

‘How Effective is Treating the 3–6%?’: An Investigation on the Effects Participant and Victim Gender has on Attitudes Towards Female Sex Offenders and the Effectiveness of Their Treatment.

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of participant and victim gender on attitudes towards female sex offenders and treatment effectiveness. A total of 217 participants (aged 18–66, 49.8% males, 50.2% females) read vignettes featuring a fictional female sex offender with either a male or female victim, then completed questionnaires assessing attitudes towards sex offenders and treatment. A between-subjects MANOVA unveiled significant differences related participant gender, with male participants demonstrating the most negative attitudes towards the offender. No significant differences emerged between victim conditions or in the interaction between participant and victim genders. These findings highlight a sense of public uncertainty, underscoring the necessity for further research and advocacy for evidence-based policies concerning female sex offenders.

Key Words: *female sex offenders, public attitudes, offender rehabilitation, male victims, gender.*

¹ Publication based upon dissertation research conducted and submitted in partial fulfilment for the Bachelors of Science Degree (BSc) in Forensic Psychology at the Manchester Metropolitan University (2021).

Introduction

Sexual offences are understood to be a range of criminal actions that include contact offences such as rape and non-contact offences such as storing and distributing images of abuse (Baarsma et al, 2016). Generally, the public projects negative attitudes towards all sex offenders and deems offenders to be an equal risk to communities, regardless of different offending behaviours (Barlow & Olver, 2010; Budd & Mancini, 2016). Despite this, female sex offenders (FSO) cannot elude the stereotypical views of women being seen as caregivers, nonsexual and nonviolent (Herzog & Oreg, 2008).

These stereotypical views of women and the stereotypical view that sex offenders are male explains the lack of literature surrounding FSO and the uncertainty of their prevalence in comparison to male sex offenders (MSO; Wijkman et al, 2010). Government statistics suggest that between 2007 and 2013, around 3% of arrests relating to sexual offences were female (Cortoni et al., 2017). Although this illustrates that sex offenders are disproportionately more likely to be male (Smith et al., 2017), Saradjian (2010) suggested that these statistics are lower than in reality, and female sex offending is a much greater issue. Recent studies have found that females account for approximately 5% (Cortoni et al., 2010) to 6% (Cortoni et al., 2017) of all sexual assaults. These results are double the percentage of the government statistics, which could indicate that a substantial number of offenders and victims need clinical attention (Gannon & Cortoni, 2016).

The taboo of FSO has led to them being perceived as a lesser risk than MSO, and their victims are taken less seriously (Wijkman et al., 2010). Despite these perceptions, FSO cause just as much physical and psychological harm to their victims as MSO (Denov, 2001). Public attitudes play an essential role in developing sex offender legislation (Shackley et al., 2014). Public attitudes seem to override academic research, as illustrated by sex offender residence restriction policies like 'Megan's Law' (1996) which has huge public support, yet is opposed by academics (Rydberg et al., 2018). Research surrounding public attitudes toward sex

offenders can be used to appropriately highlight the risk and prevalence of FSO to the public using psychoeducation (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012). This could help reduce the burden felt by FSO victims and influence sex offender legislation. Furthermore, as attitudes play a significant role in verdicts (Louden & Skeem, 2007), measuring public attitudes towards FSO could illustrate the perceived risk and culpability of these offenders in a jury setting. Despite the importance, very few studies have investigated public attitudes towards FSO.

Hegemonic masculinities and gender expectations prevail in society, and as male sexual assault victims embody subordinate masculinities, the crimes they are involved in are seen as less severe than crimes involving female victims (Bosma et al., 2018; Depraetere et al., 2020). Male victims are often seen as disrupting the gender order of men and challenging hegemonic masculinity; therefore, they are often marginalised by other men as 'deviant' and 'abnormal' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Javaid, 2017). These views are also consistent throughout FSO research with the literature predominantly focused on female victims (Elliot & Bailey, 2014), despite the fact that FSO equally victimise both men and women (Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2009). The evidence of gender bias towards victims, alongside the critical role attitudes play in the criminal justice system highlight the need for future studies to investigate the role the victim's gender plays in attitudes towards sex offenders.

Despite differences between men and women (Gannon et al., 2014), minimal research has investigated the potential difference in gendered attitudes towards FSO. Women tend to focus on maintaining relationships and are socialised into a caregiving role; men, on the other hand, are socialised to be emotionally distant and in control (Denov, 2004; Gannon et al., 2014). As attitudes are crucial in decision-making, measuring the difference between male and female attitudes is essential to identify if gender plays a role in a jury setting.

