'Well I've done that to myself': A feminist exploration of consent, blame and the 'grey areas' of sexual violence

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Abstract

In recent years, worldwide proliferation of the #MeToo movement has brought the issue of sexual violence against women and girls to the forefront of public consciousness. Increased awareness has exposed complexities associated with so-called 'grey areas' of sexualised violence, where gendered and heteronormative consent scripts blur the lines between consent and coercion. Of concern in the present study is how these complexities contribute to a socio-cultural climate that blames women for the violence perpetrated against them. This analysis examines 7 women's views surrounding the normative boundaries of consent, and subsequent victim-blaming of women. Two focus group interviews were thematically analysed through a feminist social constructionist framework, resulting in the construction of two interconnected themes: The Gatekeepers of Sexual Activity and The Unwritten Rules of Consent. Findings provide nuanced understandings of specific 'rules' and roles that govern women's behaviour in the 'grey areas'. These findings support the notion that for many women, negotiating consent continues to be a constrained process, governed by gendered ideology and harmful constructions of blame.

Key Words: *#MeToo, Consent, Sexual Violence, Feminism*

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Introduction

In recent years, worldwide proliferation of the #MeToo movement propelled the scale of sexual violence against women back into public consciousness (Fileborn and Phillips, 2019). Millions of people (primarily, though not exclusively, women) began to disclose stories, not just of criminal acts of rape, but of a wide spectrum of non-consensual and coercive sexual experiences. In turn, the movement sparked renewed public discourse and continued academic scrutiny surrounding the normative boundaries of sexual consent, coercion and the so-called 'grey areas' between.

In feminist literature, this term 'grey area', and the real-life experiences it refers to, are a matter of contest and debate (Hindes and Fileborn, 2020). Gunnarsson (2018:7) encapsulates the term as sexual experiences which occur 'at the murky interface of consent and coercion'. She suggests that, because consensual sex and sexual assault are discursively framed as dichotomous, binary experiences, there is little room for the recognition complex, non-binary experiences that do not fit in these categories. This has led to a salient problem with harmful lived consequences, wherein women have difficulty in both recognising, and resisting, coercive behaviours perpetrated against them (Conroy et al., 2015: Kelley, 1988). Thus, this research will follow Gunnarsson (2018) and the term 'grey area' will be used to encapsulate women's unwanted and non-consensual experiences that fall between the normative and discursive boundaries of consent and coercion.

Extant research paints an uncomfortable picture as to how women can be pressured into unwanted sexual encounters. Despite the gender and sexual diversity of contemporary Western societies, heteronormative ideologies remain an organising feature that shapes how (some) women and men vary in conceptualing and negotiating consent (Brady et al., 2018; Conroy et al., 2022; Sowersby et al., 2022). Traditional ideals of heterosexuality have typically positioned men as 'active' seekers of sex (Cense et al., 2018). Meanwhile, women have historically been positioned as 'passive', bearing an onus of communication, and choosing whether to acquiesce to male advances (Brady et al., 2018; Hust et al., 2014). Research suggests that some men's use of pressure is often normalised within contemporary heterosexual relating (Brady et al., 2018: Hindes and Fileborn, 2020). Indeed, Cense et al.'s (2018) interviews of 68 young men and women explored how their sexual negotiations were shaped by social norms. Emergent narratives identified continued

relevance of heteronormative gender roles, and a divergence of understanding behaviours which constitute a partner's willing consent. Of particular concern, was the frequency with which young men detailed past experiences of pressuring and coercing women into sex, whilst seeming unaware of the ways in which their behaviours may have been sexually aggressive and harmful (Cense et al., 2018).

Broader social norms also pressure women into unwanted sexual encounters. Research has shown how women engage in unwanted sex for a variety of reasons, including: to maintain romantic relationships (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008), an expectation to fulfil a male partners desire (Conroy et al., 2015), and to avoid rape and further violence (Kelly, 1998; Gunnarsson, 2018; Lilley et al., 2022), leading to a cultural scaffold in which it is difficult for women to refuse unwanted sexual advances. Adding complexity to these issues are progressive changes in discourses surrounding female empowerment and sexuality. In recent decades, feminist advances have contributed to more liberal ideologies of female sexuality, with scholars Farvid and Braun (2014:126) describing a collective female identity that is more 'assertive, independent and sexually liberated'. Yet, despite these gains, concerning prevalence statistics (CSEW, 2020), and the millions of voices that emerged in the wake of #MeToo indicate the concerning levels to which women continue to be pressured and coerced by men. Thus, while the ideological 'sexually assertive woman' (Gill, 2007:74) is, in theory, empowered to refuse unwanted advances, for many women this process is not entirely free or unconstrained. Of concern in the present study is how an intersection of these norms constructs the so-called 'grey area' between consent and coercion and, as a result, contribute to a sociocultural climate which unduly blames women for the violence perpetrated against them (Fray et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

Victim-blaming, originally coined by Ryan (1971), refers to a normative, often unconscious transference of blame from the perpetrator of a crime to a victim. This phenomenon is not unique to sexualised violence, however the way in which women are routinely blamed for male violence is a form of gender inequality central to feminist activism (Boduszek et al., 2017; Eagly et al., 2012). Positivist psychological inquiry has contributed understanding of why blame can be attributed to survivors. One dominant theory is Rape Myth Endorsement (Burt, 1980), which encapsulates stereotyped, prejudicial and false beliefs about women, sexual violence and

perpetrators. Of salience in the present context is the rape myth: 'she didn't say no' (McMahon and Farmer, 2011); a problematic misconception that has been evidenced to justify the use of pressure, intimidation, and coercion (Cense et al., 2018).

Feminist-constructionist explanations likewise contribute knowledge, with research demonstrating how intersections of gendered ideology, power imbalance, and prescriptive social norms can lead to negative constructions of survivors. Women can be blamed for violence perpetrated against them when they 'transgress' traditional norms of femininity (Cense et al., 2018), with harmful critiques being made about their characters, appearance, and behaviours (see meta review: Gravelin et al., 2019). Victim-blaming messages have become entrenched within (Western) ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), with common narratives of blame purveyed within the media (Hindes and Fileborn, 2019), education systems (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008), legal settings (Willmott et al., 2021; 2017) and thus through normative discourse (Gravelin et al., 2019).

Unsurprisingly, victim-blaming narratives have harmful implications for women, with invalidating responses from support networks often becoming a source of secondary victimisation and trauma (Relyea and Ullman, 2015). Studies show how women use the messages they receive from society to assess whether others will blame them and, consequently, whether they blame themselves (Campell et al., 2001: Ullman, 1999). This can lead to women believe there is something internally, or personally wrong with them (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2011; Miller et al., 2010) which can exacerbate trauma and create barriers to therapeutic recovery (Releya and Ullman, 2015).

When viewed collectively, this research suggests that for many women, negotiating consent is a complex social process, governed by gendered ideology and heteronormative consent scripts. Adding complexity is the so-called 'grey area' between consent and coercion, where gendered divergences of what is and, most importantly, what is not consent make it difficult for women to identify and resist sexually coercive behaviour. Of concern, is how these complexities contribute to a socio-cultural climate which normalises coercion and unduly apportions blame to women. As feminist scholar Code (1995:20) notes: to determine that which needs to be 'criticised, challenged or changed', we must have valid and contextualised knowledge of the oppressions and marginalisation's of women. Thus, continued academic scrutiny is warranted for these issues.

