Affiliative and Hostile Grooming in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: Juror Blame Attribution and the Role of Expert Testimony

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Kate Evelien Van Den Anker

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Abstract

This study examined whether mock jurors' evaluations of child sexual abuse (CSA) differ as a function of grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and the presence of expert testimony. Drawing on attribution theory, rape-myth frameworks, and the Sexual Grooming Model, it was hypothesised that affiliative grooming would increase victim blame, reduce perpetrator responsibility, and result in more lenient sentencing relative to hostile grooming, while expert testimony was expected to reduce these biases by clarifying the manipulative nature of grooming behaviours. Using a 2 × 2 × 2 mixed-subjects experimental design, participants (N = 271) recruited via CloudResearch Connect read a CSA vignette depicting affiliative or hostile grooming, with or without expert testimony, before completing measures of victim blame, perpetrator blame, and sentencing recommendations.

Contrary to predictions, grooming type and expert testimony did not significantly influence victim blame, perpetrator blame, or sentencing recommendations. Across conditions, participants attributed high responsibility to the perpetrator and minimal responsibility to the victim. Although equivalence testing indicated sentencing differences were not statistically equivalent within a pre-specified one-year bound, effects were small and generally consistent with hypotheses.

These findings suggest that when CSA is clearly established and offender responsibility is uncontested, juror judgments may be driven more by moral certainty than by variations in grooming presentation. The absence of expert testimony effects further suggests such testimony may be most useful in cases characterised by ambiguity or evidentiary uncertainty. Overall, this study introduces an affiliative–hostile grooming framework within juror decision-making research and suggests these distinctions may have limited influence under conditions of confirmed abuse.

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Affiliative and Hostile Grooming in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: Blame Attribution and the Role of Expert Testimony

Grooming is a strategic and manipulative process that sex offenders use to gain access to victims, facilitate abuse, and inhibit disclosure (Winters & Jeglic, 2022). Grooming behaviours are pervasive in cases of child sexual abuse (CSA). In a recent survivor survey, 99% of participants reported experiencing at least one grooming tactic, with an average of 14 behaviours endorsed (Winters et al., 2024). Although many CSA cases never reach trial—often due to evidentiary challenges, or withdrawn complaints—jurors play a critical role in those that do, and their interpretations of grooming behaviours can decisively shape outcomes (Walsh et al., 2010; Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023). However, grooming is often misunderstood or overlooked in court, particularly when behaviours appear benign rather than coercive, leaving jurors vulnerable to minimising their relevance as evidence (Pollack & MacIver, 2015; St. George et al., 2020). If so, it may be that expert testimony and juror education can reduce misconceptions about grooming (Crowley et al., 1994; Klettke et al., 2010; Hudspith et al., 2024). In this study, we examine the extent to which potential jurors assess different grooming behaviours and whether expert testimony aids these assessments.

Grooming is a purposeful sequence of behaviours designed to gain access to a child, build trust and compliance, desensitise the victim to sexual activity, and inhibit disclosure (Winters & Jeglic, 2022). The Sexual Grooming Model describes this process as progressing through several stages: victim selection, access, trust development, desensitisation, post-abuse maintenance, and prevention of disclosure (Winters et al., 2020). Validation studies show these stages map onto observable behaviours (Winters et al., 2020). At each stage, offenders employ a continuum of tactics, ranging from ostensibly benign, such as displaying favouritism, offering flattery, or providing gifts, to clearly inappropriate and harmful, such as discussing “sex education,” gradual desensitisation to physical touch, and exposure to

sexually explicit material. Recognising grooming as stage-based and patterned is critical in both research and legal contexts, as it underscores how seemingly harmless behaviours can function as stepping stones toward abuse (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2022).

CSA almost invariably involves grooming. Survivor studies show that virtually all victims report experiencing multiple grooming tactics, often spanning several stages of the SGM (Winters et al., 2024). Conceptual and empirical work consistently reinforces grooming as central rather than peripheral to CSA (Craven et al., 2006). Research on internet-facilitated abuse similarly demonstrates that grooming is a near-universal precursor to both online and offline exploitation (Whittle et al., 2013). Offender interviews further highlight its cross-contextual nature, occurring in familial, educational, sporting, and digital environments (Winters & Jeglic, 2022). Collectively, this evidence positions grooming as foundational to CSA and essential for legal professionals and jurors to recognise.

Despite grooming's centrality to CSA and critical for understanding how abuse unfolds, it is frequently misunderstood by legal professionals and jurors, undermining fair adjudication of CSA cases. Practitioners often overlook grooming in cases without violence or with delayed disclosure, leading to inconsistent case evaluations (Pollack & MacIver, 2015). Analyses of institutional grooming cases—such as large scale abuse in the Boy Scouts of America—demonstrate that legal professions often overlook systematic boundary-crossing tactics, reflecting critical training deficits (Winters & Jeglic, 2024). Research on trial transcripts supports the idea that only a small fraction of attorney questioning addresses grooming, and discussion is usually narrow in scope (Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023). Defence questioning may further exploit misunderstandings about grooming to discredit victims (George et al., 2022). These findings reveal systemic shortcomings in recognising and properly evaluating grooming, underscoring the need for corrective interventions.

One possible explanation for these systematic shortcomings is victim blaming, which occurs when responsibility for abuse is shifted away from the offender and attributed, at least in part, to the victim. Victim blaming is often embedded in attributional processes—the tendency to search for the cause of behaviour—yet these inferences are prone to error (Kelley, 1973; Malle et al., 2014). Jurors may commit the fundamental attribution error, interpreting victims' behaviour as causal rather than situational, particularly when only correlational cues are available (Kelley, 1973; Malle et al., 2014). Attribution theories also highlight the role of affect, as culpable control theory suggests that emotional reactions such as anger or contempt sway judgements of intent, increasing perceptions of victim responsibility (Alicke, 2000). Motivational biases add a further layer of distortion; just-world and defensive attribution frameworks emphasise people's need to preserve the belief in a fair and predictable world, leading jurors to assume that they contributed to their abuse (McCaul et al., 1990; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2020). Cognitive biases compound these tendencies, with hindsight and confirmation biases making grooming behaviours appear obvious once disclosed, consequently encouraging the belief that victims should have recognised or resisted them (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). Finally, cultural 'rape scripts' impose rigid expectations of how a 'real' victim behaves, which can undermine credibility when victims deviate from these norms (Lee et al., 2023). Collectively, these psychological mechanisms demonstrate how jurors may misjudge grooming behaviours, reinforcing systemic shortcomings in CSA adjudication.

In addition to bias that leads to victim blaming, jurors and legal professionals may also misunderstand grooming because of reliance on rape myths—false or stereotyped beliefs that deny, trivialise, or justify sexual violence (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Rape-myth acceptance is strongly linked to victim blaming and biased evaluations of CSA evidence (Grubb & Turner, 2012; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). These myths often overlap with

cultural ‘rape scripts’, or shared social expectations of what constitutes a ‘real’ rape, such as the assumption that it involves violence, resistance, or immediate disclosure (Lee et al., 2023). Transcript analyses show how myths surface in juror questioning, with stereotyped assumptions such as “Did you fight back?” undermining credibility (St. George et al., 2020). Features common in grooming, such as delayed disclosure, amplify scepticism and increase victim blame (Miller et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that targeted RMA education can reduce these biases, supporting the use of expert testimony as a corrective mechanism (Hudspith et al., 2024).