Sex offenders who complete treatment programs are less likely to re-offend; however, Grady et al. (2013) estimate that up to 86% of sex offenders fail to complete treatment. They stated that non-completion results from various reasons, including criminal history and mental health problems. Research suggests that to maintain compliance and effectiveness, thorough

implementation needs to be executed (Daggett et al., 2008). The risk-needs-responsivity model suggests that to implement a treatment program successfully, the facilitators must consider the offenders' specific needs and cognitive abilities (Redondo et al., 2012). Sex offender treatment has been developed solely for MSO (Mann & Marshall, 2009), and FSO treatment needs are not accommodated as they differ cognitively and have different underlying factors behind their offence (Beech et al., 2012; Strickland, 2008). This may prove problematic, especially when considering that FSO samples are more likely to have borderline personality disorder and be a victim of sexual abuse (Almond et al., 2017; Christopher et al., 2007). This may indicate that treatment provided to FSO is ineffective, resulting in FSO needing proper clinical treatment and, therefore, carrying an increased risk of recidivism. However, this is an assumption as according to the current researchers' knowledge no study has yet investigated the effectiveness of FSO treatment in the United Kingdom (UK). Previous literature has demonstrated the role the public plays in sex offender legislation and treatment development; therefore, it is important to investigate the current attitudes held by the public regarding the effectiveness of FSO treatment. This may help identify their current stance and how these attitudes can be changed to raise awareness surrounding the issue of FSO treatment.

Gakhal and Brown (2011) conducted a between-group sample of 176 participants and utilised the Attitude Towards Sex Offender Scale (ATSO; Hogue, 1993) to investigate the attitudes of forensic professionals, students, and the public towards FSO. They concluded that professionals held the most positive attitudes, whilst the public held the least favourable. Recently, Steans and Duff (2020) replicated these findings in relation to MSO, demonstrating overall that the public attributes more negative attitudes towards sex offenders than professionals. However, unlike Steans and Duff (2020), Gakhal and Brown (2011) highlighted that the average score on the ATSO in the public condition sits within the mid-range. This indicates that the public holds a level of uncertainty and is undecided on its attitudes. This is significant and adds support for the calling of psychoeducation regarding FSO. Despite these

findings, the study fails to include the participant's gender and does not investigate public attitudes towards treatment, nor the effects of victim gender.

Malinen et al., (2014) investigated how gender impacts attitudes towards MSO. The study highlighted that female participants assign more positive attitudes to MSO than the male participants. This study utilised a relatively small sample of 87 participants with an arguably significant overrepresentation of female samples (69%). A more recent study by King and Roberts (2017) gathered a more representative sample of male and female participants and a much higher sample size of 174 participants. The study found that in fact female participants were significantly more punitive to MSO than male participants were. Shaver's defensive attribution theory may explain such findings by suggesting that the male participants perceive similarities between the MSO and themselves and are therefore more likely to shift blame (Shaver, 1970). Although both studies provide an insight into how attitudes of sex offenders differ between the two genders, Malinen et al. (2014) utilised the Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale which has since been dismissed as a measurement of attitudes. Shackley et al. (2014) conducted a factor analysis and found that the scale is a measurement of perception; therefore, studies that utilised this scale cannot claim to be measuring attitudes. The contradictory findings in the studies discussed, alongside the importance of attitudes in verdict decision-making, highlight the importance of further research on this subject to affirm the prevalence of gender biases. Like most sex offender literature, these studies do not address attitudes towards FSO, leaving a gap in the research.

To the researcher's knowledge, Banton and West (2020) is currently the only study investigating the variable of victim gender in relation to FSO. Additionally, the study also investigated the effects of gender on the perceived seriousness of MSO and FSO. They found that males in the male victim/female offender condition perceived the offence as the least serious offence, echoing the previously discussed findings regarding hegemonic masculinities and male victimisation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Javaid, 2017). Despite these findings, they failed to find a significance between the gender of the victims. A possible explanation may

be that as the study involved a child, the victim's age having been the most dominant factor, not the gender. Although the study does not measure attitudes, it is one of the only studies to provide an insight into how the victim's gender may influence verdict decisions regarding FSO; further research must investigate the role the victim's gender has on attitudes.

