Why didn't she fight back? An exploration of victim blaming through tonic immobility reactions to sexual violence.

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Abstract

Despite research showing that tonic immobility is the most common reaction to sexual violence, it is often misunderstood by some and disregarded by others. Research also indicates that holding prejudicial or false beliefs about victims can impact the judicial system, affecting reporting and conviction rates. This study explored rape myth acceptance and victim blaming in relation to victims' reactions to sexual violence. This was done through an online survey, utilising the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and featuring four vignette scenarios, producing both quantitative and qualitative data. The research showed that rape myths and victim blaming are linked phenomena, that there were distinct differences in the perceived blame and naturality assigned to victims based on how they reacted to sexual violence, and that tonic immobility was the least understood reaction to trauma. This research highlighted the continual presence of rape culture, through rape myths and victim blaming attitudes, and the need to educate the public on common reactions to sexual abuse, with the hope to improve the judicial system and make a positive impact on society.

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Introduction

This chapter aims to provide preliminary background information on the novel research, seeking to add all-important context on why the study is necessary and of value to the sexual violence field. The introduction will also include a rationale behind why the topic was chosen, a brief summary on the aims and objectives of this study and an overview on the structure of this paper.

Background

"There remains what seems like an impenetrable wall of silence around violence, and we must all play a role in breaking this silence."

- Reese Witherspoon, 2009

The full extent of violence against women is difficult to estimate as it continues to be under-reported and heavily stigmatised worldwide, meaning we are only grasping a fraction of the devastating reality for many survivors (EIGE, 2021). Research goes on to suggest that sexual abuse is one of the most prevalent crimes in today's society, yet conviction and reporting rates still remain far lower than any other crime (Rennison and Rand, 2003; Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005), creating an environment where perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions. Several studies within the field suggest that this is down to our deep-rooted rape culture which is preserved by the continual acceptance of rape myths, consequently generating victim blaming attitudes, preventing any universally effective solution to rape from emerging (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, 2005; Thacker, 2017; Ryan, 2019).

Rape culture is so embedded in society that it is even present in the judicial system, with studies showing overwhelming evidence of rape myths and victim blaming beliefs and attitudes amongst lawyer's, judges', and jurors' (Krahe *et al.,* 2008). Research into rape myths within the criminal justice system also incorporate the notion of "classic rapes" and "ideal victims", meaning the victim will be penalised if they do not fit inside the stereotypical definition of rape (Williams, 1984). Evidence goes on to indicate that they hold strong beliefs and expectations on how the victim should behave during an assault (Leverick, 2020), with many jurors stating that they believe a "genuine" victim would instinctively fight back (Ellison and Munro, 2009). This misperception directly impacts their judgement on the victim's credibility and endorses victim blaming, ultimately resulting in rape cases ruling in favour of alleged perpetrators (Krahe *et al.,* 2008). Therefore, it is vital to explore and research rape

myths and victim blaming attitudes in more detail, to educate the public and make society aware of the biases held by many, in the hope to make vital changes within our social environments and the judicial system. Through dispelling rape myths and ending victim blaming attitudes, this should in turn increase conviction and reporting rates, making important steps towards true justice for victims.

Aims and Objectives

Sexual violence is an important topic to research because the information gathered can help make crucial steps towards ending violence against women and achieving gender equality (CSEW, 2013). Gaining a comprehensive understanding on the global magnitude of all aspects of sexual abuse, including the endorsement of rape myths and victim blaming that continue to preserve the epidemic of abuse (WHO, 2002), means we can exonerate the shame and guilt many survivors experience and prevent future gender-based violence. Therefore, this study aims to research rape myths in more detail, whilst also exploring victim blaming in relation to how survivors react to sexual abuse. The objective of this research is to gain a greater understanding on whether individuals assign more blame to victims who suffer tonic immobility in comparison to other natural responses to violence and whether rape myths influence an individuals' victim blaming attitudes, with the hope to add knowledge to the field.

Researcher's Rationale

As a professional working within the sexual violence field, I believe it is vital to actively be trying to prevent future abuse from happening through research, activism, and advocacy. I chose the topics of rape myths, victim blaming and tonic immobility because these issues lie close to my heart. During my time at university, I quickly became aware of the extent of violence against women and sadly suffered a traumatic experience that opened my eyes to the disturbing reality for many survivors. I was bombarded with judgement, questions, and personal opinions on the way I dressed, the way I behaved, and the way I acted during the assault. This led friends, strangers, and professionals to ask and make personal and inappropriate questions and statements on what I could have done differently to avoid being raped, including the infamous "why didn't you fight back?"

This question held heavy on my mind for over a year, until I received specialist counselling, where I developed a deeper understanding of sexual violence and came to the realisation that experiencing tonic immobility during an assault is both a common and natural reaction to rape (RCS, 2017). This led me to educate myself

further in sexual victimisation and perpetration, where I established a passion for educating the public and advocating for survivors. After university, I was driven to volunteer and later work at my local rape crisis centre, where I am now an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor, helping victims in crisis through the criminal justice system. Therefore, this study was created with input from both my personal and professional background, in the hope of eradicating some of the shame and guilt survivors experience by highlighting the ongoing presence of rape myths in society and addressing the blame individuals assign to victims who react in a certain way during an assault, which all have major repercussions in both our social environments and the judicial system.

Structure Overview

This paper will begin with a literature review, providing important context on the existing literature in the field (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996), whilst also identifying the gap in research this study is attempting to address. Next, the methodology will be discussed, incorporating the study's theoretical framework, design, collection, and analysis of methods used (Kallet, 2004). After this, the findings will be presented concisely and clearly, covering the data collected as a direct result of the research. Leading on from this there will be a discussion and conclusion chapter where the findings will be interpreted and reviewed in relation to the study's original research question, aims and objectives. This will also involve comparing the novel research findings to existing literature and indicate implications for future research (Atherton, 2010).

Literature Review

The literature review provides a critical summary and assessment of a wide range of existing materials dealing with knowledge and understanding in a given field (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996). Its purpose is to review and offer insight into previous work, locate the current research project within the existing literature and form the study's context or background (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996; Kumar, 1996), giving justification to the novel research project and highlighting a current gap in research.

Sexual Violence

Violence against women is a pervasive public health and human rights issue of global epidemic proportions (WHO, 2013), with approximately 85,000 women (aged

sixteen to fifty-nine) raped and 400,000 women sexually assaulted in England and Wales alone every year (MoJ, Home Office, ONS, 2013). Sexual assault and rape are often considered two different acts, however, for the purpose of this paper, “rape”, “sexual assault”, “sexual abuse”, “sexual aggression” and “sexual violence” will be used synonymously and interchangeably to discuss violence against women. Sexual violence, as defined by the World Health Organisation (2002, p. 149), is: ‘any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting’. With ever-increasing estimations suggesting that one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in their lifetime, and a recent study showing that of a sample of 22,419 women living in the UK, 99.3% have been repeatedly subjected to sexual violence (Taylor and Shrive, 2021), sexual abuse has become the most common yet least punished crime in the world and poses an enormous obstacle in achieving global gender equality (United Nations, 2010; CSEW, 2013), with only around 15% of victims reporting the crime to the police (MoJ, Home Office, ONS, 2013). Although it is known that men can also suffer at the hands of sexual violence, the majority of rape and sexual assaults are committed by men on female victims (Black *et al.,* 2011, p. 24), therefore this research will be focussing on men’s violence against women.

‘Sexual violence is notoriously difficult to measure, and there is no single source of data that provides a complete picture of the crime’ (RAINN, 2020). However, statistics clearly show that sexual abuse can result in a multitude of physical and psychological health problems, with both immediate and long-term negative outcomes (Campbell, Dworkin and Cabral, 2009). It can have damaging physical impacts on victims, such as bruises, scrapes, broken bones, genital trauma, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies (Basile and Smith, 2011). Studies have revealed that as many as 50-90% of rape survivors have experienced genital injuries (Sommers, 2007), 4-30% have contracted an STI as a direct result of rape (Koss and Heslet, 1992; Jo *et al.,* 2011) and rape-related pregnancy rates range from 5-30% depending on factors such as culture and ovulation (Holmes *et al.,* 1996; McFarlane *et al.,* 2005), highlighting the vast range of serious short and long term implications sexual violence can have on victims.

At a psychological level, sexual abuse can lead to radical changes in how the victim sees herself, in her relationships with others, in the community as a whole, and in how she interprets the past, present, and future, altering the victim’s entire life course (WHO, 2003; Josse, 2010). Following a rape, many victims report suffering psychological distress, mental health issues, disruptions to their daily routines and encounter numerous emotional reactions in response to the violence, including shock, denial, self-blame, confusion, fear, anger, anxiety and withdrawal (Koss, 1993; Campbell *et al.,* 2001). In addition to this, sexual violence also has a

substantial impact on the economy, with research showing that violence against women lowers economic productivity, drains resources and costs the economy billions of pounds ever year on the anticipation and consequences of violence and in responding to the effects of abuse (Home Office, 2018). However, despite the severity and impact of violence against women on the victims, their networks, society and the economy, cases of rape remain highly underreported in the United Kingdom (RCEW, 2017). Therefore it is imperative that we address, research and attempt to understand more about sexual abuse, to better meet the needs of survivors, hold perpetrators accountable and prevent future violence against women from taking place (Krebs *et al.,* 2007).

There are many factors that contribute to the occurrence of sexual violence. Over the past few decades, several theories have been formed and developed in the attempt to further our knowledge and understanding of sexual victimisation and perpetration. Whilst there are too many theories to discuss within the scope of this research, it is hard to ignore the contributions of feminists when attempting to understand the causes of violence against women. They argue that theories surrounding sexual abuse are "gender blind" without a feminist lens, therefore offering a deeper understanding of gender-based violence by analysing how it is connected to, and embedded in, patriarchal structures of power (Cockburn, 2004). Patriarchy refers to the power relationship between men and women, where a system of social structures and practices are created in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby, 1990). Feminists argue that in turn, social expectations on male sexual aggression and female passivity are thus learnt, establishing a culture that is more accepting of rape (Chasteen, 2001).

Rape Culture

The term 'rape culture' was originally developed in the 1970s during the rise of second-wave feminism (Connell and Wilson, 1974) and is defined as "a society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes have the effect of normalising or trivialising sexual assault and abuse" (Oxford Dictionary, 2017), which some theorists argue prevents any real systemic solution to rape from emerging (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, 2005). Behaviours and practices commonly associated with rape culture include victim blaming, slut-shaming, rape jokes, sexual harassment, objectification and "banter", routine policing and judgement of women's bodies, appearance, and code of conduct, as well as impunity for perpetrators, despite their crimes (Herman, 1994; Mendes, 2015). This culture creates a world where women are taught *how not to be raped* instead of teaching men *how not to rape* (Prior, 2019), blaming victims for their own assaults and

establishing a society that tolerates, excuses and condones sexual violence (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas and Bollinger, 2009).

Victim Blaming

Rape culture and the practice of victim blaming are inherently linked phenomena, and both are prevalent in today's society (Thacker, 2017). Victim blaming, as described by Eigenberg and Garland (2008) is when a victim of a crime or any wrongful act is held entirely or partially to blame or deemed responsible for the event. While victim blaming can occur in a variety of settings, it appears particularly likely in cases of sexual assault (Bieneck and Krahé, 2011). Rape culture and thus victim blaming is perpetuated most significantly through the media (Thacker, 2017), particularly in westernised society. Media shapes the way people think and interpret social problems such as sexual violence (Thacker, 2017). Therefore, with media being one of the only sources of information readily available for many people (Berns, 2004), the lack of alternative sources becomes problematic because unless individuals have different experiences outside of the media, to help shape their opinions, they cannot correctly evaluate the credibility of the source (Berns, 2004), reinforcing victim blaming attitudes.

This has been evidenced by a multitude of high-profile sexual violence incidents, including the recent tragic case of Sarah Everard (Connor, 2021). Sarah Everard was kidnapped, raped and murdered on her walk home in South London. She chose well-lit streets, was appropriately dressed, spoke to her boyfriend on the phone, and did everything she could to be safe, yet she still suffered at the hands of sexual violence and fell victim to blame (Connor, 2021). In light of the incident, individuals began fuelling the long-running culture of victim blaming, with police suggesting women should not go out alone at night and members of the public questioning if she was drunk, what she was wearing, why she walked home instead of getting a taxi, and whether she had been wearing headphones, implying that Sarah did not take the proper precautions to avoid the violence that was inflicted on her (Connor, 2021), consequently shifting the blame onto the innocent victim, which was reinforced heavily by the media.

Furthermore, victims are not only judged for their actions leading up to and after an assault, but are often blamed for their reactions during an assault as well (Nielsen, 2019). In turn, this creates and encourages a social environment where perpetrators are not being held responsible for their actions and victims are being heavily blamed for their behaviours before, during and after an assault. Consequently, this harmful culture can have detrimental effects on both survivors and the criminal justice

system. Many survivors report experiencing self-blame and guilt after being attacked and express feeling stigmatised, isolated, shame and humiliation due to victim blaming attitudes (Weiss, 2010), which can lead victims to refrain from reporting to avoid secondary victimisation, where they suffer further harm as an indirect result of the crime (George and Martínez, 2002).