Taken together, these areas of research suggest that legal decision makers may see the harm of some grooming behaviours but not others. Specifically, people are likely to condemn overtly coercive or sexualised grooming behaviours but may be less likely to condemn seemingly benign grooming tactics like praise, mentorship, or gift-giving. To define and operationalise this distinction more precisely, we propose a dual taxonomy of grooming behaviours. The first category we call *affiliative grooming* behaviours. Affiliative grooming refers to behaviours that appear positive or prosocial; these are behaviours that on their face seem moral—such as gift giving—but are strategically designed to facilitate later abuse. The second category we call *hostile grooming* behaviours. Hostile grooming refers to negative, antisocial, and/or explicitly sexualised grooming behaviours; these are behaviours that on their face are clearly immoral, such as showing pornography to children.

Both affiliative and hostile grooming are designed to facilitate and conceal CSA, and are therefore equally harmful and equally blameworthy. However, we hypothesise that legal decision makers will have a more difficult time assessing blame and responsibility for affiliative grooming compared to hostile grooming. The reasoning is somewhat clear based on how we defined the terms; affiliative grooming by nature is hidden and ostensibly pro-social. But even when legal decision makers know CSA occurred—that is, they can identify

the behaviour as grooming—we anticipate that they will continue to misjudge affiliative grooming because of human tendencies to victim blame and accept rape myths (Burt, 1980; Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023). The first goal of this experiment was to test this hypothesis.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that although affiliative and hostile grooming serve the same abusive ends, jurors may perceive them differently, underestimating the culpability attached to affiliative tactics. This highlights a broader difficulty in CSA adjudication: without guidance, jurors may struggle to contextualise grooming evidence appropriately. One promising solution to address this gap is expert testimony, which can clarify how both affiliative and hostile behaviours function within the grooming process and correct common misconceptions.

If juror misconceptions about affiliative grooming exist, one possible remedy is expert testimony. Court analyses reveal gaps in attorney questioning, leaving space for expert input to clarify complex issues (Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023). Experimental studies show that case-specific testimony improves juror comprehension, reduces victim blaming, and supports more appropriate verdicts (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011; Klettke et al., 2010; Kovera et al., 1997). Implementing testimony with judicial instructions or educational modules may further enhance juror understanding. Therefore, the second goal of this study was to test the effectiveness of expert testimony about grooming.

In summary, grooming is a pervasive and strategic component of CSA, yet jurors and legal professionals frequently misinterpret its behaviours due to attribution biases and rape-myth acceptance. These misconceptions can lead to inappropriate victim blaming and distorted evaluations of offenders. Evidence suggests that expert testimony can mitigate these harms, but its effectiveness in clarifying different categories of grooming remains underexplored. This thesis introduces the affiliative–hostile framework to refine conceptualisations of grooming, investigates how jurors perceive each category, and

evaluates whether expert testimony reduces related biases. By addressing these gaps, the thesis aims to advance psychological and legal understanding of grooming and contribute to fairer outcomes in CSA trials.

Method

Design

The study employed a 2 × 2 × 2 mixed-subjects experimental design examining the effects of grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and expert testimony (present vs. absent) on mock-juror blame attribution (victim vs. perpetrator) in a child sexual abuse (CSA) trial. We also looked at the effects of grooming type and expert testimony on sentencing recommendations. All variables were measured using Likert or slider scales. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number HREC(Health)2025#65; see Appendix A).

Participants

Participants were recruited through CloudResearch Connect. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, fluent in English, and residing in the United States. A power analysis conducted using G*Power indicated that a total of 256 participants (64 per group) would be required to detect a medium-sized effect (Cohen's d = 0.50) with 80% power and an alpha level of .05 in a 2 × 2 × 2 mixed-subjects design. Data collection continued until this target was reached. Participants were excluded if they failed the attention or quality-control check, withdrew before completion, or produced incomplete or unusable data.

Participant Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 271 participants. The sample was evenly split by gender, with 49.8% identifying as male (n = 135) and 49.8% as female (n = 135), and one participant (0.4%) identifying as another gender. Most participants identified as Caucasian

(74.2%), with smaller proportions identifying as African American (12.5%), Hispanic or Latino (7.0%), Asian (3.7%), or another ethnic background (1.1%). Regarding education, the largest proportion of participants reported holding a bachelor's degree (42.1%), followed by some college without a degree (17.7%) and a graduate or professional degree (15.9%).

Materials

Participants first read an information sheet and provided informed consent before beginning the survey. They then completed a short series of demographic questions assessing age, gender, ethnicity, and education level. The expert-testimony manipulation consisted of a statement attributed to a psychologist describing sexual grooming as a systematic process through which offenders identify vulnerable children, build trust, and reduce resistance to abuse (see Appendix C). The passage explained that grooming behaviours may appear caring or generous but are nonetheless manipulative, fostering dependence and confusion that inhibit disclosure. It also described coercive tactics such as intimidation, guilt induction, and fear of punishment. Participants in the expert-absent conditions did not receive this statement. The testimony was adapted from Sexual Grooming: Integrating Research, Practice, Prevention, and Policy (Winters & Jeglic, 2022).

The grooming-type manipulation consisted of two written trial summaries describing a fictional CSA case involving a 35-year-old male defendant, David, and a 13-year-old female complainant, Lisa (see Appendix C). The vignettes were adapted from previous research on grooming and juror decision-making (e.g., Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023) and pilot-tested for clarity. In the affiliative-grooming condition, the offender gained the child's trust through warmth, flattery, and generosity. In the hostile-grooming condition, the offender employed manipulative and coercive tactics, isolating Lisa from her peers, exposing her to pornographic material, and using guilt or fear to suppress disclosure. Both vignettes concluded with multiple assaults and a police confession.

After reading the assigned vignette (and, where applicable, the expert testimony), participants responded to items measuring their evaluations of the case (see Appendix C). Perpetrator-blame items assessed attributions toward the offender (for example, “How much do you blame David for what happened?” and “To what extent do you believe David acted with intent to harm?”) on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much). Victim-blame items assessed attributions toward the complainant (for example, “How much do you think Lisa is to blame for what happened?” and “How much do you believe Lisa had control over the situation?”) on the same scale; the item “How sorry do you feel for Lisa?” was reverse-coded prior to analysis. Participants then allocated 100 percentage points of total responsibility among Lisa, David, and “other circumstances,” and indicated a recommended prison sentence using a slider ranging from 0 to 25 years in one-year increments labelled “Years to serve.” An attention/quality control question verified participant engagement by asking them to summarise what the survey involved. All materials were administered through Qualtrics.

Procedure

Participants accessed the study via CloudResearch Connect, which redirected them to the Qualtrics survey. After providing informed consent and completing the demographic questions, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: affiliative grooming with expert testimony, affiliative grooming without expert testimony, hostile grooming with expert testimony, or hostile grooming without expert testimony. Each participant read a single vignette and then completed the dependent measures in the order described above. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Upon finishing, participants were debriefed and compensated through CloudResearch Connect in accordance with the platform’s standard procedures.

Results

Data Analysis Plan

We calculated descriptive statistics for all dependent variables, and they are presented as means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals where appropriate. The primary hypotheses regarding sentencing recommendations were tested with a 2×2 between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA), with grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and expert testimony (present vs. absent) entered as fixed factors. We tested the primary hypotheses regarding blame attribution using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed ANOVA with grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and expert testimony (present vs. absent) as between-subjects factors, and blame attribution (victim vs. perpetrator) as a within-subjects factor.