Research Aims:

This study aims to provide a literary contribution that may enhance understanding, facilitate consciousness raising and advocate for social change. To provide useful and contextualised knowledge, it will aim to capture a nuanced understanding of gender norms and social process surrounding consent. This has led to the development of the following research questions:

Research Questions:

a) How do women negotiate the normative boundaries of consent in the 'grey areas' of sexual violence?

b) How is blame constructed in these scenarios?

Research aims:

- Explore nuances of gendered inequality in the 'grey areas' between sexual consent and coercion.
- Enhance understanding of how blame is constructed in such scenarios.
- Provide a literary contribution that may deepen knowledge, facilitate consciousness raising and advocate for social change.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

The feminist epistemological position of this study draws from social-constructionist philosophy concerned by the way individuals are moulded, construct knowledge and draw meaning from the social world (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hare-Musten and Maracek, 1990; 1994). The integration of these stances acknowledges the diversity of women's perspectives and attends to the ways that gender roles are produced through socialisation, cultural context, policies and interaction (Hare-Musten and Maracek, 1994). While the negotiation of consent is underpinned by legal frameworks, in practice it is a social process influenced by gendered ideology (Cense et al., 2018). Thus, a feminist social-constructionist stance can allow for the identification of gendered inequality and victim-blaming norms that have become naturalised and entrenched in contemporary societies.

Design

A qualitative methodology was designed to explore women's constructions of consent and blame in the 'grey areas' of sexual violence. Seven women engaged in two focus groups which involved the use of media prompts surrounding a high-profile case of grey area sexual coercion. The analytic process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was adopted through the epistemological lens of feminist social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hare-Musten and Maracek, 1990; 1994), resulting in the construction of two interconnected themes: The Gatekeepers of Sexual Activity and The Unwritten Rules of Consent.

Participants and Recruitment

Seven women participated in two focus groups. The study was advertised online using the Research Participation Pool at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), and verbally by the researcher to students of MMU. Collectively, these mediums led to the recruitment of 4

participants, who assisted in the recruitment of the following 3 via snowball sampling (Noy, 2008).

Strict inclusion criteria allowed for a homogenous sample; participants were of a narrow age range (20-24), current psychotherapy students of MMU, and self-identified as women. Exclusively exploring women's perspectives was motivated by extant psychological research and the feminist theoretical frame. Gendered divergences in understanding what constitutes sexually coercive behaviour (Cense et al., 2018) suggests that the normative boundaries of consent differ between some women and men. Further, a core aim of this study was to investigate the nuances of gendered inequality and social processes that govern women's negotiation of consent. Thus, this study was exclusively open to women to give voice (McHugh, 2014) to their perspectives and provide useful and contextualised knowledge.

Data Collection

Data were collected via two focus group discussions. The first, (N=4), was conducted in-person within a confidential space at MMU. The second, (N=3), took place online and was video recorded via Microsoft Teams. Online participation was offered as an option to widen the sample pool, increase accessibility, and accommodate for participants who could not attend in-person.

Group-based approaches allow for a non-directive stance whereby participants can identify and generate meaning from issues of importance in their own words; a core value of feminist work (Hennink, 2008). When research seeks to gain an understanding of topics of a sensitive or distressing nature, smaller sample sizes are ethically appropriate (British Psychological Society; BPS: 2021). Thus, discussions were designed to take place with a maximum of 4 participants, and an informal, conversational approach to interviewing was adopted to foster a comfortable environment (Oakley, 1998; McHugh, 2014). Engaging with focus groups can become a source of empowerment for those involved (Leavy, 2013) and can facilitate the consciousness raising of participants (McHugh, 2014) which are necessary the precursors of deepening knowledge and promoting social change. Thus, this method of data collection met the aims of this study and was ethically considerate.

Materials and procedure

Upon arrival, participants were encouraged to ask any final questions before being given an overview of how the discussion would take place. To ensure they were able to provide informed consent, participants were reminded of the sensitive subject nature of the study, and of their continuous right to withdraw (BPS, 2021). They were then guided to read and watch 3 media prompts to introduce the issues of the present study and facilitate discussion.

Discussion prompts were purposively selected and comprised of media coverage surrounding allegations of sexual misconduct levelled against comedian Aziz Ansari. In the wake of #MeToo, this high-profile case sparked media controversy surrounding the normative boundaries of sexual consent and coercion (Fileborn and Phillips, 2019). In an account posted to Babe.net (Way, 2018), a woman under the pseudonym of 'Grace' reported going on a date with Ansari and then back to his home. Here, she alleges he pressured her to perform unwanted sexual acts, detailing how Ansari repeatedly ignored her 'non-verbal cues' (i.e. turning away, passive participation, remaining quiet) (PSHE Association, 2019). Participants firstly read a news article derived from American culture and news organisation, TIME.com (Cooney, 2018), to introduce them to this case study. Before the second media prompt (a text-exchange between Grace and Ansari) (Cooney, 2018) participants were reminded this would expose them to competing arguments of consent and details of sexual assault. At this time, participants were asked if they felt comfortable proceeding with the discussions and were again reminded of their right to withdraw (BPS, 2021).

Participants watched an 8-minute video-clip from American day-time television show; 'The View' (2018). Here, TV presenters debate the allegations against Ansari. This video was an ideal prompt to encourage discussion around themes of blame, given that the TV presenters frequently prescribe to the common rape myth narrative: 'she didn't say no' (McMahon and Farmer, 2011). Narratives such as these conform to heteronormative consent scripts by positioning women as bearing the onus of communication (Hindes and Fileborn, 2019). When taken together, these prompts were considered ideal material to explore the nuances of gender inequality, consent and blame. Following the prompts, discussions were initiated with a broad opening question:

'What are your general thoughts after reading the article and watching the video?'

A full interview schedule was designed to facilitate discussion (Appendix 1), however in both groups the prompts sparked heated debate. At this time, it was decided that a manualized adherence to the schedule may constrain the natural progression of discussion. As such, a non-directive interviewing approach was adopted to respect participants' autonomy to give voice to issues of importance in their own words (Hennick, 2008). Discussions lasted for a duration of 52 and 42 minutes and were video-recorded and transcribed by the researcher for analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analysed following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In reflexive thematic analysis (TA), the subjectivity of the researcher is viewed as valuable rather than problematic aspect of qualitative sensibility (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This stance compliments the functional epistemology (Wilkinson, 1988) of feminist research, by encouraging researchers to reflect upon their worldviews, political positions, and personal experiences that cannot be bracketed. The impact of victim-blaming and gender-based violence is enmeshed within the researcher's professional interests. This comes through their role as a volunteer within a domestic abuse service, and as a research assistant exploring the pervasive impact of victim-blaming narratives within UK rape trials. While this situated perspective may lead some to comment upon the possibility of conducting objective, impartial research (Noble and Smith, 2015), within the present context it is viewed as an asset (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Wilkinson, 1998). This is supported by scholars Brook and Hesse-Bieber (2013), who discuss the feminist values of self-awareness, reflexivity, and having a personal connection to the research.

