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# Organized sexualized and ritual violence: Results from two representative German samples

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Organized sexualized and ritual abuse (ORA), a contentious issue since the 1980s, remains a polarizing topic. Although there is much debate about the existence of this phenomenon, a differentiated perspective is lacking, and no representative study has yet addressed the frequency.

**Objective:** This paper aims to investigate the frequency of ORA in Germany using two representative datasets.

**Participants and setting:** Data were collected from representative samples of the German population ( $N = 2522$ ,  $N = 2515$ ). Participants aged 16 to 96 years (50 and 53 % female) were recruited. They were selected by a random route procedure and asked to fill out a paper-pencil-questionnaire.

**Methods:** The four aspects of ORA (severe sexual violence, perpetrator networks, commercial exploitation, ideology) were assessed based on the definition provided by an expert group. Additionally, in the second survey, a direct yes/no question about the experience of ORA as well as details on perpetrators and offense characteristics were surveyed.

**Results:** Frequency of ORA was low. The direct question on ORA was affirmed by 0.5 % ( $n = 13$ ), while according to the criteria of the definition, only 0.2 % or less of individuals experienced organized sexualized abuse, and <0.1 % experienced ritual abuse.

**Conclusion:** Although ORA is discussed thoroughly, frequencies in the German population are low. This may be due to inconsistent terminology and operationalization of definitions with lack of precision. However, an intersection of conspiracy beliefs and the topic of ritual violence sheds another light on this issue that should receive more attention.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s organized sexualized and ritual violence has been a polarizing issue in research and the media. While scientific studies on child sexual abuse, trauma consequences, and evidence-based therapeutic methods are well-established and replicated (e. g., [Goldbeck et al., 2016](#); [Hailes et al., 2019](#); [Thielemann et al., 2022](#)), the field of especially so-called ritual violence and the ‘false memory debate’ has seen limited progress in the last 30 years ([Gerke et al., 2022](#)).

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The term ‘organized sexualized and ritual abuse’, abbreviated as ORA, is often used to summarize and equate the two phenomena of organized sexualized abuse and ritual abuse (e. g., Schröder et al., 2018). The professional committee ‘Expert Group for Sexualized Violence in Organized and Ritual Structures’ at the German Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women, and Youth has formulated a definition for ORA, which is currently the status quo in Germany (Igney & Kreyerhoff, 2018). The following aspects were utilized to describe ‘organized sexualized violence’: (1) systematic severe sexual violence, possibly in combination with physical and emotional violence, (2) several perpetrators or perpetrator networks working together, and (3) possibly involving commercial exploitation, e. g. forced prostitution with so-called child or violent pornography. When (4) an ideology is used to justify or rationalize the violence, it is referred to as a ‘ritual abuse structure’ (Igney & Kreyerhoff, 2018). The literature regarding the matter if the phenomena should be considered types of violence on an equal level, i. e. being summarized and equated, or ritual aspects are more appropriately seen as a strategy employed by perpetrators in cases of organized sexualized violence is not yet conclusive (see also Gerke et al., 2024). According to La Fontaine (1993), organized sexualized abuse includes any situation in which one or more minors are sexually abused by two or more adults acting together, with at least one adult not being part of the family or not living in the same household. Ritual abuse has been defined as the “involvement of children in physical, psychological or sexual abuse associated with repeated activities (‘ritual’) which purport to relate the abuse to contexts of a religious, magical or supernatural kind” (McFadyen et al., 1993, p. 37). An earlier definition by Finkelhor et al. (1988) is similar, but includes additionally the repeated use of symbols or activities specifically to frighten and intimidate the children. Salter (2012) argues that ritual abuse is primarily a strategy employed by groups involved in producing images of child abuse, prostituting minors, and other forms of organized abuse, rather than constituting its own distinct category of violence. Furthermore, he emphasizes the similarities between ritual abuse and other forms of sexual violence and exploitation (Salter, 2012). Despite the inconclusive discussion on the terms, we use the consolidated term ‘organized sexualized and ritual abuse’ and its abbreviation ORA, as the discussion in Germany revolves around this term and previous figures do not describe the respective individual phenomena, but rather the combined organized sexualized and ritual abuse. We also employ the individual terms ‘organized sexualized violence/abuse’ and ‘ritual violence/abuse’, if one of the two aspects is meant more specifically. Especially in international literature, the term ‘ritual abuse/violence’ is often used individually (e. g., Bottoms et al., 1996; McMinn & Wade, 1995; Ost et al., 2013). When citing studies, we adopt the terminology used therein.