Rape Myth Acceptance

One of the major detriments of victim blaming is the widespread acceptance of rape myths. These are described as 'attitudes and general false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, which serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women' (Burt, 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994). Rape myths play a pivotal role in the social construction of rape, working to exonerate rapists, legitimise sexual aggression, and consequently, foster violence against women (Ryan, 2019). Much like the effects of victim blaming, the endorsement or acceptance of rape myths allow an individual to shift the blame for the sexual violence onto the victim (Chapleau and Oswald, 2010). Some examples of rape myths in literature include "any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to" (Burt, 1980), "if a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control" (Payne, Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1999) and "when women go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble" (McMahon and Farmer, 2011). Acceptance of rape myths about violence against women continue to facilitate victim blaming and promote a rape-supportive culture (Grubb and Turner, 2012), therefore it is important to further investigate and measure rape myth acceptance and victim blaming in the hope to change attitudes and educate the public (Gerger *et al.,* 2007).

The Judicial System

The decision making of juries in sexual offence cases is an issue that has attracted a great deal of attention (Leverick, 2020). Despite attempted progress within the judicial system, research indicates that beliefs in rape myths influence lawyers', judges' and jurors' decisions in rape cases to rule in favour of alleged perpetrators (Krahe *et al.,* 2008; Ellison and Munro, 2010; Chalmers, Leverick and Munro, 2021). In 2019, an evidence based review was conducted to assess the current literature surrounding prejudicial and false beliefs held by jurors that may be impacting their evaluation of evidence and decision making within the courtroom (Leverick, 2020). The review was the largest mock jury study to date in the United Kingdom, using 64 mock juries and over one thousand participants. The research found overwhelming evidence that rape myths significantly affect the way in which jurors evaluate evidence in rape cases, both in terms of the degree of blame attributed to a rape

victim and their views around what the verdict should be (Leverick, 2020). The review went on to suggest that rape supportive attitudes arose most frequently during jury deliberations (Finch and Munro, 2006; Ellison and Munro, 2009) and that many jurors had strong expectations about how a victim would behave before, during and after an assault, which directly impacted their perceptions of the victim's credibility (Taylor and Joudo, 2005). Furthermore, many of the studies showed that jurors held the belief that a "genuine" victim of rape would have instinctively fought back, with one juror insisting that her instinctive reaction would be to lash out aggressively and inflict injury on the defendant and another stating "I think it's instinct, if you've got a hand free you'd grab his eyes or his face or anything" (Ellison and Munro, 2009). These views were still formed despite the jurors being directed that it was not necessary for there to be evidence of a struggle in order to establish non-consent (Ellison and Munro, 2015). This review showed the need to educate the general public, who are potential jurors, on rape myths, understand more about the blame individuals assign to victims and make vital changes to the criminal justice system in order to increase conviction rates and encourage reporting, in the hope to make important steps towards true justice.

Classic Rape Theory

With such low reporting rates and approximately only 5.7% of rape cases ending in the conviction of the perpetrator (Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005; RCEW, 2017), researchers have suggested that these rates may be indicative of a major societal issue, enhanced drastically by the existence of rape supportive and victim blaming attitudes and beliefs (Johnson, 2017). However, only a handful of studies have gone on to explore the theories behind rape reporting and low conviction rates, with the Classic Rape Theory (Williams, 1984) most frequently used to attempt to explain why victims of sexual violence are reluctant to report and perpetrators are likely to get away with their crimes (Clay-Warner and McMahon-Howard, 2009).

The Classic Rape approach focuses on the influence of social norms and rape myths, with research suggesting that held beliefs on the place of assault, victim-offender relationship, and evidence of victim-resistance directly affect perceptions of whether an event is a "real" or "classic" rape (Williams, 1984; Estrich, 1987), which in turn impacts the likelihood of reporting. Williams (1984) draws from Sudnow's (1965) ideas on "normal crimes", which are events that meet the stereotypical definitions of crime. Williams (1984) defined a stereotypical rape as one in which the woman is violently assaulted, typically by a stranger in a secluded place, where the victim offers strong physical resistance to the assault, which acts as evidence that the sexual contact was unwanted (Weis and Borges, 1973; Clay-Warner and McMahon-Howard, 2009). Anything outside of this stereotypical rape definition is then seen as

something that the victim could have prevented or the victim is not seen as the “ideal victim”, promoting rape-supportive attitudes, continuing to affect perceptions of assailant blame and victim responsibility and directly affecting the criminal justice system (Williams, 1984).

The concept of the “ideal victim” myth serves to undermine the credibility of female victims who are seen to deviate too far from the stereotypical notion of “real rape” and too far from what is deemed to be a “reasonable” reaction to sexual violence, leading to victims being blamed and judged for their actions (Randall, 2010). A fundamental way in which sexually assaulted women can escape or minimise blame for their assaults is by demonstrating vigorous physical resistance (Ellison and Munro, 2009). This resistance is seen as evidence that the victim was truly unwilling and therefore provides “proof” or “validation” of non-complicity (Randall, 2010). Physical resistance to sexual violence has not only become a social expectation, but is also imbedded historically in the judicial system and persists in widespread rape culture (Ellison and Munro, 2009). Nevertheless, literature over the decades has consistently demonstrated that the majority of rapes are not physically resisted by the victim (Nielsen, 2019), with one study showing that of 274 police reports on rape from the United States, only 22% of survivors used physical resistance (Ullman and Knight, 1992) and another study suggesting that the majority of survivors in fact show no resistance at all due to the bodies biological and instinctive response to trauma (Möller, Söndergaard and Helström, 2017).

Common Reactions to Trauma

Victims of sexual assault are often blamed for how they reacted during an assault (Nielsen, 2019). Evolution has endowed all humans with a set of innate, hard-wired and automatically activated defence behaviours similar to animals, termed “the defence cascade”, when faced with threat or danger (Kozlowska *et al.,* 2015). Active resistance, such as “fight” (where the victim physically resists the rape by slapping, hitting, kicking or pushing (NIJ, 2000)) or “flight” (where the victim puts distance between themselves and the danger, by running or backing away (RCEW, 2017)), are considered to be “normal” reactions during rape (Möller, Söndergaard and Helström, 2017). However, studies have indicated there are several instinctive defence reactions, including “faint” and “freeze” (Kozlowska *et al.,* 2015). Despite research suggesting that active resistance is the most effective strategy for stopping or preventing a sexual assault (Light, 2017), further research shows that “freezing”, otherwise known as tonic immobility (TI), is the least familiar, yet most frequent reaction to rape (RCS, 2017).

Tonic immobility has been studied extensively in animals and is considered to be an evolutionary adaptive defensive reaction to predatory attack when resistance is not possible (Kozlowska *et al.,* 2015). However, research on tonic immobility in humans is relatively new phenomena and has been described as a catatonic-like state where individuals experience an 'involuntary, temporary state of motor inhibition in response to situations involving intense fear' (Marx *et al.,* 2008) that render the victim incapable of resisting the aggressor even though their mental cognition remains active and uncompromised (Schiewe, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that this reaction has been frequently linked to sexual assault, as sexual violence has been labelled as one of the most fearful and traumatic experiences a person can be exposed to (Chivers-Wilson, 2006).

Over the years there have been several studies looking into tonic immobility in sexual assault survivors. One study looked at reactions to sexual violence through seven survivors own perspectives (TeBockhorst, O'Halloran and Nyline, 2015). All survivors reported experiencing tonic immobility, where they felt a strong urge to leave during the assault but were unable to move their bodies voluntarily. Furthermore, another study using thirty-five rape survivors found that 37% of participants clearly indicated tonic immobility during their assault, reporting feeling frozen and paralysed even though they were not physically restrained (Galliano *et al.,* 1993). Finally, a larger study revealed that out of 298 women survivors who entered an emergency clinic in Stockholm, 70% reported significant tonic immobility and 48% reported extreme tonic immobility, denoting the occurrence of freezing during an assault (Möller, Söndergaard and Helström, 2017). Despite literature supporting tonic immobility as a natural reaction to trauma and organisations working with survivors documenting tonic immobility as a 'common', 'instinctive' and 'normal' reaction (RCEW, 2017; RCEW, 2021), research suggests that victims are still blamed if they react this way during an assault (Nielsen, 2019).

The Current Study

Current literature suggests that sexual violence is prevalent in today's society due to an entrenched rape culture that serves to excuse and condone violence against women (Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, 2005), which in turn leads to the emergence and acceptance of victim blaming (Thacker, 2017) and rape supportive attitudes (Ryan, 2019), allowing individuals to shift the blame away from the perpetrator and onto the victim. This widespread social acceptance and justification of sexual violence means victims are less likely to report in fear that they will be faced with rape supportive and victim blaming attitudes and beliefs (Johnson, 2017). In circumstances where they do report, victims are less likely to see a guilty verdict due to the systemic entrenchment of rape culture within the judicial system (Leverick,

2020), especially when the assault was not actively resisted, effecting the global understanding on how victims should look, act and respond to violence.

Existing literature in this field offers important insight into the impacts and experiences of sexual violence as a way to help inform prevention and intervention strategies and offer tailored support to victims (NSVRC, 2011). Although there have been a plethora of studies on rape culture, rape myths and victim blaming, research has failed to look at the link between rape supportive attitudes and the blame assigned to victims based on how they reacted during an assault. Therefore, this study was designed to explore this link, paying particular attention to tonic immobility reactions to sexual violence. The research aimed to provide society with a greater understanding on whether rape myths directly influence an individual's allocation of blame and whether individuals assign more blame to victims who experience tonic immobility during an assault compared to other natural responses, due to the unfamiliarity of the phenomena (RCS, 2017). This knowledge would in turn help to highlight specific trends in victim blaming and rape supportive attitudes and outline victim blaming beliefs surrounding tonic immobility, in the hope to educate and inform the public on common reactions to rape and dispel entrenched myths. Ultimately this will work towards better supporting victims, guiding professionals and preventing future violence against women, by creating a society that does not accept, excuse or tolerate violence.

In the next chapter, the research philosophy, strategy and design will be discussed, along with details on the methods used, the collection and analysis of the data and a summary on both ethical considerations and limitations within this study.

Methodology

This chapter aims to accurately and clearly describe the methodological procedures used in the research and the rationale for them, alongside explaining the processes undertaken to collect and analyse the data. In short, this should allow readers to evaluate the quality, validity, and replicability of the study and draw conclusions from it (Kallet, 2004; Fox and Jennings, 2014).

This section will cover the aims and objectives of the research question, the justified theoretical framework and the methods used within the study. It will also include data collection and analysis, ethical considerations and limitations of the study, concluding with a succinct summary on how the research question has been adequately answered.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research was to explore victim blaming and rape myth acceptance with particular attention to tonic immobility reactions to sexual violence. The objective of this study was to see whether individuals will assign more blame to victims who freeze during an assault in comparison to victims who fight, flee or faint, and whether those who do assign more blame will have a higher rape myth acceptance in general. The research also considers whether males will score higher in rape myth acceptance compared to females and whether participants will view tonic immobility as a less natural response to sexual violence in comparison to victims who fight, flee or faint. Finally, the study aims to research victim blaming in more detail. There were six hypotheses:

1. Participants who score higher in rape myth acceptance will assign more blame to victims in general.
2. Males will score higher in rape myth acceptance compared to females.
3. Participants will assign more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility than the other reactions to sexual violence.
4. Participants who score higher on the subscale “It wasn’t really rape” will assign more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility.
5. Participants will view the tonic immobility response as less natural in comparison to the other reactions to sexual violence.
6. Participants will use victim blaming attitudes when attempting to justify their allocation of blame.

Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, there were two main theoretical frameworks within research; positivism and interpretivism, which were presented as being fundamentally opposed to one another (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Positivist ontology states that the world exists independently of us and can therefore epistemologically take a scientific approach, using quantitative methods, to understand human behaviour through observation and reason (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). In contrast, the interpretivist paradigm uses qualitative methods and takes the stance that the world does not exist independently of us, adopting the philosophy that reality is instead socially constructed (Putnam and Banghart, 2017).

Many researchers have since recognised that both paradigms in fact complement each other and should be combined in order to compensate for their mutual weaknesses (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Therefore, as a consequence of the

continuous debates between positivism and interpretivism, researchers have constructed an alternative framework that accommodates the diverse nature of research (Feilzer, 2010), called pragmatism, which this piece of research falls into. The pragmatist paradigm is focused on answering the research question as comprehensively as possible, applying the notion that we should focus on what works instead of what might be considered objectively "true" (Frey, 2018). They believe that epistemological issues regarding objectivity and subjectivity exist on a continuum, rather than in opposition (Bacchus *et al.,* 2016). Early pragmatists reject the idea that social understanding using one single scientific method can access the truth about the real world (Frey, 2018) and emphasise the advantages of using mixed method approaches to research (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Combining both quantitative and qualitative methods enables triangulation to occur, increasing the credibility and validity of research and developing a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999; Flick, 2014). Therefore, this theoretical framework has been adopted in this study, to allow the research to shed light on the incidence and prevalence of victim blaming and rape myth acceptance, through quantitative methods (White and Farmer, 1992), whilst also gaining an in-depth understanding into how individuals make sense of, interpret and act in society, through qualitative methods (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

Throughout this research, feminist ideologies, such as patriarchy and female oppression, were entwined within the text. Therefore, the feminist approach was also combined within this study as feminist research aims to highlight and overcome gender injustice and social inequalities (Hundleby, 2011).