The primary analyses indicated no statistically significant effects of grooming type or expert testimony on sentencing recommendations or blame attribution. However, the absence of statistically significant differences under null-hypothesis significance testing (NHST) does not provide evidence that the group means are equivalent (Lakens, 2017; Lakens et al., 2018). A non-significant result may reflect limited statistical precision rather than true similarity between conditions (Tryon & Lewis, 2008).

Given the applied and legal relevance of juror decision-making, it is important to distinguish between a failure to detect differences and evidence that differences are small enough to be considered practically negligible. In a legal context, conclusions that different forms of grooming yield comparable sentencing outcomes may meaningfully influence how such evidence is used and interpreted in court, as well as the perceived utility of expert testimony in assisting juror decision-making (Winters & Jeglic, 2022; Hudspith et al., 2024). This distinction is particularly important given evidence that even modest differences in sentence length can shape perceptions of punishment severity and proportionality (Englich & Mussweiler, 2001; Englich et al., 2006). Accordingly, we conducted follow-up equivalence

testing to evaluate whether observed differences fell within a predefined margin of practical equivalence (Lakens, 2017).

Unlike traditional null-hypothesis significance testing, which assesses whether an effect differs from zero, equivalence testing evaluates whether effects are statistically indistinguishable from values considered practically negligible (Lakens, 2017; Lakens et al., 2018). To test for statistical equivalence, the Two One-Sided Tests (TOST) procedure was used (Lakens, 2017; Tryon & Lewis, 2008). This approach requires that the researchers specify the smallest effect size of interest (SESOI), defined as the largest standardised mean difference that would still be considered practically negligible in the applied context (Lakens et al., 2018). We then evaluated the observed effects relative to these bounds, such that if the confidence interval fell entirely within the specified range, statistical equivalence was supported. In contrast, intervals extending beyond the bounds were interpreted as statistically indeterminate (Lakens, 2017).

What, then, is a practically negligible difference in sentence length? One factor is the perceived seriousness of the offence and the relative length of punishment associated with it. For instance, a difference of a few months is likely a meaningfully longer prison sentence for common assault (max sentence up to one year in New Zealand) than for rape (maximum sentence 20 years in New Zealand). However, extralegal factors beyond crime severity can produce meaningful differences in sentencing length and influence perceived severity (Kalven & Zeisel, 1966; Englich & Mussweiler, 2001; Englich et al., 2006). This fact means that judicial and juror recommendations can vary substantially. For example, Meaux et al. (2018) reported a standard deviation of approximately 5.55 years in mock-juror sentence recommendations, indicating that individual sentencing judgements commonly vary by multiple years. Relative to this level of variation, a one-year difference represents a

comparatively small shift in punishment severity. However, a difference of this magnitude would still be practically significant in comparing sentence length, even for serious crimes.

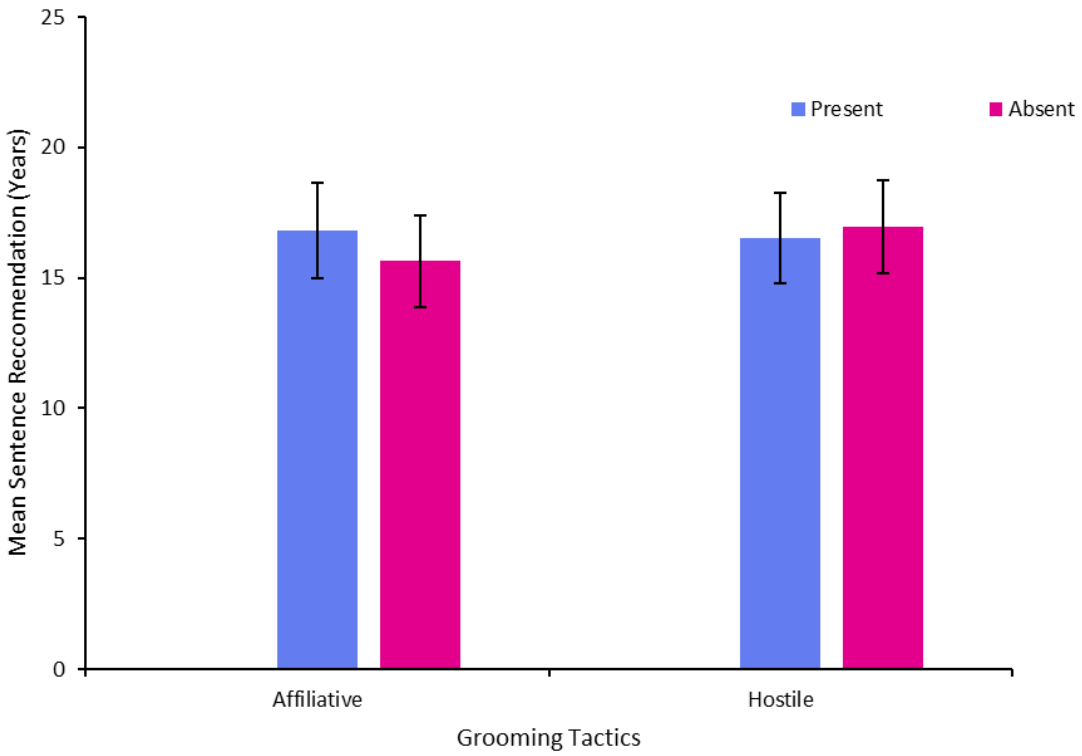
Therefore, we defined a meaningful sentencing difference as a threshold of one year (±1.0 year). This value balances practical interpretability with the empirical variability observed in juror sentencing decisions, such that differences below this range can reasonably be considered negligible for the purposes of the present study. To express this threshold in standardised units, we divided the one-year difference by the pooled within-group standard deviation derived from the ANOVA error term (7.42 years), consistent with recommendations for equivalence testing (Lakens, 2017). This conversion yielded equivalence bounds of approximately $d = \pm 0.13$. We interpreted effects falling within these bounds as practically equivalent.

Perpetrator Sentencing Recommendations

A 2 × 2 ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of grooming type and expert testimony on recommended prison sentence length. Results indicated no significant main effect of grooming type, $F(1, 267) = 0.31$, $p = .581$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, and no significant main effect of expert testimony, $F(1, 267) = 0.17$, $p = .682$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$. In addition, the interaction between grooming type and expert testimony was not significant, $F(1, 267) = 0.79$, $p = .374$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$. Mean sentencing recommendations did not differ significantly between conditions (see Figure 1). This suggests that participants recommended similar prison sentences across all conditions.

Figure 1

Mean Sentencing Recommendation for Perpetrator Across Conditions



Note. Error bars represent ±95% confidence intervals around the mean.

