

Weighing in: Mock jury perceptions of male sexual assault victims

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For scenarios involving female victims of sexual violence, attractiveness and, more specifically, body weight seem to have an effect on perceptions of victims and perpetrators. As it is assumed that sexual victimisation is a result of sexual attraction to the victim by the perpetrator, female victims who are viewed as unattractive may not be seen as likely targets for victimisation. While this relationship holds true for women, higher weight men seem to be regarded the same as average weight men, potentially negating this effect of attractiveness observed in women. A sample of 186 participants from across Canada and the United States were recruited from social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. Using a mock jury paradigm, participants were asked to provide their judgements on a case involving a perpetrator (presented as either male or female) and a male victim (presented as either thin or overweight) and answer several standardised measures of prejudicial attitudes. Results indicate that there is no effect of victim weight or perpetrator gender for male victims of sexual violence. There were several differences based on participant gender indicating that men tend to hold more prejudicial attitudes and generally endorse more pro-perpetrator/anti-victim attitudes than women. These results suggest that victim weight is not a salient variable to consider with male victims of sexual violence and that higher weight men are perceived similarly to average weight men.

Keywords: male rape myths; male victims; prejudicial attitudes; sexual violence; victim weight

Research has shown that juries often use appearance to make a judgement on the defendant during trials (Maeder et al., 2015). Although some research has investigated the physical appearance of the perpetrator (Popovich et al., 1996; Winters, 2018), the majority of the literature has focused on victim characteristics – particularly female victims. For example, Callan et al. (2007) found that the death of an attractive woman was seen as more tragic and unfair than that of an unattractive woman. When examining the effect of victim attractiveness on a number of different crimes, it was found that, although there were no effects of victim attractiveness in mugging and robbery scenarios, the unattractive victim was viewed as more responsible for her own victimisation in a sexual assault scenario, providing support that sexually violent crimes are particularly susceptible to these effects (Seligman et al., 1977). Additionally, Gerdes et al. (1988) found that, in a sexual assault context, when the attractiveness of female victims was manipulated, attractive victims were assigned less blame in some contexts than those who were depicted as unattractive. While much of the general literature on appearance has been outmoded, this effect seems to be replicated in more recent literature looking at specific characteristics (Bell, 2013; Clarke & Lawson, 2009; Clarke & Stermac, 2011; Gotovac & Towson, 2015; Zidenberg et al., 2019) which will be examined in greater detail here.

The belief that sexual assault is a sexually motivated crime is further supported by the work of Ferguson et al. (1987) who found that providing information (i.e., a two-page description of power and anger as motivating factors) about the causes of sexual violence diminished the bias against victims. This effect of victim attractiveness seems to be particularly salient in cases of sexual assault, as a common assumption is that sexual assault is a crime motivated by sexual desire and, therefore, a woman must be sexually desirable in order to become a victim of sexual violence (Maeder et al., 2015). Less physically attractive women may be viewed as less sexually desirable, and therefore less likely to be viewed as a victim of a sexual crime. Because attractive women were viewed as provoking their victimisation – at least in part – unattractive victims are seen as more credible (Vrij & Firmin, 2001).

The findings in these studies may be explained by competing hypotheses regarding how victim attractiveness is perceived. First, the “beautiful is good” stereotype (Dion et al., 1972) posits that attractive people are more readily associated with socially desirable traits such as competence, intelligence, popularity, and social desirability (see Feingold, 1992; and Langlois et al., 2000 for further exploration of these traits). As per Callan and colleagues (2007), attractive victims are perceived as more deserving of justice and, in the context of sexual violence, victims are perceived as less responsible for their victimization, more honest, credible, and viewed less negatively overall than those who were unattractive (Deitz et al., 1984; Seligman et al., 1977; Thornton & Ryckman, 1983; Vrij & Firmin, 2001). On the other hand, given that sexual violence is often viewed as being motivated by sexual urges, it may be seen as something that attractive women should expect given their appearance or that they have brought upon themselves by provoking their assailants with their looks (Burt, 1998; Jacobson & Popovich, 1983). In this vein, attractive victims tend to be judged as more careless, provocative, and responsible for their own victimization (Calhoun et al., 1978; Jacobson & Popovich, 1983).