TA's theoretical flexibility allowed for the analysis to be informed by feminist approaches concerned with 'giving voice' to participants (McHugh, 2014), whilst locating their meaning within wider sociocultural contexts. The researcher became familiarised and immersed in the data,

often re-listening to segments whilst transcribing to get a sense, not just of what participants said, but what this meant. Coding was conducted deductively at the latent level (appendix 2). This orientation refers to a more theory driven approach, in which the research question asked, thus codes developed, reflect conceptual assumptions that the researcher seeks to understand through the dataset. This stance suited the study's theoretical frame, given that data ware analysed through a feminist lens, and with pre-existing conceptual understandings of some content in the data. Theme development was thoroughly conducted and refined over several days, with multiple revisions to ensure rigour (Tobin and Begeley, 2004). This resulted in the construction of two distinct but interconnected themes: The Gatekeepers of Sexual Activity and The Unwritten Rules of Consent.

Ethical Considerations

A meticulous ethical application was developed in accordance with the BPS's (2021) Code of Human Research Ethics. This was submitted to, and granted by, the ethics committee of MMU's Psychology department, through the online application system 'Ethos' (appendix 3). Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, it was made clear during recruitment and within the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) that engaging with this study would involve exposure to potentially distressing information relating to sexual violence against women (BPS, 2021). To mitigate the risk of this study causing distress for participants, there were several exclusion criteria (see PIS: appendix 4) and additional precautions taken by the researcher (see Interview Schedule, appendix 1). Participants engaged in study under pseudonyms to promote confidentiality and were consistently reminded of their right to withdraw (BPS, 2021). Following both discussions, participants were debriefed by the researcher in accordance with the following debrief sheet: (Appendix 5).

Analysis and Discussion

Participants expressed a patterned set of ideas surrounding how women negotiate the normative boundaries of consent when confronted with unwanted sexual advances. Embedded within their

discussions was a clearly articulated narrative of how blame is unduly attributed to women in scenarios where the lines between consent and coercion are 'grey' and blurred. The analytic process of reflexive thematic analysis resulted in two distinct but interconnected themes. *See figure 1.*

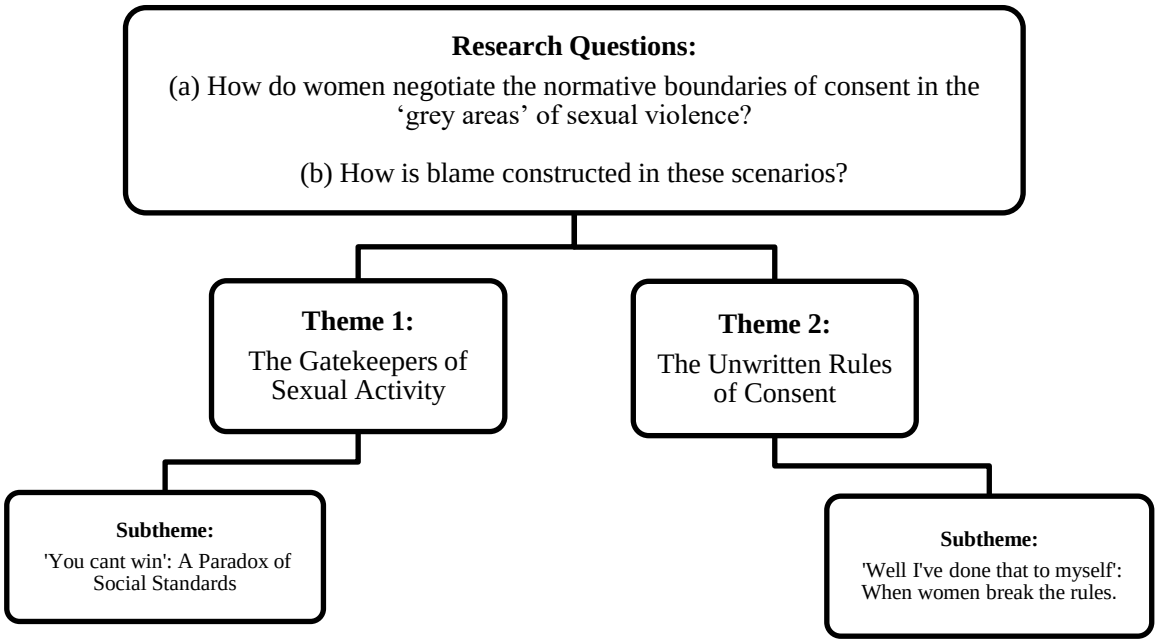

Figure 1: Thematic Map

Theme 1: The Gatekeepers of Sexual Activity

This theme encapsulates a normative social positioning of women as the 'gatekeepers' of sexual activity. While this concept has been previously established in literature (Brady et al., 2018; Cense et al., 2018) this analysis provides additional nuance by capturing how women negotiate the position in the so-called 'grey areas'.

Following the introduction to the case study, Magda reflected upon a normative and implicit pressure placed upon women to gatekeep sex:

> "Is that, in itself, this pedestal we put on women in sexual situations like this? Like where is the responsibility here? Is it on *both* people to be like 'are we both interested in this?' Or is it on one person, arguably women, to say 'I'm in control of when this stops or not'".
>
> (Magda: 365-368)

Magda's quote reflects a normative, often unconscious position of authority she believes is given to women within heteronormative encounters. This quote of many reflects participants views that the equal responsibility of ensuring a partner is willingly consenting is often removed from men. Participants described a social climate in which women are positioned as responsible for putting a stop to unwanted sexual advances, which, when they are unable to do so, often leads to coercive behaviour going unchallenged:

> "Not one for a moment did someone go 'oh but why didn't he stop?'. Why didn't he just, out of his own kindness to the other person, just stop and ask 'are you okay? Can we have sex? Are you alright with this?' Not even once did anyone question this. Not once".
>
> (Sana: 38-40)

Sana's frustration was echoed amongst every woman who participated. When taken with Magda's quote, hegemonic and heteronormative consent scripts are exposed. Here, women are typically viewed as bearing the onus on sexual communication (Brady et al., 2018) and men's use of pressure is normalised (Cense et al., 2018; Coy et al., 2016). Throughout both focus groups, there was a palpable sense of anger and shared injustice at normative blame of women who do not conform to this role. This was often expressed through satirical reproductions of common rape myths (McMahon and Farmer, 2011) that remain prevalent in Western cultures:

> "Magda: It was like a judge and jury type thing. *She* didn't say no, so *she's* the issue.
>
> Jasmine: *Silly* her!"
>
> (Lines 551-552)

Magda and Jasmine's frustrations echo the reductionist nature in which the television presenters discussed the encounter between Grace and Azis. Their oversimplification of the complexities surrounding consent is indicative of normative discourse surrounding 'grey-area' sexual violence. Krieger (2017) argued that such overtly reductionist reasoning, paired with the social norm of shifting blame onto victims, positions sexual violence as 'inevitable'. The reality of this injustice was articulated by participants, all of whom were cognisant and critical of gendered constructions of blame. Drawing from the philosophy of Butler (1990;1994), here, the role gatekeeping is normalised as a sociocultural expectation. With such expectation comes pressure for women and men to 'perform' in accordance gendered norms, which, as these findings demonstrate have become naturalised and entrenched. In the present context, these are enmeshed with traditional, heteronormative consent scripts, thus these findings support feminist assumptions that the negotiation of sexual consent continues to be influenced by gendered ideology (Brady et al., 2018).