Method

Given that this study falls within the pragmatist paradigm, a mixed method approach was used to answer the research question, through a questionnaire and vignette scenarios, via an online survey. Online surveys allow us to reach a wide range of individuals from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds in a relatively short amount of time, at a low cost (Wright, 2005), making the survey more attainable.

To mitigate the transmission of COVID-19, a conscious decision was made to design a study that was exclusively online, to make it easily accessible to all from the safety of their own homes. The study was created to be more straightforward and less time-consuming than originally planned, to help with the uptake of participation in an unstable time. It aimed to be non-invasive, anonymous and confidential, to help

eliminate social desirability and capture genuine beliefs on rape myths, tonic immobility and victim blaming.

“No matter how complicated the research, or how brilliant the researcher, the public always offer unique, invaluable insights” (Staley, 2009). Over the past 60 years, students have played a crucial role in research as they are accessible, available in abundance and highly convenient (Foot and Sanford, 2004). For this study, a sample of forty-five students from three courses within the disciplines of Education, Business and Sport at the University of Worcester served as participants, to represent the general public. They were recruited via course leaders from each discipline, who acted as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers worked as an intermediary between both the researcher and potential participants (McFadyen and Rankin, 2016), by sending an introductory paragraph and online survey link on the researcher’s behalf via Blackboard to all students asked to take part (see Appendix A). Twelve individuals participated from Education, twenty-nine from Business and four from Sports with 31.1% taking part in their first year, 44.4% in second year and 24.4% in their third year of study.

Of the forty-five participants who took part in the study, twelve identified as male, thirty-two as female and one as non-binary. Participants’ ages ranged from eighteen to forty-four, and they described themselves as White/Caucasian (82.2%), Mixed or Multiple Ethnicity (6.7%), Asian or Asian British (8.9%), and Black, African, Caribbean or Black British (2.2%). Furthermore, forty participants identified as heterosexual, one as homosexual, two as bisexual and two as asexual.

Participants began by reading an online participant information sheet and confirming they were over the age of eighteen and consented to voluntarily participate in the study. Next, they completed a demographics questionnaire, to acquire information on their gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, course and year of study (see Appendix B).

Next they completed the 22-item updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon and Farmer, 2011), as shown in Appendix C, to obtain their agreement to rape myths. This measurement was chosen due to the scale’s sufficient internal consistency and reliability (Payne, Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1999; McMahon and Farmer, 2011). The final part of the online survey consisted of four vignette scenarios on rape, where the victim either fought, ran away, froze or fainted (see Appendix D). The scenarios had key differences between place of attack, perpetrator relationship to victim and reaction to rape. Participants were asked a series of questions related to each vignette to assess who they deemed more responsible for

the incident and whether the victim had any control over the situation. The questionnaire also measured the amount of blame participants assigned to the victim, featuring a free text box, where participants were able to give reason to and justify their answer to this question. Finally, participants were asked whether they thought the victims' reactions to rape were natural responses. Both the questionnaire and vignette scenarios were scored using a five-point Likert scale because they allow for a more in depth measure of participants' rape myth acceptance and victim blaming in comparison to simple 'yes' or 'no', 'agree' or 'disagree' answers (Jamieson, 2004).

Once data collection was finished, a statistical analysis was conducted on the quantitative answers to make sense of, and draw inferences from, the data (Allen and Seaman, 2007). This analysis is considered a rigorous way of understanding a large amount of data, that can be presented coherently and with justification (McGraw-Taylor, 2007). For the written qualitative data derived from the four vignette scenarios, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify and report on commonalities and patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), helping to understand how participants interpret and justify allocating blame to the victims, filling the crucial gap between information and knowledge.

Ethical Considerations

This study received full ethical approval from the University of Worcester before any research took place (see Appendix E). There are several risks when conducting research on violence against women (Ruiz-Perez, Plazaola-Castano and Vives-Cases, 2007), including complex ethical and practical challenges for the researcher (Duma, Khanyile and Daniels, 2009). These challenges are over and above the ordinary ethical considerations posed by general research, such as issues of informed consent, confidentiality, and autonomy (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005). This is due to the highly sensitive research topic, where participants can experience potential harm or re-traumatisation, meaning sexual violence research should be designed with care and rigour to ensure participants' contributions get the recognition they deserve (Newman, Risch and Kassam-Adams, 2006).

Many sexual assault studies ask participants to engage with rape-related materials, such as taking part in interviews and questionnaires, listening to audio recordings and reading sexual violence vignettes. If participants are unaware of the activities involved within the research, they may feel deceived, especially if they are sexual violence survivors (Campbell, Goodman-Williams and Javorka, 2019). Therefore, as this study involved several rape-related materials, it was important to mitigate

deception. This ethical dilemma was tackled by making it clear to participants before they began the online survey that the study was about sexual violence, alongside ensuring participants were aware they have the option to withdraw at any point throughout the study.

Due to the study's sensitive nature, there was a higher chance that it would attract the attention of sexual violence survivors and abusers. Therefore, to reduce the amount of distress and vulnerability participants may have experienced, a decision was made not to focus on personal experiences of sexual violence but to look at societal views towards victim blaming. Regardless of the shift in focus, however, research has begun to recognise sexual violence studies involve both benefits, such as relief or a sense of sharing and being listened to, as well as harms, including minor upset, significant distress and re-traumatisation (Appollis *et al.,* 2015). Therefore, to reduce participant upset and increase their wellbeing, a list of support agencies related to sexual violence and mental health was provided on each page of the questionnaire. This meant those who wished to withdraw from the research before completion could do so, whilst still being supported.

Due to the problematic subject matter, it was also important to control who answered the survey. To help verify the study was being answered by the appropriate audience, it was made clear via a disclaimer that it should only be completed by students at the University of Worcester, within the disciplines that were approached, to help limit the possibility of individuals under eighteen taking part. As good practice, within the demographic questions, the options "under 18" and "not a student at the University of Worcester" were provided, to help confidently eliminate these responses from the data.

Respect for privacy is vitally important given how easy it is to access personal information online (Gelinas et al., 2017). Therefore, to eradicate the risk of exposing sensitive information, the survey was both anonymous and confidential, in line with GDPR (2016) and the Data Protection Act (2018). This meant there was no identifiable information within the study, however, as good ethical practice, all electronic data was stored on an encrypted USB for safe keeping. In terms of disposal plans, the anonymised data will be stored by the University of Worcester for a maximum of 10 years, in line with their data storage procedures (UOW, 2019).

Limitations of the Research

Although successful, there were a few limitations within the study that must be considered when interpreting the results. Many concerns have been raised in using student samples to represent the “general public” in empirical research due to the lack of generalisability and comparability (Peterson and Menruka, 2014). As students are typically younger and more educated than the general public, it is unclear whether age or level of education – or an interaction between the two – is responsible for the results within this study (Hanel and Vione, 2016), providing limitations with regards to future replicability. Moreover, the generalisability of this study was affected by the small sample size and the use of a homogenous group, making it problematic to generalise from students to the general public (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 2010).

Another limitation when conducting research on sensitive issues such as sexual violence is the possibility of social desirability. Social desirability refers to the tendency for participants to give what they believe is “a socially acceptable or desirable response”, instead of choosing responses that reflect their true feelings (Grimm, 2010). This can in turn not only create complexities in interpreting findings but can also compromise the validity of the research entirely (Salkind, 2010; Bergen and Labonté, 2020). To mitigate the impact of social desirability bias, the participants were approached via course leaders using an online platform, meaning the researcher was once removed from the study, and the research was kept anonymous and confidential.

Conclusion

Using pragmatic theoretical underpinnings, the research question was answered with a mixed method approach. Qualitative and quantitative data collection took place, via an online survey, to explore participants’ rape myth acceptance and victim blaming attitudes. Once data collection was finished, both statistical analysis and thematic analysis were carried out, to identify key themes within the qualitative data and to explore rape myths, victim blaming and reactions to trauma in more depth.

Within the next chapter, the hypotheses and outcomes of the data collection will be discussed thoroughly. The chapter will build a foundation for the analysis and present the findings, whilst also tackling the research question from various perspectives.

Findings

In this chapter, the hypotheses, experimental results, themes and data analysis will be presented and examined to explore victim blaming and reactions to sexual violence in detail. Participant's completed the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon and Farmer, 2011) alongside victim blaming questions on four vignette scenarios, which produced both quantitative and qualitative data. Both statistical and thematic analyses were applied to interpret the data collected.

Descriptive Statistics

The results gathered from the quantitative survey were compiled to show the mean, standard deviation, and scale response percentages for each item of the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (see Table 1).

(N = 45)							
			Scale Responses (%)				
Item	**Mean**	**SD**	1	2	3	4	5
Subscale: She Asked for It							
1. If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand.	**1.2**	**0.65**	88.9	6.7	0.0	4.4	0.0
2. When women go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.	**1.24**	**0.52**	80.0	15.6	4.4	0.0	0.0
3. If a woman goes to a room alone with a man at party, it is her own fault if she is raped.	**1.07**	**0.25**	93.3	6.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
4. If a woman acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble.	**1.62**	**0.9**	60.0	24.4	8.9	6.7	0.0
5. When women get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear.	**1.47**	**0.98**	75.6	11.1	8.9	0.0	4.4
6. If a woman initiates kissing or hooking up, she should not be surprised if a man assumes she wants to have sex.	**2.04**	**1.07**	42.2	24.4	20.0	13.3	0.0
Subscale: He Didn't Mean To							
7. When men rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex.	**2.2**	**1.15**	44.4	4.4	37.8	13.3	0.0
8. Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.	**1.87**	**1.02**	51.1	20.0	20.0	8.9	0.0
9. Rape happens when a man's sex drive goes out of control.	**2.02**	**1.16**	48.9	17.8	15.6	17.8	0.0
10. If a man is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally.	**1.64**	**1.01**	66.7	11.1	13.3	8.9	0.0

11. It shouldn't be considered rape if a man is drunk and didn't realise what he was doing.	**1.29**	**0.78**	84.4	6.7	6.7	0.0	2.2
12. If both people are drunk, it can't be rape.	**1.4**	**0.74**	73.3	15.6	8.9	2.2	0.0
Subscale: It Wasn't Really Rape							
13. If a woman doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it can't be considered rape.	**1.27**	**0.71**	84.4	8.9	2.2	4.4	0.0
14. If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.	**1.22**	**0.76**	91.1	2.2	0.0	6.7	0.0
15. A rape probably doesn't happen if a woman doesn't have any bruises or marks.	**1.11**	**0.53**	95.6	0.0	2.2	2.2	0.0
16. If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.	**1.07**	**0.44**	97.8	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.0
17. If a woman doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape.	**1.64**	**1.14**	66.7	17.8	6.7	2.2	6.7
Subscale: She Lied							
18. A lot of times, women who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it.	**2.11**	**1.04**	37.8	24.4	26.7	11.1	0.0
19. Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men.	**2.24**	**1.12**	33.3	26.7	24.4	13.3	2.2
20. A lot of times, women who say they were raped often led the man on and then had regrets.	**1.69**	**0.94**	57.8	22.2	13.3	6.7	0.0
21. A lot of times, women who claim they were raped have emotional problems.	**1.71**	**1.0**	57.8	22.2	13.3	4.4	2.2
22. Women who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape.	**2.2**	**1.2**	42.2	15.6	24.4	15.6	2.2

Table 1. A table to show the descriptive statistics for each item of the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale.

The mean, standard deviation, and scale response percentages for each quantitative item of the vignette scenario survey were also collected (see Table 2).

