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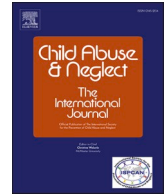
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## “What does that mean?”: The content validity of the ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool - Child version (ICAST-C) in Romania, South Africa, and the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool (Children’s Version), known as the ICAST-C Version 3, is used widely to assess violence against children, but there is limited psychometric evidence, especially on content validity.

**Objective:** This study aimed to assess the content validity of the ICAST-C with adolescents in Romania, South Africa, and the Philippines.

**Methods:** A purposive sample of adolescents ( $N = 53$ , 51 % female) were recruited from urban areas in Romania, the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, and Metro Manila, Philippines. Semi-structured one-on-one in-depth cognitive interviews sought adolescent perspectives on the relevance, comprehensibility, and comprehensiveness of the ICAST-C. Data were analysed using template analysis.

**Results:** The ICAST-C was broadly perceived to be relevant and comprehensive in measuring violence against children in all study locations. However, there were issues with the comprehensibility of the measure, described at three levels: interpreting items, undertaking coherent elaborations of relevant behaviors and places, and generating a coherent response to the questions.

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*Conclusions:* Suggestions to revise the ICAST-C include, among others, adding a practice or how-to section on answering the survey, clarifying the intent of questions, especially on neglect and sexual abuse, emphasizing that questions cover all locations, and asking more positive questions. Pilot studies testing the content validity and cultural appropriateness are needed as a matter of practice in large self-report surveys.

## 1. Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is a significant global public health issue, with adverse effects on children, families, and society (Fang et al., 2016; Fry et al., 2017; Hillis et al., 2016; Hillis et al., 2017). A public health approach to VAC prevention necessitates rigorous ways of measuring and tracking this phenomenon (Mian & Collin-Vézina, 2017). While VAC is a 'hidden' phenomenon and the invisible nature of violence is well-recognised (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), it can be monitored by conducting representative population-based surveys, sentinel surveys (surveys that collect data from professionals working with children in community and government organisations) and agency reports (administrative data on actual or suspected child maltreatment and deaths due to child maltreatment) (Jud et al., 2016; Meinck et al., 2016). Each of these methods has its own biases. For example, agency reports and sentinel surveys provide useful information on the most vulnerable populations and services accessed, but are affected by bias due to underreporting (Maier et al., 2013; Meinck et al., 2016). Self-report population surveys are affected by recall bias (Cutajar et al., 2010) and may use inconsistent definitions and timescales which make them difficult to compare (Greene & Herzberg, 2014).

Population-based surveys are also not immune to underreporting of violence. Higher levels of violence are reported when questions are framed around behaviors (Veenema et al., 2015) and asked directly to the target population, instead of informants (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Despite these limitations, population-based surveys are valuable in ascertaining accurate rates of a 'hidden' phenomenon like violence, as they typically ask questions of a representative sample of the population to understand their experiences. Prevalence estimates of child maltreatment in the Netherlands showed that prevalence of child maltreatment through self-report surveys were nearly five times higher than estimates through sentinel and child protective services reports (Euser et al., 2013). Adolescents are an ideal age group as they can self-complete questionnaires and share their experiences of violence; school-going adolescents aged 13 and over may be particularly feasible to recruit (Meinck et al., 2016).

Population-based surveys have been conducted more regularly in recent years, with a recent review identifying 30 such studies in 22 countries (Mathews et al., 2020). Moreover, there is no universally accepted measure for violence against children; the best way to evaluate a measure is to assess its psychometric properties (Bailhache et al., 2013). The Consensus-based Standards for the selection of health status Measurement Instruments Checklist (COSMIN) taxonomy highlights content validity as one of ten key psychometric criteria for an instrument (Mokkink et al., 2010; Prinsen et al., 2018). Content validity is defined as the degree to which the content of a patient-reported outcome measure adequately reflects the construct (Mokkink et al., 2010). It is considered to be the primary measurement property as it assesses whether the measure is *relevant, comprehensive, and comprehensible* to the target population and underpins many of the other psychometric properties such as reliability, validity, and internal consistency (Terwee et al., 2018).

The content validity of a VAC measure is rarely reported. In two systematic reviews, content validity was assessed in 10 out of 124 studies of child self-report measures (Meinck et al., 2022), and in 12 out of 288 studies on retrospective adult self-report measures (Steele et al., 2022, forthcoming). In a review of 15 caregiver-report measures, no measure received high-quality ratings for all three aspects of content validity: relevance, comprehensiveness, and comprehensibility (Yoon et al., 2020). Further, in-depth qualitative methods are seldom used to assess content validity, yet are the most appropriate for this (Terwee et al., 2018). Content validity may be particularly important to assess among adolescent populations given developmental issues such as language, cognition, and diverse experiences (Sawyer et al., 2018). Thus, there is a critical gap on the content validity of violence self-report measures, and the use of qualitative methods to investigate it. Both these gaps are concerning as content validity is considered to be the most important measurement property (Terwee et al., 2018).

The current study takes a step towards addressing these gaps in the evidence. It aims to examine the content validity of a self-report measure on VAC and understand the issues and processes of such validity. COSMIN guidelines assess content validity using in-depth qualitative methods (such as focus groups or individual interviews) with the target population, asking about their individual views on different dimensions. Interviews should be conducted by trained interviewers using a topic guide, recorded and transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a recognised approach (Terwee et al., 2018). For comprehensibility, participants should be asked about the instructions, items, response options, and recall periods. Cognitive interviews are considered to be the best method for assessing the content validity of measures (Terwee et al., 2018). In this study, we tested the content validity of the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool Children's Version 3 (ICAST-C) with adolescents in Romania, South Africa, and the Philippines (Zolotor et al., 2009).