Blame Attribution by Target

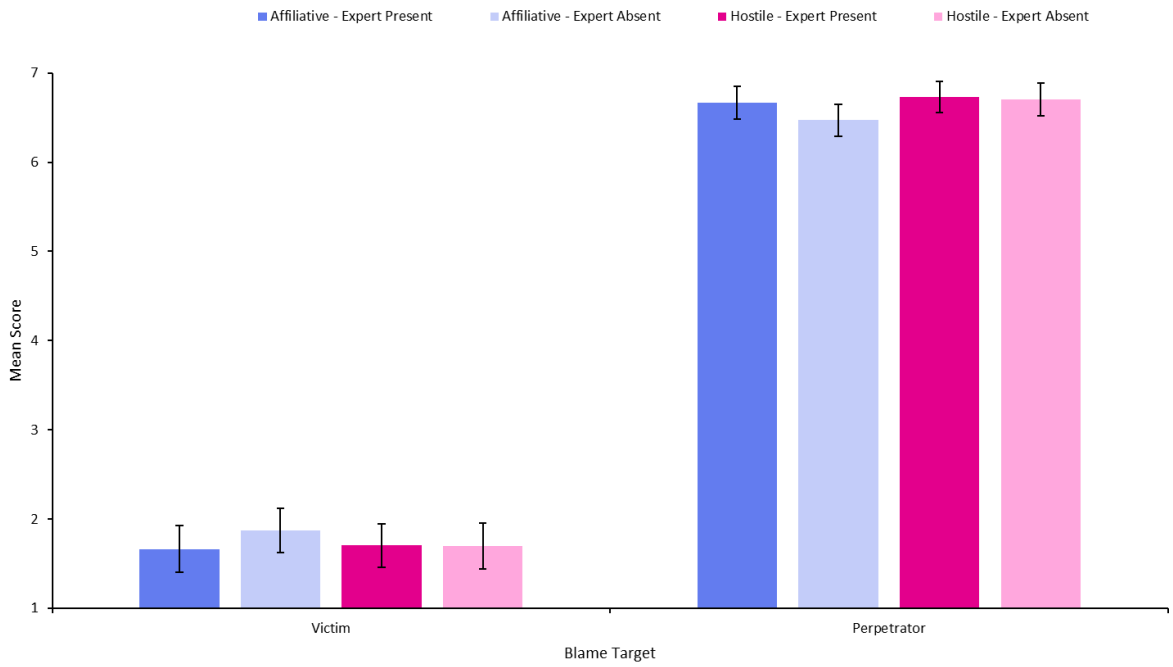
To compare blame attribution across targets, we conducted a 2 × 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA with grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and expert testimony (present vs. absent) as between-subjects factors, and blame target (victim vs. perpetrator) as a within-subjects factor. Results revealed a significant main effect of blame target, $F(1, 265) = 2301.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .897$, indicating that participants attributed substantially more blame to the perpetrator ($M = 6.64$) than to the victim ($M = 1.74$; see Figure *2*). This pattern was consistent with the study hypotheses and with legal expectations that primary responsibility should be attributed to the perpetrator.

The two-way interaction between blame target and grooming type was not significant, $F(1, 265) = 1.10$, $p = .295$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, nor was the interaction between blame target and expert testimony, $F(1, 265) = 1.11$, $p = .293$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$. Finally, the three-way interaction between blame target, grooming type, and expert testimony was also not significant, $F(1, 265) = 0.90$,

$p = .344$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$. Overall, and contrary to the hypotheses, these results indicate that the relative allocation of blame between victim and perpetrator did not differ as a function of grooming condition or the presence of expert testimony (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2

Mean Sentencing Recommendation for Perpetrator Across Conditions



Note. Error bars represent ±95% confidence intervals around the mean.

Equivalence Testing

Equivalence testing was conducted using bounds of ±1.0 year (12 months) to examine whether differences in sentencing recommendations could be considered practically equivalent. For expert testimony, equivalence was not supported between the Expert and No-Expert conditions, $M_D = 0.37$ years, 90% CI [−1.11, 1.86]. Similarly, equivalence was not supported between affiliative and hostile grooming conditions, $M_D = -0.51$ years, 90% CI [−2.00, 0.97]. In both cases, the 90% confidence intervals were wider than the equivalence bounds, indicating that the observed differences were not practically equivalent. Traditional

null-hypothesis significance tests for these comparisons were also non-significant. Taken together, these results suggest statistically indeterminate, meaning that although large differences in sentencing recommendations were not observed, the data were not precise enough to conclude that sentencing outcomes were meaningfully similar within a one-year threshold.

Discussion

The present study examined whether jurors' evaluations of child sexual abuse (CSA) differ as a function of grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and the presence of expert testimony. Drawing on conceptual and empirical work positioning grooming as a central and near-universal feature of CSA (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2022), and on attributional and rape-myth frameworks suggesting that jurors may misinterpret seemingly benign grooming behaviours (Arthur & Down, 2019; Winters & Jeglic, 2024; Hudspith et al., 2024), we hypothesised that affiliative grooming would be associated with greater victim blame and reduced perpetrator responsibility relative to hostile grooming. It was further predicted that expert testimony would diminish these biases by clarifying the manipulative and strategic nature of both grooming types. Contrary to predictions, grooming type and expert testimony did not significantly influence victim blame, perpetrator blame, or sentencing recommendations. Instead, participants attributed high levels of blame and responsibility to the perpetrator and minimal blame to the victim across all experimental conditions. Importantly, follow-up equivalence testing did not support statistical equivalence within the pre-specified one-year sentencing bound, indicating that the observed differences could not be considered practically negligible. Rather than reflecting misunderstanding or minimisation of grooming, the present findings suggest that when CSA is explicitly established, jurors demonstrate a strong moral consensus that is unaffected by grooming presentation. In the present study, participants were informed that multiple assaults had

occurred and that the offender had confessed. Under these conditions, grooming behaviours may have lost relevance, with jurors' judgements guided primarily by the certainty of abuse rather than by the specific strategies used to facilitate it.

One possible interpretation of this pattern is that grooming effects are attenuated when abuse is unambiguous. In the present study, participants were informed that multiple assaults had occurred and that the offender had confessed, thereby eliminating uncertainty about guilt. Under such conditions, affiliative and hostile grooming may carry less diagnostic weight in shaping blame and sentencing judgements. It remains possible that grooming presentation exerts a stronger influence in cases characterised by evidentiary ambiguity or contested credibility.

Attributional and rape-myth frameworks provide a theoretical basis for this possibility. Attribution theory posits that observers engage in greater causal reasoning when intent and responsibility are uncertain (Kelley, 1973; Malle et al., 2014). In cases where abuse is contested, jurors may scrutinise victims' behaviour—such as continued contact, delayed disclosure, or apparent cooperation—through dispositional lenses. Just-world and defensive attribution theories likewise suggest that observers are motivated to locate victim contribution when outcomes are ambiguous, thereby preserving beliefs in a fair and predictable world (McCaul et al., 1990; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2020). Much of the rape-myth and rape-script literature similarly centres on credibility assessments in contexts where abuse is not firmly established (Grubb & Turner, 2012; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Lee et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2022).

Under such conditions, affiliative grooming behaviours may align more closely with stereotypical expectations of voluntary engagement, increasing the risk of victim blame. By contrast, when abuse is explicitly confirmed, as in the present study, the cognitive and motivational mechanisms described by these theories may be attenuated. Once abuse is

firmly established, these cognitive distortions may be superseded by a dominant moral schema in which responsibility is assigned to the offender.

A related explanation applies to the lack of effect observed for expert testimony. Educational interventions are most effective when jurors hold misconceptions or endorse rape myths that require correction (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011; Hudspith et al., 2024). In the present sample, however, victim blame was uniformly low and perpetrator blame uniformly high across all conditions, indicating little evidence of bias to attenuate. Under these circumstances, expert testimony may have reinforced beliefs already held by participants, precluding its capacity to produce measurable change. Accordingly, the absence of effects does not suggest that expert testimony lacks value, but rather that its corrective function is most relevant in cases where misconceptions, scepticism, or evidentiary ambiguity are present.