Kerr et al. (2018) investigated the attitudes of the general public and volunteers towards the effectiveness of MSO treatment. Their findings are consistent with previous literature in that the public attributes the most negative attitudes (Gakhal & Brown, 2011). However, the study's most notable findings are that the average scores stood at around the mid-point indicating a level of uncertainty amongst public attitudes regarding the effectiveness of sex offender treatment. Although the study does not address the effects of gender concerning these attitudes, the study demonstrates a need for psychoeducation, especially considering the crucial role the public plays in treatment development and community integration.

Rogers et al. (2011) found similar findings in that participants tend to score around the mid-point of the scale, concluding on the potential prevalence of public uncertainty regarding attitudes towards sex offender treatment. Surprisingly, the interpretation of their findings illustrates that although there is a level of uncertainty, the public tends to hold slightly more positive than negative attitudes, which challenges the current literature surrounding this topic (Budd & Mancini, 2016). In addition, Rogers et al. (2011) investigated the role gender has on attitudes towards MSO and the treatment effectiveness. Although they failed to find a significance, they found that male participants held the most negative attitudes, supporting the findings of Malinen et al. (2014). A strength of this study is that it is currently one of the only studies that has measured gendered attitudes towards sex offender treatment with a sample that is representative of gender. Nevertheless, the study only measured attitudes towards MSO treatment, failing to address FSO.

Senethavilay (2018) is one of the only studies to investigate the effects of participant gender on attitudes regarding MSO and FSO and the effectiveness of their treatment. They found a significant difference between attitudes towards MSO and FSO and their treatment,

with participants in the FSO condition attributing the most negative attitudes. The evil women theory coined by Cavadino and Dignan (1997) adds explanation by suggesting that FSO are subject to 'double deviance', meaning that as their crime is a contradiction of the feminine model expected of women in an overtly patriarchal society, they are treated much harsher in the criminal justice system. Senethavilay (2018) further found that male participants held the most negative attitudes, although a significance was found of participant gender and attitudes towards treatment effectiveness, the study failed to find a significance concerning attitudes towards sex offenders in general. An explanation may be the utilisation of the CATSO scale; as already discussed, this scale has been criticised for measuring perceptions rather than attitudes (Shackley et al., 2014). In addition, the scale does not provide participants with an option not to answer the question or state uncertainty. This can provide a skewed set of data and is problematic considering that the literature discussed has illustrated a level of uncertainty amongst public attitudes. The study would have benefited from utilising a scale that has strong support for measuring attitudes and an option to proclaim uncertainty, and a more heterogeneous sample, as they gathered data from students and an overrepresented sample of females (79%). Nevertheless, the study successfully provides insight into gendered attitudes towards FSO and their treatment and highlights the need for further research in this area.

Current Study

The current study aims to investigate public attitudes towards FSO who offend against adult victims and the effectiveness of their treatment; by doing so, the study will contribute to the sparse and much-needed literature surrounding this topic. Additionally, the study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the effect of victim and participant gender on such attitudes. The final aim is to investigate if there is an interaction between these variables, as to date no current study exists that has investigated both the gender of participants and victims regarding attitudes towards FSO and their treatment.

In achieving such aims, the present study firstly hypothesizes that a significant will be found between participants with males attributing the most negative attitudes, as per the findings of Malinen et al (2014), Rogers et al. (2011) and Senethavilay (2018). The second hypothesis is that a significant difference between victim gender will be found, contradictory to Banton and West (2020), as this study will use an adult victim rather than a child. Following the literature concerning victimisation and public attitudes, this present study expects to find that those in the female condition will attribute the most negative attitudes towards the offender. Following on, and considering the literature discussed, the final hypothesis is that an interaction will be found between the gender of the participant and victim, with male participants in the female victim condition portraying the most negative attitudes to the FSO.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited via an electronic poster advertised across various social media outlets, whereby a Qualtrics URL link was attached, leading possible participants to the study. Opportunity sampling was used, as giving individuals the choice to take part increases willingness, decreasing potential response bias (Sharma, 2017). To avoid psychological harm to participants, victims of serious sexual assault and those under the age of 18 were told not to participate in the study (Moss et al., 2018). The researcher successfully gathered a heterogeneous sample of ages ranging from 18–6 ($M = 33.88$, $SD = 12.55$). Although 11 participants did not disclose their age, as they agreed to read the inclusion criteria, it can be assumed they are above the age of 18, so they were included within the sample.