The ICAST-C assesses physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, as well as some items on exposure to domestic violence and community violence (Zolotor et al., 2009). The ICAST-C was initially designed as two separate instruments: the ICAST-CI (institutional version) and the ICAST-CH (home version) which were revised and combined to develop the ICAST-C in 2015. Initial ICAST tools were developed by expert groups and a subsequent Delphi process (Runyan et al., 2009). The ICAST instruments developed questions based on common legal, research, and programmatic definitions of child abuse and neglect (Zolotor et al., 2009). Since its release, the ICAST-C has been used in multiple countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe (Meinck et al., 2022). Psychometric and field testing carried out with the first version of the ICAST, namely ICAST-CI (used in institutions) and ICAST-CH (used in homes) revealed

that reliability was good to very good (Cronbach's alpha 0.72–0.86) for physical, emotional, sexual violence and neglect in the home and school environment, and in the fair range for exposure to domestic violence (Cronbach's alpha 0.69) (Zolotor et al., 2009). When tested for measurement invariance across nine Balkan countries, the ICAST-C showed good cross-cultural validity for physical, psychological, and sexual violence, neglect and witnessing violence (Meinck et al., 2020). A recently developed version of the ICAST for use in trials (ICAST-Trial) is now available, and showed stable factor structure and acceptable reliability (Meinck et al., 2018). We selected the ICAST-C as it has been, and is currently used, in surveys in several countries, it is a non-commercialised measure that is relatively easily available, and measures lifetime and past-year experiences of different types of VAC.

Our objectives were to: 1) examine the content validity of a self-report measure on violence against children (in this case, using the ICAST-C Version 3 as the exemplar); 2) assess the different dimensions of content validity (i.e., relevance, comprehensibility, and comprehensiveness) and unpack any issues of the measure related to such domains; and 3) generate recommendations for using the ICAST-C with adolescents.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sampling and participant recruitment

This was a multi-country study conducted in urban areas in Romania, the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, and Metro Manila, Philippines. These specific contexts were chosen due to high prevalence of VAC (Nikolaidis et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2016; Ward et al., 2018), and social, cultural, and geographical differences. In addition, the ICAST-C (or another version such as the ICAST-Trial) had been used in a previous survey in these countries which allowed the sampling of research-exposed adolescents. Purposive sampling was used to recruit young people in the early (10–14 years) and middle (14–17) stages of adolescence, both male and female participants, and research-exposed (i.e., participants who had answered the ICAST-C in the past) and non-research-exposed (i.e., participants who had not answered the ICAST-C or a similar measure in the past) adolescents. We theorized that previous exposure to the measure may impact on participant views of content validity and therefore accounted for this in the sample. Research-exposed participants in South Africa were recruited via the Parenting for Lifelong Health Teen study (Cluver et al., 2018), and from the Parenting for Lifelong Health for Teens study in the Philippines (Alampay et al., 2018). Recruiting research-exposed participants in Romania was not possible as the previous study sample had been fully anonymised. Non-research-exposed participants in all contexts were recruited through community networks to identify local contacts such as community workers, building managers, and head teachers who introduced families to researchers.

### 2.2. Procedures

The study received ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh (Ref 1725/2018), Babeş-Bolyai University (No. 18.082/2018), University of Cape Town (PSY201–063/2018), and Ateneo de Manila University (AdMUREC\_18\_129/2019). Written informed consent was obtained from both adolescents and their caregivers, with detailed protocols developed for distress and disclosures. Face-to-face semi-structured cognitive interviews (Collins, 2016) in private locations, and art activities, were used to understand adolescents' perceptions of the ICAST-C. The emphasis was on the relevance and comprehensibility dimensions of content validity.

Cognitive interviewing helps unpack whether participants understand survey questions in the intended way, are able to recall relevant information, and fit their experiences within the response options provided (Collins, 2015; Willis, 2005). It is similar in structure to an in-depth qualitative interview but uses techniques such as 'think aloud' and verbal probing. Participants were observed while they completed the survey; they were asked to 'think aloud', i.e., to share their reactions and thought processes as they answered the questions, and asked specific questions about their interpretation of items and process of recalling and responding to specific items (Ardenne & Collins, 2015). These latter techniques preserve the feeling of answering a survey without interruptions. Art activities included giving participants pens, colors, and emoji stickers to change the ICAST-C in whatever way they wished to, and colored drawing sheets to draw their experience of the ICAST-C. Beyond standard interviews, simple visual tasks and arts-based methods help include wider domains of experiences, and encourage thinking in non-standard ways, which may be neglected otherwise (Bagnoli, 2009). Researchers employed a semi-structured approach to probing and used both scripted and spontaneous probes (Ardenne & Collins, 2015).

In a typical interview, participants first answered the ICAST-C on their own. Then, the interviewer conducted the cognitive interview, after which participants completed the art activity. In all contexts, two interviewers conducted interviews, all of whom were trained in cognitive interviews and spoke the local languages. Some interviews in South Africa were conducted in English where this was preferred by participants. Participants predominantly answered the ICAST-C in their local languages, but some participants in South Africa preferred to answer in English. Participants took 15–45 min to complete the ICAST-C and interviews lasted between 20 and 70 min. Participants received a Certificate of Recognition along with specific appreciation payments in each context: a stationery set (Romania); a hamper with food and household items (South Africa); and gift checks for a local supermarket and canned food items (Philippines).