(N = 45)							
			Scale Responses (%)				
Item	**Mean**	**SD**	1	2	3	4	5
Fight Scenario							
1. Is Isabelle responsible for what happened?	**1.07**	**0.33**	95.6	2.2	2.2	0.0	0.0
2. Is Jack responsible for what happened?	**5.0**	**0.0**	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100
3. Did Isabelle have any control over the situation?	**1.89**	**1.06**	46.7	31.1	11.1	8.9	2.2
4. How much is Isabelle to blame for how she reacted?	**1.13**	**0.45**	91.1	4.4	4.4	0.0	0.0
5. Was Isabelle's reaction to fight a natural response?	**4.62**	**0.64**	0.0	0.0	8.9	20.0	71.1

Freeze Scenario							
6. Is Melissa responsible for what happened?	**1.16**	**0.47**	89.9	6.7	4.4	0.0	0.0
7. Is Jason responsible for what happened?	**4.89**	**0.38**	0.0	0.0	2.2	6.7	91.1
8. Did Melissa have any control over the situation?	**1.67**	**0.87**	57.8	20.0	20.0	2.2	0.0
9. How much is Melissa to blame for how she reacted?	**1.22**	**0.55**	84.4	8.9	6.7	0.0	0.0
10. Was Melissa's reaction to freeze a natural response?	**4.44**	**0.98**	2.2	2.2	15.6	8.9	71.1
Flight Scenario							
11. Is Lisa responsible for what happened?	**1.42**	**0.86**	77.8	6.7	11.1	4.4	0.0
12. Is Mark responsible for what happened?	**4.84**	**0.42**	0.0	0.0	2.2	11.1	86.7
13. Did Lisa have any control over the situation?	**1.73**	**1.02**	60.0	13.3	22.2	2.2	2.2
14. How much is Lisa to blame for how she reacted?	**1.33**	**0.82**	82.2	8.9	2.2	6.7	0.0
15. Was Lisa's reaction to run away a natural response?	**4.8**	**0.54**	0.0	0.0	6.7	6.7	86.7
Faint Scenario							
16. Is Sally responsible for what happened?	**1.11**	**0.53**	95.6	0.0	2.2	2.2	0.0
17. Is Michael responsible for what happened?	**4.87**	**0.5**	0.0	0.0	6.7	0.0	93.3
18. Did Sally have any control over the situation?	**1.27**	**0.65**	82.2	11.1	4.4	2.2	0.0
19. How much is Sally to blame for how she reacted?	**1.16**	**0.56**	91.1	4.4	2.2	2.2	0.0
20. Was Sally's reaction to faint a natural response?	**4.31**	**1.13**	4.4	4.4	13.3	11.1	66.7

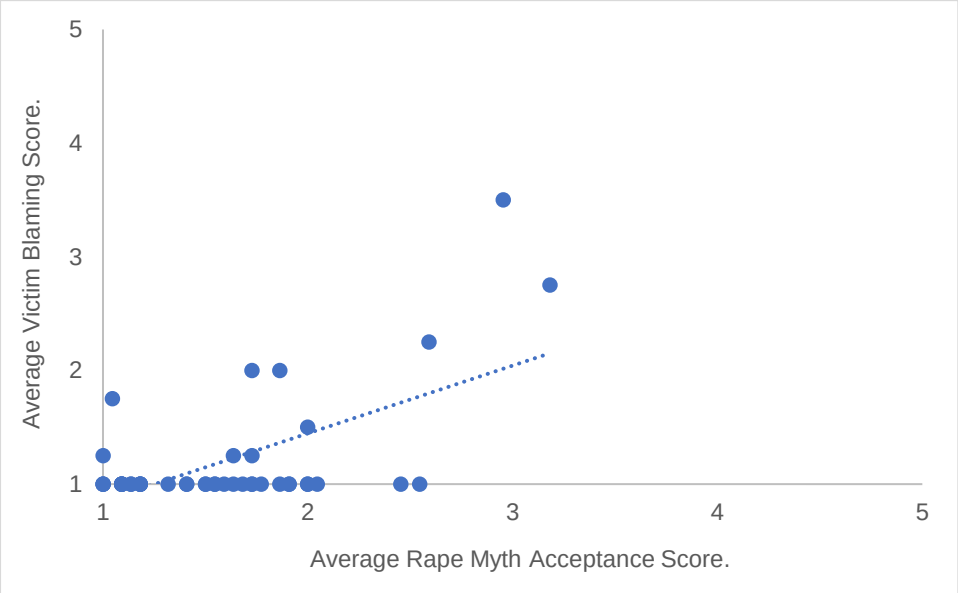
Table 2. A table to show the descriptive statistics for each vignette scenario item.

Statistical Analyses

For the following statistical analyses, assumptions on the skewness, kurtosis and shape of the population distribution were checked for each hypothesis. All results indicated an abnormal distribution, therefore non-parametric alternatives were chosen to interpret the data (Pallant, 2013).

Hypothesis 1. **Those who score higher in rape myth acceptance will assign more blame to victims.**

Figure 1. A graph to show the relationship between participants' average Rape Myth



Acceptance score and their average victim blaming score across all vignette scenarios.

Correlation Matrix

		Average Rape Myth Acceptance scores	Average victim blaming scores
Average Rape Myth Acceptance scores	Spearman's rho	—	0.316 *
	p-value	—	0.017
Average victim blaming scores	Spearman's rho	0.316 *	—
	p-value	0.017	—

Note. H_a is positive correlation

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, one-tailed

Table 3. A Spearman's rho analysis to test the association between average Rape Myth Acceptance scores and average victim blaming scores.

Table 3 indicated a moderate positive correlation relationship between participants' average rape myth acceptance scores and their average victim blaming scores across all vignette scenarios, which was statistically significant ($r_s(43) = 0.316$, p =

0.017). This means that the findings support the hypothesis that those who score higher in rape myth acceptance will assign more blame to victims in general.

Hypothesis 2. **Males will score higher in rape myth acceptance in comparison to females.**

Group Descriptive Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD
Average Rape Myth Acceptance scores	Males	12	1.95	1.93	0.516
	Females	32	1.49	1.50	0.487

.

Table 4. The descriptive statistics on the average Rape Myth Acceptance scores for males and females.

Non-parametric test: Mann-Whitney U

	Statistic	p	Mean difference	Effect Size
Average Rape Myth Acceptance scores	86.0	0.003	0.437	0.552

Table 5. A Mann-Whitney U test to compare the differences between male and female Rape Myth Acceptance scores.

A Mann-Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference between the rape myth acceptance scores of males and females ($p = 0.003$), supporting the hypothesis that males will score higher in rape myth acceptance compared to females. The effect size is 0.552, which according to Cohen's (1988) classification of effect size, is a large effect. For the purpose of this test, the non-binary participant was removed, due to lack of representation and potential biases in the data analysis.

Hypothesis 3. **Participants will assign more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility than any of the other responses to sexual violence.**

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Median
Fight	1.13	1
Freeze	1.22	1
Flight	1.33	1
Faint	1.16	1

Table 6. The descriptive statistics on the average blame scores for each vignette scenario.

Friedman Test

χ^2	df	p
7.57	3	0.056

Table 7. A Friedman test to detect differences in the blame scores for each vignette scenario.

Pairwise Comparisons (Durbin-Conover)

			Statistic	p
Fight	-	Freeze	1.666	0.098
Fight	-	Flight	2.443	0.016
Fight	-	Faint	0.333	0.740
Freeze	-	Flight	0.777	0.438
Freeze	-	Faint	1.333	0.185
Flight	-	Faint	2.110	0.037

Table 8. A pairwise comparison Durbin-Conover test to show the blame differences between each vignettes scenario in detail.

A Friedman test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference in the allocation of blame depending on which response the victims' had to sexual violence ($\chi^2(3) = 7.57$, $p = 0.056$), rejecting the hypothesis that participants will assign more

blame to victim who froze (TI) than any other response. However, a pairwise comparison Durbin-Conover test indicated there was a significant difference in the allocation of blame between the fight and flight responses (p = 0.016) and the flight and faint responses (p = 0.037). There were no significant differences between any of the other responses.

Hypothesis 4. **Participants who score higher on the subscale "It wasn't really rape" will assign more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility.**

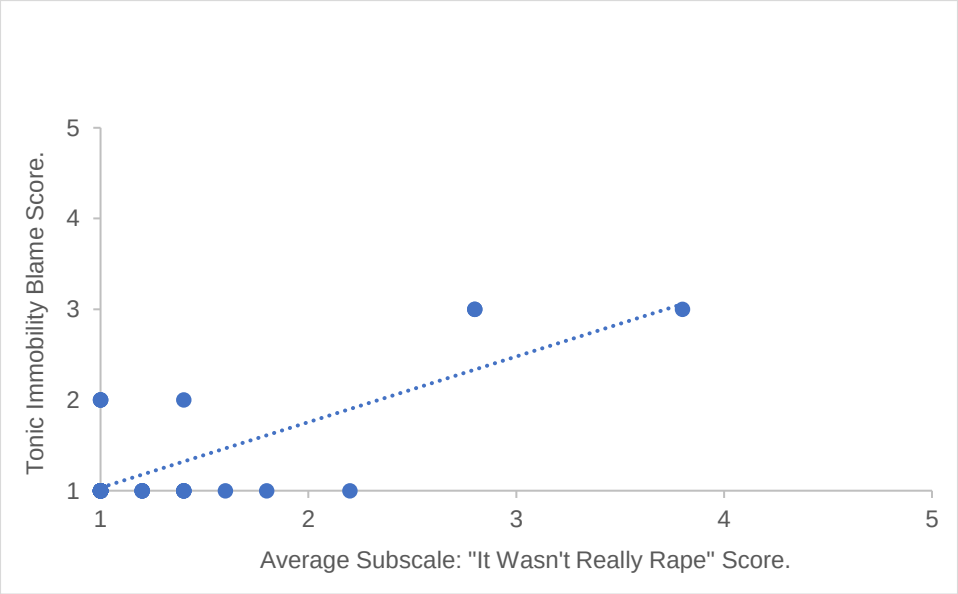


Figure 2. A graph to show the relationship between participants' average Rape Myth Acceptance score for the subscale "It wasn't really rape" and their blame assignment score for the tonic immobility vignette scenario.

Correlation Matrix

		Average IWRR Subscale Score	Tonic Immobility Blame Score.
Average IWRR Subscale Score	Spearman's rho	—	0.341 *
	p-value	—	0.011
Tonic Immobility Blame Score.	Spearman's rho	0.341 *	—
	p-value	0.011	—

Note. H_a is positive correlation

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, one-tailed

Table 9. A Spearman's rho analysis to test the association between participants' average Rape Myth Acceptance score for the subscale "It wasn't really rape" and their blame assignment score for the tonic immobility vignette scenario.

A Spearman's rho test indicated a moderate positive correlation between participants' average rape myth acceptance scores for the subscale "It wasn't really rape" and their blame score for the tonic immobility vignette scenario question, which was statistically significant ($r_s(43) = 0.341$, $p = 0.011$). This means that the findings support the hypothesis that those who score higher on the subscale "It wasn't really rape" assign more blame to victims who suffered from tonic immobility.

Hypothesis 5. **Participants will view the tonic immobility response as being less natural in comparison to the other responses to sexual violence.**

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Median
Fight	4.62	5
Freeze	4.44	5
Flight	4.80	5
Faint	4.31	5

Table 10. The descriptive statistics on the average perceived naturality scores for each vignette scenario.

Friedman

X^2	df	p
11.6	3	0.009

Table 11. A Friedman test to detect differences in the perceived naturality for each vignette scenario.

Pairwise Comparisons (Durbin-Conover)

			Statistic	p
Fight	-	Freeze	0.000	1.000

Pairwise Comparisons (Durbin-Conover)

			Statistic	p
Fight	-	Flight	2.413	0.017
Fight	-	Faint	0.951	0.344
Freeze	-	Flight	2.413	0.017
Freeze	-	Faint	0.951	0.344
Flight	-	Faint	3.364	0.001

Table 12. A pairwise comparison Durbin-Conover test to show the perceived naturality differences between each vignette scenario in detail.

A Friedman test revealed a statistically significant difference in the perceived naturality between the victims' different responses to sexual violence ($\chi^2(3) = 11.6$, $p = 0.009$). A pairwise comparison Durbin-Conover test indicated there was a significant difference in perceived naturality between fight and flight responses ($p = 0.017$), freeze and flight responses ($p = 0.017$), and flight and faint responses ($p = 0.001$). There were no significant differences between any of the other responses, rejecting the hypothesis that participants will view the freeze (TI) response to sexual violence as less natural in comparison to the other responses. The descriptive statistics showed that overall participants viewed faint as the least natural, then freeze (TI) and fight, with flight being viewed as the most natural response to sexual violence.

Thematic Analysis

Hypothesis 6. **Participants will use victim blaming attitudes when attempting to justify their allocation of blame.**

Within the study, participants were asked how much they believed each victim was to blame for how they reacted to sexual violence. This question was followed up with a free text box, where participants were asked to explain their answer in more detail. All participants were instructed not to provide any identifiable information within the free text box, to keep the study anonymous.

A thematic analysis of the data produced five themes: “expectation and prevention”, “she wasn’t to know”, “identifying and assigning blame”, “certainty of outcome”, and “(natural) responses to trauma”. Within these, the participants’ answers will be separated and evidenced in each response category: “fight”, “freeze”, “flight”, and “faint”.

Expectation and Prevention

This theme encapsulates the participants projection of assumption and expectation within the scenarios. This included what the participants proposed led to the crimes, what the victims could have done differently and therefore whether they believed it was preventable. The qualitative data presented victim blaming statements, with specific attention directed towards the victims’ actions before the sexual offences took place.

Fight vignette scenario:

“Going into the bedroom may be a bit suggestive”.

“Going upstairs … could have been interpreted as wanting more”.

“The suggestion of going to a bedroom should have been seen as a red flag”.

“She could have not gone up to the bedroom with him”.