The debate is highly polarized and emotional, hindering professional discussion and the necessary differentiation of the topic. While organized and cruel forms of sexual abuse certainly exist, there might also be conspiracy theories associated with it. After a phase of apparent stagnation in this debate, the spread of relevant conspiracy narratives has increased, especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, aspects of the narrative surrounding ritual/satanic violence against children have also emerged in widespread conspiracy narratives, including among followers of the QAnon conspiracy. Bottoms et al. (1996) surveyed a total of 2722 clinical psychologists regarding child and adult patients who had experienced ritual or religion-related violence. The psychologists’ self-reports emerged that 13 % had encountered adult survivors of ritual abuse, and 11 % had worked with children who had such experiences. The study compared satanic ritual cases to equally severe religion-related cases. As ritual abuse is often considered intergenerational, the reports of adult and child cases should represent two perspectives on the same phenomenon. Interestingly, the reports differed, revealing an outstanding extremity in the adult-survivor cases of ritual abuse, while the cases involving children were not as extreme. The authors suggested while some acts of child abuse might be ritualistic, there is no indication of a highly organized, intergenerational, international child-abusing satanic cult (Bottoms et al., 1996).

Data from a sect information center in Germany indicate a clear increase in cases of counseling related to satanism/occultism. The focus of counseling has been on the topics of ritual violence and so-called “mind control” (Riede, 2023). Cases have recently surfaced in Switzerland revealing followers of an initiated circle of therapists suggested certain pseudo-memories or narratives of ritual violence to patients during the course of treatment. This misconduct in the treatment of patients, which has since been investigated and acknowledged in several clinics (Lexperience, 2022; Seifritz, 2023), holds significance under professional, civil, and possibly even criminal law. More precisely, the medical records of 422 examined patients with a dissociative diagnosis (F44 diagnosis, International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th edition, ICD-10, Dilling et al., 2008) revealed in almost half of the cases ( $n = 188$ ) discrete indications of conspiracy narratives during therapy, and the records of 43 patients revealed a significant influence of conspiracy narratives within therapy (Seifritz, 2023). Recently, especially in Switzerland, these confirmed cases of false memories generated in therapy have prompted discussions about false suggested memories, particularly in connection with therapeutic malpractice (Fegert & Urbaniok, submitted).

The aforementioned difficulties and inaccuracies in the terminology surrounding the topic of ORA (see also Gerke et al., 2024) make it challenging to provide an exact frequency estimate of this phenomenon. Individual studies of clinical samples with patients receiving treatment for the consequences of sexual abuse have shown high frequencies, with up to 17 % of women (Briere, 1988) and 2 % to 8 % of children and adolescents (McClellan et al., 1995) reporting experiences of ORA. In a survey of South African secondary school students conducted by Madu (2001), 10 % reported ritual violence, defined as witnessing or experiencing one “was tortured, repeatedly hurt, or forced to do something sexual during some sort of a meeting, ritual, cult gathering, or religious activity” (Madu, 2001, p. 435). Another survey of 200 Iranian students, which differentiated between physical, emotional, sexualized, and other forms of violence within ritual contexts, found 12.5 % of the respondents had experienced physical, emotional, and other forms of ritual violence, but none reported experiencing sexualized forms of ritual violence or satanism (Nobakht & Dale, 2018). It has to be noted, that the study defined religious/ritual abuse as “any inappropriate act under the guise of religion/pseudoreligion which can include psychological abuse, physical harm/harassment, and humiliation” (Nobakht & Dale, 2018, p. 10). According to the study, this could include parental physical punishment due to refusal to engage in religious rites or neglect in the treatment of illness due to religious beliefs (Nobakht & Dale, 2018). The use of small and highly segregated specific samples, a lack of a consistent terminology and definitions, and differing cultural backgrounds present challenges. The frequencies described here must be interpreted with caution for

this reason.

Aspects of professionals, such as their own religious beliefs or the training they have attended, seem to have an effect on their assessments. A survey of U. S. Christian and non-Christian psychologists by [McMinn and Wade \(1995\)](#) showed a significant difference in the identification of satanic ritual abuse: A total of 1.7 % of Christian psychologists and 0.5 % of non-Christian psychologists reported experiences with victims of ritual violence. No differences between the two groups were observed in the identification of sexual abuse or in diagnosing dissociative identity disorder (DID) ([McMinn & Wade, 1995](#)). In an Australian survey ([Schmuttermaier & Veno, 1999](#)), counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists were asked about ritual violence, discussed definitions of ritual violence, identified cases, assessed the extent to which professionals believed their clients, considered their own religious beliefs, and regarded training in sexual violence counseling. Between the years 1985 and 1995, 26 (28 %) of the 93 respondents self-reported witnessing a total of 153 cases of ritual violence ([Schmuttermaier & Veno, 1999](#)). In this study, there was no difference between faith-based and non-faith-based professionals, but there was a positive effect in the detection of ritual violence following training in the treatment and recognition of sexual abuse ([Schmuttermaier & Veno, 1999](#)). In a study conducted by [Ost et al. \(2013\)](#), 32.4 % of 222 chartered clinical psychologists and hypnotherapists surveyed in the U. K. reported having treated patients with experiences of satanic/ritual violence. Compared to hypnotherapists, clinical psychologists were significantly more likely to report having seen such cases. On the other hand, hypnotherapists were more likely to have seen cases where an individual had recovered a memory of abuse from prior amnesia (40 %) compared to the clinical psychologists (20 %) ([Ost et al., 2013](#)).