#### 2.2.1. Measure and materials

The ICAST-C (3rd version) released in 2015 (Zolotor et al., 2009) assesses physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, as well as some items on exposure to domestic violence and community violence. We modified the ICAST-C (3rd version) by removing some items from the following sections: social and demographic questions (13 items removed, 3 items retained), physical

and emotional abuse (14 items removed, 26 items retained), and participants' opinions of the questionnaire (6 items removed, as these topics were covered in detail during the cognitive interview). We modified these to make the ICAST-C shorter and quicker to complete and therefore reduce participant burden.

All study materials including the ICAST-C were translated into the relevant local languages: Romanian (Romania), isiXhosa (South Africa), and Tagalog (commonly known as Filipino) (Philippines). Members of the study team in Romania, South Africa, and the Philippines, all of whom were Masters-level qualified psychologists or had prior experience in research on violence, HIV/AIDS, or sexual health with adolescents, translated the ICAST-C into local languages. Researchers then discussed the translation with each other and resolved disagreements through consensus.

### 2.2.2. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and translated verbatim from the local language to English, with identifying information removed. Translation was carried out by the research staff in individual countries to achieve methodological rigor as they were skilled and experienced with the languages and research topic, as well as familiar with the interview data. All de-identified transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software Quirkos (Quirkos, 2021) and analysed using template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015).

Template analysis is a type of thematic analysis which uses hierarchical coding and balances structure with flexibility in data analysis. An important feature of template analysis is to develop a coding template based on a subset of data, which is then applied to the rest of the data, refined and modified as analysis progresses. Template analysis supports developing a priori themes at the start of data analysis (King & Brooks, 2016). We chose to use template analysis as its feature of an initial coding template fit the phased collection of data. Its use of a priori or early themes was also appealing as this suited the defined nature of our research questions and the categories that were likely to be generated from the data (we note that these early themes were only an initial framing and were revised numerous times as analysis progressed).

We pooled data from the different contexts, instead of analysing separately by context, and in doing so, considered the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. We were aware that analysing data separately may have yielded more contextualised insights due to the differences between the contexts. However, we ultimately decided to pool the data as our focus was on assessing content validity across, rather than in, contexts, and we were interested in generating comparable insights on content validity domains. As we did not want to lose context-specific findings, we have additionally highlighted where findings only apply in particular contexts.

All data sources were integrated, i.e., all interviews, drawings which used words, and filled-in ICAST-C forms were transcribed, translated, and assembled in one location for each participant. Where drawings did not use text, their meanings as described by participants in the interview were also added to their transcript. Then, the lead author (LN) read the transcripts in their entirety and developed *a priori* themes, some of which were derived from the transcripts, and others derived from the Question Appraisal System, a framework to aid in the systematic appraisal of survey questions (Willis & Lessler, 1999). The lead author then conducted line-by-line coding of a subset of transcripts to identify emerging codes. A second researcher (ML) double coded a random subset of transcripts. A codebook was then developed, which was continually refined and updated during data analysis. The codebook was amended iteratively throughout analysis, and we also subsumed interrelated codes into sub-themes and themes as analysis proceeded. Where applicable, we used existing frameworks to organise findings e.g., we classified issues with clarity according to the information processing model developed by Karabenick et al. (2007).

### 2.2.3. Rigor

The three data sources - interviews, their modifications of the ICAST-C, and individual drawings – allowed for triangulation of data, which in turn enhanced credibility of the research (Madill et al., 2000; Mays & Pope, 2000). In addition, researchers summarized the main points emerging from the interview to the participants shortly afterwards to validate interview data. Moreover, to ensure dependability of findings generated, a clear audit trail documented the research process at every step, including decisions made in the analysis and interpretation of data (Nowell et al., 2017).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Sample characteristics

Our total sample comprised of 53 adolescents aged 10–17 years, with 17 participants in Romania, 20 participants in South Africa,

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics ( $N = 53$ ).

|                 |                      | Romania  | South Africa | Philippines | Total    |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------|--------------|-------------|----------|
| Age             | 10–14 years          | $N = 12$ | $N = 10$     | $N = 8$     | $N = 30$ |
|                 | 15–17 years          | $N = 5$  | $N = 10$     | $N = 8$     | $N = 23$ |
| Gender          | Male                 | $N = 8$  | $N = 10$     | $N = 8$     | $N = 26$ |
|                 | Female               | $N = 9$  | $N = 10$     | $N = 8$     | $N = 27$ |
| Research status | Non-research-exposed | $N = 17$ | $N = 12$     | $N = 9$     | $N = 38$ |
|                 | Research-exposed     | $N = 0$  | $N = 8$      | $N = 7$     | $N = 15$ |
|                 | Total                | $N = 17$ | $N = 20$     | $N = 16$    |          |

and 16 participants in the Philippines. Among these, 38 participants were non-research-exposed and 15 participants were research-exposed. Participants were between 10 and 17 years of age, with approximately 51 % female and 49 % male participants. Detailed sample characteristics are provided in Table 1.

### 3.2. Findings

Findings are presented under three overarching themes which represent the domains of content validity discussed above, namely the comprehensibility, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the measure. Participants initially evaluated the ICAST-C highly on all content validity domains, but on further probing, shared important issues pertaining to the comprehensibility of the measure. See Fig. 1 for a diagrammatic representation of findings.

In discussing findings, we observed if a particular finding was reflected in one or more key sub-groups of interest, such as age, gender, research exposure status, and location. By doing so, we intend to convey that such a finding is especially relevant for such sub-groups, and additionally, such a finding is not especially reflected or concentrated in any other sub-group. We also note that due to the semi-structured and participant-centred nature of cognitive interviews, observing that a finding was particularly reflected in a sub-group does not necessarily mean that other sub-groups had contrasting findings.