Subtheme: 'You can't win': A Paradox of Social Standards

Embedded within participant negotiations of gatekeeping was a deeper, problematic reflection that this position of authority, or 'pedestal' (Magda:365), is fraught with paradoxical social norms. This was constructed as a conflict between an expectation of women to be assertive when communicating with their partners, whilst simultaneously conforming to traditional norms of femininity:

> "Jasmine: Just like, the way in which we're socialised as women. We're always taught to be accommodating to everybody. Not just in sexual relationships but, you know like

> when you voice an opinion and you say like, 'I think' after it […] It's always to not be so threatening […] You downplay yourself as a woman.
>
> Magda: Exactly. If you're assertive, you're threatening".
>
> (Lines: 262-269)

In this exchange, participants described the difficulty of being seen as assertive for fear of negative consequences from their partners. Similar narratives are evident within Pickens and Clarke's (2019) explorations of normative feminine behaviour within heterosexual relationships. These researchers highlight how many women experience hostility from male partners when they 'transgress' the feminine ideals of politeness, often leading to social criticism and blame. Gavey (2005) discusses how such repercussions contribute cultural scaffold that makes it difficult for women refuse unwanted advances, which became evident in the following quote from Amelia:

> "In your *own* head you're conflicted because you're like, 'well I *do* like this person, and I *do* like the date but I'm not ready for that'. But I almost don't want to be rude and be like 'no' because you feel like - I don't know, it's like this underlying pressure".
>
> (Amelia: 109-114)

Amelia describes the implicit pressure attached to negotiating the boundaries of desirable feminine behaviour whilst trying to refuse unwanted advances. This suggests clear limits to gendered equality and female entitlement to assertiveness within (some) heterosexual relating. These findings contrast with contemporary, liberal ideologies of the 'sexually assertive' woman (Farvid and Braun, 2014), and highlights that in some scenarios, negotiating and communicating non-consent remains constrained. Amelia's quote captures an internal conflict of not wanting to engage in sexual activity but simultaneously seeking to 'perform' in the gendered role of being polite and agreeable (Butler, 1990;1984; Pickens and Clarke, 2019). This indicates a fraught position for

women to occupy, which Jasmine expressed as losing either way; 'You can't win'. This precarious negotiation of gendered norms and expectations was consistently voiced by participants. This demonstrates how even women who are critical of the social norm of gatekeeping can experience internal conflict as a corollary of social pressure to be assertive *and* acquiescent to the norms of desirable femininity. This suggests that these roles and expectations remain deeply socially engrained (Butler, 1990;1984).

Theme 2: The Unwritten Rules of Consent

This theme captures participants views surrounding a wider sociocultural context in which the 'gatekeeping' role is situated. When it comes to negotiating consent, participants articulated an implicit, yet strict social climate whereby there are 'unwritten rules' for women to abide by. A central tenet here was that there is a socially acceptable, thus 'correct' way to refuse unwanted sexual advances:

> "[the television presenters] were saying there needs to be a very *clear* saying. If you *say* you don't want to have sex, then that's okay. But if you didn't say *anything?* Well then, he can do whatever he wants to you".
>
> (Sana: 115 – 128)

Sana discusses the television presenters' subscription to a singular, socially acceptable means of refusing unwanted advances. Here, a woman's passive compliance, and/or reliance upon nonverbal communication is positioned as contributing to the 'inevitability' of sexual violence (Krieger, 2017). It also became clear how the binary nature of this rule is used to blame to women: '[satirical] *She* didn't say no, so *she's* the issue' (Magda: 551). Sian discusses how this can become problematic for women when negotiating consent:

> "I think one thing that does more harm than good is the whole saying that 'no means no'. Because I think people take it so literally. It's like the *only* thing that means no is when someone physically says no."
>
> (Sian: 475-478)

Sian captures the essence of a problem commonly reflected in literature. Binary, 'no means no' understandings contribute to a social climate that does not allow for the recognition of nonverbal communication (e.g. turning away, remaining silent, not reciprocating sexual activity)(Whittington, 2021a). This is problematic for a wealth of reasons, with Coy et al., (2016) noting that 'no means no' can lead to scenarios in which some men may unintentionally misread women's signals. This is not a concern solely experienced by women, with studies articulating narratives of young men being conscious and concerned of violating women's boundaries (Cense et al., 2018; Whittington, 2021). That said, some feminist scholars reject the notion of men misinterpreting signals, instead suggesting that this can be used as an excuse for sexually aggressive men pressure women into sexual activity (Hickman and Muelenhard, 1999: O'Byrne et al., 2006). Here it is recognised that both perspectives have truth to them when viewed as different sides of the same story; the ultimate and harmful consequences of which, is women being pressured into unwanted sexual encounters. When taken with the 'rules' constructed in the present theme, this further indicates a gendered divergence in understanding of behaviours which constitute consent, non-consent and sexual coercion.

Subtheme: 'Well I've done that to myself'; When Women Break the Rules

This subtheme captures participants views on negotiating consent in accordance with the 'unwritten rules' above. Embedded within their discussions was an underlying awareness that, were a sexual violation to occur whereby a woman did not 'say no', she would likely be blamed and held responsible. Alice reflected upon the social disapproval and subsequent invalidation of women's use of nonverbal cues to communicate non-consent:

> "It's just kind of seems like sad like to me. I feel like I do believe in like the whole non-verbal cue thing. Like, I feel like that is like a way of consent".
>
> (Alice: 115-117)

Throughout both focus groups, the use of nonverbal communication was consistently constructed as a valid means of refusing unwanted advances. This was articulated despite an underlying awareness that such cues may not always be understood or respected by male partners (Hickman and Muelenhard, 1999). This indicates some participants resistance to gendered norms and expectations when it comes to negotiating consent. However, it also became apparent that while all participants were critical of the unwritten rule of 'saying no', some were also cognisant of a reality in which women *must* be complicit to avoid blame and keep themselves safe:

> "In my in my case, I think I would be more likely to [use nonverbal cues] and be like: 'yeah, no thanks'. Would- would that be seen as assertive? Probably not. And then it's like, would that be made to be my fault if something bad happened? Maybe. I don't know."
>
> (Sian: 254-154)

Sian later went on to describe how normative pressure to be assertive would encroach upon her own understanding of who would be to blame in a hypothetical scenario of grey-area sexual violence:

> "I'm not saying that I am a victim, but if it ever came to the point where I was – it would be like the mindset of 'well I've done that to myself'".
>
> (Sian: 373-375)

Sian's uncomfortable reflection captures a victim-blaming narrative deeply embedded in women's collective consciousness (Gavey, 2005). In the first quote, she makes an objective assessment of whether her use of non-assertive communication would be socially positioned as blameworthy. This indicates an awareness and subtle resistance of normative constructions of blame. However, her second quote captures how pervasive victim-blaming narratives can encroach upon women's own evaluations of whether they are responsible for male violence. Of note here, is that the coercive and/or harmful behaviours of the (hypothetical) perpetrator are absent from Sian's reflection. Such self-blame following an incident of sexual violence is known to have a profoundly harmful impact upon women's psychological wellbeing. Studies show these internal narratives can invalidate feelings of distress and, in some cases, lead to a wealth of negative mental health outcomes (Relyea and Ullman, 2015). When taken with extant research, this subtheme captures the harmful corollaries that come with the social norm of gatekeeping and breaking the 'unwritten rules' of 'no means no'.