Although the hypothesised effects were not supported, equivalence testing did not demonstrate that differences between affiliative and hostile grooming, or between expert and no-expert conditions, were practically negligible within the pre-specified one-year sentencing bound (Lakens, 2017; Lakens et al., 2018). Notably, the observed difference between affiliative and hostile grooming conditions was the predicted direction, with participants recommending slightly shorter sentences in the affiliative grooming condition relative to the hostile grooming condition. However, this difference was small and appeared to be attenuated when expert testimony was present.

Accordingly, the present findings refine rather than resolve questions regarding how grooming behaviours are interpreted in juror decision-making contexts. First, the study introduces a theoretically grounded distinction between affiliative and hostile grooming behaviours, operationalising a continuum that is well established within the Sexual Grooming Model (Winters & Jeglic, 2022) but rarely examined within juror decision-making research.

In the present design, both grooming types were perceived as similarly blameworthy when abuse was explicitly confirmed and guilt uncontested. However, because evidentiary ambiguity and credibility assessment were not manipulated, the extent to which affiliative grooming may be minimised under contested or uncertain trial conditions remains unclear. That is, we cannot assume that juries would necessarily judge these grooming behaviours equivalently in a real trial where the outcome is ambiguous. Prior literature indicates that attributional reasoning and rape-myth endorsement are particularly salient when jurors evaluate credibility or interpret ambiguous victim behaviour (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Lee et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2022). As such, further research is warranted to determine whether the affiliative–hostile distinction exerts greater influence in cases characterised by uncertainty regarding intent, responsibility, or the occurrence of abuse.

Second, the findings raise the possibility that grooming misunderstandings may exert greater influence earlier in the justice process, particularly under conditions of evidentiary ambiguity. In the current design, abuse was explicitly confirmed and guilt uncontested, thereby limiting opportunities for credibility-based reasoning or interpretive distortion. Under such conditions, grooming presentation did not meaningfully alter blame or sentencing outcomes. This pattern suggests that grooming may be more consequential during earlier procedural stages (such as police investigations, prosecutorial screening, or credibility assessments) where uncertainty is inherent. In this sense, grooming may be better conceptualised as procedurally critical rather than uniformly verdict-determinative. Understanding public perceptions of grooming remains essential, as conceptual clarity is foundational for prevention, early identification, and equitable adjudication of CSA cases.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the study was powered to detect medium-sized effects (Cohen's $d = 0.50$), smaller effects may have gone undetected. The assumption of a medium effect size was informed by prior work examining juror bias

and educational interventions (e.g., Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011; Klettke et al., 2010). However, the absence of significant findings, combined with inconclusive equivalence testing, suggests that any true effects—if present—are likely smaller than anticipated. Detecting such effects would require substantially larger samples and potentially more complex designs. While increased power would improve precision, the present findings indicate that large or robust differences between affiliative and hostile grooming are unlikely under conditions of confirmed guilt.

Second, the vignette embedded certainty of abuse by including multiple assaults and an explicit confession. This design allowed for focused examination of blame allocation while holding guilt constant; however, it constrained the ability to examine how grooming behaviours function when abuse is ambiguous. Manipulating evidentiary certainty would require additional experimental factors (such as denial, delayed disclosure, or conflicting testimony), substantially increasing design complexity and analytic demands. Within the scope of a one-year master's thesis, such a multi-factorial design was not feasible.

Third, the expert testimony manipulation was presented in written summary form and lacked several features characteristic of real trial testimony. Although it was closely adapted from Winters and Jeglic's (2022) Sexual Grooming framework, it was not delivered by a practising clinical or forensic psychologist, nor was it embedded within adversarial examination or judicial instruction. Research on expert influence in legal contexts is mixed. Some studies suggest that jurors are not unduly swayed by credentials alone and instead prioritise evidentiary coherence (Klettke et al., 2010; Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011). However, other work indicates that perceived expertise and contextual framing can shape how testimony is evaluated (Kovera et al., 1997). In cases involving grooming, behaviours can appear benign while serving manipulative purposes. In real trials, where credibility is often contested and defence questioning may draw on rape-myth assumptions (George et al.,

2022; Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023), expert clarification may therefore play a more important role. Because the present study presented testimony in a brief, written format without adversarial context, its impact may have been reduced.

More broadly, the simulated vignette lacked several elements inherent in real CSA trials, including emotional testimony, cross-examination, deliberation, and competing narratives. Real-world jurors are exposed to affective cues and adversarial framing that may heighten reliance on heuristic processing or bias-consistent reasoning (Lee et al., 2023). The emotionally neutral and structurally simplified format of the present study may have reduced the salience of grooming distinctions and limited opportunities for interpretive distortion. Accordingly, the absence of expert testimony effects in this controlled paradigm should not be interpreted as evidence that expert input lacks utility in real-world CSA proceedings.

Finally, participants were exposed to a single category of grooming behaviour within each condition. In practice, CSA cases frequently involve a mixture of affiliative and coercive tactics unfolding across stages of the grooming process (Winters et al., 2020; Winters et al., 2024). Presenting grooming behaviours in isolation enhances experimental control but may not capture the cumulative and evolving dynamics of real abuse. Juror responses may differ when affiliative and hostile tactics co-occur, interact, or escalate over time. Future research should therefore examine grooming as a multifaceted and temporally extended process rather than as discrete behavioural categories.

Future research should examine grooming perceptions in cases characterised by evidentiary ambiguity, such as those involving delayed disclosure, absence of confession, or contested testimony. Incorporating deliberative jury simulations and pre-verdict reasoning measures may further clarify how grooming evidence is processed in realistic trial contexts. Development of a validated scale assessing recognition of affiliative versus hostile grooming behaviours would also strengthen the empirical utility of this framework.

Discussion

The present study examined whether jurors' evaluations of child sexual abuse (CSA) differ as a function of grooming type (affiliative vs. hostile) and the presence of expert testimony. Drawing on conceptual and empirical work positioning grooming as a central and near-universal feature of CSA (Craven et al., 2006; Winters & Jeglic, 2022), and on attributional and rape-myth frameworks suggesting that jurors may misinterpret seemingly benign grooming behaviours (Arthur & Down, 2019; Winters & Jeglic, 2024; Hudspith et al., 2024), we hypothesised that affiliative grooming would be associated with greater victim blame and reduced perpetrator responsibility relative to hostile grooming. It was further predicted that expert testimony would diminish these biases by clarifying the manipulative and strategic nature of both grooming types. Contrary to predictions, grooming type and expert testimony did not significantly influence victim blame, perpetrator blame, or sentencing recommendations. Instead, participants attributed high levels of blame and responsibility to the perpetrator and minimal blame to the victim across all experimental conditions. Importantly, follow-up equivalence testing did not support statistical equivalence within the pre-specified one-year sentencing bound, indicating that the observed differences could not be considered practically negligible. Rather than reflecting misunderstanding or minimisation of grooming, the present findings suggest that when CSA is explicitly established, jurors demonstrate a strong moral consensus that is unaffected by grooming presentation. In the present study, participants were informed that multiple assaults had occurred and that the offender had confessed. Under these conditions, grooming behaviours may have lost relevance, with jurors' judgements guided primarily by the certainty of abuse rather than by the specific strategies used to facilitate it.

One possible interpretation of this pattern is that grooming effects are attenuated when abuse is unambiguous. In the present study, participants were informed that multiple assaults

had occurred and that the offender had confessed, thereby eliminating uncertainty about guilt. Under such conditions, affiliative and hostile grooming may carry less diagnostic weight in shaping blame and sentencing judgements. It remains possible that grooming presentation exerts a stronger influence in cases characterised by evidentiary ambiguity or contested credibility.