Research on the frequency of ORA conducted in Germany is rare. In a survey of practicing psychotherapists in the German Ruhr area in North Rhine-Westphalia, 5 % reported having treated patients with experiences of ORA ([Kownatzki et al., 2012](#)). Further research in Germany has not explicitly focused on the frequency of the phenomenon ORG. However, surveys have been conducted in specific selective circles to describe the phenomenon ([Nick et al., 2018, 2019](#)). Samples of 165 self-identified victims and 174 professionals were gathered, providing insights into the phenomenon ([Nick et al., 2018, 2019](#)). Although the studies do not explicitly measure the frequency of ORG, they suggest that it has a significant extent. Further examination of German data reveals identifiable numbers in selective inquiry samples, such as the telephone contact point of the first Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues (UBSKM), in which 1 % of victims of sexual abuse (50 out of 4570 victims) reported ritual abuse ([Fegert et al., 2013](#)). Additionally, about 1 % of (suspected) cases at the Help Line Sexual Abuse are associated with the context of ORA. The Help Line berta, which was specifically established for addressing sexualized violence in organized and ritual contexts, has a substantial user population, with almost 5500 counseling sessions conducted in the first two years, according to the USBKM press release of April 29, 2021. In interpreting these numbers, the previously described influencing factors, as well as the selectivity of the samples, must be considered.

Official figures can hardly be contrasted with these studies, as there are no law enforcement statistics available for ORA. Conclusions can only be drawn about individual aspects of violence related to ORA. Cases including so-called “child or youth pornography”, i. e. digital images of abuse, registered in the German police crime statistics have increased in recent years. In 2021, there were >39,000 cases of distribution, possession, and production of digital images of abuse (“child or youth pornography”) ([BKA, 2021](#)); however, the increase can be partly attributed to tightening of laws in Germany. Very low numbers ( $n = 56$ ) were found in the “production and distribution of pornography on a *commercial and gang basis*”, so that official figures indicate a very low proportion of jointly acting, organized perpetrator networks ([BKA, 2021](#)). Cases of ritual abuse or cases with ritual aspects are not found in the statistics, nor have there ever been convictions in such cases.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, until now, the frequency of ORA has only been determined through samples of victims and professionals. The aim of this paper is to determine the frequency of ORA in Germany using two representative datasets of the German population. As already described, there are currently only a few frequency estimates based exclusively on selective victim and therapist samples. By determining the frequency of ORA, a more neutral approach is sought to inquire into the phenomenon. The study aims to obtain representative figures on the subject to advance the previously emotionally charged and polarized discussion on an objective scientific level. Our hypothesis is that the figures we find in the representative samples will be significantly smaller than the frequencies identified in selective victim and professional samples previously reported.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Procedure

The analyses in this paper are based on two representative datasets of the German population from the years 2022 and 2023. On a regular basis, a demographic consulting company (USUMA) located in Berlin, Germany, conducts representative surveys. Various research groups submit questions on different topics which are included in the survey; the submission of the questions analyzed in this paper was made possible through funding from the German Independent Commissioner on Child Sexual Abuse Issues. The company USUMA selects households according to a predefined pattern designed to ensure randomness and representativeness. A Kish selection grid is used to randomly select participants in multi-person households.

After the initial recruitment contact, appointments were scheduled to complete the questionnaires. Inclusion criteria required participants to have sufficient knowledge of the German language and to be at least 16 years old. To ensure representativeness of the participants, there is no maximum age of participation. Initially, socio-demographic information was collected through interviews conducted by research staff. Additional information was obtained through paper and pencil questionnaires, with research staff available to assist with any questions. All responses were kept anonymous.

Data collection was carried out using specialized data capture software, which imported the scanned questionnaires into a digital

database based on a programmed capture mask. After machine data entry, trained staff verified all questionnaires using predefined search fields and software-specific criteria depending on the case. All open-ended responses were recorded during this process. Handwritten numerical entries were also individually cross-checked (visual inspection). In case significant accumulations of missing data were identified at this stage, the affected questionnaires were not considered complete. Therefore, 26 questionnaires in 2022 and 22 questionnaires in 2023 were excluded. The resulting samples are representative in terms of age, gender, and geographic region.

The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice of the International Chamber of Commerce, as well as those of the European Society of Opinion and Marketing Research. The Ethics Committee of the Medical Department of the University of Leipzig approved the study.

## 2.2. Measures and analyses

In the USUMA 2022 survey, the research team from Ulm included a question regarding experiences of ORA. This question followed the definition criteria provided by the professional committee ‘Expert Group for Sexualized Violence in Organized and Ritual Structures’ at the German Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women, and Youth (Igney & Kreyerhoff, 2018). Participants were presented with a multiple-choice format featuring the four aspects of the definition, as well as the options “none” and “no specification” (see also Fig. 1).