Conclusions

This research contributes to extant literature by exploring women's constructions of consent, coercion, and blame in the so-called 'grey areas' of sexual violence. Participants articulated a constrained social context which requires precarious negotiation and, at times, complicity with gendered norms. Two interconnected themes: 'The Gatekeepers of Sexual Activity' and 'The Unwritten Rules of Consent' encapsulate a set of roles and rules which governed women's own perceptions and understanding of these social processes.

The complex ways in which these themes intersect identified a sociocultural climate where women seem to be at a constant risk of 'getting consent wrong'. Here however, it is argued that these competing roles, rules, norms and expectations lead to a lived reality in which it is impossible for women to 'get it right'. The powerlessness of this position was evident within the collective voices of participants and was succinctly captured by Jasmine: 'You Can't win'. Thus, these women's accounts consolidated what has long been understood within feminist academic enquiry: for many women, negotiating consent and refusing unwanted advances remains a constrained experience,

governed by a paradox of gendered norms and power imbalance (Brady et al., 2018; Cense et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, many participants articulated a resistance of these hegemonic roles and rules. This was frequently expressed through satirical, often mocking reproductions of common rape myth narratives, but also more implicitly; every woman involved consistently positioned the use of nonverbal cues as a valid means of communication. A striking feature of the data was an underlying sense of shared anger, injustice, and insider solidarity when discussing the nuances of these inequalities. That said, while most participants were critical of the 'unwritten rule' of 'saying no', others were cognisant of a reality in which they *must* be complicit to keep themselves safe and avoid being blamed. The harmful corollaries that come with 'breaking the rules' or 'getting it wrong' surfaced in some of participants reflections, demonstrating how narratives of blame remain entrenched in some women's collective consciousness (Gavey, 2005), even as they are cognisant and critical of them.

By giving voice to women's views, this analysis exposes the nuances of gendered inequality when it comes to navigating sexual consent. The findings enhance knowledge as to how the so-called 'grey area' contributes to a social climate where women are unduly blamed for the violence, pressure, and coercion perpetrated against them. Thus, this analysis further consolidates how, for many women, negotiating consent remains a fraught experience. Participants critique, shared anger and resistance to the articulated norms highlights the necessary precursors for social change and underscores the importance of addressing these issues to foster a more equitable and just society.

Practical Implications

An area in which these findings may be of salience is within the lobbying of current legislation surrounding consent education in UK schools. As of 2019, progressive changes in government guidance saw that 'Relationships and Sex Education' (RSE) is now mandated in all secondary schools (Department for Education: DfE, 2019). This change brought comprehensive teaching resources for RSE educators, which, to their credit, provide contextual examples of coercion and

the use of non-verbal communication (PSHE Association, 2019). However, while dissemination of these resources represents a proactive and necessary shift in our education systems, to date their implementation in schools is not a statutory requirement (DfE, 2019). When taken with the present findings, and the work of scholar and lobbyist Dr Elsie Whittington, this is cause for concern. Whittington's (2021a) two-year participatory action project demonstrated the benefits of open, honest and in-depth RSE education with young people. By provoking thought around consent, Whittington found that young people were interested and engaged by contextualised examples of boundary setting and viewing consent as a spectrum rather than a binary 'yes/no'. However, Whittington (2021b) also observed that within contemporary practice, many educators remain wary of opening such conversations, instead feeling more comfortable delivering teaching that references legal, thus binary, models of consent. As the present findings demonstrate, such binary understandings are problematic and harmful. Thus, this analysis contributes to, and advocates for, a need to embed mandatory resources and training into the statutory RSE curricula.

There is also potential use for these findings in counselling and psychotherapy practice. By interrogating gendered norms of consent and blame, this study exposes a fraught social positioning which may lead many women to seek counselling. Moreover, these findings contribute to a wealth of extant literature demonstrating how victim-blaming narratives are deeply ingrained within both the public, and women's own collective consciousness (Gavey, 2005). Discussing and interrogating these issues can create space for reflection and new understandings, thus dissemination of this study can inform psychotherapeutic practice and facilitate therapeutic healing for those affected.

Epistemological Reflexivity

The knowledge proffered within this analysis should be viewed through the sociocultural context in which it is situated. Participants were all undergraduate psychotherapy students and of a narrow age range (20-24), thus it is possible these findings reflect more liberal views of consent and sexual violence. This is owed research showing how, compared to those not in education, younger students typically hold more liberal ideologies when it comes to traditional gender norms and navigating sexual relationships (Kajonius and Dåderman, 2014; Messner et al., 2015).

While this research gives voice to women of a certain decade, context and time, it has not captured the viewpoints of a wider generations. These findings therefore miss the ways in which the societal rules and expectations develop, persist and/or may be resisted by women of different ages. Moreover, while this analysis explores the concept of gender, it recognises that this does not operate in isolation from other social identities (Shields, 2008). Future investigations may draw from research that explores these issues through the lens of intersectionality (McHugh, 2014), as such diversified contextualised knowledge is necessary to address the full complement of forces that shape the present issues (Code, 1995). This research is, nonetheless, a useful contribution for thinking about the specifics of this sample and making sense of articulated experiences in a sociocultural contextualised way. Dissemination may facilitate consciousness raising by provoking thought and interrogation of the complexities surrounding sexual consent, coercion, and the so-called 'grey areas' between.

Reflexive Account

At its core, feminist research aims to empower women, expose inequality and advocate for social change (Wilkinson, 1988). Most importantly, the research process must do this in a way that does not replicate or reinforce harmful assumptions and power differentials reflected in wider societies. Thus, through reflexivity, researchers engage in a process of questioning and critically examining the research process (McHugh, 2014), which, in the present context, facilitated a salient learning experience.

In the early stages of conceptualising this project, my understanding of victim-blaming narratives was founded upon positivist theoretical knowledge (McHugh, 2014). This was largely influenced by my role as a research assistant, exploring the pervasive ways in which victim-blaming narratives are used in rape trials to discredit women's testimonies, and lived experiences of trauma. This is an injustice that angers and saddens me, and became a primary motivation for pursuing a related topic for my dissertation. However, as I became more versed with feminist literature, I began to feel a sense of unease with the way I was thinking about these issues. By conceptualising with the content through a positivist lens, I was exploring 'perceptions' of certain 'types' of women, with

'assertive' or 'non-assertive' personality traits. Through a process of reflexivity, I realised that despite my best intentions, I had inadvertently conformed to deficit models that attribute blame and responsibility to women. Through continued reading and supervision, this led me towards the feminist social constructionist paradigm (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hare-Musten and Maracek, 1990; 1994), which more closely aligns with the research aims and my own socio-political values. In this sense, conceptualising and re-conceptualising the epistemological position of this project has been an experiential learning curve that enabled me to develop feminist consciousness, has contributed to a more ethical research process, and has fundamentally shifted my psychological thinking for the better.