Attributional and rape-myth frameworks provide a theoretical basis for this possibility. Attribution theory posits that observers engage in greater causal reasoning when intent and responsibility are uncertain (Kelley, 1973; Malle et al., 2014). In cases where abuse is contested, jurors may scrutinise victims' behaviour—such as continued contact, delayed disclosure, or apparent cooperation—through dispositional lenses. Just-world and defensive attribution theories likewise suggest that observers are motivated to locate victim contribution when outcomes are ambiguous, thereby preserving beliefs in a fair and predictable world (McCaul et al., 1990; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2020). Much of the rape-myth and rape-script literature similarly centres on credibility assessments in contexts where abuse is not firmly established (Grubb & Turner, 2012; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Lee et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2022).

Under such conditions, affiliative grooming behaviours may align more closely with stereotypical expectations of voluntary engagement, increasing the risk of victim blame. By contrast, when abuse is explicitly confirmed, as in the present study, the cognitive and motivational mechanisms described by these theories may be attenuated. Once abuse is firmly established, these cognitive distortions may be superseded by a dominant moral schema in which responsibility is assigned to the offender.

A related explanation applies to the lack of effect observed for expert testimony. Educational interventions are most effective when jurors hold misconceptions or endorse rape myths that require correction (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011; Hudspith et al., 2024). In the

present sample, however, victim blame was uniformly low and perpetrator blame uniformly high across all conditions, indicating little evidence of bias to attenuate. Under these circumstances, expert testimony may have reinforced beliefs already held by participants, precluding its capacity to produce measurable change. Accordingly, the absence of effects does not suggest that expert testimony lacks value, but rather that its corrective function is most relevant in cases where misconceptions, scepticism, or evidentiary ambiguity are present.

Although the hypothesised effects were not supported, equivalence testing did not demonstrate that differences between affiliative and hostile grooming, or between expert and no-expert conditions, were practically negligible within the pre-specified one-year sentencing bound (Lakens, 2017; Lakens et al., 2018). Notably, the observed difference between affiliative and hostile grooming conditions was the predicted direction, with participants recommending slightly shorter sentences in the affiliative grooming condition relative to the hostile grooming condition. However, this difference was small and appeared to be attenuated when expert testimony was present.

Accordingly, the present findings refine rather than resolve questions regarding how grooming behaviours are interpreted in juror decision-making contexts. First, the study introduces a theoretically grounded distinction between affiliative and hostile grooming behaviours, operationalising a continuum that is well established within the Sexual Grooming Model (Winters & Jeglic, 2022) but rarely examined within juror decision-making research. In the present design, both grooming types were perceived as similarly blameworthy when abuse was explicitly confirmed and guilt uncontested. However, because evidentiary ambiguity and credibility assessment were not manipulated, the extent to which affiliative grooming may be minimised under contested or uncertain trial conditions remains unclear. That is, we cannot assume that juries would necessarily judge these grooming behaviours

equivalently in a real trial where the outcome is ambiguous. Prior literature indicates that attributional reasoning and rape-myth endorsement are particularly salient when jurors evaluate credibility or interpret ambiguous victim behaviour (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Lee et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2022). As such, further research is warranted to determine whether the affiliative–hostile distinction exerts greater influence in cases characterised by uncertainty regarding intent, responsibility, or the occurrence of abuse.

Second, the findings raise the possibility that grooming misunderstandings may exert greater influence earlier in the justice process, particularly under conditions of evidentiary ambiguity. In the current design, abuse was explicitly confirmed and guilt uncontested, thereby limiting opportunities for credibility-based reasoning or interpretive distortion. Under such conditions, grooming presentation did not meaningfully alter blame or sentencing outcomes. This pattern suggests that grooming may be more consequential during earlier procedural stages (such as police investigations, prosecutorial screening, or credibility assessments) where uncertainty is inherent. In this sense, grooming may be better conceptualised as procedurally critical rather than uniformly verdict-determinative. Understanding public perceptions of grooming remains essential, as conceptual clarity is foundational for prevention, early identification, and equitable adjudication of CSA cases.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the study was powered to detect medium-sized effects (Cohen's $d = 0.50$), smaller effects may have gone undetected. The assumption of a medium effect size was informed by prior work examining juror bias and educational interventions (e.g., Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011; Klettke et al., 2010). However, the absence of significant findings, combined with inconclusive equivalence testing, suggests that any true effects—if present—are likely smaller than anticipated. Detecting such effects would require substantially larger samples and potentially more complex designs. While increased power would improve precision, the present findings

indicate that large or robust differences between affiliative and hostile grooming are unlikely under conditions of confirmed guilt.

Second, the vignette embedded certainty of abuse by including multiple assaults and an explicit confession. This design allowed for focused examination of blame allocation while holding guilt constant; however, it constrained the ability to examine how grooming behaviours function when abuse is ambiguous. Manipulating evidentiary certainty would require additional experimental factors (such as denial, delayed disclosure, or conflicting testimony), substantially increasing design complexity and analytic demands. Within the scope of a one-year master's thesis, such a multi-factorial design was not feasible.

Third, the expert testimony manipulation was presented in written summary form and lacked several features characteristic of real trial testimony. Although it was closely adapted from Winters and Jeglic's (2022) Sexual Grooming framework, it was not delivered by a practising clinical or forensic psychologist, nor was it embedded within adversarial examination or judicial instruction. Research on expert influence in legal contexts is mixed. Some studies suggest that jurors are not unduly swayed by credentials alone and instead prioritise evidentiary coherence (Klettke et al., 2010; Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2011). However, other work indicates that perceived expertise and contextual framing can shape how testimony is evaluated (Kovera et al., 1997). In cases involving grooming, behaviours can appear benign while serving manipulative purposes. In real trials, where credibility is often contested and defence questioning may draw on rape-myth assumptions (George et al., 2022; Denne & Stolzenberg, 2023), expert clarification may therefore play a more important role. Because the present study presented testimony in a brief, written format without adversarial context, its impact may have been reduced.

More broadly, the simulated vignette lacked several elements inherent in real CSA trials, including emotional testimony, cross-examination, deliberation, and competing

narratives. Real-world jurors are exposed to affective cues and adversarial framing that may heighten reliance on heuristic processing or bias-consistent reasoning (Lee et al., 2023). The emotionally neutral and structurally simplified format of the present study may have reduced the salience of grooming distinctions and limited opportunities for interpretive distortion. Accordingly, the absence of expert testimony effects in this controlled paradigm should not be interpreted as evidence that expert input lacks utility in real-world CSA proceedings.

Finally, participants were exposed to a single category of grooming behaviour within each condition. In practice, CSA cases frequently involve a mixture of affiliative and coercive tactics unfolding across stages of the grooming process (Winters et al., 2020; Winters et al., 2024). Presenting grooming behaviours in isolation enhances experimental control but may not capture the cumulative and evolving dynamics of real abuse. Juror responses may differ when affiliative and hostile tactics co-occur, interact, or escalate over time. Future research should therefore examine grooming as a multifaceted and temporally extended process rather than as discrete behavioural categories.

Future research should examine grooming perceptions in cases characterised by evidentiary ambiguity, such as those involving delayed disclosure, absence of confession, or contested testimony. Incorporating deliberative jury simulations and pre-verdict reasoning measures may further clarify how grooming evidence is processed in realistic trial contexts. Development of a validated scale assessing recognition of affiliative versus hostile grooming behaviours would also strengthen the empirical utility of this framework.