“She agreed to go upstairs”.

Freeze vignette scenario:

“It was probably the first time that it happened as she wouldn’t get into the bed naked … knowing that she might get that kind of reaction”.

“She didn’t need to be naked, so again he could have assumed she wanted to have sex”.

“Their marriage gave him the impression ‘it was okay’”.

Flight vignette scenario:

“Lisa went back to Mark’s room”.

“Inviting someone to a bedroom may be suggestive especially if initiating kissing”.

“She was kissing him and agreed to sleep in his bed”.

“If Lisa felt scared, she shouldn’t have asked for a ‘cuddle’. This could be misinterpreted as her wanting more”.

“Agreeing to go to a hotel room sends a signal that things will go further”.

“She was the one that gave him cuddles and got his hopes up”.

Faint vignette scenario:

“Staying the night at his suggests she was prepared to have sex”.

“Going over implies things”.

“She Wasn’t to Know”

This theme captured participants’ victim blaming attitudes which were presented in a less direct way. The participants used language with more positive connotations to explain their answers to each scenario. However, the data clearly suggested that the victims were still blamed for their actions, through their naivety and innocence, suggesting that the victim *should have known better* and to *expect the inevitable*.

Fight vignette scenario:

“She was under the impression they were just going to talk”.

“She didn’t know what was going to happen”.

“Isabelle trusted Jack wouldn’t do that”.

“She wasn’t to know what was going to happen”.

“She was frightened, worried and scared for the inevitable.”

Freeze vignette scenario:

“I assume that … she could not believe that this person … would really do it to her”.

Flight vignette scenario:

“She did unknowingly put herself in the situation”.

“[She] didn’t know that would have happened”.

“She asked to just cuddle”.

Faint vignette scenario:

N/A

Identifying and Assigning Blame

Throughout the responses, participants were deliberating whether the victim had any fault within the scenarios. The data discovered that participants assigned blame using specific terminology such as “fault”, “blame”, “responsible”, and “control”. The majority of participants assigned blame to the perpetrator directly or removed the blame from the victims.

Fight vignette scenario:

“The actions proceeding this are entirely not her fault”.

“In my opinion Jack’s in the wrong very much”.

“If someone forces themselves onto you, this is not your fault”.

“She is not at all responsible”.

“Isabelle is not to blame at all”.

“Jack is at fault”.

Freeze vignette scenario:

“Yes it was Jason’s fault”.

“It’s not her fault her husband got on top of her”.

“Melissa isn’t responsible”.

“She had no control over her body or the situation”.

“He is to blame for what happened and how she reacted”.

Flight vignette scenario:

“She isn’t to blame for the rape”.

“Lisa has no blame whatsoever”.

“She isn’t to blame for her reaction”.

“She had no control over what happened”.

“He is to blame”.

“Mark is completely in the wrong”.

Faint vignette scenario:

“He is at fault”.

“She had no control or awareness of what was going on”.

“Sally isn’t responsible, Michael is”.

“Sally had zero control over the situation”.

“She can’t be to blame as she was unconscious from fainting”.

Although most participants explicitly blamed the perpetrator for their actions or removed blame from the victim through the use of direct statements, a number of these were followed up with contrasting conjunctions, such as “but” and “however”, to add a second clause. These typically included victim blaming attitudes and conformed to some rape myths. Therefore, this reversed the original statement, shifting the blame back onto the victim. These appeared across all four vignette scenarios.

“She isn’t responsible but at a house party I’d avoid getting drunk and going into a bedroom with someone regardless of if they are old friends or not”.

“She isn’t to blame but I don’t think Jason’s intentions were to rape”.

“Mark shouldn’t have taken things further without her consent however Lisa should’ve realised that things might have gotten out of control”.

“She was asleep when it happened, however she was the one who gave him cuddles and got his hopes up”.

“She isn’t fully to blame but she played some part in it all”.

“[If] she didn’t want anything to happen, then nothing should have. But perhaps she should have tried to leave after the first incident”.

Certainty of Outcome

This theme looks at what type of language the participants used to determine the severity of the crimes. It focuses on whether participants directly acknowledge the sexual offences as rape or whether they used other language to describe the outcomes of the scenarios.

Fight vignette scenario:

“Jack raped Isabelle, clearly”.

“She didn’t consent to having sex with Jack”.

“He clearly raped her”.

“Jack assaulted her”.

“NO MEANS NO”.

“She categorically did not consent … therefore she is 100% entitled to defend herself in response”.

“She trusted him, he broke her trust and attacked her”.

Freeze vignette scenario:

“Just because they are married and Melissa was naked is not an invitation to have sex so is still rape”.

“Melissa did not consent by saying yes. She actually said no and that she did not want to participate in sexual intercourse. Just because people are in a relationship does not give them a pass to have sex, consent is still needed from both parties. In this case, Melissa did not provide consent, yet Jason continued while knowing Melissa had already said no”.

“Jason should’ve respected Melissa’s wishes”.

“Being married doesn’t give him the right”.

“Jason should have respected his wife and gone to sleep”.

“She tried to discourage her husband many times and gave reasonable explanations as to why she wasn’t feeling up to it”.

“It does not give him permission to have sexual intercourse with her just because she is naked”.

“No means no whatever the situation”.

Flight vignette scenario:

“Lisa clearly said she did not want to go any further”.

“She said no yet he persisted”.

“He raped her”.

“He forced himself on her”.

“Lisa clearly stated she wasn’t interested and was unconscious when Mark decided to have intercourse with her”.

“She made it very clear what she wanted and did not want. She did not provide any consent to having sex”.

“He took advantage of her and raped her whilst she was sleeping”.

“Mark abused his power”.

Faint vignette scenario:

“[She] clearly said no and yet Michael chose to carry on anyway”.

“In this scenario it is plainly rape”.

“Sally said no and was clear, Michael was not understanding and continued without her consent”.

“No means no”.

“He raped her”.

“She did not consent to this”.

“Michael lashed out and forced himself on her”.

“She repeatedly expressed her wishes”.

“She repeatedly said that she didn’t want to sleep with him and he took advantage of her when she was unconscious”.

(Natural) Responses to Trauma

The final theme refers specifically to when participants clearly identified a victim's response to trauma or implied what the victims' did wrong or should have done differently. Some responses highlight that it is 'natural' for victims to react in different ways to trauma, whereas others only focus on active resistance, disregarding other possible natural responses.

Fight vignette scenario:

"Her fight or flight response kicked in".

"He clearly raped her and is completely at fault seeing as she clearly resisted".

"We tend not to see the bad in people straight away, almost give them the benefit of the doubt, especially when we know a person. I think this was the reason why Isabelle did not run away".

"Some people freeze in shock, others try to physically get them off".

"Not all rape victims have a natural reaction to fight back. It is completely depending on the person how they react to the assault".

"To avoid being raped, she should do all she can".

Freeze vignette scenario:

"She could've taken more extreme measures".

"Freezing is natural".

"Her reaction to freeze is a natural response as I imagine she would … not want to fight her husband".

"She could have said no and tried to resist or push him off but some people do freeze when they are scared and uncomfortable".

"I'm surprised Melissa froze as it was her husband".

"She was too ill to use force to stop him".

“Melissa was clearly unwell which may be why she didn’t physically push him off”.

“Everyone has a different response to a situation they do not want to be in. Some may fight, some may run and in this case Melissa froze. All of which are natural reactions”.

“Melissa did all she could to stop him without the situation getting violent”.

Flight vignette scenario:

“Every reaction is normal”.

“Running away is natural”.

“When he first tried to have sex, Lisa could have moved to the other room to make it clear she didn’t want it to progress”.

“It is a perfectly reasonable response”.

“It is normal to be scared and run away”.

“Waking up to that happening anyone would run”.

“It is common to react like that”.

“Lisa’s reaction was completely justified”.

“She decided to leave the situation which is a natural response”.

Faint vignette scenario:

“Everyone reacts in a different way to situations that have a big impact on us”.

“Fainting is her response as she is being forced into something. Her body could’ve gone into shock”.

“It is a natural reaction to faint when scared”.

“She couldn’t try and resist in any way because she had fainted”.

“Michael lashed out and forced himself on her which made her faint”.

“People react differently and just because she didn’t keep saying no or try stopping him doesn’t mean she gave consent”.

“She fainted which is an natural response to what he did”.

“Perhaps she could have tried to leave after the first incident”.

The next chapter will interpret and discuss the findings of the study in detail, aiming to relate the results to the original research question, aims and objectives. The chapter will also compare the findings with previous literature in the field and clearly indicate the implications of this research (Vieira, de Lima and Mizubuti, 2019).

Discussion

This chapter will attempt to contribute new knowledge to the sexual violence field through the interpretation of the empirical evidence collected within this research. The purpose of this study was to provide a greater understanding of victim blaming and rape myth acceptance, paying particular attention to the way blame is allocated based on how victims’ react to sexual violence. The research focused on tonic immobility, exploring the blame and naturality associated with reactions to sexual violence.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis revealed some interesting results. It was believed that participants who scored higher in rape myth acceptance would assign more blame to victims in general. This hypothesis was supported through a statistically significant result, indicating that participants’ rape myth acceptance scores positively correlate with their victim blaming attitudes. This aligns with previous research that clearly states that the endorsement of rape myths allow an individual to shift the blame onto the victim in sexual violence cases (Chapleau and Oswald, 2010). This suggests that rape myths and victim blaming are linked phenomena, meaning that those who endorse rape myths are more likely to victim blame and therefore promote a rape-supportive culture (Grubb and Turner, 2012). The study also revealed that men scored higher than women in rape myth acceptance, which may be due to the patriarchal structure of society, where men are socially accepted as the dominant sex and women are seen as inferior, establishing a culture that accepts rape (Chasteen, 2001). The research suggests that because participants are normalising

and trivialising sexual violence, through the use of rape myths, they are in turn victim blaming and therefore feeding into a society that condones and tolerates violence against women. This production of rape myths and victim blaming attitudes subsequently create a vicious cycle of abuse where rape culture is enforced, rape-supportive attitudes are normalised and violence against women remains rife (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas and Bollinger, 2009; Prior, 2019).

Before the research took place it was hypothesised that participants would assign more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility than any of the other responses to sexual violence and would view this response as less natural in comparison. The findings suggested that there was not a statistical difference between the allocation of blame based on the victims' response to sexual violence. The results suggested that people assigned the least blame to the victim who fought, then to the victims who fainted and froze, and assigned the most blame to the victim who ran away. In contrast, a statistically significant difference was found in the perceived naturality between the victims' responses. Findings indicated that fainting was viewed as the least natural, then freezing and fighting, and running away was seen as the most natural response to sexual violence, rejecting the hypothesis. These results propose that participants assigned the most blame to the response they viewed as the most natural, which was unexpected, because although flight is seen as a natural, common and understood response by many (RCS, 2017), it goes against previous literature in that rape victims are typically blamed less if they actively resist sexual violence (Clay-Warner and McMahon-Howard, 2009). Although vignettes are advantageous in exploring sensitive topics (Barter and Renold, 1999), the biggest methodological concerns are the validity and reality of the scenarios (Flaskerud, 1979) especially when it is known that sexual violence is difficult to measure (RAINN, 2020). As these vignettes were all different scenarios, participants may have related more to some scenarios than others, altering their scores. Therefore, it is unclear whether the differences in blame were because of the victims' reaction to the sexual violence or the situations the victims found themselves in.

However, in line with the Classic Rape Theory (Williams, 1984), participants viewed fight and flight as the most natural responses to sexual violence and assigned the least blame to the victim in the fight vignette scenario. This suggests that participants assigned the least blamed to the victim who fought because they offered strong physical resistance which, in the participants eyes, acted as evidence that the sexual contact was unwanted (Weis and Borges, 1973; Clay-Warner and McMahon-Howard, 2009). The evidence also falls in line with the notion of "real rape" and the "ideal victim", suggesting that the victim who fought was blamed less because participants deemed their response to sexual violence as a "reasonable" reaction, making them the "ideal" victim and gaining "much needed" confirmation the rape was "real" through the physical resistance (Randall, 2010). Furthermore, as fight and

flight were seen as the most natural, this provided evidence that these individuals also viewed active resistance as the most “normal” reaction to sexual violence, showing that tonic immobility and fainting were not as clearly understood, despite tonic immobility being the most common reaction to rape (Möller, Söndergaard and Helström, 2017; RCS, 2017).

Another hypothesis delved deeper into tonic immobility through rape myth and victim blaming evidence. It was believed that participants who scored higher on the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance subscale “It wasn’t really rape”, would assign more blame to victims who suffered from tonic immobility. Statements from the subscale “It wasn’t really rape” included items such as “If a woman doesn’t physically fight back, you can’t really say it was rape” and “A rape probably doesn’t happen if a woman doesn’t have any bruises or marks” (McMahon and Farmer, 2011). This subscale was used to compare participants victim blaming attitudes on reactions to sexual violence because the subscale consists of items that serve to deny an assault occurred due to a lack of physical resistance, evidence or threat (McMahon and Farmer, 2011). The findings suggested that, in line with the hypothesis, those who scored higher in the subscale “It wasn’t really rape” assigned more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility. This suggests that participants’ rape supportive attitudes influence the blame they assign to victims based on how they react during an assault, thus proposing that the widespread acceptance of rape myths allows society to shift the blame away from the perpetrator and onto the victim (Chapleau and Oswald, 2010). This finding highlights the lack of understanding participants’ had surrounding tonic immobility, physical and active resistance, and common reactions during an assault, showing the need to educate and destigmatise victim responses to sexual violence.