A core aim of this study was to provide useful knowledge that may facilitate consciousness raising (McHugh, 2014). I wanted these focus groups to be an opportunity for women to have their voices heard on an issue that I believe affects many, but for reasons that became evident, are not always freely spoken about. However, I was entirely unprepared for how empowering these discussions would be, both for some participants and myself. In both discussions, the case study provoked heated debate that culminated in a sense of anger, shared injustice, and resistance to the norms articulated. This sense of 'happening' (Leavy, 2013) is well documented in literature, with group-based discussions facilitating a form of collective testimony that enables women to interrogate the norms of patriarchal cultures (Brodsky, 1973). Women in both focus groups shared how they'd felt validated and empowered by these discussions. Another sent me an email to share that she was glad to have been part of a 'great and important conversation'. In this sense, conducting this project has been a privilege and hearing these women's insights has emboldened me to grow as a researcher, academic, and feminist. While the present findings indicate a fraught social position (and stark reality) for many women of today, these participant's anger and resistance reflect the necessary precursors of both individual and social change.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

1. **Preamble.**
2. **Signing of consent forms/allocation of pseudonyms.**
3. **Principal Investigator will cover etiquette and introductions:**

- Firstly, I'd just like to thank you for giving your time and coming to the focus group today. I hope that everyone is feeling okay.
- As you can see, you've been given a sticker with your pseudonym on it. To maintain confidentiality for both yourself and others, please be mindful of not asking other people for their names and of sharing your own.
- Before we start, I'm just going to give you a run-down of how the session will go: we'll start by reading through a short news article that includes a case of sexual misconduct involving a high-profile comedian. Part of this article includes a text exchange between the man and woman involved, the day after the encounter – this will be showed to you up on the projector screen. We'll then move on to watch a segment of a daytime TV show discussion where this case is discussed.
- After all of this, we'll take a short break, and then if everyone is still feeling happy and okay to continue, I'll start the recording and we'll begin the discussion.
- I'll be taking more of a peripheral role throughout so the space is entirely yours, however I will interject at times to ask you some questions and I may ask you to elaborate at times.
- We're going to be engaging in a process of discussion, so I'd just like to ask that you be respectful of the other members of the group and try not to talk over each other where possible.
- We're all different and have different values and opinions so I please ask that you try to be mindful that other people may have different thoughts and opinions to you. Please try to treat everyone's ideas with respect and without judgement. There are no right or wrong answers, so please feel free to share your views even if they are different from the other members of the group.
- The subject nature of this discussion has the potential to be sensitive. We'll be taking a break throughout the session, but I'd just like to remind you that you are free at any time to leave. You can do this by simply saying 'I'd like to leave the session'. No questions will be asked of you. If at any time you feel like you may be struggling or this brings up some difficult emotions for you, please feel free to ask for a break at any time.
- I would also just like to gently remind you that this study is not asking you to discuss or share any experiences of sexual violence, if you have had any. I kindly ask you to please refrain from discussing any personal experiences of your own at this time, in the interest of your own care and for the wellbeing of the other people in the group.
- However, if you are feeling that you or someone you know may need support, then please know that you can come and talk to me at the end of the session, and I can direct you to some

support services that may be helpful. These will also be provided on the participant information sheet and the debrief sheet which I'll give to you at the end of the session.

4. **Discussion prompts:**

Prompt 1: TIME News Report https://time.com/5104010/aziz-ansari-affirmative-consent/

Participants will be directed to read through the news article. This will be provided on paper, and they will be invited to make notes/highlight areas if they wish.

Prompt 2: Twitter video detailing text-exchange.
https://twitter.com/babedotnet/status/952551371433238528?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E952551371433238528%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftime.com%2F5104010%2Faziz-ansari-affirmative-consent%2F

The PI will give a **trigger warning** before this clip is played:

- Before we move on to this next video, I just want to check in with how everyone is feeling at this point and whether we're feeling okay to continue.
- This next video will show a text exchange between the woman named Grace and the comedian Aziz, the day after the event took place.
- I just want to make you aware before we watch it, that this clip contains some details of the distress Grace felt during and after their encounter. The term she used in the original article was that she felt 'violated'. There are some descriptions of sexual violence, and also some strong language.
- I'd like to check in and see if we're happy to continue at this point. I also want to remind you again that you do not have to stay and watch the clip if you feel like it might be difficult for you. It is completely okay for you to leave now if you feel like that is what you need, and I fully encourage and support you in doing so.
- If everyone feels okay to continue, then we'll watch this clip now.

Prompt 3: TV Show panel debate. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6eGhCetjBQ**

After this clip, the PI will invite the participants to take a short break. If participants feel comfortable to continue, the PI will start the recording and the discussion will begin.

5. Discussion

Questions: (Prompted on projector screen).

1. What are your general thoughts after reading the article and watching the video?
2. Can you please tell me about what 'assertiveness' means to you in relation to sexual consent?
3. How do you feel about how the women under the pseudonym of 'Grace' asserted herself during the sexual encounter?
4. How do you feel in general about the use of 'non-assertive cues' to indicate not consenting to sexual activity?
5. How do you feel about how the case is discussed during the interview panel?
    a. Does this raise any thoughts for you about the wider topic of assertiveness and consent?
6. Before we finish, is there anything you'd like to add that hasn't been discussed already?

6. Debrief (on projector screen and in conjunction with Debrief Sheet).

Appendix 2: Coded Transcripts

75. Alice: And it sounded like she felt bad, like, you know, on the text messages. Like, I was
76. reading it, thinking she feels bad for this, and that is sad that you you feel like you've got to
77. go back and you've got to do certain things. Like why couldn't you go back and just -she
78. obviously didn't feel like she was she. It sounded to me like she was trying to put him first in
79. that scenario going 'this is what the expectation is, this is what I think he wants'. And so she
80. felt bad almost for saying no. And why can't we say no? Like, *'I'm not ready yet*. I might
81. *never* be ready, and that's okay'. Like why? Why is there all of that? It's just - I felt bad for her because -it sounds like there's that expectation that you go back and that's what
82. somebody wants. And why does it have to be like that? Yeah. Where did this start from?
83. And-

84. Sian: Like to me it kind of seems like I_, I don't know. Like maybe this is just me
85. personally, but like, I wouldn't like, think I'm gonna go back with this person like that means
86. that we're definitely gonna have sex. Like I would, I would see it like we finished this date.
87. And like, I don't necessarily wanna go home yet, but like, I feel as though like as well you
88. wanna you, wanna be with them like in like that kind of space first.

89. Olivia: Yeah, you wanna see them in there, like, natural habitat type thing?

90. Sian: Because if you if you go over and you're like, a bit close and you're like cuddling or
91. whatever, and they're being a bit weird, then I'd be like, no, I'm not doing anything else. I'm
92. gonna go home but like.

93. Olivia: Exactly.

94. Sian: So why? Why all of a sudden? Is it like: Yeah if you go home with them, it means you're literally agreeing to having sex with them, right? You sign a contract right then and now. It just seems bizarre to me.

95. PI: It's like it's almost like the consent comes at the agreement to go back, right?

96. Olivia: Yeah.

97. Sian: Yeah, exactly.

98. Alice: Yeah, but there's so much more that you'd find out. You know what I mean? That
99. would sway your decision after that. So why, like, it needs to be. It's like, you know
100. how you're giving -you're doing continuous consent through this study. It's kind of
101. like that. You kinda gotta keep evolving it because it's like the more we find out, the
102. more it might change our decision. That's why you do it. So that's why it's necessary
103. in that situation or any situation, you know, it happens both ways. Like, I'm sure it's
104. not just like going back to a males, going back to like, *it's so many* and everyone
105. needs to feel comfortable and that's the main thing and it's just continuous consent
106. is like the best thing, isn't it? And I think it's that like maybe that maybe she didn't
107. feel like she would be believed. I don't- I don't know. I don't know what it is. I think
108. it's probably that sadness that she thought that it would have gone differently or
109. that it *should* have gone differently and I that you know there's like say for example
110. there's apps isn't there that like you sign some of the thing like before and I know it

Sophie Seviour
Women owe men something.