#### 3.2.1. Initial impressions

Most participants initially expressed positive overall views on the ICAST-C. These evaluations were found across the sample, among different ages, genders, and research-exposure status in all contexts. When initially asked about their view on the measure as a whole, participants said the following: “It’s fine” (PH\_P6); “I’m okay with it” (PH\_P15); “It was nice” (RO\_P3); “It was a new and pleasant

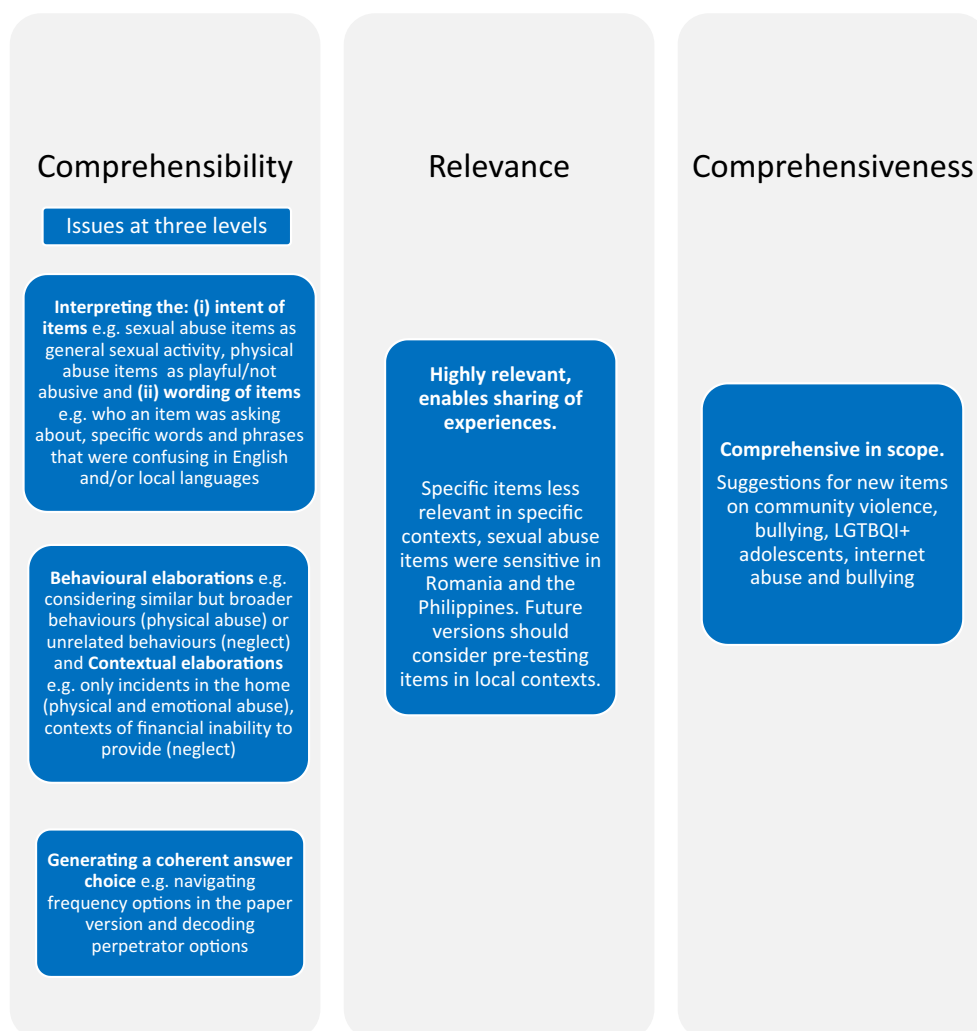


Fig. 1. Content Validity of the ICAST-C.



experience” (RO\_P6); “It was nice. I enjoyed it” (SA\_P1); and “It was good, and I enjoyed it” (SA\_P11). We also assessed overall views on the comprehensibility of the ICAST-C. Most participants noted that the ICAST-C was easy to understand, clear, and they faced no particular difficulties in comprehending the items with the following observations: “I understood everything.” (PH\_P9); “It was pretty easy. There was not anything that made it very difficult” (RO\_P2); and “The questions look understandable and they sound good to me.” (SA\_P10). However, upon further probing, participants shared issues with specific domains of content validity which are detailed below.

### 3.2.2. Comprehensibility

Comprehensibility means that the items should be understood by the target population as intended (Terwee et al., 2018). Probing identified issues in clarity at three interrelated stages of information processing developed by Karabenick et al. (2007): item interpretation (ascertaining the range of acceptable interpretations of the item), coherent elaborations (range of memories about experiences, thoughts, and perceptions), and coherent answer choice (selecting responses consistent with elaborations).

### 3.3. Item interpretation

Participants in the Philippines interpreted the intent of items on sexual abuse as enquiring about sexual activities in general, and not as enquiring about *forced* sexual activities. As a female participant in the Philippines stated:

Interviewer: Okay. What did you feel when you were asked about the sexual abuse? When you were reading the questions?

Participant: I felt embarrassed because there are questions that are lewd for me.

Interviewer: Why did you feel embarrassed?

Participant: I felt embarrassed because when I read it, I have not yet experienced some of them so what will I answer there?” (Philippines, female participant PH\_P3)

Difficulties in discerning the intent of items was present even when the wording itself was interpreted correctly, such as a participant in South Africa who suggested that the ICAST-C could be modified to include questions on rape. This participant was able to interpret the wording of item O8a (Forced you to have sex or tried to have sex with you when you did not want them to?) but did not consider that the intent of the item was to enquire about instances of rape. Other challenges with discerning the intent of items extended to items on physical abuse, which were perceived as not abusive or otherwise playful, and items on positive caregiving, which were considered manipulative or simply unfamiliar, such as the item D8a (Gave you a reward for behaving well?).