Although the effect of victim attractiveness has been tested fairly extensively among women, there is very little information available on the effects of victim attractiveness for men or gender diverse persons, particularly in cases of sexual violence. Most of the research that does exist relies heavily on the gender binary, with separate rape myth scales available for men and women. Indeed, until the latter half of 2021, there was no rape myth acceptance scale available that was not dependent on the binary (Johnson et al., 2021; Urban & Porras Pyland, 2021). Although the authors could not find any published research on the effects of victim attractiveness for male sexual assault victims, research in the domain of sexual harassment offers insight into the possible influence of victim attractiveness. LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) found that men perceived the situation as more harassing when the victim was unattractive while women saw the situation as more harassing when the victim was attractive. However, LaRocca and Kromrey (1999) mainly discuss their results in terms of the perpetrator and do not clearly indicate whether the effect observed for victims is for male and female victims or if there was a difference between the genders of the victim. Wuensch and Moore (2004)

later examined the effect of victim attractiveness on evaluations of male employee's allegations of sexual harassment against a female employee and found that there was an effect of victim attractiveness. Specifically, mock jurors were twice as likely to side with the victim and were more certain of the guilt of the female perpetrator when the male victim was presented as attractive. Wuensch and Moore (2004) indicate that their participants found it difficult to believe that a female employee would harass a physically unattractive male, causing the victim not to be believed. This lack of belief is not uncommon in the literature as it has been found that, more generally, male victims of sexual violence face a host of stereotypical beliefs about their victimization including that male victims of sexual violence have lost their manhood, that male victims of sexual violence perpetrated by other men must be gay, or that adult men cannot experience sexual violence at all (Donaldson, 1990; Melanson, 1998; Mezey & King, 1989; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992).

As noted above, the relationship between victim attractiveness and perceptions of the crime have not been tested extensively with male victims of sexual violence, as male victims of sexual assault are chronically understudied (Davies & Rogers, 2006). What we do know about male rape victims is that gay men are attributed more fault for their victimization than heterosexual men, potentially owing to homonegative attitudes and other masculine gender norms (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Additionally, male victims of female perpetrators face a host of deleterious beliefs about their victimisation including that it is impossible for a woman to rape a man, that they encouraged their own victimization, and that they derived pleasure from their assault (Davies & Rogers, 2006). These stereotypical beliefs, also referred to as rape myths (Burt, 1980), are fundamentally different from those that apply to female victims who tend to be viewed as provoking their own victimization through their appearance (Gerger et al., 2007; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, 1995; McMahan & Farmer, 2011; Payne et al., 1999).

Victim weight

Although there is a fairly substantial extant literature regarding victim attractiveness and perceptions of culpability for the sexual victimization of women, there is very little information regarding the effect of victim weight on perception of the victims of sexual assault; especially in cases with male victims. Victim weight is a very salient clue and an attribute that is routinely noted in the care of victims of sexual violence (Cybulska, 2013). The majority of explorations of victim attractiveness are based on physical attractiveness, often pictures of faces; however, these judgements can be quite subjective and culturally dependent, even when the photos have been pilot tested. Weight, on the other hand, may be one of the most objective and easily manipulated measures of attractiveness, as higher bodyweight is often conflated with unattractiveness in Western societies – particularly for women (Bordo, 2004; Nurka, 2014; Stearns, 2002; Zidenberg et al., 2019). Weight is often a less subjective variable as compared to general physical attractiveness. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the effects of victim weight on perceptions of a sexual assault victim.

Weight is often used as a basis for making evaluations on an individual's sexual attractiveness and interpersonal experiences – especially when the person is a woman – but this relationship does not seem to hold true for men. While higher weight women are seen as being less sexually attractive, skilled, warm, responsive, and experienced, higher weight men were seen as being highly similar to average-weight men in such attributes (Regan, 1996). The finding that having a heavier body weight is detrimental in person perception research applied to women, but not men, is evident across early adolescence (Acharya & Relajo, 2017; Chen & Brown, 2005; Pearce et al., 2002) and emerging adulthood (Sheets & Ajmire, 2005). These results indicate that higher weight men are not subjected to the same level of stigma experienced by higher weight women and, thus, are not subject to the exclusion and possible predation (e.g., hogging; Gailey & Prohaska, 2006) that women experience (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). Based on the consistent findings that higher weight men do not experience the same romantic or sexual stigma as higher weight women and the possible role of these negative attitudes, it stands to reason that there could be a similar association for male victims of sexual violence. Additionally, owing to the previously mentioned differences in rape myths, weight—and appearance more generally – may be less salient for male victims of sexual violence. In regard to higher weight women, there is an implicit assumption that higher weight women should be

appreciative of any sexual attention that they receive, no matter how unwanted or demeaning (Gailey & Prohaska, 2006; Zidenberg et al., 2019). Owing to male rape myths emphasizing that men always desire sexual contact (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Melanson, 1998), this stereotypical belief may extend to all men regardless of weight.