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Appendices

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Appendix A	Pre-Registration
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Appendix A

ASPREDICTED

Wharton CREDIBILITY LAB
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

Potential Jurors Perception of Interrogation Techniques and False Confessions (#182201)

Author(s)
Kate Van Den Anker (University of Waikato) - kv47@students.waikato.ac.nz
Andrew Evelo (University of Waikato) - andrew.evelo@waikato.ac.nz

Pre-registered on: 07/08/2024 04:04 PM (PT)

1) Have any data been collected for this study already?
No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

2) What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?
To what extent are potential jurors in New Zealand aware of the coerciveness of interrogations and likelihood of false confessions?

3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.
The key dependent variables are ratings of perceptions and thoughts of different interrogation techniques and false confessions.
This study has 4 sections.
⊡ Section 1 explores participants' general confession perceptions - 5 point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)
⊡ Section 2 investigates participants' opinions about seven specific interrogation techniques used by police. Participants rate these techniques on the likelihood that police use them, the extent they are coercive, and the likelihood they will produce TRUE or FALSE confessions. There are 2 different 5 point Likert scales used throughout this section (1=not at all likely - 5=very likely, 1= not at all coercive- 5=extremely coercive)
⊡ Section 3 assesses the participants' perceptions of potential risk factors that may contribute to false confessions. Like section 2, there are 2 different Likert scales (1=no contribution - 5=large contribution, 1=not at all allowed - 5=definitely allowed).
⊡ Section 4 assesses participants' knowledge of the rights of New Zealanders when in police custody, as well as their knowledge of international cases of false confession. Half of section 4 has yes and no questions, and the other half has a "select all that apply" question.

4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?
Participants will not be assigned to any conditions.

5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.
We will calculate mean scores, standard deviation, and confidence intervals for the dependent variables. We will categorise responses on each side of bi-polar scales (e.g., "likely" responses and "unlikely" responses) and calculate proportions and confidence intervals. We will run an ANOVA to assess differences in responses across different similar variables. A logistic regression will be used to predict perception based on familiarity with false confessions.

6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.
To identify outliers, we will examine the scores visually and any scores that are ±2 standard deviations.
We will conduct analyses with and without outliers, and if the results differ, we will report both analyses.
We will exclude any participants:
- who finish reading the survey in under 2 minutes.
- who are not able to correctly tell us what our survey was about
- who indicate that they do not want us to use their responses
- who fail the CAPTCHA verification at the beginning of the survey,
- who produces strange patterns of results, such as picking the first option in every multiple-choice question.
All exclusions will be reported.

7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size? No need to justify decision, but be precise about exactly how the number will be determined.
We plan on letting the study run online for 2 weeks, our goal is to collect usable data from 200 people. If the 200 target is not reached, we may supplement from universities around New Zealand.

8) Anything else you would like to pre-register? (e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)
Nothing else to pre-register.

Appendix B

The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Gate 1, Knighton Road
Hamilton, New Zealand

Human Research Ethics Committee
Professor Gary Wilson
Email: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

10 September 2025

Dr Andrew J. Evelo
School of Psychological and Social Sciences
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology, and Social Sciences
By email: andrew.evelo@waikato.ac.nz

Dear Dr Andrew J. Evelo,

HREC(Health)2025#65: The Effects of Grooming Tactics and Expert Testimony on Juror Perceptions of Responsibility in CSA Cases

Thank you for your responses to the Committee feedback.

We are now pleased to provide formal approval for your project.

Please contact the Committee by email (humanethics@waikato.ac.nz) if you wish to make changes to your project as it unfolds, quoting your application number with your future correspondence. Any minor changes or additions to the approved research activities can be handled outside the monthly application cycle.

We wish you all the best with your research.

Regards,

Professor Gary Wilson
Chairperson
University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix C

Information Sheet: Criminal Case Interpretation [HREC(Health)2025#65]

Who is conducting this research?

This research is being conducted by a team of researchers led by Dr. Andrew J. Evelo (Andrew.evelo@waikato.ac.nz) in the School of Psychology at the University of Waikato. The divisional Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this research. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research can be sent directly to the committee secretary (alps-ethics@waikato.ac.nz).

Content Warning:

This material includes a fictional case summary involving child sexual abuse (CSA). Although the case is not real, the subject matter is sensitive and may be upsetting. Please take care of yourself if you choose to engage with this content. If you need support, Safe to Talk offers free, confidential help 24/7 in the United States: call 1-800-422-4453

Your well-being is important.

What is the purpose of this research

The purpose of this research is to understand your legal decision making. Specifically, we are going to ask your opinion about a criminal case involving childhood sexual abuse. If you do not want to read case facts for this type of case, please do not agree to participate.

What is involved if you agree to participate?

- You will participate by taking an online survey
- We anticipate your total time participating will be about 7-10 minutes.
- We do not anticipate any risks arising from your participation in this study.
- When you have completed the research, you will receive 1.75
- For scientific reasons, this information form does not include complete details about the purpose of this research, but you will receive more information after

you complete the survey.

What happens to the information that you provide?

- Confidentiality. We will not collect direct identifying information, such as your name or email, to protect your privacy. However, we may ask for certain demographic information (e.g., age or gender).
- Storage. We will keep proof of your consent and data for at least five years after this research is published, and we may keep them indefinitely. All of this information will be stored on a secure online server.
- Analysis. Your responses will be collected and combined with those of other participants. We will then analyse the data and examine the overall patterns of responses.
- Publication. The anonymised data and group analyses may be published in various formats, including journal articles, scholarly presentations, theses, dissertations, and press releases. We may also share the data with related projects or other scholarly professionals.

Voluntary Participation and Withdraw

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study before your participation is complete without giving a reason.

At the end of the study, we will provide you with an additional opportunity to withdraw your consent and any other information you have provided. However, due to the anonymous nature of the responses, withdrawing or deleting your information will not be possible after this point.

Contact Information

Research Coordinator	Lead Investigator	Ethics Committee
Kate Evelien Van Den	Andrew J. Evelo	University of

Anker		Waikato
kv47@students.waikato.ac.nz	andrew.evelo@waikato.ac.nz	alps-ethics@waikato.ac.nz

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read and understood the information about this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered satisfactorily. I understand the purpose of this research, what will happen if I participate, and what will happen to the information I provide. I understand the measures in place to protect my privacy and confidentiality. I understand that I can withdraw my consent before my participation ends, and I do not have to give a reason.

I agree to participate in this research, and I understand that checking (ticking) the box below indicates my consent.

O Yes, I agree to participate in this research.

O No, I do not wish to participate in this research.

Appendix D

Quality Control Instructions

During this experiment, we ask that you comply with the following study requirements:

1. Please complete the study in a single session, and do not leave the experiment to engage in other tasks. So do not check your mail, look at Facebook, use your mobile phone, get up for a drink, etc. If you need to engage in any tasks, please do so right now before continuing on to the next page.

2. Please do not use your web browser's back or refresh buttons at any point during the experiment.

3. Please complete the experiment in an environment free of noise and distraction. Do not speak to anyone or have anyone near you. Ideally, you would be alone in a quiet room or in a room where other people are quiet (such as a library).

We ask you to follow these instructions to ensure the quality of the information you provide.

Please advance the survey when you are ready.

Demographic Questions

First, tell us a little bit about yourself.

What is your age? _____

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-Binary
- Prefer not to say
- Other _____

Which race or ethnicity do you identify most strongly with?