The question was implemented again in 2023. However, as a first question, participants were asked in the USUMA 2023 survey in a direct and straightforward inquiry: “Did you experience organized sexual and/or ritual violence during your childhood?” Respondents could choose from “yes”, “no”, or “I cannot/do not want to answer this” (see Fig. 2).

Additionally, the 2023 survey included supplementary questions about the perpetrators, offenses, and any other potential victims. The number of perpetrators and presence of other victims was inquired. It was surveyed which (pseudo-)ideology was used to justify or rationalize the violence, or was incorporated in individual aspects, giving multiple choice options of Christian ideology, Satanism, fascism, mythologies, Buddhism, esoteric, and/or other ideologies. The number of perpetrators, as well as other victimized children and/or adolescents, was surveyed. The main perpetrators were surveyed with answer possibilities including family of origin (e.g., father, mother, uncle, aunt), people from the social environment (e.g., neighbor, acquaintances of parents), people from a facility attended (e.g., kindergarten, institution, church). The strategies of the perpetrators were questioned using multiple choice options including administration of alcohol/drugs, use of weapons/use of objects as weapons, forced co-perpetration (i.e., being forced to exert violence and thus becoming co-perpetrators), torture/sadism, intimidation/threats/blackmail, stalking/pursuit, instrumentalized emotional attention (e.g., affection, praise, appreciation), instrumentalized material attention (e.g., gifts, outings). The type of experienced violence was assessed with multiple choices such as physical violence (e.g., hitting, kicking), severe physical violence/torture (e.g., using tools), emotional violence (e.g., ignoring, insulting), severe emotional violence (e.g., locking someone alone in a dark room), sexualized violence, emotional neglect, physical neglect. Moreover, it was asked whether and in what form digital media were used, with response options including networking of perpetrators, creation of image/video material, sharing of image/video material, trafficking of children for violence/abuse, sale of image/video material, establishing contact with victims (“grooming”), stalking/pursuit of victims, threatening/blackmailing victims. Another question asked whether one was passed on to other adults for money as a child and subjected to violence.

Did you experience violence in your childhood in which...

- ... severe sexual violence was systematically used, possibly in combination with physical and psychological violence?.....
- ... several perpetrators or perpetrator networks worked together?.....
- ... commercial exploitation, e. g. forced prostitution with so-called child or violent pornography?.....
- ... an ideology was used to provide a rationale or justification for the violence?.....

-- Or --

- None.....
- Not specified.....

Fig. 1. Question on experiences of ORA following the definition of the expert group.

Did you experience organized sexual and/or ritual violence in your childhood?

Yes.....

No.....

I cannot/do not want to answer.....

Fig. 2. Additional question that was presented in USUMA 2023.

All analyses were carried out using SPSS version 25, and frequencies of organized sexualized and ritual abuse were determined through descriptive analyses. For group comparisons, Mann-Whitney-U and Chi<sup>2</sup> tests were conducted.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Sample

In 2022, the sample included a total of 2522 participants, with 1246 (50.1 %) females, and an average age of  $M = 49.3$  ( $SD = 17.7$ ) years. In 2023, the sample comprised 2515 participants, with 52.7 % being female, and one person identifying as diverse. The average age was  $M = 49.9$  ( $SD = 17.8$ ) years, with the youngest participant aged 16 and the oldest 93. The vast majority of participants of both surveys were German citizens, about half had a full-time job and were married (see Table 1).

#### 3.2. Frequencies

In the survey of 2022, 2360 (93.6 %) participants answered the question on experiences of ORA with “none”, while 131 (5.2 %)

**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic data of the samples.

	2022 N (%)	2023 N (%)
Age		
Mean (SD)	49.3 (17.7)	49.9 (17.8)
Range	16–96	16–93
Gender		
Female	1264 (50.1 %)	1325 (52.7 %)
Male	1254 (49.7 %)	1189 (47.3 %)
Diverse	4 (0.2 %)	1 (<0.1 %)
Family status		
Married, living w/ partner	1165 (46.2 %)	1094 (43.6 %)
Married, not living w/ partner	41 (1.6 %)	43 (1.7 %)
Single	736 (29.2 %)	757 (30.1 %)
Divorced or widowed	578 (20.1 %)	617 (24.6 %)
Citizenship		
German	2431 (96.4 %)	2391 (96.1 %)
Occupational status		
Full-time	1224 (48.7 %)	1172 (46.8 %)
Part-time	304 (12.1 %)	310 (12.4 %)
Hourly	61 (2.4 %)	60 (2.4 %)
Federal volunteer service/parental leave	20 (0.8 %)	21 (0.8 %)
Unemployed	100 (4.0 %)	105 (4.2 %)
Retiree	607 (24.2 %)	647 (25.8 %)
Homemaker	56 (2.2 %)	52 (2.1 %)
In training	30 (1.2 %)	32 (1.3 %)
Student	109 (4.3 %)	107 (4.3 %)

indicated “no specification”. A total of 31 participants confirmed at least one of the aspects of the definition (multiple answers were possible). Less than one percent of the responses related to each of the four aspects of the definition of the expert group (see Table 2).