Using G*Power, a priori tests were conducted to determine the sample size of the study. Consistent with Senethavilay (2018) and Wnuk et al (2006) studies, an alpha equal to 0.05 and a medium effect size of 0.25 was used; it was intended for the researcher to recruit 128 participants (32 participants in each condition) to meet the desired power of 0.8. In total, 298 participants were recruited. As the study aimed to investigate adult male and female attitudes,

those who did not identify as male or female and were under the age of 18 were excluded. Additionally, to remove potential biases, individuals who disclosed that they had been a victim of a serious sexual assault were excluded. As a result of the exclusion criteria, 70 participants were removed. The data was then checked for missing scores, and 11 participants were removed due to incomplete data. As a result, the total sample size used was 217. The study successfully gathered data from an equal split of males ($n = 108$, 49.8%) and females ($n = 109$, 50.2%). However, due to data removal, there was not an equal split of participants in the male victim ($n = 116$, 53.4%) and female victim ($n = 101$, 47.6%) conditions. Ultimately the 4 groups were divided as male participant/male victim ($n = 61$), male participant/female victim ($n = 47$), female participant/male victim ($n = 55$) and female participant/female victim ($n = 54$).

Materials

An information sheet regarding the study was provided before the questionnaires. Consent was then obtained to legitimise the agreement of the participant's involvement (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018). After completing a demographic questionnaire, participants were then randomised to a vignette involving a sexual assault committed by a FSO, whereby the victim was either male or female (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Vignettes were chosen to help desensitise the subject (Gourlay et al., 2014) and direct the responder towards the study's main purpose (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014). Following the vignette presentation, the participant completed two questionnaires.

The first questionnaire that the participants were presented with was the Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders-21 (ATSO-21; Hogue & Harper, 2019). This scale is a revised version of the Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders scale (ATSO; Hogue, 1993), which contains 21 of the original 36 items. The scale was developed to measure general attitudes towards sex offenders and has been proven to be a very reliable scale ($\alpha = .91$), possessing very strong levels of internal consistency ranging from .79 and .84 (Hogue & Harper, 2019). The maximum an individual

can score on the scale is 105, and the higher the score, the more negative attitudes they hold towards sex offenders.

The second scale, Attitudes Toward the Treatment of Sex Offenders Scale (ATTSO; Wnuk et al., 2006), measures attitudes towards the effectiveness of sex offender treatment. In contrast to the ATSO-21, the higher an individual scored, the more positive attitudes they held regarding how effective they believe sex offender treatment is. The scale contained 35 items and internal consistency ranging from .78 and .86 using Cronbach's alpha. Both questionnaires utilised a Likert rating scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Option 3 (neither agree nor disagree) was included to prevent forced-choice questionnaire bias (Xiao et al., 2017). For this current study, the word 'female' was added in front of 'sex offender' for each statement. Altering these materials to specify gender on these questionnaires was previously implemented by Gakhal and Brown (2011) and Senethavilay (2018).

After completing the questionnaire, the participants were provided with a debrief sheet informing them of the study's main purpose. They were then provided with details to remove their data if they wish and with contacts of relevant charities if the participant felt distressed.

Design

Quantitative, experimental primary data were collected consisting of a between-group sample. A quantitative approach was favoured over qualitative as it is much more efficient to gather a larger sample for generalisability and measure numerous self-reported properties at once (Rahman, 2017). This current study investigated two dependent variables. The first dependent variable was the attitudes towards FSO and used the scores of the ATSO-21 to measure such. The second dependent variable was the attitudes towards the effectiveness of FSO treatment and utilised the scores from the ATTSO. The independent variables were the gender of the participant (male or female) and the type of vignette (male victim or female victim). Due to the number of independent variables and the study's aims, a MANOVA was used to analyse the data.

Procedure

Qualtrics randomised the participants into two groups depending on which vignette they were presented with. After reading the vignette, the participants completed the ATSO-21 and ATTSO questionnaires. To prevent the data from being skewed, all participants completed the same questionnaires, however only provided with one of the vignettes and not being told about the other. This was to ensure that the results were not impacted, and the sole purpose of the research remained anonymous to maintain reliability. The participants were debriefed as previously discussed and created a unique identification code to store their data. The data was then moved from Qualtrics to SPSS, in which the participants were divided further into two groups based on their gender, and the data was then prepared, and those within the exclusion criteria were removed. Following on and in accordance with Hogue and Harper (2019), 11 items were reversed. A MANOVA was conducted to analyse the significance of the data between such groups.