Difficulty with being assertive/saying no.

Sophie Seviour
Unwritten rules.

Sophie Seviour
Different language of consent.

Unwritten rules.

Sophie Seviour
Unwritten rules

A need for education.

Sophie Seviour
Women must negotiate consent to keep themselves safe?

Sophie Seviour
Continuous and open consent.

Sophie Seviour
Women shouldn't talk about it.

Invalidation of experience.

Sophie Seviour
A need for education.

101. PI: So is it like, what you're saying there is like the agreement sort of comes when
102. you agree to go back -

103. Jasmine and Magda: yes/yep

104. PI – so that's like when the consent comes?

105. Jasmine: exactly yeah like 'oh for sure that's what we're going to do'. But like
106. consent also changes doesn't it, like you could be for it and then you're like 'oh wait
107. no I don't feel comfortable'. So it's about being like present and saying like 'do you
108. feel okay now, like -

109. Amelia: Listen if you're enjoying the date and you enjoy their company, in your *own*
110. head you're conflicted because you're like, 'well I *do* like this person and I *do* like the
111. date but I'm not ready for that' but I almost don't want to be rude -

112. Group members: Murmured agreement

113. Amelia: -and be like 'no' because you feel like, I don't know, it's like this underlying
114. pressure.

115. Sana: And you need to remember there's so many different people with so many
116. different personalities like, you know what I mean, one person will be like 'listen, I
117. like you, I want to talk more but I *don't* want to have sex and I don't want you to
118. touch me' and they'll say it straight to the guys face. And then there who will be
119. absolutely conflicted as you say who will not know what to do, she might come from
120. a different background, been told differently, or is just shy and she just doesn't
121. know what to do and she just tries to go with the flow and then she just *doesn't*
122. know how to say no.

123. Jasmine: That is difficult though because women are sort of painted with the same
124. brush aren't they, so like, and we're all expected to act the same in situations

125. Sana: Yeah that's exactly what they're saying, they were saying like there needs to
126. be a very *clear*, you know like, clear like saying, like, if you say you don't want to
have
127. sex then that's it, but if you didn't say *anything* then he can do whatever he wants to
128. you.

129. Jasmine: yep.

130. Sana: Because all the women are the same. Because it doesn't matter, we're *all* the
131. same, so if you say 'I don't want to have sex' yeah, he's not allowed to touch you.
132. But if she's just there being uncomfortable but not saying a word – absolutely crazy.

Sophie Seviour
Being present in consent

Sophie Seviour
Uncomfortable saying no

Gendered expectations.

Sophie Seviour
Male entitlement – you owe them something?

Sophie Seviour
Power and privilege and individual difference

Sophie Seviour
Gendered expectations

Sophie Seviour
Expectations of being a woman.

Sophie Seviour
Societal expectation of how women SHOULD be assertive.

Sophie Seviour
Male entitlement

Valid vs non-valid consent.

Sophie Seviour
Valid vs not valid consent

Gendered expectations.

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval

EthOS Reference Number: 38422

Ethical Opinion

Dear Sophie Lyn Seviour,

The above application was reviewed by Dr Julia Robinson and on the 01/02/2022, was given a favourable ethical opinion. The approval is in place until six months after the end date recorded in your application documentation (13/05/2022).

Approved Documents

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Project Protocol	Ethics Protocol (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Information Sheet	Participant Information Sheet (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Consent Form	Consent Form (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Recruitment Media	Study Advertisement (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Additional Documentation	Debrief Sheet (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Additional Documentation	Discussion Prompt #1 News Report (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Additional Documentation	Discussion Schedule (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2
Additional Documentation	Focus Group Presentation (31.01.22)	31/01/2022	1.5.2

Conditions of favourable ethical opinion

The favourable ethical opinion is granted with the following conditions

Approval is in place for your UG/PGT project

This approval is only valid for Undergraduate (UG) and Post Graduate Taught (PGT) projects and does not grant approval for any Staff or PGR projects.

Appendix 4: Debrief Sheet

Debrief Sheet

A qualitative investigation into the victim blaming of women and girls

Thank you very much for taking part in my research. The data you contributed will help me to complete my dissertation project, which is focussed on enhancing our knowledge of how and why women who are perceived as non-assertive may be blamed for sexual violence.

What happens now?

I will now start analysing the data from all participants. If you decide that you no longer wish your data to be used, you are free to withdraw your data from the study up until two weeks after the final interviews for this study take place. Please email me at the following address if you would like to remove your data: S.L.Seviour@stu.mmu.ac.uk.

What if I need to speak with someone following participation?

I hope that you found participating in this study an interesting experience. That being said, the nature of this study included thinking and talking about sensitive information related to sexual violence against women. This is of course an emotive topic for some. If this experience has brought up any difficult emotions, or has left you feeling distressed, please could you let me or my supervisor know so that we can identify appropriate support options for you. You can get in touch using the contact details provided on the following page. You can also reach out for confidential support by using the (free) services provided below.

Can I find out about the results of the study?

If you would like a lay summary of the results, I would be happy to send this to you upon the study completion. Please let me know if you do require this summary so I can make a note and ensure that I send it to you.
Finally, if you have any further questions, or want an update on the research, please feel free to contact me using the details provided on the email address provided on the following page.
Thank you again for taking part, your input was invaluable.

Sophie Seviour
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Support Services in Manchester

The Counselling and Wellbeing Service

Counselling support services open weekdays 9am – 4pm

Manchester Metropolitan University
All Saints Building
M15 6BH
+44 (0)161 247 2000

Manchester Women's Aid

Confidential service offering support for those affected by domestic/sexual violence

Open weekdays, 9.30 am – 4.30pm.
Helpline: 0161 660 7999

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

A qualitative exploration into the victim-blaming of women and girls.

Invitation to research

My name is Sophie Seviour and I would like to invite you to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation project for my degree at Manchester Metropolitan University. This study aims to explore how and why blame may be attributed to women who have experienced sexual violence.

Why have I been invited?

You are invited to take part in a study that involves your participation in a focus group discussion. This will be conducted at Manchester Metropolitan University with up to three other participants. The aims of the discussion are to explore our perceptions of women who have experienced sexual violence and who are perceived as non-assertive. Specific focus will be given to how and why blame may be attributed to these women.
To participate in this study, you **must** meet the following criteria:

- You are 18+ years old.
- You are currently enrolled as a student at Manchester Metropolitan University.
- You have a good level of English literacy (however this does not need to be your first language).
- You are willing to engage in an open, face-to-face discussion with other students at the university.
- You identify as a woman and/or as female **(please see below).*
- You do not envisage participating in this study causing you any emotional distress **

***** Due to the gendered nature of sexual crime prevalence within the UK, this study will exclusively explore female perspectives of male violence against women. As such, participation in this study will be open to any student who identifies as a woman and/or as female.
Despite the aims of this particular study, the sexual victimisation of all genders is of equal concern and should not be discounted. Any participants who may be interested in exploring studies pertaining to the experiences of other genders are invited to contact the Principal Investigator, who will be happy to direct them towards published research in this area.