- Asian
- Black or African American
- Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Two or More Races
- Other (please specify): _____

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school (no diploma)
- High school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college (no degree)
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Some graduate school
- Graduate or professional degree (e.g., Master's, PhD, JD)

Expert Testimony Condition

Initial Instructions

Directions: In the following sections, we would like to hear your opinions on a fictional case involving child sexual abuse (CSA).

Before reviewing the case, you will first read a short expert summary on the psychology of grooming behaviours, which are often present in CSA cases. This is provided to help you understand the material.

This is not a knowledge test; it is purely opinion-based. Please be as honest as you can.

Read through the summary carefully and select the option that best represents your opinion/perception.

You may advance this page when you are ready.

Section 1

Expert Summary:

Sexual grooming is the process by which a perpetrator grooms a child for sexual abuse. It is a systematic, calculated course of action that allows an adult to find a vulnerable child, build trust, reduce defensiveness, and create an environment in which the adult feels less likely to be rejected or have their behaviour reported. Offenders are often skilled at identifying children who are more susceptible to attention: those who are lonely, emotionally vulnerable, or in need of support. Once a potential target has been selected, the offender works to build a trusting relationship, not just with the child, but also with the child's family or social circle.

The offender can use a range of different grooming tactics. Many times, this behaviour is clearly manipulative in its intent to foster control, such as exposing the child to sexualised language or content, initiating gradual physical contact, or testing boundaries in ways that confuse the child about what is normal. Over time, emotional pressure is often introduced. The offender may shame the child, invoke fear of punishment, or suggest that disclosure would cause harm to someone the child cares about. The child may begin to feel responsible, guilty, or conflicted. These feelings can delay disclosure and distort the child's understanding of the abuse, allowing the behaviour to continue undetected.

Offenders may also use grooming behaviour that seems caring, attentive, or generous. However, this behaviour is also highly manipulative. The offenders may offer gifts, share treats, or provide access to special activities. These actions are intended to foster feelings of loyalty or obligation in the child. By fulfilling emotional or material needs, the offender gradually increases the child's sense of dependence. Over time, boundaries may be blurred as the child becomes emotionally invested in the relationship. This can make it more difficult for the child to recognise abuse or to feel safe speaking up, as the relationship feels meaningful or rewarding. These dynamics are deliberate and serve to create vulnerability that facilitates sexual abuse.

Section 2

Affiliative Tactics:

Lisa, a bright and imaginative 13-year-old, felt increasingly unseen at home. Her parents, though loving, were often preoccupied with work and the demands of her younger siblings. One day, she met David, a new volunteer at the local community centre, where she occasionally helped out. David quickly took an interest in Lisa. He gave Lisa multiple compliments, often telling her, "You're the smartest kid I know, Lisa. You see things in a way others don't." He'd also commented on her appearance, remarking, "That shirt looks great on you," and would always make her feel like she was far more mature than others her age.

David started bringing small gifts. The first was a video game she had mentioned wanting in passing. "I saw this, and it made me think of you." The gifts continued, escalating to fancy jewellery. Lisa felt special and valued in a way she hadn't experienced before. David told her that she was the only one who truly understood him and that her mother didn't appreciate him like she did. As she spent more time with him, David continued to show her attention. He'd say things like, "Sometimes I forget you're only 13, I feel like I can tell you anything." Over time, this intense attention shifted, becoming more suggestive and invasive.

Eventually, these interactions transitioned into a pattern of sexual abuse. Multiple sexual assaults occurred over a period of two months. The police became involved after one of David's coworkers became suspicious and reported him to Child Protective Services. The investigation eventually yielded multiple pieces of evidence supporting the allegations of abuse. During a police interview, David confessed to multiple acts of sexual assault, including forcible touching, sexual abuse of a minor, and endangering the welfare of a child.

Hostile Tactics:

Lisa, a bright and imaginative 13-year-old, felt increasingly unseen at home. Her parents, though loving, were often preoccupied with work and the demands of her younger siblings. One day, she met David, a new volunteer at the local community centre, where she occasionally helped out. David quickly took an interest in Lisa. David started by driving a wedge between Lisa and her friends. He would make subtle, cutting remarks about them,

saying they were "immature" or "a bad influence." And not your “true friends.” David would try and dissuade Lisa from spending time with her friends, saying he had “something special planned just for the two of them”.

David started showing her some pictures on his phone, claiming they were related to his work. The images were pornographic and made Lisa feel uncomfortable. When she tried to look away, he insisted she look, saying, “This is life, Lisa. You need to learn about these things.” This behaviour continued, with David showing her increasingly explicit content and asking inappropriate questions such as, “Have you ever thought about these things before?” David told her that she was the only one who truly understood him and that her mother didn't appreciate him like she did. As she spent more time with him, David continued to show her attention. He'd often say things like, “If you really cared about me, you wouldn't tell your mother about this. I’d get into trouble.” If Lisa expressed discomfort or wanted to tell her mother about something, David would make her feel guilty, saying things like, “I thought we were friends. Friends keep secrets.” Over time, this intense attention shifted, becoming more suggestive and invasive.

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(7-point Likert scale: 1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much)

1. How much do you think Lisa is to blame for what happened?
2. How much do you think Lisa’s behaviour contributed to what happened?
3. To what extent do you think Lisa could have avoided what happened?
4. How much do you believe Lisa had control over the situation?
5. How much do you consider the incident to be Lisa’s fault?
6. How sorry do you feel for Lisa? (reverse code)

Please answer the following questions relating to this summary:

(7-point Likert scale: 1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much)

1. How much do you blame David for what happened?
2. How much do you believe David is responsible for what happened?

3. How much do you believe David manipulated Lisa?
4. How much control do you believe David had over the situation?
5. To what extent do you believe David acted with intent to harm?

Allocate 100 points for responsibility among the following:

- Lisa: ___ %
- David: ___ %
- Other (other circumstances): ___ %

(Total must add up to 100%)

1. Sentence Length: “If you were the presiding judge for this case and the jury has returned a guilty verdict, what prison sentence would you recommend?”

- Years 0-25, 1-year intervals

Appendix E

Post-study Information

Criminal Case Interpretation

[HREC(Health)2025#65]

Thank you for participating in our survey. The study is now complete.

Please do not share this or other information about the study with others who may participate. Doing so may affect the answers that they give. Valid research relies on people behaving naturally.

The Current Study

This research explored how different grooming tactics and the presence or absence of expert testimony influence perceptions of blame in child sexual abuse (CSA) cases. You were randomly assigned to read a fictional CSA case involving one type of grooming, and for some of you, expert testimony. The purpose of this study is to better understand how these factors affect jury decision-making and whether expert information can reduce potential biases. We appreciate your time and contribution to this research.

Voluntary Withdraw

Now that you have completed the research, please let us know if you would like to contribute or withdraw the data you have provided. Please note that if you say yes, you will not be able to withdraw your data later because we will have no way of identifying which response was yours. If you wish to withdraw your data, you will still receive credit for participating.

- I am happy for you to use my responses (default).
- I would like to withdraw my responses.

Results

We are currently analysing the data and do not have specific results to share with you.

However, if you would like to receive this study's findings, please email the research coordinator below.

Should you have any further questions or concerns regarding the study, please do not hesitate to contact us. Your feedback and input are important to us.

Research Coordinator	Lead Investigator	Ethics Committee
Kate Evelien Van Den Anker	Andrew J. Evelo	University of Waikato
kv47@students.waikato.ac.nz	andrew.evelo@waikato.ac.nz	alps-ethics@waikato.ac.nz

Thank you once again for your participation.

Your responses have been recorded.

You may advance the survey and exit the browser.