Although the majority of the findings were statistically significant, it is important to note that the majority of the rape myth acceptance scores and vignette scores remained near the lower end of the Likert scales, which may be due to social desirability. Social desirability is “the tendency of some respondents to report an answer in a way they deem to be more socially acceptable than would be their “true” answer” (Lavrakas, 2008). This means that instead of putting what they actually think, such as the victim is to blame or that they endorse rape myths, they *know* they should project a favourable image of themselves to avoid receiving negative evaluations, therefore give what they deem a socially desirable and conforming answer (Vesely and Klöckner, 2020). Overall, participants disagreed with rape myths, meaning these low rates of rape myths present on the surface as beneficial and positive for society. However, using the qualitative data in conjunction with the statistics proposed that the majority of participants comply to some level of victim blaming.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis was both rigorous and thought-provoking, with overall results indicating that most participants adopted some degree of victim blaming, whether subtle or blatant. The first theme identified was “expectation and prevention”, where participants made assumptions and held expectations on what they believed led to the sexual assaults and what the victims could have done differently to prevent the crime from taking place. Over the fight and flight vignette scenarios, participants focused on the victims’ actions before the rape took place, paying particular attention to the “suggestiveness” of going to a bedroom. Participants were clear that going to a bedroom not only implies things, but is also an indication of “wanting more”, thus shifting the blame from the perpetrator onto the victim. These participants are therefore implying that if the victim had not gone up to the bedroom, initiated kissing, asked for a cuddle, or slept in the perpetrator’s bed, the assault would not have happened, suggesting it is the victims fault they were raped. Within the freeze vignette scenario, the expectations and prevention suggestions were less frequent than in fight and flight. However, some participants fixated on the victim’s nakedness, suggesting that the victim “didn’t need to be naked” because the perpetrator “could have assumed she wanted to have sex”, clearly demonstrating how participants used victim blaming attitudes to shift the blame away from the perpetrator and focus on the victim’s actions and behaviours. Furthermore, one participant also wrote about how the victim and perpetrator being married gave the perpetrator the impression “it was okay”, suggesting this participant may not understand this was a rape scenario. In contrast to the fight and flight scenarios, only a couple of participants mentioned that staying the night “implies things” within the faint vignette. The majority did not focus on the victim’s actions before the assault took place, suggesting that because this participant fainted, she was excused from victim blaming, possibly out of sympathy for her involuntary reaction to the violence. Overall, contrary to original belief, victim blaming attitudes and prevention suggestions were most evident within the fight and flight or “classic” response vignette scenarios. This may have been because participants paid more attention to the scenario than the reaction the victim had to the rape, making it unclear why there was a difference in victim blaming attitudes across the vignettes.

The next theme identified was “she wasn’t to know”. This theme was similar to “expectation and prevention” in that the victims were still blamed for their actions. However, instead of using obvious victim blaming statements, participants subtly blamed victims through their naivety and innocence to the situation that was unfolding. Again, this was most evident in the fight and flight vignette scenarios. Participants focused on the victim being unknowing, unaware and too trusting, suggesting the victim was “frightened, worried and scared for the inevitable”. This suggests that participants were proposing that they knew the “inevitable” was going

to happen, therefore the victims were naïve and innocent not to know what was going to happen to them. Within the freeze and faint vignette scenarios, this more compassionate and sympathetic form of victim blaming was minimal, with only one statement found across both scenarios. This theme still focused on participants expectations of rape and their preventative suggestions, however, they propose the victim could have prevented the rape through being less naïve. As most victim blaming statements were found within the “classic” response vignettes, this suggests that participants felt more compassion and sympathy towards victims who responded in the socially accepted “correct” way. This supports the Classic Rape Theory (Williams, 1984), implying that victims have received minimised blame for their assault, through the use of compassionate and sympathetic wording, because they responded with active resistance, which is deemed to be a “reasonable” reaction to rape (Ellison and Munro, 2009; Randall, 2010).

“Identifying and assigning blame” was a theme present throughout all vignette scenarios. On initial observation, it appeared as if the majority of participants were quick to blame the perpetrator for the sexual violence or remove the blame from the victims, suggesting that participants wanted to make it clear to the reader they were not victim blaming. These included statements such as “he is at fault”, “she isn’t to blame for the rape”, “she is not at all responsible” and “he is completely in the wrong”. These statements conform with the low rape myth scores, indicating that participants appear to hold low victim blaming attitudes. However, several of these statements were followed up with contrasting conjunctions, such as “however” and “but”, with the purpose to add a contradicting second clause. This meant that participants were following up their statements with blatant rape myths and victim blaming attitudes. For example, one participant said the following: “She isn’t responsible but at a house party I’d avoid getting drunk and going into a bedroom with someone regardless of if they are old friends or not”. This implies that people want to appear as though they are not endorsing negative attitudes, thus appearing socially desirable (Lavrakas, 2008), however when given the opportunity to justify their opinions, victim blaming attitudes and rape myths have a tendency to surface. Reversing their previous statement to one that victim blames makes their original statement redundant, meaning the participant ends up assigning the blame to the victim or removing it from the perpetrator. Similarly to previous literature, this may be because of societies deeply entrenched rape culture, where society has condoned attitudes that excuse and trivialise sexual violence (Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas and Bollinger, 2009). Therefore, over time it has become the “norm” to hold these opinions, preventing victim blaming and thus violence against women from dissipating (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, 2005).

The penultimate theme identified was “certainty of outcome”. This theme referred to how participants used language to determine the severity of the crimes. Within the fight vignette scenario, participants used direct, straightforward and blunt language to justify and determine the outcome of the scenario. These included statements such as “he clearly raped her”, “NO MEANS NO”, and “she categorically did not consent”. In the flight and faint scenarios, participants were still certain of the outcome of the events, but the language used was different in comparison to the fight vignette. The statements were less abrupt and direct on the outcome, with wording such as “he persisted”, “she clearly said no” and “he forced himself on her”. In contrast, the qualitative responses from the freeze vignette scenarios were indirect and uncertain on the outcome of the event. Participants used a multitude of filler words, mainly avoided using direct and blunt words such as “rape” and “consent”, and merely eluded to but did not state what had happened. They used soft and avoidant language such as “Jason should’ve respected Melissa’s wishes” and “Jason continues while knowing Melissa had already said no”, to explain the sexual violence that took place. This can be interpreted as participants viewing the freeze vignette as less of a crime by refraining to highlight the outcome. For fight, flight and faint, participants were more willing to state it was rape, by using definitive language, suggesting that how the victims reacted to the sexual violence influenced the participants’ views on the severity of the crime. Furthermore, this provided evidence that individuals see active resistance (fight and flight) as an indication of “real rape” (Randall, 2010) and the survivor as the “ideal victim” (Williams, 1984), by using clear language to outline and advocate that sexual violence occurred. Participants may have also been certain of outcome for the faint victim because often people see this reaction as involuntary and therefore something the victim could not control (Kozlowska *et al.,* 2015). Although participants should have also seen freeze in a similar way to faint, this evidence suggests that participants were clearly confused and unsure about this reaction to sexual violence, through their use of filler words and soft language, showing the need to educate the public further on tonic immobility.

‘(Natural) responses to trauma’ was the final theme identified in the thematic analysis. This theme encapsulates participants’ identification of victim responses to trauma and their views on what the victims’ did wrong or should have done differently. Several participants were clear to state that “everyone has a different response” to trauma and that “every reaction is normal”, which was positive. Others suggested that physical or active resistance were the only “natural” ways to respond to trauma, suggesting the victim’s “fight or flight response kicked in”. Many participants even went further to imply that they see fight as the default response to trauma. This was shown through statements such as “she could have said no and tried to resist or push him off”, “her reaction to freeze is a natural response as I imagine she would … not want to fight her husband” and “she was too ill to use force

to stop him". This suggests that individuals are blaming the victim based on how they respond to sexual violence and are proposing that a victim's initial response should always be to fight, showing the need to dispel myths on common reactions to trauma. The findings also suggested that flight and faint were viewed as secondary or alternative responses to sexual abuse, where the victims' reactions were equally justified in comparison to the victim who fought. This was shown through participants clearly stating the victims' reactions to run away or faint were "natural", "common", "completely justified" and "perfectly reasonable". In comparison, the qualitative responses within the freeze vignette featured some confusion, from "I'm surprised Melissa froze" to "She could have taken more extreme measures", suggesting that although participants are acknowledging the victim froze, they believe they should have actively or physically resisted instead, thus victim blaming. This falls in line with the Classic Rape Theory (Williams, 1984), which states that victims will be blamed more if they do not actively resist rape (Ellison and Munro, 2009). Furthermore, one participant stated in the fight scenario that the perpetrator "clearly raped her and is completely at fault seeing as she clearly resisted". This puts emphasis on the victim's reaction directly altering the blame assigned to the perpetrator, implying that if the victim had not resisted, the perpetrator would not be at fault (Randall, 2010). The findings from this theme evidently show the need to further educate individuals on all responses to trauma and to highlight that tonic immobility is both a common and natural reaction to sexual violence.

The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research offer much needed evidence as to why victims may be reluctant to report their assaults and why conviction rates still remain low. Researchers have previously linked low reporting and conviction rates (Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005; RCEW, 2017) with the presence of rape myths and victim blaming attitudes within the judicial system (Leverick, 2020). Although the quantitative findings within this study were low and social desirability may have concealed participants' honest opinions (Lavrakas, 2008; Vesely and Klöckner, 2020), overall this research suggests that when asked to justify or explain an allocation of blame within a sexual violence scenario, victim blaming attitudes and rape myths were common. Previous research proposed that this may be down to societies' deeply entrenched rape culture, where blame is often removed from the perpetrator and shifted onto the victim, creating an environment that condones rape (Johnson, 2017), where victims are discouraged from reporting. Furthermore, supporting previous research (Taylor and Joudo, 2005; Ellison and Munro, 2009), this study found evidence that perceived victim credibility is altered depending on how a victim reacts to sexual violence. It also showed that some participants clearly hold the belief that the "correct" and "natural" response to rape is to actively resist, showing a clear lack of understanding about other responses to sexual violence, particularly when the victim suffers from tonic immobility. As most members of the public are potential jurors, holding these embedded rape myths and

victim blaming attitudes can negatively influence the criminal justice system and thus reporting and conviction rates. Therefore, it is essential that society is better educated on both rape culture and common reactions to trauma, with the hope to create a fair judicial system where justice is served and rape is no longer excused or tolerated.

The final chapter will offer a succinct summary of the main points of this study, bringing together what was learnt and what can be inferred from the evidence (McNeil, 2006). The conclusion will also offer implications for future research and present any contributions the research has to the sexual violence field.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore victim blaming and rape myth acceptance, paying particular attention to reactions to sexual violence, with a focus on tonic immobility. The objectives were to see whether allocation of blame and naturality altered depending on how the victim responded to sexual violence and whether rape myth acceptance scores affected victim blaming attitudes. This was attempted through a mixed method study using an online survey, where participants completed quantitative questions on rape myths and sexual violence vignette scenarios. They also completed a qualitative question for each vignette, focusing on the blame they assigned to the victims of the scenarios.

Overall, the study produced a number of interesting results. The statistical analysis found that those who score higher in rape myth acceptance assign more blame to victims, and that of the individuals participating, males scored higher than females in rape myth acceptance. This supported previous evidence that suggests rape myths and victim blaming are linked phenomena (Grubb and Turner, 2012) and that men may score higher in rape myth acceptance due to the patriarchal structure of society, where women are seen as subordinate to men (Chasteen, 2001). Furthermore, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not assign more blame to the victim who suffered from tonic immobility than any of the other responses to sexual violence, nor did they view it as the least natural. In fact, the victim who ran away was assigned the most blame even though running away was viewed as the most natural, which may have been down to the differences in the vignette scenarios (Flaskerud, 1979) instead of the differences in the victims' reactions to trauma, going against previous literature that proposes rape victims are blamed less if they actively resist (Clay-Warner and McMahon-Howard, 2009). However, findings did suggest that

participants assigned the least blame to the victim who fought and viewed running away and then fighting as the most natural, suggesting that, in line with the Classic Rape Theory (Williams, 1984), victims may have been blamed less because participants deemed their response to sexual violence as a “reasonable” and “natural” response, providing evidence through active resistance (Randall, 2010). Finally, the statistical analysis found that those who scored higher in the subscale “It wasn’t really rape” assigned more blame to victims who suffered from tonic immobility, suggesting participants’ rape supportive attitudes influence the blame they assign to victims based on how they react during an assault.