Over the past decade there have been several studies examining the association of victim weight with judgments of sexual assault scenarios (Bell, 2013; Clarke & Lawson, 2009; Clarke & Stermac, 2011; Gotovac & Towson, 2015; Zidenberg et al., 2019). The results of these studies are mixed and difficult to compare, especially given the disparate methodologies used across studies, but it does seem that weight emerges as a variable which may influence respondents' attributions of responsibility towards female victims. Results from earlier studies examining scenarios of physical coercion were mixed, with some of these studies indicating that higher levels of fault tend to be attributed to thin victims compared to their higher weight counterparts (Clarke & Lawson, 2009; Clarke & Stermac, 2011) while others have found no differences (Bell, 2013; Gotovac & Towson, 2015). In these studies, the scenario presented was very clearly an assault, leading participants to react favourably to the victim and attribute blame to the perpetrator, potentially obscuring any weight-related effects. More recently, researchers have attempted to use verbal coercion scenarios to examine the effect of weight (Zidenberg et al., 2019) as situations involving verbal coercion tend to be more ambiguous and participants may be more likely to rely on stereotypes to attribute blame and responsibility to the actors in the situation (Jacobson & Popovich, 1983). Results from Zidenberg et al. (2019) demonstrated that thin victims elicit more negative attitudes toward perpetrators, while more consideration is given to the perpetrator when the victim is higher weight, suggesting a belief that higher weight women should be appreciative of any sexual attention that they receive, so long as there is no clear indication of physical harm from the encounter (Zidenberg et al., 2019). Based on these lines of research, it seems clear that weight has at least some effect when examining attributions of blame in scenarios of sexual violence, although it is difficult to reach a consensus on the magnitude of the effect or to generalise these findings to male victims.

Current study

The aim of this study is add to the developing literature examining the effects of victim weight on perceptions of sexual violence; specifically, to examine the association between weight and perceptions of the perpetrator and victim when the victim is male. The results from this study can then be used to compare to the results of studies with female victims. As there is relatively little research into the effects of weight on perceptions of male victims in general, the current study is guided by the following exploratory research questions with accompanying sub-hypotheses where appropriate:

1. Does victim weight influence a mock juror's perceptions of blame and responsibility in a sexual assault vignette with a male victim?
 - a. There will be no effect of victim weight on perceptions of blame and responsibility in a sexual assault vignette with a male victim.
2. Are there any gender differences in perceptions of sexual assault?
 - a. Male participants will assign more blame to the victim and excuse the perpetrator's action more frequently than female participants.
 - b. Compared to female participants, male participants will assign more blame to the victim when the perpetrator is female than when the perpetrator is male.
3. Are antifat attitudes, male rape myth acceptance, hypermasculine beliefs, and/or homonegativity associated with perceptions of sexual assaults against men?
4. Is there a difference in perceptions of victims based on the gender of the perpetrator?
 - a. Participants will assign more blame to the victim of a female, vs a male, perpetrator.
 - b. Participants who have more homonegative attitudes will assign greater blame to victims of male perpetrators compared to those with less homonegative attitudes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited from social media using websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Two hundred eighty individuals responded to the survey, but 85 were excluded as they did not answer at least 95% of the questions. Ten additional participants were removed due to lack of consent, failing manipulation checks, or for indicating that they were under the age cut-off for the study. This resulted in a final sample of 186 participants. The majority of participants (64.7%) were from the United States. The mean age was 28.39 years ($SD = 11.11$; range: 18–78) and participants were primarily women (66.5%), heterosexual (65%), White (69.9%), had at least some university education (71%), resided in an urban locale (70.9%), and were liberal in political orientation (63.6%). The small number ($n = 7$) of participants of other genders precluded their inclusion in gender stratified analyses.

Measures

Mock police report. Participants were given a mock police report which described a fictitious, alleged sexual assault which took place between the victim, Christopher Steven Keenan, and the perpetrator in Toronto, Ontario, Canada (see Appendix A). Participants were presented with one of four possible vignettes. All information in the vignettes was the same with the exception of the gender of the perpetrator (the perpetrator was presented either as Michael or Hayley Paulson) and the weight of the victim (described as either being thin or overweight).

Judgements of the case. As Zidenberg et al. (2019) found support for the internal consistency of the scales created in Clarke and Stermac (2011; all α 's > 0.83), these scales were retained for the current study. All scaled questions were answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). Composite scales were created for Attributions of Victim Responsibility (4 items; range: 4 to 28), Attributions of Perpetrator Responsibility (Spearman-Brown coefficient = 0.87; 2 items; range: 2 to 14), Perpetrator Mitigating Factors (Spearman-Brown coefficient = 0.57 ; 2 items; range: 2 to 14), Sympathy Towards the Victim ($\alpha = 0.78$; range: 3 to 21), Sympathy Towards the Perpetrator (3 items; range: 3 to 21), Negative Affect Towards the Victim (3 items; range: 3 to 21), and Negative Affect Towards the Perpetrator (3 items; range: 3 to 21). As perpetrator responsibility and perpetrator mitigating factors were 2-item scales, Spearman-Brown coefficients were used to calculate internal consistency (Eisinga et al., 2013).