In the representative sample of 2023, a total of 13 participants (0.5 %) confirmed having experienced ORA in childhood in response to the direct question. Moreover, 46 (1.8 %) could not or did not want to answer this question. Group comparisons between those who affirm the direct question about ORA and those who deny it show no gender differences ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.475, p = .225$ ), no significant age differences ( $U = 11,356.5, Z = -1.792, p = .073$ ), and no influence of church affiliation ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.005, p = .946$ ). Furthermore, none of the self-identified victims of ORA has undergone therapy so far.

About 1 % or less of the responses related to each of the four aspects of the definition of the expert group (see Table 2).

There are only slight overlaps between the group which affirmed experiencing ORA based on the direct question and the group fulfilling the experience of ORA according to the definition provided by professionals. Among the 13 individuals who affirmed the direct question, only one person meets the criteria for organized sexualized violence, none for ritual abuse, and six individuals affirming only one aspect of the definition. Among the 2453 individuals who denied the direct question, five still reported violence justified by an ideology, three individuals met the criteria for organized sexualized violence, and one person met the criteria for ritual abuse.

As multiple responses were possible, descriptive numbers were evaluated based on participant and response combinations (see Table 3). Singular aspects of the definition were reported by <1 % of the participants. Organized sexualized abuse, according to the definition of the expert group, was reported by one person in 2022 and by 4 (0.2 %) individuals in 2023. Ritual abuse, also in line with the expert group’s definition, was reported by one person each year. Three of the four individuals meeting the criteria for organized sexualized abuse as well as the person meeting the criteria for ritual abuse, responded “no” to the direct question on experiences of ORA. This is notable, considering that the question was phrased to encompass experiences of organized sexualized abuse and/or ritual abuse.

### 3.3. Perpetrators and offense characteristics

The participants of the survey who had either answered affirmatively to the question “Did you experience organized sexual and/or ritual violence in your childhood?” or affirmed experiencing any of four aspects of the definition of ORA by the expert group were further questioned about the experienced violence. Among the participants who reported that ideology was used to justify violence against them ( $n = 11$ ), Christian (pseudo)ideologies were particularly frequent ( $n = 10$ ). A total of 33 participants answered the question regarding the number of perpetrators, with approximately half of them ( $n = 17$ ) reporting the involvement of two perpetrators. Furthermore, participants in the survey were questioned about the presence of other victims. Out of the 35 participants who responded to this question, more than half reported either no other victims ( $n = 9$ ) or a group of one to five other victims ( $n = 11$ ). When asked about the primary perpetrators ( $N = 35$ ), two major groups emerged. On one hand, family members (e. g., father, mother, uncle, aunt) were frequently mentioned ( $n = 14$ ), and on the other hand, individuals from attended institutions (e. g., kindergarten, care facility, church) were cited by a substantial number of participants ( $n = 19$ ). A total of 35 participants answered questions of perpetrator strategies. The most common perpetrator strategy involved intimidating/threatening and blackmailing the victims ( $n = 21$ ). Additionally, instrumentalized emotional affection (such as affection, praise, appreciation) and instrumentalized material favors (such as gifts and outings) were also frequently reported strategies, with each mentioned by 14 individuals. Participants were queried about the specific forms of violence they had experienced. Of the 34 individuals who provided an answer to this question, half of them ( $n = 19$ ) reported experiencing sexual violence. The majority reported experiencing emotional violence ( $n = 21$ ), such as ignoring or insulting. The vast majority of respondents ( $n = 22$ ) indicated that no digital media was used. Commercial sexual abuse, i. e. “selling” children for abuse, was reported by two individuals, while four others could not recall. For further details, see Table 4.

**Table 2**  
Frequencies of answers in both surveys, reported in both absolute numbers and percentages.

	2022	2023
	N (%)	N (%)
Did you experience organized sexual and/or ritual violence in your childhood?		
Yes	NA	13 (0.5)
No	NA	2453 (97.5)
I cannot/do not want to answer	NA	46 (1.8)
Did you experience violence in your childhood in which...		
(1) ...severe sexual violence was systematically used, possibly in combination with physical and psychological violence?	16 (0.6)	27 (1.1)
(2) ...several perpetrators or perpetrator networks worked together?	7 (0.3)	6 (0.2)
(3) ...commercial exploitation, e. g. forced prostitution with so-called child or violent pornography?	2 (0.1)	4 (0.2)
(4) ...an ideology was used to provide a rationale or justification for the violence?	11 (0.4)	11 (0.4)
Not specified	131 (5.2)	NA

Note. Multiple answers were possible for the second question. Percentages are based on total numbers of responses, not based on total number of responding participants. NA = not available.