Although the majority of the quantitative scores were low, when participants were asked to justify and explain the blame they assigned to each victim, rape myths and victim blaming attitudes were common. The discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative data is thought to be due to social desirability, where individuals initially answered in a way they deemed socially “correct”, even when it did not reflect their true opinions (Lavrakas, 2008). However, when participants justified their answers, their initial low scores did not match their use of rape myths and victim blaming attitudes, supporting the hypothesis. The thematic analysis identified five main themes within the qualitative data; “expectation and prevention”, “she wasn’t to know”, “identifying and assigning blame”, “certainty of outcome”, and “(natural) responses to trauma”. The findings found that although participants used more victim blaming statements when the victim responded in a “classic” way to the violence, going against previous literature, the language used was typically more compassionate and sympathetic towards the victims who actively resisted. This supports past research that suggests blame is minimised when individuals deem a response to sexual violence to be “reasonable” and “correct” (Williams, 1984; Ellison and Munro, 2009; Randall, 2010). Furthermore, when identifying and assigning blame, it appeared as though participants were not conforming to victim blaming. However, a deeper analysis showed that contrasting conjunctions were used to add a contradicting second clause, which led participants to undermine the assault, blame the victim and endorse rape myths, making their original and socially desirable statements redundant. Similarly to other literature, it was suggested that this was because of rape culture, where it has become the “norm” to trivialise and excuse rape, preventing a long-lasting solution to sexual violence from emerging (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, 2005; Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas and Bollinger, 2009). This research showed that some participants did recognise that everyone has a different response to trauma and that all reactions are normal. However, the language used to determine the severity of the crimes differed depending on how the victim reacted to sexual violence, with clear and direct language being used towards the victim who physically resisted and unclear and indirect language used for the victim who froze. Furthermore, findings showed that several participants viewed physical or active resistance as the only “natural” ways to respond to trauma, with some implying they see fight as a default response, flight

and faint as alternative responses, and freeze as “unnatural” and “confusing”, showing a clear lack of understanding surrounding tonic immobility reactions to trauma.

This study has found there is a clear link between rape myths and victim blaming attitudes, with distinct differences in the blame assigned to victims based on how they react to sexual violence. The research contributes much needed knowledge to the sexual violence field through the exploration of tonic immobility and proposes the negative impacts that endorsing rape myths and victim blaming can have on the judicial system, especially its influence on jurors, reporting and conviction rates. The results from this study indicate that our deeply entrenched rape culture is still present in today’s society and victim blaming attitudes remain rife, especially when discussing reactions to sexual abuse. Therefore, this shows a vital need to educate the public on common reactions to trauma, by dispelling rape myths, eliminating victim blaming attitudes and holding perpetrators accountable, with the hope to break the impenetrable wall of silence surrounding sexual violence (Witherspoon, 2009).

This study has opened several avenues for future research. Expanding the scope of this study outside of the university setting and into the wider community may be beneficial, to gather a broader range of data on individuals’ perceptions of reactions to sexual violence. Furthermore, having a bank of interchangeable vignette scenarios may also help with determining whether blame allocation differs due to the victims’ reaction or the scenario itself. This research could also aim to focus more specifically on tonic immobility, as this was clearly the reaction that led to the most confusion amongst participants, making for some potentially interesting future research. Overall, this research has contributed further knowledge to the sexual violence field, attempting to fill current gaps in research, with the hope to highlight trends and biases that are still preserving violence against women in today’s society.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Invite

Dear Student,

I would like to make you aware of a research project that you are invited to take part in. Please see below a message from the researcher Sophie Heritage.

Hi All,

My name is Sophie and I am a master's student on the MA in Understanding Domestic and Sexual Violence at the University of Worcester. I am inviting you to take part in my piece of research on victim blaming, rape myths and sexual violence. **This is voluntary and you will not be penalised if you do not take part.** The survey will involve demographic questions, a questionnaire on rape myths and then some scenario-based questions. This should take around 10-15 minutes to complete.

If you would like to take part, please click on the link below:
https://ucw.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/sh-dissertation-project

The survey will be open from **Friday 16th April 2021 – Sunday 9th May 2021.**
All answers are anonymous and confidential. Please answer all questions with honesty.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me at: hers1_20@uni.worc.ac.uk

Thank you,
Sophie

Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire

What gender do you identify as?

Male	**Female**	**Transman**	**Transwoman**
Non-binary	**Other**	**Prefer not to say**	

How old are you?

Under 18	**18 - 24**	**25 - 34**	**35 - 44**
45 - 54	**55+**	**Prefer not to say**	

What is your ethnic group?

White	Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	Asian or Asian British
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	Other ethnic group	Prefer not to say

What sexuality do you identify as?

Heterosexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Pansexual
Asexual	Other	Prefer not to say	

What subject area is your course in at the University of Worcester?

Education	Business	Sport
Other	Not a student at the University of Worcester	

What year of study are you in?

First year	Second year	Third year
Postgraduate	PHD	Other

Appendix C: uIRMA

Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon and Farmer, 2011).

	1 = strongly disagree	2 = somewhat disagree	3 = neither agree nor disagree	4 = somewhat agree	5 = strongly agree
If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand.					

When women go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.					
If a woman goes to a room alone with a man at party, it is her own fault if she is raped.					
If a woman acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble.					
When women get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear.					
If a woman initiates kissing or hooking up, she should not be surprised if a man assumes she wants to have sex.					
When men rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex.					
Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.					
Rape happens when a man's sex drive goes out of control.					
If a man is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally.					
It shouldn't be considered rape if a man is drunk and didn't realise what he was doing.					
If both people are drunk, it can't be rape.					
If a woman doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it can't be considered rape.					

If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.					
A rape probably doesn't happen if a woman doesn't have any bruises or marks.					
If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.					
If a woman doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape.					
A lot of times, women who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it.					
Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men.					
A lot of times, women who say they were raped often led the man on and then had regrets.					
A lot of times, women who claim they were raped have emotional problems.					
Women who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape.					

Appendix D: Vignette Scenarios

Vignette 1

Isabelle was at a house party with her friends. Her old school friend Jack approached her and they began talking about 'the good old times', but it was hard to hear each other over the music. Jack suggested they go upstairs into one of the empty bedrooms to talk. Whilst upstairs, Jack tried to kiss Isabelle. Isabelle explained she had a boyfriend and asked him to stop. Jack persisted to try and kiss Isabelle and then physically pushed her onto the bed, took down her knickers and began to have sexual intercourse with her. Isabelle

repeatedly said no whilst trying to fight him off. Isabelle finally managed to kick Jack backwards and get away.

1. **Is Isabelle responsible for what happened?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

2. **Is Jack responsible for what happened?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

3. **Did Isabelle have any control over the situation?**

None		Some		A lot
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

4. **How much is Isabelle to blame for how she reacted?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

- **Please can you explain your answer to this question.**

5. **Was Isabelle's reaction to fight a natural response?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Vignette 2

Melissa and Jason have been married for 2 years. They both have busy jobs and don't get much time together, however have?? both booked some annual leave to go away on holiday. Whilst on holiday, Jason and Melissa had sex several times. By the last day Melissa didn't feel very well and suspected she had food poisoning. Whilst tucked up in bed, Jason got on top of Melissa and began touching and kissing his wife. Melissa told him to stop and explained that she didn't feel well. Jason pleaded with her that he wanted to have some fun on their last night away. Melissa told Jason to get into bed and to get some sleep as they had to get up early to get to the airport. As Jason pulled back the cover to get into bed, he realised that Melissa was naked and asked whether that was for him. She explained she felt hot and asked him to turn the light off and get some sleep. At this point Jason got on top of Melissa again. Melissa froze as he began to have sexual intercourse with her. When Jason was finished he smiled at Melissa and turned the light off.

6. **Is Melissa responsible for what happened?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

7. **Is Jason responsible for what happened?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

8. **Did Melissa have any control over the situation?**

None		Some		A lot
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

9. **How much is Melissa to blame for how she reacted?**

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

- **Please can you explain your answer to this question.**

10. Was Melissa's reaction to freeze a natural response?

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Vignette 3

Lisa is at a works do. She is staying in a hotel overnight with her work colleagues and decided to share a room with two of her female work friends. Lisa had a few drinks and decided to ask her colleague Mark for a dance. Mark agreed and they danced until they were dizzy and even shared a few kisses. Mark asked Lisa if she would like to stay in his room tonight, which she said she would. When they got to the room, they began to kiss and Mark tried to take things further. Lisa said she didn't want to sleep with him straight away and asked to cuddle instead. Lisa fell asleep very quickly and awoke to Mark on top of her having sexual intercourse. Lisa was alarmed and ran straight back to the room she was meant to stay in.

11. Is Lisa responsible for what happened?

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

12. Is Mark responsible for what happened?

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

13. Did Lisa have any control over the situation?

None	Some	A lot

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

14. How much is Lisa to blame for how she reacted?

Not at all Somewhat Very Much

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

- **Please can you explain your answer to this question.**

15. Was Lisa's reaction to run away a natural response?

Not at all Somewhat Very Much

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Vignette 4

Sally and Michael have been dating for the past month. They have been getting on well and Michael has asked Sally if she would like to stay the night at his. Sally agreed and told Michael she was looking forward to it. When Sally arrived at Michaels, he took her straight to his bedroom and began to make out with her on the bed. Sally stopped him and explained that she didn't want to sleep with him that night. Michael said this wasn't his intention and they went downstairs to watch TV. Later on, when it was time for bed, Michael tried to become more intimate with Sally. Again Sally said she didn't want to, but Michael was not understanding this time. Michael became annoyed with her and told Sally to "stop being so frigid". Sally got upset and tried to leave but Michael dragged her back into the bed. Sally fainted as he began to have sexual intercourse with her. She stayed unconscious during the intercourse which lasted several minutes. When he was finished, he shook her and she regained consciousness. Michael smiled and told her he was happy she changed her mind.

16. Is Sally responsible for what happened?

Not at all Somewhat Very Much

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

17. Is Michael responsible for what happened?

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

18. Did Sally have any control over the situation?

None		Some		A lot
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

19. How much is Sally to blame for how she reacted?

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

- **Please can you explain your answer to this question.**

20. Was Sally's reaction to faint a natural response?

Not at all		Somewhat		Very Much
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Appendix E: Full Ethical Approval

University of Worcester

MASTERS DISSERTATION PROPOSAL FORM

For consideration of proposals for Dissertations within the Taught Courses Regulatory Framework

Please type, or write clearly on this form and complete all sections and ensure you have completed and attached the Ethics Check List

Student Name	Sophie Heritage	**Student No**	200134231
No. of modules completed to date including AP(E)L/APL		**Your University email address**	
Correspondence Address		**Home Tel. No.**	
		Home email address	
		Work Tel. No.	
Proposed date you intend to start your Dissertation?			

Please enter the module code in the box provided and state whether you will be taking a 2, 3 or 4 module Study. If you wish to study your Dissertation over 4 modules you must first check your Course Leader you are eligible for this option.

Is this a revised proposal?			

I will be studying a	**2 Module (40 – Credit) Dissertation**		**Module Code**
Please select one	**3 Module (60 – Credit) Dissertation**		
	4 Module (80 – Credit) Dissertation		

Dissertation Topic: Please indicate the proposed title of your study (Maximum 30-words)

Why didn't she fight back? An exploration of victim blaming and rape proclivity through tonic immobility reactions to sexual violence.

OUTLINE OF PROPOSED DISSERTATION
Context
Relationship to established scholarship
Theoretical/methodological framework
Methods – data collection and analysis

Past research indicates that victim blaming in cases of sexual assault and rape are prevalent in today's society (Bieneck and Krahe, 2011) and that victims are often blamed on how they react during an assault (Nielsen, 2019). It is known that 'fight' or 'flight' are common reactions to rape, yet the least familiar and most frequent reaction to rape is 'freezing', otherwise known as tonic immobility (RCS, 2017). Tonic immobility in humans has been described as a catatonic-like state where individuals experience an 'involuntary, temporary state of motor inhibition in response to situations involving intense fear' (Marx ***et al.,*** 2008), therefore it is not surprising that this state has been frequently linked to sexual assault, as sexual assault and rape have been labelled as one of the most fearful and traumatic experiences a person can be exposed to (Chivers-Wilson, 2006). One study revealed, using the Tonic Immobility Scale, that out of 298 women survivors, 70% reported significant tonic immobility, with 48% reporting extreme tonic immobility during a sexual assault (Möller, Söndergaard and Helström, 2017), showing the sheer likelihood to freeze during rape.