Ethical Considerations

The study gained ethical approval from X University and was conducted in accordance with the University's ethics and BPS guidelines (X University, 2021; British Psychological Society, 2018). Participants were first presented with a consent form, which included numerous requirements that they must agree with before participating in the study, ensuring full consent was given before involvement. Participants were aware that responses were anonymised and were reminded that they could withdraw their data at any point during the study or after until the date stated using their unique identification code. The participants were made aware of the sensitive nature of the study, and at the end, were debriefed and provided with contact details for multiple charities involved in sexual assault support.

Results

Preparation of Data

Data screening took place prior to the MANOVA analysis. No input errors or missing data were found. Skewness and Kurtosis calculations showed that the data is not skewed as groups fell within the accepted value (-1.96 and 1.96; Ghasemi and Zahediasl, 2012). Z-scores suggest that there were no problematic outliers as all results satisfied the acceptable ± 3 (Kline, 2015). Additionally, comparing the Mahalanobis distance values to the chi-square distribution, none of these outliers was identified as problematic. After outliers were removed, the data followed the normal Q-Q plots, and the data balanced above and below the detrended Q-Q plots. The assumption that there is an absence of multicollinearity was tested, and as $r = -.74$, the assumption was met. Levene's test showed that the variances of the groups were equal both ATSO scale, $F(3, 213) = 1.16, p = .326$, and ATTSO scale, $F(3, 213) = 2.01, p = .110$. Thus, confirming the assumption of the equality of variances in the samples (homogeneity of variance; Martin & Bridgmon, 2012). Box's test was used to assess the homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and the result was non-significant ($5.88 p < .001$; Hahs-Vaughn, 2016). As assumptions were met, interpretation used Wilk's lambda.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including the means (M) and standard deviation (SD) for the ATSO-21 scale and each condition, are presented in Table 1 and presented in Table 2 for the ATTSO scale. Interpretation of the means scores supports the hypothesis that males attribute the most negative attitudes towards FSO ($M = 62.43, SD = 11.94$) and their treatment ($M = 95.31, SD = 12.87$). However, contrary to the second hypothesis, the mean scores suggest that those in the male victim condition held the most negative attitudes towards the offender ($M = 61.37, SD = 11.10$) and their treatment ($M = 96.84, SD = 11.60$). Ultimately male participants in the male victim condition held the most negative attitudes towards the FSO ($M = 64.36, SD = 11.51$) and the effectiveness of their treatment ($M = 93.56, SD = 11.93$). Further interpretation

of the results suggests that the average scores of both ATSO-21 ($M = 60.41$, $SD = 11.34$) and ATTSO ($M = 97.58$, $SD = 12.19$) meet the midpoints of the scales.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the measure of general attitudes towards female sex offenders depending on the participants gender (male or female) and the which gendered condition they completed (male or female victim).

	Participant Gender					
	Male Participant		Female Participant		Overall Score	
Victim Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male Victim	64.36	11.51	58.05	9.69	61.37	11.10
Female Victim	59.91	12.16	58.78	11.10	59.30	11.56
Overall Score	62.43	11.94	58.41	10.37	60.41	11.34

Note. *M* and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the measure of attitudes towards the effectiveness of female sex offender treatment depending on the participants gender (male or female) and the which gendered condition they completed (male or female victim).

	Participant Gender					
	Male Participant		Female Participant		Overall Score	
Victim Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male Victim	93.56	11.93	100.49	10.14	96.84	11.60
Female Victim	97.60	13.79	99.15	12.87	98.43	12.84
Overall Score	95.31	12.87	99.83	11.08	97.58	12.19

Note. *M* and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively.

Inferential Statistics

Using Wilks' Lambda, there was a non-significant effect of the victim's gender on attitudes towards FSO, $V = 0.99$, $F(2, 212) = .75$, $p = .472$, $\eta^2 = .007$. A significant effect was found of participant gender, $V = 0.99$, $F(2, 212) = 3.70$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .034$. Separate univariate tests on the outcome variables revealed significant attitudes on the ATTS-21 scale, $F(1, 213) =$

6.02, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .027$, and the ATTOS scale, $F(1, 123) = 6.76$, $p = 0.010$, $\eta^2 = .031$. Additionally, there was a non-significant interaction between the conditions and participant sexuality, $V = 0.99$, $F(2, 212) = 1.62$, $p = .200$, $\eta^2 = .015$.

Discussion

The present study gathered data from a representative sample of gender (49.8% male, 50.2% female), a wide age range and utilised two validated measurements of attitudes (Hogue & Harper, 2019; Wnuk et al., 2006). It successfully achieved its first aim in contributing to the sparse literature concerning public attitudes towards FSO. Secondly, participant and victim gender were also investigated to distinguish whether their attitudes towards FSO and the effectiveness of their treatment varied. The third aim was achieved through a possible interaction between participant and victim gender regarding attitudes (no study to date has investigated such interaction). The study found no interaction and failed to find a significant effect between the victim genders, contrary to the second and third hypotheses. Nevertheless, the study met its first hypothesis that a significant difference between participant genders would be found.