****** Participating in this study will require being exposed to sensitive and potentially distressing information that relates to sexual violence against women. This will be during the focus group discussion where you will be shown a news article pertaining to a case of sexual misconduct involving a celebrity. You will then be invited to watch a short video of a day-time television show where this case is discussed by a panel of presenters. As a result, participating in this study involves thinking and talking about sensitive information that has the potential to be emotionally distressing. It is therefore recommended that if you anticipate that this may cause you some emotional distress, you are encouraged not to participate. It is important to note that the researcher will **not in any way ask you to disclose or talk about any experiences you may have had yourself**. Indeed, in the interest of your own self-care and for the care of the other members in the group, this will be actively

discouraged during the discussion.

3. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide. This sheet will describe the study and what your participation will involve. Please take the time to read through the information and think carefully about whether you wish to participate. You are free to ask any questions about the study by getting in contact with the Principal Investigator, whose details are provided at the end of this sheet. If you decide you wish to participate, you will then be asked to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without having to give reason.

4. What will I be asked to do?

Before engaging with the study, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form that will ensure you meet the criteria and understand what the discussion will entail. You will then be given a pseudonym (e.g. Participant A) before joining the in-person focus group with up to three other people, and the Principal Investigator. You will not be asked to share your name with the other members of the group.

Before the discussion, the researcher will give a short introduction regarding the etiquette of engaging within the discussions, which you will be asked to respect and adhere to. You will then be invited to read through a newspaper article which details an incident of sexual misconduct involving a high-profile comedian. While this study will not expose you to any graphic or overly sensitive content, please be aware **that this article contains some descriptions of sexual violence.** This article also includes a short text-message exchange between the woman involved and the comedian, which will be shown to you via a video clip posted on Twitter. This conversation contains some **descriptions of the emotional distress** the woman experienced following the encounter and some **descriptions of sexual violence.** Following this, you will be directed to watch a short video of a day-time television show in which the case is discussed by a panel of television hosts. **This video also contains some descriptions of sexual violence and competing arguments of sexual consent.** After the video, you will be given a short break before engaging in a process of moderated discussion that will be facilitated by the researcher. This will involve a general discussion around the concepts of female assertiveness and consent. You will be encouraged to share your views and discuss them with other members of the group. The study is expected to last between 45 minutes to an hour.

Due to the nature of face-to-face group discussions, you will be identifiable to other participants of the study. As such, full anonymity is not possible in this case. You will not be asked to provide any personal information with the other participants in the study. You will also be asked not to share the identities of any of the other participants. Any information discussed within the group must be kept confidential and must not be discussed with anyone except the Principal Investigator.

You will also be asked to consent to the discussion being video and audio recorded so that the researcher may transcribe and analyse the data. Full details of how this data will be processed and stored are provided below.

Are there any risks if I participate?

As previously mentioned, participating in this study will involve being exposed to sensitive information that relates to sexual violence against women. This will require thinking and talking about potentially sensitive and distressing subjects. It is therefore advised that you do not engage with this study if you anticipate that this may cause you any distress. It is imperative that you are aware that the researcher will **not in any way ask you to disclose or talk about any experiences you may have had**. In the interest of self-care, it is recommended that any person who identifies as having been a survivor or victim of sexual violence be encouraged to think carefully about whether their participation may bring up some difficult emotions. That being said, you do not need to have been a

survivor of sexual violence to still find this subject emotionally distressing. Please take care of yourself and carefully consider whether you wish to engage with the study.

If this experience leaves you feeling distressed, or brings up any difficult emotions, you are encouraged to reach out to someone to talk to. The details of the Principal Investigator and their supervisor are provided at the end of this form. Alternatively, there is also a list of (free) support agencies provided should you feel that you need any additional support or advice.

Are there any advantages if I participate?

Participants recruited via the MMU Research Participation pool will be eligible to claim points for their participation in this study. Engaging within this study is also an excellent opportunity for students to gain an understanding of what it is like to participate in psychological research, which may become useful if/when they come to develop their own research projects.

What will happen with the data I provide?

When you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to provide some personal information (your name and contact details). When you sign the consent form, you will be given a pseudonym which will be used to identify you during and after the study. All of your personal information will be stored on a password protected file. Following the study, the video recordings of the discussion will be transcribed, and any identifying information will be anonymised. All recordings of the discussion will be deleted immediately after the PI has transcribed them for analysis. As previously discussed, you are free to withdraw your data and this can be requested at any time up until two weeks after the final interview. Unfortunately, it will not be possible to remove your data after this time.

All data obtained in this study will be securely stored for one year, after which it will be automatically deleted. The Manchester Metropolitan University ('the University') is the Data Controller in respect of this research and any personal data that you provide as a research participant.

The University is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), and manages personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University's Data Protection Policy.

We collect personal data as part of this research (such as name, telephone numbers or gender identity). As a public authority acting in the public interest, we rely upon the 'public task' lawful basis. When we collect special category data (such as medical information or ethnicity) we rely upon the research and archiving purposes in the public interest lawful basis.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained. We will not share your personal data collected in this form with any third parties.

If your data is shared this will be under the terms of a Research Collaboration Agreement which defines use, and agrees confidentiality and information security provisions. It is the University's policy to only publish anonymised data unless you have given your explicit written consent to be identified in the research. **The University never sells personal data to third parties.**

We will only retain your personal data for as long as is necessary to achieve the research purpose. For further information about use of your personal data and your data protection rights please see the University's Data Protection Pages (https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/data-protection/).

What will happen to the results of the research study?

Anonymised quotations of the transcribed discussion will be used within the data analysis for this undergraduate dissertation project. Any video and audio recordings of the discussion will not be shared or seen by anyone but the Principal Investigator.

Who has reviewed this research project?

The study has been reviewed and approved by the supervisor of the researcher, Dr Julia Robinson. Ethical approval has also been granted by the Manchester Metropolitan University Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care Research Ethics and Governance Committee.

Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?

If you have any questions or would like further information prior to or following your participation, please contact the Principal Investigator. If you have any issues and that you may not feel comfortable disclosing to the Principal Investigator, you are encouraged to contact the Principal Supervisor.

Sophie Seviour
Principal Investigator
Email: Sophie.l.seviour@mmu.ac.uk

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Manchester
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If you would like to complain about the study, please contact the dissertation unit leader Dr Tom Hostler, t.hostler@mmu.ac.uk or alternatively; the chair of the faculty of Health and Education Ethics and Governance Committee Dr Claire Fox, FOHE-ethics@mmu.ac.uk
If you have any concerns regarding the personal data collected from you, you are free to contact the Data Protection Officer who will investigate. You can also do this in writing using the following address.

Data Protection Officer
Telephone: +44(0) 161 247 3331
Email: legal@mmu.ac.uk

Data Protection Officer
Legal Services
All Saints Building
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester
M15 6BH

You also have a right to lodge a complaint in respect of the processing of your personal data with the Information Commissioner's Office as the supervisory authority. Please see: https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/

Thank you for considering participating in this project.

Please see below for the contact details of relevant support agencies.

The Counselling and Wellbeing Service

Counselling support services open weekdays 9am – 4pm

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All Saints Building
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+44 (0)161 247 2000

Manchester Women's Aid

Confidential service offering support for those affected by domestic/sexual violence

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Helpline: 0161 660 7999

Anxiety UK

Confidential helpline service offering support for those experiencing anxiety

Open weekdays, 9.30 am – 5.30pm.
Helpline: 03444 775 774