This natural neurological reaction to sexual violence has been documented thoroughly on almost every rape crisis website in the United Kingdom (RCEW, 2021; RCS, 2017), highlighting the reaction as common, instinctive and 'normal'. Yet, there is limited research into the effects of believing the misconception that tonic immobility isn't a 'valid' reaction to sexual violence and how this can have major implications within society, such as on survivor's recovery and predicting perpetration. Research has also failed to look at whether individuals allocate more blame to victims who freeze in comparison to those who fight, flee or faint. Therefore, my study aims to fill this gap in the literature, proposing that individuals will assign more blame to victims who freeze because they will view freezing as a conscious decision not to take action to prevent abuse from happening, compared to those victims who actively try to fight or flee, or those who faint, which is out of the victim's control. I also predict that individuals who assign more blame to victims who freeze during an assault, will have a higher rape myth acceptance and be more likely to commit rape if there were no consequences. I want to highlight that believing this myth and thus victim blaming, can predict potential perpetration, showing the need for more education around common reactions to sexual violence, hopefully contributing to changing the narrative about freezing, consent and sexual violence, eliminating some of the shame and guilt survivors feel, whilst adding knowledge to the field.

In order to test the theory that individuals who endorse rape myths will assign more blame to victims who experience tonic immobility than other reactions, and score higher in rape proclivity, it is important to gain a large, generalisable sample of participants, where the study can easily be replicated, to capture societies view. Therefore, these factors, along with the study being exclusively quantitative, means that my research falls under the positivist paradigm. Positivist ontology states that the world exists independently of us and can therefore epistemologically take a scientific approach to understanding human behaviour through observation and reason (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). However, although it is vitally important to gain data on the patterns and trends within society, my study also encompasses ideas of patriarchy and the oppression of women. Therefore, I will also be combining a feminist approach to my study as feminist research aims to highlight and overcome gender injustice and social inequalities (Hundleby, 2011). Although the majority of feminist theories advocate the

Continue onto next page if required

importance of qualitative methods, feminist empiricists also emphasise the advantages of using quantitative, scientific methods to represent progressive concerns such as sexual violence, thus aiming to highlight the scale and prevalence of the issues at hand (Hughes and Cohen, 2010; Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991).

Given that my study is quantitative, I will be conducting vignette scenarios and two questionnaire scales via an online survey. Online surveys allow us to reach a wide range of individuals from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds in a relatively short amount of time, at a low cost (Wright, 2005). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I made the conscious decision to design a study that was easily accessible to all from the safety of their own homes, that was non-invasive and didn't inherent risks around vulnerability, anonymity and distress. I deem it relevant to provide an anonymous and confidential survey, to help eliminate social desirability and capture genuine beliefs on rape myths, tonic immobility, victim blaming and rape proclivity. Participants will complete the 22-item Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon and Farmer, 2011) to obtain their agreement to rape myths. This measurement was chosen due to the scale's sufficient internal consistency and reliability (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Next participants will be provided with four vignettes on sexual violence scenarios, where the victim will either fight, flee, freeze or faint. Participants will be asked a series of questions to assess the amount of blame participants assign to the victim and perpetrator of each scenario. Finally, participants will be presented with the Likelihood to Rape Scale (Malamuth, 1981), one of the most frequently used indicators for rape proclivity, which consists of one question. This question simply asks participants if they would commit rape if they knew for certain they would not be apprehended. All three sections will use a 5 point Likert scale to answer the statements. Likert scales are one of the most commonly used scales, where I, as the researcher, will be able to measure the strength of their acceptance, blame and rape proclivity in more depth than simple "yes" or "no", "agree" or "disagree" answers (Jamieson, 2004). Once the data collection has finished, I will complete a statistical analysis to make sense of, and draw inferences from, my data (Allen and Seaman, 2007). This technique is considered a rigorous way of understanding a large amount of data, that can be presented coherently and with justification, filling the crucial gap between information and knowledge (McGraw-Taylor, 2007).

Signed	Sophie Heritage	**Date**	10/01/2021

Section B: Checklist

		Yes	No
1.	Does your proposed research involve the collection of data from living humans?	☐	☐
2.	Does your proposed research require access to secondary data or documentary material of a sensitive or confidential nature from other organisations?	☐	☐
3.	Does your proposed research involve the use of data or documentary material which (a) is not anonymised **and** (b) is of a sensitive or confidential nature **and** (c) relates to the living or recently deceased?	☐	☐
4.	Does your proposed research involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent?	☐	☐
5.	Will your proposed research require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?	☐	☐
6.	Will financial inducements be offered to participants in your proposed research beyond reasonable expenses and/or compensation for time?	☐	☐
7.	Will your proposed research involve collection of data relating to sensitive topics?	☐	☐
8.	Will your proposed research involve collection of security-sensitive materials?	☐	☐
9.	Is pain or discomfort likely to result from your proposed research?	☐	☐
10.	Could your proposed research induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?	☐	☐
11.	Will it be necessary for participants to take part in your proposed research without their knowledge and consent at the time?	☐	☐
12.	Does your proposed research involve deception?	☐	☐
13.	Will your proposed research require the gathering of information about unlawful activity?	☐	☐
14.	Will invasive procedures be part of your proposed research?	☐	☐
15.	Will your proposed research involve prolonged, high intensity or repetitive testing?	☐	☐
16.	Does your proposed research involve the testing or observation of animals?	☐	☐
17.	Does your proposed research involve the significant destruction of invertebrates?	☐	☐
18.	Does your proposed research involve collection of DNA, cells, tissues or other samples from humans or animals?	☐	☐
19.	Does your proposed research involve human remains?	☐	☐
20.	Does your proposed research involve human burial sites?	☐	☐
21.	Will the proposed data collection in part or in whole be undertaken outside the UK?	☐	☐
22.	Does your proposed research involve NHS staff or premises?	☐	☐
23.	Does your proposed research involve NHS patients?	☐	☐

If the answers to any of these questions change during the course of your research, you must alert your Supervisor/Tutor immediately.

Section C: Full Application

Who are your participants/subjects? (if applicable)
"No matter how complicated the research, or how brilliant the researcher, the public always offer unique, invaluable insights" (Staley, 2009). For my research project, I plan to use the general public (adults) as my participants for my online survey, to gain a wider societal view of the issues on victim blaming, tonic immobility and rape proclivity. This means that I will not be targeting a specific group of participants who need to meet stringent eligibility requirements to take part. The only factor that participants will be restricted to is whether or not they are over the age of 18. This survey will only be looking for participants 18 or over due to the sensitive nature of the discussion topic in hand. Using the general public will hopefully mean my study can be generalisable and reach a large sample of potential participants in a short amount of time. I will not be limiting my online survey by race, sexual orientation, location or gender, however these demographics will feature as questions within my survey to gain a better understanding of the participant, without providing identifiable information, making the participants anonymous. Finally, being a voluntary and anonymous quantitative survey means that people who may not have the confidence, finances or time to take part in an identifiable and qualitative study, can still have their say on sensitive topics such as sexual violence, meaning there is the potential to reach a more diverse group of participants from different economic, cultural or social backgrounds (Involve, 2005) and a larger sample of participants.
How do you intend to recruit your participants? (if applicable) This should explain the means by which participants in the research will be recruited. If any incentives and/or compensation (financial or other) is to be offered to participants, this should be clearly explained and justified.

The prevalence and popularity of social media is ever growing, and with this, so is the appeal to use social media as a recruitment tool (Gelinas *et al.,* 2017). I intend to recruit my participants via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, where I will comply with their terms and conditions, with the aim to reach a wide range of diverse individuals who will represent the 'general public'. However, by using social media as a recruitment tool, many ethical issues arise (Jones, 2011) that I plan to limit or eradicate, which I will discuss further down in this application.

As a quantitative study, I am hoping to gather a large sample of participants, which will validate my data as generalisable to the public, covering a vast range of individuals from different backgrounds. I am not aiming to recruit a specific number of participants as this study is open to the general public. Recruiting my participants via social media also means I run the risk of only reaching a small amount of individuals from my localised area. However, I am hoping that with the use of the 'share' function, that my network of individuals on social media will share with their wider network and so on, reaching a varied and unknown-to-me range of individuals.

How will you gain informed consent/assent? (if applicable)

Where you will provide an information sheet and/or consent form, please append this. If you are undertaking a deception study or covert research please outline how you will debrief participants below

For my research project I will provide a participant information sheet at the beginning of the survey, where I will outline the purpose of the research, what will happen if they agree to participate, the benefits and risks to taking part, what I will do with their data, how long I will keep their data for, that the survey is voluntary and finally that they have the right to withdraw from the survey at any time by closing the browser page down without submitting, but that once they have submitted their responses, they will be unable to withdraw their data due to participation being anonymous, in line with the University of Worcester policy (UOW, 2019). The information sheet intends to make it clear to the participant exactly what they are taking part in.

Gaining informed consent is paramount as it provides participants with sufficient information for them to make a voluntary decision regarding whether or not to participant in a research study (Nijhawan *et al.*, 2013). The consent form will follow the participant information sheet and ask several questions on whether the participant understands the information about the project, what they need to do and how their data will be stored and analysed. Both sheets will conclude with a tick box signifying the participant consents and understands the research study.

Confidentiality, anonymity, data storage and disposal (if applicable)

Provide explanation of any measures to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of data, including specific explanation of data storage and disposal plans.

Confidentiality and anonymity are vital ethical practices designed to protect the privacy of human participants while collecting, analysing and reporting data (Coffelt, 2017). Having these agreed practices in place form a contract between the researcher and participant which becomes a legal obligation with GDPR (2016) and under the Data Protection Act (2018). Within my study, there will be no identifiable data, therefore I do not need to store my data in a locked cabinet, however, as good practice, I will keep all electronic data on an encrypted USB for safe keeping. My informed consent forms will be part of the survey and will consist of a tick box to make sure the participant has read and understood what they are taking part in. I will not be gathering signed consent forms or any information that includes the participants name, age, date of birth and so on, therefore I will confidently be able to preserve the participants right to confidentiality and anonymity. In terms of disposal plans, the University of Worcester will store my anonymised data for a maximum of 10 years, in line with their data storage procedures (UOW, 2019).

How specifically are you working to mitigate the transmission of COVD-19?

To mitigate the transmission of COVID-19, I have changed my research project to an exclusively online format where my survey will be easily accessible to participants from the safety of their own homes. I have consciously decided to undertake a quantitative study as I feel individuals are more likely to participate in a straightforward, less time-consuming and non-invasive study, rather than delve into personal experiences that could leave participants feeling vulnerable in an already unstable time.

Potential risks to participants/subjects (if applicable)

Identify any risks for participants/subjects that may arise from the research and how you intend to mitigate these risks.

There are several risks when conducting research on violence against women (Ruiz-Perez, Plazaola-Castano and Vives-Cases, 2007). However, as my study is not gathering data on participant's personal experiences of sexual violence and is instead looking at the societal views towards victim blaming and rape proclivity, I am vastly reducing the amount of distress and/or vulnerability participants may experience. However, this does not mean that participants won't become distressed or upset during the online survey. Research has begun to recognise that sensitive topics such as sexual violence may involve both benefits, such as relief or a sense of sharing and being listened to, as well as harms, including minor upset, significant distress and re-traumatisation (Appollis *et al*., 2015). Therefore, to help support my participants and to look after their wellbeing, I will provide them with a list of support agencies that they can reach out to if they feel the need to. Normally this would be provided at the end of an online survey, however, as we know the topic of sexual violence can be triggering and distressing to individuals, I will provide contact details for external agencies on each page of the questionnaire so that if the participant wishes to withdraw before they have completed the survey, they are still able to access helplines and referral services as required.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my survey will exclusively be online, therefore there are no physical risks within the community or physical risk assessments that need to be carried out.

Other ethical issues

Identify any other ethical issues (not addressed in the sections above) that may arise from your research and how you intend to address them.

One ethical concern about using social media as a recruitment tool is the idea of public" or "private" information (Townsend and Wallace, 2015). Typically, if participants shared a research study online that targets specific participants, it would become common knowledge that this individual met the requirements for that study, potentially exposing sensitive information that the participant may not be prepared for. Within the context of social media recruitment, respect for privacy is vitally important given the vast amount of personal information available online and how easily it can be accessed (Gelinas *et al.,* 2017). To remove this ethical concern, the only 'qualifying' requirement for my study will be that the participant is over 18, meaning the information within the survey will not focus on personal experiences or expose any sensitive information about the participant if they were to share the survey with their wider network.

The ethical issue of using social media recruitment that I feel I cannot control, limit or eradicate is that my online survey is being answered by the appropriate audience. When publishing my study on social media, I intend to make it clear via a disclaimer that the survey contains sensitive discussion topics and is only to be completed by people 18 and over. However, this is not a guarantee, therefore I will be looking out for anomalies within the data and will provide 'under 18' as a demographic option, so I can confidently eliminate these responses from my data.

As my survey is anonymous, issues such as safeguarding concerns and breaches of confidentiality do not need to be addressed, as participants are unidentifiable.

Published ethical guidelines to be followed

Identify the professional code(s) of practice and/or ethical guidelines relevant to the subject domain of the research.

University of Worcester. (2018) '*Ethics Policy.'* Available at: https://www.worcester.ac.uk/research/discover-our-research/research-integrity-and-ethics.aspx (Accessed: 7 January 2021).

World Health Organisation. (2017) '*Code of Conduct for Responsible Research.'* Available at: *https://www.who.int/about/ethics/code-of-conduct-responsible-research.pdf* (Accessed: 7 January 2021).