Male rape myth scale (MRMS). The MRMS is a 22-item self-report scale designed to assess participants' adherence to stereotypic beliefs about sexual violence perpetrated against male victims (Melanson, 1998). Participants rate their level of agreement on a 6-point Likert scale anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 6 (strongly agree). Scores on the MRMS ranged from 22 to 132 with higher scores indicating higher endorsement of rape myths. Sample items of the MRMS include: "It is a terrible experience for a man to be raped by a woman" and "the extent of a man's resistance should be a major factor in determining if he was raped."

Antifat attitude scale (AFAS). Participants were asked to complete the AFAS (Morrison & O'Connor, 1999) to assess their attitudes towards higher weight people. The AFAS is a 5-item scale anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Scores on the AFAS ranged from 5 to 25 with higher score indicating higher endorsement of antifat attitudes. Sample items include: "Fat people are less physically attractive than thin people" and "on average, fat people are lazier than thin people"

Modern homonegativity scale-Gay men (MHS-G). Participants were asked to complete the 12-item MHS-G (Morrison & Morrison, 2011) to assess their level of prejudice toward gay men. The MHS-G was presented as a 5-item Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

Scores on the MHS-G range from 12 to 60 with higher scores indicating greater prejudicial beliefs. Sample items include: “Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges” and “gay men seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals, and ignore the ways in which they are the same.”

Belief in a just world. Participants were asked to complete the General Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert et al., 1987). The General Belief in a Just World Scale is a six-item measure and was scored by participants using a 6-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 6 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicating more adherence to just-world beliefs. Just world beliefs are a cognitive bias that assumes that the world is a just place where individuals are always deserving of the treatment that they earn (Dalbert et al., 1987). Sample items include: “I think the world is a just place” and “I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve.”

Hypermasculine values questionnaire-short form (HVQ-S). The HVQ-S (Archer, 2010) is a 16-item scale rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale designed to measure participants’ endorsement of hypermasculine values. Scores on the HVQ-S ranged from 16 to 112 with higher scores indicating more endorsement of hypermasculine values. Sample items of the HVQ-S include: “Men who take part in yoga or ballet deserve to be ridiculed” and “real men don’t back away from barroom confrontations.”

Filler items. Participants were also presented with 10 filler questions in order to obscure the true purpose of the study. The filler questions were chosen by the first author and presented as one scale along with the items of the AFAS to participants, however, were not included in the analysis due to their irrelevance. Questions selected included items related to alcohol consumption (e.g., “I think that people have a right to drink if they want to”) and attachment (e.g., “It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others”).

Procedure

This study was reviewed and approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB #14,78) at the University of Saskatchewan. Participants were recruited from across Canada and the United States using advertisements on social media sources (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit). Advertisements did not mention victim appearance or weight and stated that participants would be asked to give their judgements of a sexual violence case. There was no compensation offered to participants in exchange for their participation. All participants completed the survey on an online platform and were randomly assigned to a condition. If they provided their consent to participate, participants were directed to imagine that they were selected as a jury member who would be deliberating on a case. Participants were given a mock police report to consider and then were asked to answer several questions about the case, to complete several standardised questionnaires, and to provide demographic details about themselves. Participants were then fully debriefed via an online debriefing form containing contact information for the research team and thanked for their participation.

Data analytic strategy

In order to answer our first research question regarding the effect of victim weight on attributions of blame and responsibility in a sexual assault vignette with a male vignette, our second question regarding gender differences in perceptions, and our fourth question on participant gender differences, a 2(victim gender) x 2(victim weight) x 2(participant gender) MANOVA was conducted to examine the main effects of these variables and any possible interaction effects. As past research (i.e., Clarke & Lawson, 2009; Zidenberg et al., 2019) has used similar approaches, this will allow for the results to be compared across studies. All of the data to be analysed for these questions was based on composited scales derived from Likert-type items and, therefore, were continuous and appropriate for inclusion in a MANOVA. MANOVA was selected in order to control for error and multiple comparisons (Olson, 1979). In order to answer our third question regarding the relationship between different prejudicial attitudes, correlations were calculated. As all of the measures of prejudicial attitudes were numerical and used continuous data, Pearson’s *r* was calculated to measure the

strength and direction of the correlations (Sedgwick, 2012). All analyses were completed using SPSS version 24.