Several participants noted that across sections, it was difficult to understand the wording of items e.g., understanding whose experiences items were asking about. This is because items on the ICAST-C are phrased to center the abusive or neglectful behaviors. For instance, the item D1a (Shouted, yelled, or screamed at you very loudly?) asks about a behavior without explicitly stating who it is referring to, although it is implicit that the item is asking if anyone had shouted, yelled, or screamed at [the participant] very loudly. Other words and phrases that were confusing, included the following: shook, buttocks, reward, choked, burned/scalded, embarrassed, and withheld a meal as punishment. Younger adolescent participants also reported they found the sexual abuse questions difficult to understand. Both these findings were because questions did not translate well for the adolescent (especially younger adolescent) population in these contexts.

### 3.4. Coherent elaborations

We identified issues in participants undertaking coherent elaborations, specifically: behavior elaborations (thinking about behaviors relevant to a question) and context elaborations (thinking about places or contexts relevant to a question) (Karabenick et al., 2007). Participants frequently recalled behaviors similar to or broader than those referenced in the item. Less frequently, they also thought about behaviors that were unrelated to what was being asked in the question. Across countries, this was present especially on items measuring physical abuse. For instance, with items measuring hitting and slapping, participants articulated that they thought more broadly of whether they “got hurt” and otherwise felt that these items were repetitive, because their ultimate objective was to assess if the participants were hurt or injured.

A few participants in Romania and the Philippines also elaborated on behaviors unrelated to the behaviors mentioned in the items. This was noticeable in items on neglect, where participants considered item N2a (You had to wear clothes that were dirty, torn, or inappropriate for the season), and spoke of situations where children were forced into begging (as they may have interpreted references to dirty or torn clothes as referring to forced begging). Similarly, when considering items N5a (You did not feel cared for) and N6a (You were made to feel unimportant), participants considered instances of peer exclusion and conflict, as opposed to neglectful behaviors exhibited by caregivers. As a participant said: “Not paying attention to me and saying to a lot of people (something I said), saying something personal to another friend. For example, if I say, ‘I like that boy’, she goes and tells him and then never speaks to me again” (Romania, female participant RO\_P9).

There were distinct trends when undertaking context elaborations, present among participants of varied ages, gender, location, and research exposure status. When answering items on physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, participants perceived these items to be predominantly asking about behaviors which happened in the home, even though they were intended to cover other contexts such as schools: “So for the whole questionnaire I thought about family, what happened in the family” (Romania, female participant RO\_P7). This was also observed when participants suggested that the ICAST-C could be modified to ask about instances of bullying or peer



victimisation that happened in school contexts (which the ICAST-C does formally cover, in asking about perpetrators both inside and outside the home). A participant in the Philippines noted:

“As you can see, the items are focused within the family setting, about parents. If you are being hit by your parents, being disciplined at home by your mother, are you being hit. Because these things do not only happen within the home environment. Actually, during my elementary days, I was able to experience those kinds of punishments like being hit by your teacher if you do not have any homework. So perhaps, it is needed to be added especially that the cover of your research is [children aged] 10-17, this age group are still students, so they are most likely experiencing these things.” (Philippines, male participant PH\_P1)

Participants interpreted items on neglect as referring to families facing a financial inability to provide, situations of poverty, or other unrelated behaviors in schools. This was predominantly so in Romania, but also (though less frequently) in South Africa and the Philippines. Participants also considered behaviors in school, such as when they did not receive enough to eat at school with reference to item N1a (You did not get enough to eat (went hungry) and/or drink (were thirsty)?) and when they experienced social exclusion and peer conflict, with reference to items N5a (You did not feel cared for?) and N6a (You were made to feel unimportant?).

### 3.5. Coherent answer choice

A fundamental issue with using the paper version of the ICAST-C is the confusion participants faced in navigating the layout and figuring out how the response options at the top of the page applied to questions on the ICAST-C. Participants, especially in South Africa and the Philippines, were particularly confused about how the two rows of frequency options – one referencing options such as once a week, several times a month, and the other mentioning frequencies such as >50 times, 13–50 times – were meant to function together. While most participants deduced this after answering a few questions, others did not, and devised their own system of answering the ICAST-C. For instance, participants in South Africa sometimes answered by saying “hayi” (no) or “ewe” (yes) to record that they had or had not experienced a particular behavior. As one participant reflected: “What does that mean? I didn’t understand that question. I just said it never happened in my life” (South Africa, female participant SA\_P2).

Moreover, participants across all contexts highlighted either on the ICAST-C or in their interviews, that they wanted to say that certain items were “not applicable” to them, but they felt that none of the responses afforded this option. Despite the presence of ‘No answer’ or ‘Never in my life’ options, participants explicitly wanted to be able to say that a particular item or a set of items was “not applicable” to them.

Finally, there were issues in decoding the perpetrator options, which was particularly reflected among female participants. Here, participants had difficulty interpreting that a ‘b’ item asking about perpetrators was a logical follow-up to the ‘a’ item which asks about behaviors. Participants sometimes selected perpetrators for a behavior they had not experienced or neglected to choose a perpetrator for a behavior they had experienced: “At the beginning, I thought if I answer A, I should also answer B” (Philippines, female participant PH\_P8). They were also not confident that they could choose multiple perpetrators (the ICAST-C allows for this) and otherwise felt the perpetrator options did not necessarily help them link their internal response to the options presented in the ICAST-C. As the perpetrator options did not contain examples – say for adult female to have examples like a teacher, relative – to contextualise categories of people, participants sometimes only considered family members and could not efficiently link the options to their life experiences: “And here instead of man/woman it would be more relevant to say colleague, professor...because a man can be your father or your teacher and there are some questions which can be about school life but also home life” (Romania, male participant RO\_P2).