The current study utilised the ATSO-21 scale (Hogue & Harper, 2019) and successfully found a significant difference between the general attitudes of males and females towards FSO, unlike that of Senethavilay (2018), adding possible support to the idea that a significance was not found due to the utilisation of the CATSO scale. Nevertheless, the study found that male participants held the most negative attitudes towards FSO and treatment effectiveness; such findings support that of Malinen et al. (2014), Rogers et al. (2014) and Senethavilay (2018), in that men tend to be more negative towards sex offenders than females.

Banton and West (2020) investigated the role gender plays on the perceived seriousness of sex offences committed by females, and although they failed to find a significant difference, they found that those in the male victim condition perceived the offence to be the least serious. Although no study has yet investigated victim gender on attitudes concerning FSO, this current

study was expected to find a significant difference as it investigated adult victims rather than a child. Additionally, considering the literature surrounding male victimisation and the findings of Banton and West (2020), the study expected those in the female victim condition to assign the most negative attitudes to the offender. However, this hypothesis was not met. The study failed to find a significant effect, and when the scores were interpreted, it was found that those in the male victim condition attributed the most negative attitudes.

Surprisingly no interaction was found between victim and participant gender. It was expected that an interaction would be found, with male participants in the female victim condition portraying the most negative attitudes towards FSO and the effectiveness of their treatment. Despite a failure to find a significance, interpretation of the overall scores indicates that male participants in the male victim condition held slightly more negative attitudes, with female participants in the male victim condition holding the least negative attitudes overall. This contradicts the current literature regarding male victimisation, more specifically Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory on subordinate masculinities, which suggests that men perceive 'lesser' men, such as victims, more harshly. The study instead may be adding support to the rising concept of 'supportive' masculinities.

The concept of supportive masculinities refers to a shift in traditional gender norms and attitudes that promote toxic masculinity (Gough & Gough, 2018). This emerging trend in masculinities highlights the importance of promoting positive, healthy behaviours and attitudes in men and rejecting traditional gender norms that promote aggression, dominance, and suppression of emotions. This shift towards supportive masculinities is driven by a growing awareness of the negative impact toxic masculinity can have on both individuals and society. The goal of supportive masculinities is to encourage men to embrace a more compassionate and equitable view of masculinity, one that values emotional intelligence, empathy, and healthy relationships (Connell, 2021). This trend is being seen in various social and cultural contexts, from media and popular culture to education and health initiatives. Overall, the emergence of

supportive masculinities represents a positive step towards promoting healthy and equitable gender norms.

An additional possible explanation for these findings may be shaver's defensive attribution theory (Shaver, 1970). The theory would suggest that male participants held the most negative attitudes towards the FSO when the victim was male as they perceived more similarities with the victim than the FSO. On the other hand, female participants perceive more similarities with the FSO than the male victim and, therefore are more likely to hold more positive attitudes towards the FSO when in the male victim condition.

The results supported the findings from Gakhal and Brown (2011) and Kerr et al. (2018) in that the general public generally answered “*neither agree nor disagree*”. There are a variety of explanations for this. Firstly, and most probable, they may lack knowledge surrounding this area of topic and therefore may have found it harder to formulate an opinion, compared to those who hold a background in criminology, psychology, or criminal justice. Furthermore, the complex phrasing of some statements may have also influenced the scoring, as they may have proven to be difficult for certain individuals to understand, and as a result, participants may have ticked “*neither agree nor disagree*”. Further research may want to utilise an information sheet including facts regarding FSO to aid those without a forensic or psychological background. A further explanation for these findings may be due to central tendency bias (Boari & Nai Ruscone, 2015), although this is less likely the reason as the study did not offer an incentive. Future research may want to take into consideration the timings of completing the survey and remove participants who fell below an appropriate time.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The current study utilised self-report data and such studies have been found to be subject to limitations and biases (Kreitchmann et al., 2019). Firstly, there is a risk that participants either consciously or unconsciously distort their answers to create a false impression that is not representative of their true attitudes, especially considering that attitudes towards sex offenders

are politically charged. Moreover, when participating in surveys, people are more likely to skim or skip descriptive text and go straight to the questions (Phellas et al., 2011). This is particularly important considering that the current study was measuring victim gender, which was manipulated within the vignettes; this could be a possible explanation for the failure to find a significant difference between the victim genders. However, this current study utilised self-report surveys because they are easy to use and inexpensive (Hook et al., 2020), making it much easier to achieve the aim of gathering data from across the UK. It is recommended for future research to test the participants' knowledge of the vignettes by asking specific questions; this will help identify dishonest responders.