RESULTS

Attitudinal correlates with perceptions of victims and perpetrators

Table 1 presents a correlation matrix of study variables, specifically, the attitudinal correlates with perceptions of victims and perpetrators. Several themes were evident. First, endorsement of male rape myths (MRMS) was positively correlated with victim culpability and negative affect toward the victim, and negatively correlated with sympathy toward the victim. Conversely, rape myth acceptance was associated with decreased perpetrator responsibility and negative affect toward the perpetrator, but positively associated with perpetrator sympathy and mitigating factors. All correlations were moderate to large in magnitude. Similar association directions and magnitudes were observed for hypermasculine values with respect to these victim and perpetrator variables; indeed, hypermasculine values and male rape myths were highly positively correlated ($r = .65, p < .001$). Second, a more complex pattern of associations emerged for antifat attitudes; specifically, antifat attitudes were positively correlated with victim responsibility and negatively correlated with both sympathy for the victim and attributions of perpetrator responsibility. Similarly, modern homonegativity was also moderately positively correlated with victim responsibility but, unlike antifat attitudes, it was also positively correlated with negative affect towards the victim. Modern homonegativity was negatively correlated with victim sympathy, perpetrator responsibility, and perpetrator negative affect. Just world belief was positively correlated with victim responsibility and negatively correlated with victim sympathy. Additionally, all measures of prejudicial attitudes (i.e., male rape myths, antifat attitudes, modern homonegativity, hypermasculine values, and just world beliefs) were positively intercorrelated. Patterns of correlations by conditions (i.e., thin and overweight) were similar.

Table 1
Correlation matrix of study variables

Variables	<i>n</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Responsibility of victim	–	–											
2. Sympathy for victim	183	–.506 [<.001]	–										
3. Negative affect for victim	182	.324 [<.001]	–.351 [<.001]	–									
4. Responsibility of perpetrator	183	–.546 [<.001]	.572 [<.001]	–.388 [<.001]	–								
5. Sympathy for perpetrator	181	.216 [.003]	–.220 [.003]	.406 [<.001]	–.243 [.001]	–							
6. Negative affect for perpetrator	179	–.285 [<.001]	.475 [<.001]	–.324 [<.001]	.390 [<.001]	–.137 [.069]	–						
7. Mitigating factors for perpetrator	183	.341 [<.001]	–.111 [.133]	.278 [<.001]	–.323 [<.001]	.329 [<.001]	–.143 [.055]	–					
8. Male rape myth acceptance	158	.660 [<.001]	–.486 [<.001]	.397 [<.001]	–.538 [<.001]	.290 [<.001]	–.299 [<.001]	.384 [<.001]	–				
9. Antifat attitudes	164	.281 [<.001]	–.167 [.032]	.060 [.445]	–.207 [.008]	–.083 [.292]	–.014 [.861]	.149 [.056]	.443 [<.001]	–			
10. Modern Homonegativity	153	.521 [<.001]	–.433 [<.001]	.191 [.018]	–.227 [.005]	.049 [.547]	–.227 [.005]	.078 [.335]	.573 [<.001]	.434 [<.001]	–		
11. Hypermasculine Values	154	.449 [<.001]	–.421 [<.001]	.278 [<.001]	–.415 [<.001]	.144 [.077]	–.300 [<.001]	.299 [<.001]	.645 [<.001]	.375 [<.001]	.620 [<.001]	–	
12. Just World Beliefs	160	.292 [<.001]	–.188 [.017]	–.065 [.417]	–.117 [.138]	–.046 [.567]	–.144 [.072]	.044 [.583]	.228 [.005]	.240 [.002]	.398 [<.001]	.261 [.001]	–

Note: Exact *p*–values in parentheses

Group comparisons by weight and gender

The means for all composite scales and measures of prejudicial attitudes are presented in Table 2. Based on a 2(victim gender) x 2(victim weight) x 2(participant gender) MANOVA, it was determined that there were no significant interactions for any of the dependent variables ($F_{(1,139)} = 1.06, p = .109$; all $ps > .087$). Additionally, there were no significant main effects for victim gender or victim weight. There was a significant main effect of participant gender for victim sympathy ($F_{(1,139)} = 4.14, p = .044$), perpetrator responsibility ($F_{(1,139)} = 4.10, p = .045$), perpetrator mitigating factors ($F_{(1,139)} = 12.09, p = .001$), victim sympathy ($F_{(1,139)} = 10.42, p = .002$), negative affect toward the victim ($F_{(1,139)} = 7.16, p = .009$), male rape myths ($F_{(1,139)} = 17.25, p < .001$), antifat attitudes ($F_{(1,139)} = 12.72, p = .001$), modern homonegativity ($F_{(1,139)} = 10.92, p = .001$), and hypermasculine values ($F_{(1,139)} = 13.34, p < .001$). Men had higher mean endorsement of victim responsibility, victim negative affect, perpetrator sympathy, perpetrator mitigating factors, male rape myths, antifat attitudes, modern homonegativity, and hypermasculine values. Women had higher mean endorsement of victim sympathy, and perpetrator responsibility.