**Table 3**  
Answers given itemized by aspects of ORA based on the definitions by the expert group.

Itemized aspects of ORA	2022 N (%)	2023 N (%)
Only systematic severe sexualized use of violence	12 (0.4)	19 (0.8)
Only collaboration of several perpetrators	5 (0.2)	1 (0.0)
Only commercial sexual exploitation	2 (0.1)	1 (0.0)
Only presence of an ideology	8 (0.3)	7 (0.3)
Systematic severe sexualized violence, commercial sexual exploitation	0	1 (0.0)
Systematic severe sexualized violence, presence of an ideology	2 (0.0)	2 (0.1)
Commercial sexual exploitation, presence of an ideology	0	1 (0.0)
Systematic severe sexualized violence, collaboration of several perpetrators = <b>organized sexualized abuse</b>	1 (0.0)	4 (0.2)
Systematic severe sexualized violence, collaboration of several perpetrators, commercial sexual exploitation, presence of an ideology = <b>ritual abuse</b>	1 (0.0)	1 (0.0)

*Note.* In the USUMA 2023 survey, respondents had the option to choose “I do not know” as an answer. A total of 39 participants (1.6 %) provided this response to at least one of the questions; these answers have been excluded from the analysis. ORA = organized sexualized and ritual abuse.

#### 4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the frequencies of ORA in Germany based on two representative datasets of the German population. Results indicate 0.5 % or less of the participants affirmed experiences of ORA. The findings also reveal fewer individuals met the respective aspects of ORA, according to the definition of the expert group for sexualized violence in organized and ritual structures (Igney & Kreyerhoff, 2018), than individuals stating the experience when directly asked about experiences of ORG. Moreover, the group affirming the direct question and the group meeting (at least a single) criteria of the definition overlap only slightly. The results regarding perpetrator and offense characteristics mainly indicate the use of Christian ideology, with two perpetrators mainly from an institutional context and one to five victims. Findings also indicate multiple strategies and types of violence being used by the perpetrators, and rather no use of digital media or involvement of monetary payment.

Our frequency estimates are in significant contrast to previous studies, where much higher numbers were reported based on victim and professional surveys (Briere, 1988; Kownatzki et al., 2012; McClellan et al., 1995; Ost et al., 2013). Previous studies describing up to 28 % of professionals reported experiences with cases of ritual abuse (McMinn & Wade, 1995; Schmuttermaier & Veno, 1999). Furthermore, high numbers are observed in Germany among inquiry samples of contact points or help lines. While the telephonic contact point of Germany’s first Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues, documented a total of fifty cases of ritual abuse (1 % of all victims of sexual abuse contacting them between 2010 and 2011) (Fegert et al., 2013), the help line berta, being specifically initiated in 2019 for victims of ORA, has received over 200 calls per month in the first two years since its establishment. Previous literature as well as inquiry samples of the helping system suggest significantly higher numbers of ORA as can be found in the two representative samples in the present study. The present analyses indicated only a slight overlap between the group of self-identified victims of ORA and the group meeting at least one aspect of the definition. Therefore, it remains unclear how participants who answered “yes” to the direct question about ORA define ORA or what kind of violence they have experienced. The previously mentioned issue of lacking conceptual clarity becomes evident, making it challenging to assume comparability between studies and figures at this point. Besides self-identification of participants or patients, a perception bias of professionals could have an effect on numbers of studies or inquiry samples of the support system. Previous literature has described that religious belief (McMinn & Wade, 1995) as well as training on the topic of ritual abuse (Schmuttermaier & Veno, 1999) seem to affect the numbers of cases of ritual abuse that professionals deal with. This suggests that reasons behind these changes in estimates after training or due to religion should be investigated. For one reason professionals being more sensitive to the type of violence might rather believe victims when talking about these experiences. Another reason for the different perception on ritual violence, especially after training, might however be believing in conspiracy theories and the suggestion of false memories to patients and clients. The initially quoted study from Switzerland also highlights the influences of conspiracy narratives within the framework being applied in the context of therapies at a clinic could not be ruled out (Seifritz, 2023).

Varying figures of the mentioned studies could be due to different definitions and operationalizations used (for a discussion see Gerke et al., 2024). The definition to capture the current state of a definition in a representative sample used in the present study can be seen as the current status quo in Germany. However, problems arose in the use: The definition does not sufficiently differentiate organized sexualized abuse from commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (also refer to Gerke et al., 2024). Moreover, organized and ritual abuse are only distinguished by one criterion which is the use of a (pseudo)ideology. The criterion with the presence of an ideology might not be specified sufficiently, as there were five participants affirming the presence of an ideology, however, negating the direct question on the experience of ORA. Research has not yet sufficiently described whether the use of a (pseudo)ideology should rather be seen as a perpetrator strategy (Salter, 2012) than as part of a description of a type of violence.