#### 3.5.1. Relevance

Relevance means that all items in the measure should be relevant for the construct of interest within a specific population and context (Terwee et al., 2018). Participants across all sub-groups perceived the ICAST-C to be broadly relevant to their lives and experiences. Participants also highlighted several reasons why the ICAST-C was relevant for other adolescents, such as the measure affording an opportunity to share experiences, for other adolescents to receive help, and be offered help if they needed it. As a participant noted “the questions speak about youth and everything that is happening in our community” (South Africa, female participant SA\_P1). The view that the ICAST-C was a relevant measure was observed not only in interviews conducted with participants but also in the frequent use of happy and laughing-faced emoji stickers they used in the ICAST-C forms.

However, participants highlighted issues with the relevance of items, especially in the context they were in. For instance, in Romania, participants highlighted some items they felt were less relevant, namely: D10a (Threatened to invoke harmful people, ghosts or evil spirits against you?), D18a (Pinched you to cause pain?), and O2b (If yes, was this because you were living where there was a war?). As some participants noted: “For example, here - Threatened to invoke harmful people, ghosts or evil spirits against you? It took me a while to figure out what this question meant and then I thought if something like that happened to me before or not” (Romania, female participant RO\_P13), and “...There were those about the war, and that is not so relevant in our country because we are not in a war. But in Syria, for example, it might be important. So, it does not seem to be adapted for Romania” (Romania, female participant RO\_P5). In South Africa, one participant highlighted item D9a (Locked you out of the home?) as not being relevant: “Also, this one is not specific. I think it should say when someone locks you out at night because it not safe at night but during the day it is fine, I see no problem with it” (South Africa, female participant SA\_P1) and item D2a (Cursed you?): “I didn’t like...the question on cursing, I didn’t think of it in a bad way. Like if my mum is making a joke with me, then she’ll like curse me in a funny way. I’ve been cursed a few times badly, but only like a few times” (South Africa, female participant SA\_P8).

### 3.5.2. Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness means that no key aspects of the construct should be missing (Terwee et al., 2018). Participants across contexts and age groups found the ICAST-C to be comprehensive in its scope and not missing any major constructs. The structure and order of items on the ICAST-C was also rated highly by participants, as they felt the questions were presented in a simple format, were organized into distinct sections, and in increasing order of difficulty. Despite this general view of the ICAST-C as a comprehensive measure, participants felt it could be enhanced and offered several suggestions for new items and sections on the ICAST-C. These suggestions included asking more questions on behaviors experienced by LGBTQI+ adolescents, experiences of street violence (emphasized to cover instances of community violence in the Philippines), and specific questions on bullying. Another suggestion to make the ICAST-C more comprehensive was to ask about abusive experiences on digital and social media platforms as well as the internet, including bullying occurring on such platforms.

Specific items for inclusion in the ICAST-C were also proposed, such as enquiring if caregivers neglected their children due to substance abuse issues, asking if adolescents had been forced to watch others having sex, how caregivers treated their children if they had a disease, if adolescents had been forced to stop going on holiday, if caregivers took their side in public, and if they had witnessed a neighbor or another adult dying by suicide. Another frequent suggestion was to include more questions on the ICAST-C that asked about positive experiences and including more positive content on the ICAST-C generally, such as asking adolescents about their aspirations and who their friends were. An information section on abuse and neglect, as well as additional space to write, were also additions adolescents felt were valuable.

### 3.6. Implementation of the ICAST-C

Most participants recommended that the ICAST-C should be asked to others, and they would also be willing to answer it again in the future. For participants predominantly in the Philippines and some participants in Romania, items on sexual abuse were also perceived to be sensitive (Romania, female participant RO\_P5: "It was kind of weird because...I do not like to think about stuff like that") and there were mixed views on including these.

Participants suggested that in future versions, the researcher should brief participants on the scope of sexual abuse questions, explain why they were being asked, and provide the space to ask questions beforehand (as was done in the present study). With these measures in place, participants felt that asking questions on sexual abuse was important as it helped adolescents disclose sexual abuse:

"Interviewer: Okay. Then, do you think these questions are supposed to be asked among children or teenagers? Questions like this?"

Participant: I guess, for me, yes in order to know our situation." (Philippines, male participant PH\_P6)

"I think it is okay to ask questions like these so that you know if there is someone abusing us." (Philippines, female participant PH\_P10)

"Interviewer: Why do you think it is important?"

Participant: Because there are kids that keep these things to themselves." (Romania, male participant RO\_P16).

With regard to mode of administration, participants most preferred answering a paper version of the ICAST-C, followed by a tablet, and finally, administered by an interviewer. These views were not concentrated within any age, gender, location, or research exposure sub-groups. While a few participants in Romania preferred phone administration, this was not widely endorsed in the sample. Reasons for preferring the paper were mainly driven by the belief that they could change their answers on paper while they may not be able to on a tablet. Those who preferred answering on a tablet cited its privacy and anonymity, as well as its general ease of use: "It could also work...I feel like in our generation, especially adolescents, when they see the paper, they can feel...because you completed a lot of questionnaires in school also...and that can be more formal. On a computer is a safer space because in the digital world you are anonymous very often..." (Romania, female participant RO\_P1). Participants who preferred the interviewer-administered version felt this could enable adolescents to share more information with an interviewer than via a questionnaire.