Table 2
Group comparisons by victim weight, victim gender, and perpetrator gender on study variables

Variables	Weight condition					Perpetrator gender		Participant gender		
	α	Overall	Thin	Higher weight	$F; p$	Male	Female	Male	Female	$F; p$
Victim responsibility	0.88	5.78	5.41	6.23	2.51; 0.12	5.76	5.79	6.47	5.23	4.99; 0.03
Victim sympathy	0.78	16.01	16.29	15.66	1.13; 0.29	16.58	15.61	14.37	16.75	12.03; 0.001
Victim negative affect	0.91	5.37	5.31	5.43	0.04; 0.84	4.89	5.70	6.54	4.67	7.76; 0.006
Perpetrator responsibility	-	12.19	12.46	11.86	2.49; 0.12	12.58	11.92	11.20	12.56	8.71; 0.004
Perpetrator sympathy	0.88	5.42	5.60	5.20	0.56; 0.45	5.38	5.42	6.48	4.81	7.00; 0.009
Perpetrator negative affect	0.85	15.66	15.53	15.83	0.15; 0.70	16.29	15.23	14.24	16.60	7.27; 0.008
Perpetrator mitigating factors	-	2.96	2.94	2.95	0.01; 0.91	2.91	2.99	3.72	2.40	20.45; 0.000
Male rape myth acceptance	0.86	40.64	40.15	41.26	0.30; 0.58	39.63	41.38	47.86	38.13	20.77; 0.000
Antifat attitudes	0.82	11.24	10.82	11.80	2.07; 0.15	11.04	11.38	13.07	10.35	13.21; 0.000
Modern Homonegativity	0.93	24.34	24.47	24.17	0.03; 0.86	24.19	24.47	28.85	22.95	9.87; 0.002
Hypermasculine Values	0.82	32.66	32.17	33.30	0.43; 0.51	32.15	32.65	38.84	30.78	20.37; 0.000
Just World Beliefs	0.82	16.99	16.30	16.60	0.54; 0.46	17.27	16.99	17.63	17.04	0.31; 0.58

Table 3
Group Comparisons by Participant Sexual Orientation on Study Variables

Variables	Heterosexual	Other	F; p
Victim responsibility	6.04	4.64	10.54*; .001
Victim sympathy	15.50	17.38	9.91*; .002
Victim negative affect	5.49	4.75	1.30; .256
Perpetrator responsibility	11.86	12.85	6.44*; .012
Perpetrator sympathy	5.25	5.27	.001; .970
Perpetrator negative affect	15.05	17.57	12.06*; .048
Perpetrator mitigating factors	2.95	2.44	3.98*; .048
Male rape myth acceptance	42.86	36.96	7.81; .006
Antifat attitudes	11.65	9.98	5.36; .022
Modern Homonegativity	26.80	20.37	15.88*; <.001
Hypermasculine Values	35.19	28.15	16.70; <.001
Just World Beliefs	18.11	14.89	11.02; .001

*Welch's F

Comparison by sexuality

As seen in Table 3, there were some differences based on participant sexuality. Due to small sample sizes, participants were divided into those who identified as heterosexual ($n = 102$) and other ($n = 55$). The "other" category was comprised of individuals who identified as gay, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, and other. Heterosexual individuals had higher mean endorsement of victim responsibility (Welch's $F_{(1, 153.58)} = 10.54, p = .001$), perpetrator mitigating factors (Welch's $F_{(1, 145)} = 3.98, p = .048$), male rape myths ($F_{(1, 145)} = 7.81, p = .006$), antifat attitudes ($F_{(1, 154)} = 5.36, p < .001$), modern homonegativity (Welch's $F_{(1, 138.76)} = 15.88; p < .001$), hypermasculine values ($F_{(1, 149)} = 16.70, p < .001$), and just world beliefs ($F_{(1, 154)} = 11.02, p = .001$). Those in the "other" category had higher mean endorsement of victim sympathy (Welch's $F_{(1, 146.84)} = 9.91, p = .002$), perpetrator responsibility (Welch's $F_{(1, 147.48)} = 6.44, p = .012$), and negative affect toward the perpetrator (Welch's $F_{(1, 144.06)} = 12.06, p = .048$). There were no differences between groups for negative affect toward the victims or perpetrator sympathy (all $ps > .256$).