The current study may also be enhanced through collection of qualitative data, and it could be argued that data collected from Likert scale questionnaires are not as thorough as data collected from qualitative methodology. There may be numerous explanations on why a level of uncertainty was found amongst responses in both surveys; it could be due to the complex nature of the questions or that the general public lacks knowledge surrounding FSO and their treatment, therefore, cannot respond to the statements. Future research may benefit from utilising either qualitative or mixed methodology to gather richer and more thorough data regarding attitudes towards FSO and their treatment and an explanation of the levels of uncertainty found in this current study and previous research.

With an age range of 18–66, and a mean of 33.88, it can be assumed this study gathered a representative sample of the UK population rather than rather than a sample of solely/exclusively students or healthcare/ mental health professionals like previous research. However, to solidify confidentiality, this current study did not record data regarding the participant's employability status. Therefore, a recommendation for future research is to record such demographic data and possibly investigate how employability impacts attitudes towards FSO and treatment effectiveness. This may be beneficial, considering the jury service is made up of a variety of professions. Also, it is unknown whether other factors influenced the attitudes, such as religion, as religious demographic data was not collected. The questionnaires contain

statements regarding capital punishment; religious individuals usually object to this form of punishment, so researchers may want to acknowledge religious demographic information, to address the potential effects religion has on attitudes towards FSO and the effectiveness of their treatment.

A further limitation regarding the demographic data measured is that the current study only included two self-identified participant gender options (male or female) and did not include data gathered from further gender identifications, including transgender and non-binary. This decision was made due to the short time frame and the urgent need for FSO literature. Individuals who identify as transgender or non-binary make up a small proportion of the UK population (Cheung et al., 2020); with the utilisation of an opportunity sample, it was assumed that this group would be significantly underrepresented. Future research should investigate the effects other self-identified genders have on attitudes towards FSO to further fill the gap in the literature.

Implications and Strengths

A major strength of the current study is having achieved its aim of gathering an equal representative sample of both males and females UK citizens, a goal that is often not achieved in the literature. Furthermore, the present study contributed to the sparse literature regarding FSO and the attitudes held by the general public concerning these offenders and the effectiveness of their treatment by utilising scales with strong empirical support for measuring attitudes, contrary to previous researchers who utilised the CATSO scale. The findings outline a potential lack of understanding amongst the general public, illustrating the problematic nature of allowing public attitudes to influence the development of sex offender legislation and treatment (Shackley et al., 2014). Therefore, this current study highlights that government bodies and policymakers may want to utilise academic research compared to public attitudes to develop sex offender legislation and treatment. Furthermore, the level of uncertainty found indicates the need for psychoeducation in regard to FSO (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012).

Psychoeducation may help to highlight the prevalence and danger of FSO, in turn reducing the burden felt by victims of FSO and signalling the need for a treatment program specifically for FSO.

By investigating participant and victim gender, the present study begins to bridge the gaps within literature about the effect of victim gender on attitudes towards FSO. Although a significant relationship between victim gender and attitudes was not found, the overall scores for participants in these conditions suggest that more negative attitudes were held by individuals in the male victim condition, as this finding contradicts previous literature concerning male victimisation, an implication of the present study is that it provides a speculative suggestion that contradicts pioneering theories such as that of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) in relation to male sexual assault victims. It highlights the need for future research regarding victim gender and attitudes towards sex offenders. The study did find a significant of participant gender, with females attributing more positive attitudes than male participants. As the jury consists of members of the public, this present study brings awareness of the potential gender bias that may exist in a jury setting. Therefore, this present study offers value for avoiding and attending to potential bias and skewed verdicts in courtroom settings.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study found a significant difference between participant gender and their attitudes towards FSO and the effectiveness of their treatment but did not find a significant difference between the gender of the victims. Although the study did meet its aim of investigating the possibility of an interaction between these variables, an interaction was not found. Ultimately, the main findings of the present study are that male participants attribute the most negative attitudes towards FSO and their treatment. Moreover, the findings point to a level of uncertainty amongst the average scores regardless of the conditions. The study points to the need for future qualitative research to investigate this level of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, this present study provides a unique insight into the potential presence of gender biases regarding attitudes towards FSO, which may have huge implications amongst jury settings.