Adolescents were also asked about their preferred way of implementing the ICAST-C. Participants predominantly preferred integrating the ICAST-C with other surveys on health and education, because it allowed researchers to collect comprehensive information which would in turn protect and help children and adolescents and asking questions about other topics would also reduce the focus on violence: "It's better if it is included with questionnaires about family so it would lessen the focus on the questions about violence" (Philippines, female participant PH\_P10). A few participants preferred questions on violence be asked separately and not integrated, as this would entail lesser physical and cognitive effort: "Because...then it's not so difficult cause you get busy with one subject and you got another subject" (South Africa, female participant SA\_P2).

## 4. Discussion

This study examined the content validity of the ICAST-C using cognitive interviews with adolescents in Romania, South Africa, and the Philippines. Content validity is an important psychometric property comprising of three domains – relevance, comprehensibility, and comprehensiveness of the measure – and underpins many other psychometric properties. The present study found that the ICAST-C had partial content validity, with relevance and comprehensiveness rated highly by adolescents. While the ICAST-C was generally perceived to be comprehensible, we found issues with its comprehensibility which occurred at three levels: item interpretation,

coherent elaboration, and coherent answer choice (Karabenick et al., 2007). Adolescents otherwise perceived the ICAST-C to be relevant, complete, and well-structured.

Adolescents faced challenges in understanding the intent of items e.g., on sexual abuse, interpreting the wording of items and response options, behaviors, and phrases, and unpacking unfamiliar behaviors. Some participants in Romania and the Philippines found items on sexual abuse to be inappropriate due to the sensitive nature of these experiences. There were no significant differences in findings between research-exposed and non-research-exposed participants. However, all research-exposed participants who were approached agreed to participate and generally observed that their experiences were broadly similar on both occasions, with better clarity on tablets relative to paper versions.

While younger adolescents especially in Romania and the Philippines found the items on sexual abuse difficult to interpret or inappropriate, they faced no issues in interpreting items on other types of abuse and neglect. The sensitivity of sexual abuse items may be due to dominant cultural norms surrounding discussions around sex in the Philippines (Gipson et al., 2020; De Jose, 2013) and in Romania (Rada, 2014). This finding must be borne out by adolescent preferences in Romania and the Philippines who still felt questions on sexual abuse should be asked, and therefore, this can be managed by more careful pre-survey cognitive testing with adolescents of varied backgrounds in these countries to ensure appropriateness. Our findings on the variation in adolescent views in different countries highlights the importance of adapting measures for use in varied cultural contexts. Indeed, the ICAST manuals recommend qualitative adaptation for each setting to ensure that it is culturally appropriate and does not exclude types of violence that are common (ISPCAN, 2015). Cognitive interviews, of course, are highly useful to undertake pilot testing and adaptation of measures for this purpose.

#### 4.1. Recommendations

##### 4.1.1. Modify the ICAST-C based on content validity findings

Based on the findings generated in this study, we offer several suggestions for modifying the ICAST-C, summarized in Fig. 2. A marked-up version of the ICAST-C is provided in Appendix 1. It is clear from the comprehensibility challenges articulated by participants that they did not always read the introduction and instructions, or if they did, did not necessarily keep these in mind while they answered. We suggest that information in these sections may be broken up into smaller sections or otherwise made engaging, by presenting more visual aids, and how-to instructions.

A section describing how to answer the ICAST-C and offering participants a practice section may not only help familiarise participants with the topics covered but also help clarify the specifics of answering the ICAST-C. A practice section is also likely to be helpful in aiding participants remember the recall period covered by the questionnaire, with a reminder to this effect integrated into the practice section, e.g., what each frequency option refers to, and what time periods should be kept in mind. This section may also remind participants that they must consider all contexts while recalling behaviors, such as homes, schools, communities, and peer interactions. We clarify that many of these suggestions may apply more specifically to paper versions, as a tablet may be easier to navigate and reduce cognitive burden for adolescents. More recommendations for using the ICAST-C are provided in a marked-up

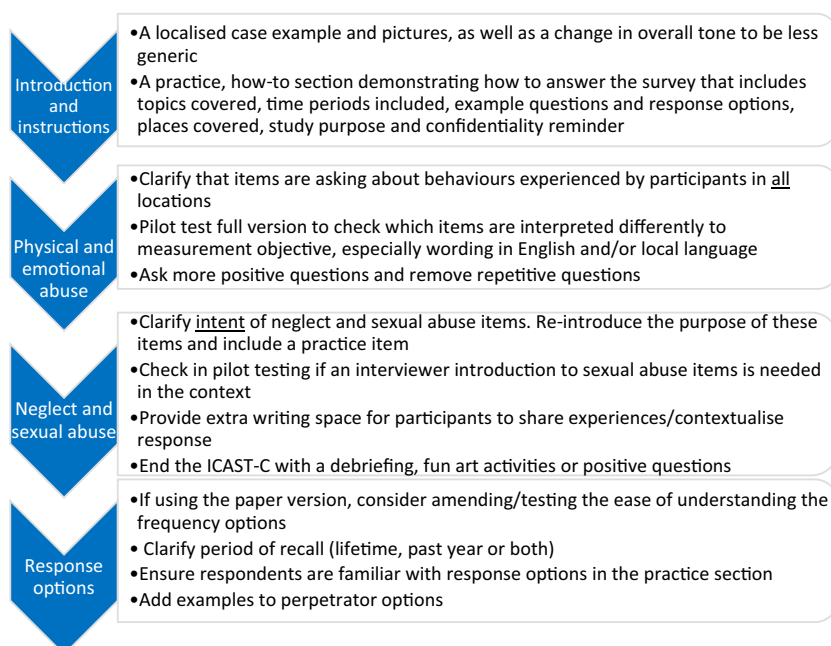


Fig. 2. Key suggested changes to the ICAST-C (version 3, 2015).

version in Appendix 1.