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the influence of prejudicial attitudes and victim body weight on perceptions of sexual coercion scenarios depicting male victims. This study was guided by four broad research questions with corresponding sub-hypotheses as outlined above. Results of this study indicate that, while there was no effect of victim weight on perceptions of perpetrators and victims of sexual assault with male victims, there were several differences based on participant gender. Compared to women, men held victims more responsible, had more negative affect towards the victim, more sympathy toward the perpetrator, endorsed mitigating factors for the perpetrator, and had more prejudicial attitudes (i.e., male rape myth acceptance, antifat attitudes, modern homonegativity, and hypermasculine attitudes) than women.

Victim weight effects

As predicted, there was no effect of victim weight on perceptions of perpetrators and victims of sexual assault with male victims. As previous research has found there to be some effect of weight when the victim was female (Bell, 2013; Clarke & Lawson, 2009; Clarke & Stermac, 2011; Gotovac & Towson, 2015; Zidenberg et al., 2019), this null finding for men is novel. While new, this finding is not unexpected as previous research has indicated that heavier bodyweight does not carry the same stigma for men as it does for women (Chen & Brown, 2005; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Pearce et al.,

2002; Regan, 1996; Sheets & Ajmere, 2005). As there was no significant difference between the men described as “thin” and those described as “overweight”, our results support the finding that higher weight men are regarded as highly similar to average weight men and not as a separate, lesser category as is generally the case with higher weight women (Regan, 1996). As previous research has demonstrated that negative attitudes and stigma regarding higher weight women (e.g., believing that higher weight women should be grateful for any sexual attention that they receive, as they are perceived to be less physically desirable; Zidenberg et al., 2019) seem to be driving the negative perceptions of higher weight women, weight would not and did not carry the same significance for male victims.

It is also important to note that the underlying assumptions and stereotypical beliefs, termed rape myths (Burt, 1980), about how women come to be assaulted are fundamentally different than those for men. For women, core rape myths include that the victim is to blame for their rape (i.e., that the victim provoked the attack by way of their appearance), that women make unfounded rape claims as retaliation against male partners, that the rape is caused by the uncontrolled sex drive of the male perpetrator, or that there is a typical (e.g., promiscuous, heavy-drinking) type of woman who gets assaulted (Gerger et al., 2007; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994,1995; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne et al., 1999). Male rape myths seem to focus less on the victim’s perceived desirability as a provoking factor and focus more on the notion that men who are raped are weak, secretly gay, or that they would enjoy any type of sexual contact even if it is unwanted (Melanson, 1998). As rape myths are often used by lay individuals to decide when an event should be deemed a “real” rape (Hockett et al., 2016), these gender differences may make appearance and weight a less salient variable when examining perceptions of male victims. While higher weight women might be expected to be appreciative of any sexual attention, no matter how wanted or demeaning that attention is (Gailey & Prohaska, 2006; Zidenberg et al., 2019), this stereotypical belief may actually apply to all men regardless of bodyweight based on typical male rape myths.

Gender and sexuality differences

While there were no mean differences of victim weight or perpetrator gender, there were several differences based on participant gender. Men held victims more responsible than women, had more negative affect towards the victim, more sympathy toward the perpetrator, endorsed mitigating factors for the perpetrator, and had more prejudicial attitudes (i.e., male rape myth acceptance, antifat attitudes, modern homonegativity, and hypermasculine attitudes) than women. Women had significantly higher means than men for both victim sympathy and perpetrator responsibility. The overall trend for these data is in line with our hypotheses and seems to indicate that men tend to hold more prejudicial attitudes and generally endorse more pro-perpetrator/anti-victim attitudes than women. This trend is a particularly robust finding in the literature on female victims of sexual violence (Zidenberg et al., 2019) and seems to translate to male victims as well.

A similar pattern was observed with heterosexual and “other” participants, where those individuals were heterosexual held the victim more responsible and endorsed more perpetrator mitigating factors and prejudicial beliefs. Contrastingly, participants in the “other” category expressed more sympathy towards the victim while holding the perpetrator responsible and holding more negative affect toward the perpetrator. These findings are in line with previous research that has found that individuals who are not heterosexual have lower levels of rape myth acceptance and blamed victims less (Davies & McCartney, 2003; Worthen, 2021). In the interpretation of these findings, it is important to note that multiple identities were collapsed into the other category, potentially limiting some of the nuances between the different groups included in the analysis (Parent et al., 2013). These results merit further exploration through carefully considered research designed to test these questions.

