults living outside such structures do. Further inquiry into how these dynamics interact with ASG would be valuable.

Study Limitations

Systematic reviews are a time-tested and reliable system for conducting research that gathers meta-data, especially meta-analyses; however, there are some limitations to this approach. Systematic reviews depend on the researcher's subjective skill and knowledge to include and exclude prior research that aligns with the developed method to gain a comprehensive understanding of an issue or problem. Human error is the greatest limitation of the systematic review process; the trustworthy and reliable tools developed to aid in analyzing research are still susceptible to selection bias and attrition bias. One of the best ways to control bias during a systematic review is to have a team analyze studies independently. Despite having 10 MSW students conduct the search along with us (the three authors), only we evaluated the included articles through the PRISMA and AMSTAR tools. Had we averaged those scores from 10 MSW students rather than just us, the results might have been different, so attrition bias must be considered specifically in our findings.

Furthermore, the terminology we use constrains our work. The terms *victim* and *survivor* are both imperfect terms to use in referencing people who have experienced adult grooming and sexual assault. These terms refer to people's negative experiences rather than any objective description or way they may have chosen to self-identify. This language, while imperfect, was our best attempt at framing people who have experienced adult grooming and sexual assault in such a way as to make clear that they absolutely fit in the same category as other people who have experienced sexual assault. However, this language created a clear framework in our minds, which may have led to bias. We would welcome further exploration of this area of potential bias, including the use of less-charged language that still clearly identifies the problem of ASG and people who have experienced it as a form of sexual assault.

Conclusion

ASG is a serious issue that has received inadequate attention from scholars and researchers and is little known in popular culture. Despite increasing recognition of the problem, the lack of empirical studies is a concerning gap in the academic understanding of adult grooming and sexual assault. The limited research on the topic demonstrates the need for more studies that explore this complex phenomenon, its impact on victims, and strategies for prevention and intervention. It was evident throughout our research process that finding sufficient scholarly studies and reputable gray data on this topic would be a challenge. Despite this difficulty, our findings indicate that adult grooming is a pervasive problem with far-reaching consequences for victims, families, and communities. While preparing our report, we could see that discoveries would assist in building a foundation for this specific demographic and subject. Our research provides valuable insights into this critical issue and serves as a call to action for continued research and advocacy. Scholars and researchers must continue to investigate this form of exploitation and abuse to inform better policies and practices to combat it. Only through continued research and analysis can we develop effective strategies to prevent and respond to ASG while promoting healthier interpersonal relationships in a safer and healthier society.

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The *Journal of Social Work in the Global Community*, sponsored by the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Walden University, is a peer-reviewed journal and recognizes that social work is a global phenomenon with a myriad of contributors and perspectives. The journal is open to social work practice and research both domestically and abroad.