In the first survey in 2022, a relatively large number of participants responded to the nested question about experiencing organized sexualized and ritual violence with “not specified”. It cannot be traced anymore whether the individuals did not want to say anything about it or whether they simply wanted to negate an experience of the aspects described above. In the second survey, one year later, a simple question about the experience was added to ensure that the query was not too complex. This led to a decrease in the number of individuals who did not answer the question, while the number of those affirming the experience of ORA increased for the short

**Table 4**  
Perpetrators and offense characteristics.

	<i>n</i>
<i>(Pseudo-)ideology (multiple answers possible) (N = 11)</i>	
Christian	10
Satanism	1
Fascism	1
Esoteric	1
Other	1
I do not know	1
<i>Number of perpetrators (N = 33)</i>	
2	17
3–5	6
6–10	0
11–20	0
More than 20	0
I do not know	10
<i>Presence of other victims (N = 35)</i>	
None	9
1–5	11
6–10	4
11–20	2
More than 20	0
I do not know	9
<i>Primary perpetrators (multiple answers possible) (N = 35)</i>	
Family of origin	14
Social environment	10
Facility attended	9
Unknown perpetrators	0
I do not know	2
<i>Strategies of the perpetrators (multiple answers possible) (N = 35)</i>	
Administration of alcohol/drugs	9
Use of weapons/use of objects as weapons	1
Forced co-perpetration	5
Torture/sadism	3
Intimidation/threats/blackmail	21
Stalking/pursuit	8
Instrumentalized emotional attention	14
Instrumentalized material attention	14
Cannot/do not want to answer	3
<i>Type of experienced violence (multiple answers possible) (N = 34)</i>	
Physical violence	13
Severe physical violence/torture	2
Emotional violence	21
Severe emotional violence	8
Sexualized violence	19
Emotional neglect	11
Physical neglect	1
<i>Use of digital media (multiple answers possible) (N = 34)</i>	
Networking of perpetrators	3
Creation of image/video material	4
Sharing of image/video material	3
Trafficking of children for violence/abuse	2
Sale of image/video material	3
Establishing contact with victims (“grooming”)	2
Stalking/pursuit of victims	2
Threatening/blackmailing victims	1
No use of digital media	22
I do not know	7
<i>Exploited sexually for monetary payment (N = 35)</i>	

(continued on next page)



Table 4 (continued)

	<i>n</i>
Yes	2
No	29
I do not know	4

question. This numerical shift may indicate the nested question was too complicated to answer in the first questionnaire being used, leading many participants to choose “not specified”. However, it could also mean many individuals would describe an experience of ORA and thus self-identify as a victim of ORA, who would not meet the criteria of the expert group’s definition. As our results showed, the groups of self-identified victims and those meeting at least one criterion of the definition did only overlap slightly. Some individuals still chose not to respond to the shortened question about experiencing ORA, either. These individuals may have experienced violence but are uncertain about categorizing it accordingly. It is also possible they have had an experience of ORA but fear mentioning it in a questionnaire. Such fear may arise from (conspiracy) beliefs in an all-encompassing perpetrator network. QAnon as a conspiracy belief (e. g., [Jensen & Kane, 2021](#)) has demonstrated its close association with other narratives, such as allegations of pedophile networks or satanic abuse. The roots of QAnon itself can be traced back to far-right networks and online platform and messaging use such as 4chan and Telegram. Further research should investigate how the occurrence of these discussions on online platforms is connected to the societal perceptions of ritual violence and filter bubbles of victims of abuse and certain therapists.

Participants who affirmed any aspect in the question about ORA were queried about offense and perpetrator aspects. The responses show a clear resemblance to other forms of sexualized violence, such as child sexual abuse in familial or institutional context (e. g., [Fegert et al., 2013](#)). The most frequently mentioned ideology used to justify the violence was Christianity, which leaves open the possibility that victims of sexualized violence in a church context identified with this question. Additionally, the fact that only two perpetrators were most frequently mentioned, and no or only few other victims, suggests this may not be sufficiently differentiated from other types of multi- or co-perpetrator abuse (e. g., [Cockbain et al., 2014](#)). Very few participants did mention offense and perpetrator characteristics matching those often described in the context of ORA (e. g., [Nick et al., 2018](#); [Young et al., 1991](#)), such as groups of more than three perpetrators, large groups of victims, forced perpetration, torture and sadism, commercial sexual abuse (use of digital media, monetary payment) and severe emotional violence, such as being locked in a dark room.

#### 4.1. Implications

In Germany, there is currently a highly polarized and emotionally charged discussion about ORA, particularly concerning ritual violence or ritual aspects of ORA. Over the past year, there have been newspaper articles both from supporters of victims who criticize the lack of belief in their experiences and from journalists placing conspiracy narrative aspects within the context of the ritual abuse narrative. A similar situation is observed in the scientific debate, with two sides presenting opposing arguments. The present study and its findings clearly highlight a problem of the current debate: the phenomenon of ORA is not adequately described, involving individuals with very heterogeneous experiences who themselves identify with it. Additionally, self-identified victims differ from those who meet the criteria of the currently used definition in Germany. This study aims to contribute an objective to the discussion. It emphasizes currently having a significant variance in individual understanding of this phenomenon, and only a small number of individuals identifying with the phenomenon according to the definition.