Associations of prejudicial beliefs

Based on the correlations, the overall trend reveals that individuals with higher endorsement of prejudicial attitudes tended to excuse the perpetrator while feeling more negatively towards the

victim. Additionally, all measures of prejudicial attitudes (i.e., male rape myths, antifat attitudes, modern homonegativity, hypermasculine values, and just world beliefs) were positively correlated with each other indicating that those individuals with high endorsement of one prejudicial attitude tended to have higher endorsement of other prejudicial attitudes. Despite the lack of significant mean differences, these findings are similar to those of perceptions of female victims where the same patterns of blame and excuses were observed (Zidenberg et al., 2019). This concurrence of results may indicate that, while the main effect of weight was not significant, prejudicial attitudes do seem to have an effect on perceptions of victims and perpetrators more generally.

Limitations and future directions

One of the main limitations of this study was the vignette used in this research. While an ambiguous situation of sexual violence was chosen for this study, the lack of detail included in the vignette could have had an impact on ecological validity of the scenario. In real world jury scenarios, the jurors would have been able to see the victim and to ascertain their weight as well. Moreover, the sample included in this study was demographically WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) which presents limitations with interpretability and generalisability (see Jones, 2010, and Henrich et al., 2010, for more information). Additionally, while this study did address male rape myths quantitatively, recent research indicates that there seems to be a shift towards more subtle expressions of these myths that are not quantifiable or currently captured in quantitative methods and suggest a shift towards more qualitative and mixed methods studies to accurately capture these constructs (Zidenberg et al., 2021). As male rape myths receive considerably less attention in the literature, it is impossible to determine whether a similar shift towards subtlety has occurred regarding male rape myths specifically. Furthermore, while the advertisements for the study explicitly welcomed individuals of all genders and sexual orientations, responses from transgender and non-binary persons were unfortunately low, which precluded separate stratified analyses with these groups. Future studies should attempt to carefully and purposively recruit individuals from these groups. Finally, the current study did not include a consideration of the participant's own perpetration history, so it was unclear if there would be any influence of perpetration history on the current results.

Although this study contributes greatly to an understudied area of research, there are many questions regarding the effect of victims' attractiveness and, more specifically, weight for male victims of sexual violence. The current study did not explore varying characteristics of the perpetrator, with the exception of gender, and only looked at differences for the victim. As many individuals assume that individuals of similar attractiveness enter into dating relationships (Feingold, 1992), participants may have made assumptions about the attractiveness and weight of the perpetrator given the lack of detail provided in the vignette. As men who are dating attractive women are perceived more favourably than those dating women deemed unattractive (Sigall & Landy, 1973), manipulating the weight of a female perpetrator might actually yield more differences than manipulating victim weight.

Additionally, while this study does provide much needed evidence for same-gender relationships, there are still large gaps in the current research landscape that the current paper is unable to fill. Rape myth acceptance scales use gendered language which assumes that the victim and perpetrator will be some combination of male and female, leaving individuals who do not fit into the gender binary excluded from the research. To the authors' knowledge, there are only two recently developed rape myth acceptance scales designed to capture the experiences of those outside of the binary (Johnson et al., 2021; Urban & Porras Pyland, 2021) and there is a dearth of research on the experiences of these groups in general. While these scales are a step in the right direction towards including the experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals, more research is needed to truly explore these groups and the unique issues and stigma that they may face. Finally, research into the potential shift towards a more subtle expression of rape myths through qualitative or mixed methods research could be undertaken. As evidence of this shift exists in the literature examining female rape myths (Zidenberg et al., 2021), there is reason to suspect that similar shifts may have occurred in regard to male rape myths.

Practice implications

The results of this paper bolster our understanding of how extra-legal factors (i.e., victim bodyweight) may impact perceptions of the victims of sexual crimes. These findings have important implications for educational programs (e.g., *Bringing in the Bystander*; Banyard et al., 2007) and legal contexts (e.g., jury and/or judicial decision making, see also Leverick, 2020). Additionally, given that weight is a commonly assessed victim characteristic in the aftermath of a sexual assault (Cybulska, 2013), these results could have important implications for individuals proceeding through both the criminal justice system and frontline services. Further, given that many victims of sexual violence tend to gain weight after an assault as part of the sequelae (Baldo et al., 1996; Pinhas-Hamiel, Modan-Moses et al., 2009; Root, 1991) and victim appearance is easily ascertainable, being aware of potential weight-related biases and how they may interact with gender is important for legal decision makers and mental health practitioners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate that, for male victims of sexual violence, there was no effect of victim weight or perpetrator gender. These results suggest that victim weight is not a salient variable to consider with male victims of sexual violence and that higher weight men are perceived similarly to average weight men. These results contribute to the literature on victim weight in cases of sexual violence and to the discussion of the consequences of weight stigma for men more generally (see Himmelstein et al., 2019 for more information).

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