It also contributes to the much-needed literature surrounding FSO and echoes the calls of the importance of future research surrounding this area. This current study has highlighted the issue with policymakers utilizing public attitudes to develop sex offender legislation; although the literature would benefit from further investigation into public attitudes, it is recommended that academic research investigates the effectiveness of FSO treatment in the UK as to the researcher's knowledge this has not yet been done. Moreover, more research needs to be done in developing methods to shift public attitudes through psychoeducation and making aware of the prevalence of FSO, which in turn will reduce the burden felt by the victims of FSO.

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Appendix A

Vignette – Female Victim and Female Sex Offender

Please read the following vignette.

After a rough break-up with an ex of six years, Jess joined a dating site. This is where Jess met Alice – a 20-year-old student. Over numerous weeks they talked most nights and exchanged multiple explicit pictures and videos. Alice opened up to Jess about how she was a virgin and has never participated in any sexual activities with somebody else. This did not bother Jess. She reassured Alice and made clear she understood her nerves and will “look after her” and “show her the ropes”. They both decided to take the next step in their relationship and meet up at a local restaurant. The date went very well, and Jess asked Alice if she wanted to continue drinking alcohol at her house. Alice agreed.

After a few hours of drinking, Alice felt it was getting late and suggested getting a taxi back home. Jess begged her to stay, but she didn’t want to. She asked Alice for a “goodbye kiss”, in which Alice followed by pecking her on the lips. Jess then pushed Alice back onto the sofa and proceeded to kiss her. Alice laughed and tried to stand back up, but Jess shoved her back down and started to take off Alice’s t-shirt, and when Alice refused, Jess grabbed her genitals. Alice was in total shock and told Jess to stop, but she giggled and said “it’s OK to be nervous”. She continued to kiss her and started to take off Alice’s trousers, at which point Alice stops kissing her back and suggest they do it another night. Jess continued to ignore her and started to perform oral sex on Alice. After finishing Jess leaves the room, and tells Alice to join her in the bedroom. However, Alice gathered her belongings and left the house.

The next day, Alice reported this to the police. Jess was taken into questioning and admitted to performing oral sex on Alice but insisted she wanted it, as her words were “if she didn’t, she could have easily pushed me away”, and that it was just nerves. Later Jess was charged and pleaded guilty in court for sexual assault. She is currently awaiting her sentencing.

Taking into consideration the vignette you have just read on Jess; please answer the questions on the next two pages concerning female sex offenders.

Appendix B

Vignette – Male Victim and Female Sex Offender

Please read the following vignette.

After a rough break-up with an ex of six years, Jess joined a dating site. This is where Jess met Zac – a 20-year-old student. Over numerous weeks they talked most nights and exchanged multiple explicit pictures and videos. Zac opened up to Jess about how he was a virgin and has never participated in any sexual activities with somebody else. This did not bother Jess. She reassured Zac and made clear she understood his nerves and will “look after him” and “show him the ropes”. They both decided to take the next step in their relationship and meet up at a local restaurant. The date went very well, and Jess asked Zac if he wanted to continue drinking alcohol at her house. Zac agreed.

After a few hours of drinking, Zac felt it was getting late and suggested getting a taxi back home. Jess begged him to stay, but he didn’t want to. She asked Zac for a “goodbye kiss”, in which Zac followed by pecking her on the lips. Jess then pushed Zac back onto the sofa and proceeded to kiss him. Zac laughed and tried to stand back up, but Jess shoved him back down and started to take off his t-shirt, and when Zac refused, Jess grabbed his genitals. Zac was in total shock and told Jess to stop, but she giggled and said “it’s OK to be nervous”. She continued to kiss him and started to take off his trousers, at which point Zac stops kissing her back and suggest they do it another night. Jess continued to ignore him and started to perform oral sex on Zac. After finishing Jess leaves the room, and tells Zac to join her in the bedroom. However, Zac gathered his belongings and left the house.

The next day, Zac reported this to the police. Jess was taken into questioning and admitted to performing oral sex on Zac but insisted he wanted it, as her words were “if he didn’t, he could have easily pushed me away”, and that it was just nerves. Later Jess was charged and pleaded guilty in court for sexual assault. She is currently awaiting her sentencing.

Taking into consideration the vignette you have just read on Jess; please answer the questions on the next two pages concerning female sex offenders.