While it is important to take all reports of abuse seriously and thoroughly investigate them, it is also crucial to approach such claims with a critical and evidence-based perspective. This study suggests that claims of ORA are relatively rare in the general population in Germany, and the frequency of such experiences should be considered in the context of broader patterns within child abuse. In this context, knowledge and consideration of conspiracy narratives is especially important. Those can be particularly entangled with the topic of ritual violence. Likewise, the discussions on ritual violence in online social networks like Instagram tend to use certain codes or appear in online threads on the issue of the diagnosis DID. Researching those discourses poses a computational challenge as so far, an automated monitoring of narratives that uses special linguistic codes is not possible. Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a huge challenge when it comes to the quantity and personalization of mis- and disinformation. At the same time, AI techniques can contribute to the detection and visualization of disinformation. In future research, we aim to refine the style-based detection of mis- and disinformation by leveraging pre-trained language models (PLMs). We will focus on analyzing inputs from social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube and Telegram. Our methodology will involve the fine-tuning of PLMs with additional layers dedicated to classification tasks. For processing inputs which translate to other German datasets, our approach will encompass two prospective methods: the first will entail the fine-tuning of a language model which has been pre-trained with original German input, known as German BERT. The second method will explore the translation of German input into English, using a neutral translation approach, followed by the fine-tuning of an English PLM. We anticipate that the translation-based method may yield superior results in the near future, as it capitalizes on the extensive training of PLMs in English and the greater availability of English language models. This direction holds promise for enhancing the accuracy and reliability of detection of certain codes and stylistic expressions used in the multilingual contexts of online social networks. Training a large language model to identify the codes and stereotypical statements used in online social networks and matching this data with routine medical data sets, e. g. on diagnoses like DID, would be beneficial to see how the online discourse might shape certain diagnoses. How large language models must be trained for identifying stereotypical statements not explicitly being mentioned, could become focus of further interdisciplinary research projects that try to match data of online social networks with routine medical data sets, e. g. on diagnoses like DID, and those of large panel studies, like the one

presented here. This could allow robust investigations of possible links between conspiracy theories such as QAnon and expanding discourses and controversies on ritual violence.

In addition to future research projects on the influence of bubbles containing therapists or victim organizations on the spread of conspiracy theories, further research should include qualitative interviews with individuals who have been suggested pseudo-memories in specific treatment settings within psychotherapy. Other research ideas encompass the criminological analysis of court records and police investigations in cases where no resolution was reached or where practitioners were reported for malpractice. Moreover, there is a need for extensive research on organized sexual exploitation online, given its significant financial implications within the realm of criminal activities.

#### 4.2. Strengths and limitations

The study has notable strengths enhancing the robustness and credibility of its findings. Firstly, the utilization of representative datasets from two separate years, 2022 and 2023, offers a comprehensive perspective on the frequency of ORA within the German population. The large sample sizes in both years, comprising over 2500 participants each, significantly bolster the statistical power and generalizability of the study's results.

This is the first study determining the frequency of ORA in a representative German sample. Using a similar methodology and sample size, extensive findings were obtained for the dark figure of child sexual abuse in Germany (Gerke et al., 2020, 2021; Witt et al., 2017; Witt et al., 2019). There were variations in the numbers depending on the data collection instrument. However, similar frequency rates for a phenomenon were determined. The instrument used here to assess experiences of violence has proven its worth and has been published in numerous peer-reviewed publications (ibid).

A limitation of the study could be the alignment with the definition of the expert's group. The nested question of the aspects of the definition were quite complex, such that participants might not have been able to understand and identify with it. A second survey with an easier direct question on experiences of violence resulted in less participants who could not answer the item, while frequencies of ORA increased. A more specific focus on the difference between organized sexualized versus ritual violence could have been an improvement for the study and should be considered for further inquiries. The common mention and inquiry of ORA should be considered as another limitation. Previous literature on the topic (Salter, 2012) and a recently written short review article (Gerke et al., 2024) suggest that these forms of violence should be viewed separately.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that claims of ORA are rare in the general population in Germany. Moreover, the phenomenon of ORA has great variance in its individual understanding. A group of self-identified victims of ORA differs from a group of participants meeting the criteria of the definition of ORA. These findings underscore the importance of approaching such claims with a critical and evidence-based perspective while also emphasizing the need for continued research on the frequency and nature of child sexual abuse in its most extreme forms. To examine a possible link to conspiracy theories, like QAnon, further research should include computational research approaches to create a dataset on ritual violence discussions in online social networks and messaging services, in order to better understand the context of potentially enhancing or even generating therapeutic and counseling requests.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Jelena Gerke:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jonas Fegert:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation. **Miriam Rassenhofer:** Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Jörg M. Fegert:** Supervision, Project administration, Conceptualization.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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