#### 4.1.2. Assess and report content validity routinely

These findings demonstrate the value of ascertaining content validity of self-report measures on VAC. In current psychometric literature on self-report measures used to assess violence against children, internal consistency and hypothesis testing analyses predominate (Meinck et al., 2022). There is relatively little focus on content validity, however our data suggest that testing this important property can yield valuable insights into fundamental issues as perceived by the target population of the measure, hence improving the quality of data collected (Olshansky et al., 2012). We hope that these findings encourage researchers to explore the content validity of violence self-report measures through cognitive interviews, in addition to other psychometric properties. Cognitive interviewing can be conducted as part of pilot studies before larger self-report surveys are undertaken and can help ensure that the measure is relevant, comprehensible, and comprehensive to adolescents. Moreover, findings from pilot studies are not commonly reported (Meinck et al., 2022). However, reporting them could generate a very helpful body of literature on this topic.

#### 4.1.3. Assess the effects of mode of administration

Given that the mode of administration significantly impacts on the comprehensibility of the ICAST-C, investigating which modes of administration work best among specific age and gender groups of adolescents in different contexts may be fruitful. Participants mostly preferred paper versions as they perceived they could change their answers more easily, compared to tablets and interviewer-administered versions. Some participants preferred an interviewer-administered version because participants wanted to provide more information than could be provided in a survey. In a previous nationally representative study of sexual violence among adolescents in South Africa, self-completed questionnaires yielded higher prevalence rates than interviewer-administered ones, suggesting that self-completion surveys could facilitate disclosure better, especially with boys (Ward et al., 2018). This finding was also reflected in household surveys in Indonesia (Rumble et al., 2018). Future studies which assess rates of disclosure and comprehensibility using multiple modes and with larger samples would be useful in enhancing our understanding of this complex topic.

#### 4.1.4. Explore comprehensiveness with target populations

We also recommend assessing the construct of comprehensiveness in future research. While the COSMIN standards define comprehensiveness as synonymous to completeness (Terwee et al., 2018) and this is how we tested it in this study, the comprehensiveness of a measure may also require measuring all relevant definitions of abuse and neglect. Early work in this field typically relied on validation of reports, opinion survey research, public perceptions (Giovannoni, 2010), and development of theoretical frameworks of abuse and neglect, such as the social and ecological model (Belsky, 1980) and the ecological transactional model (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). However, definitions and frameworks developed after consultation with children, adolescents, and caregivers are still lacking. Exploring these fundamental understandings of violence with key populations and integrating these meanings into self-report measures of violence may be hugely beneficial for future research in this field, as well as in developing more culturally sensitive measures. We found encouraging work in this direction such as a series of child-centred indicators for violence prevention in the Philippines (Third et al., 2020) and definitions of sexual abuse shared by mothers who had experienced child sexual abuse (Lange et al., 2020).

## 5. Strengths and limitations

This study is among the first to examine adolescent perspectives of the content validity of the ICAST-C using in-depth cognitive interviewing techniques. We explored detailed experiences of 53 adolescents from diverse geographic settings such as Romania, South Africa, and the Philippines. Despite some heterogeneity between adolescents on the basis of language and cultural context, we observed common themes on the relevance, comprehensibility, and comprehensiveness of the ICAST-C and presented differences where this was noted in the data. Other strategies to ensure rigor included triangulation of data, conducting the study in three contexts and using different data sources, providing an interim summary of interview data to participants to assess accuracy, and a clear audit trail.

Several limitations must be addressed when interpreting findings from this qualitative study. First, this study was conducted in three different contexts, with resultant differences in language, culture, social norms etc.; and the ICAST-C itself was translated into different languages, as were the interview questions. Despite a careful translation process, some issues with translation and language were observed during fieldwork. For example, in the Philippines an item which measured neglect (you had to wear clothes that were dirty, torn, or inappropriate for the season?) was difficult to translate as the weather in the Philippines does not change very much between seasons. Second, data collected in different contexts were pooled and analysed together to generate comparable insights rather than separately by context, which may have resulted in overlooking context-specific insights.

Third, the sample did not aim specifically to recruit adolescents with past experiences of violence, adolescents with disabilities, or those of low socioeconomic status, which has implications for the transferability of findings to other sub-groups of adolescents. We cannot comment on in-sample variation of socioeconomic status as we did not collect data on this point, apart from participants in the Philippines who were predominantly from low-income households. Fourth, interviewers asked questions in a participant-centred way using a semi-structured format, and therefore, the same probes were not used systematically across all participants. Finally, there are inherent limitations to self-reported data, such as social desirability bias. While interviewers made efforts to address this by saying to participants that there were no right or wrong answers, this limitation nevertheless must be kept in mind while interpreting findings.

## 6. Conclusion

This study makes important strides in understanding the complex processes of how adolescents interpret and view a self-report measure on violence against children. Our findings also report a neglected psychometric property, namely content validity, of the ICAST-C. We show how the ICAST-C is viewed as broadly relevant, comprehensible, and comprehensive by adolescents, but there are several issues in interpreting the intent and meaning of questions and response options, and considering relevant behaviors and contexts while answering the ICAST-C. These issues, in turn, impact responses adolescents share about their experiences of violence. We also demonstrate the utility and value of cognitive interviewing in pilot testing self-report measures to yield unique insights into how target populations perceive measures. These findings affirm the importance of assessing the content validity of self-report measures and reporting on findings to enable a proper understanding of the complex nature of measuring and understanding violence against children.

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## Declaration of competing interest

FM is an elected Board Member of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect which retains the rights to the ICAST child abuse measures.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105869>.

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