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## Attitudes of Dutch citizens towards male victims of sexual coercion by a female perpetrator

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### ABSTRACT

This vignette study examines the differences in Dutch people's attitudes towards sexual coercion perpetrated by a male against a female versus sexual coercion perpetrated by a female against a male. In total, 583 Dutch citizens (16–86 years, 59.7% female) evaluated a control scenario and three sexually coercive scenarios (verbal coercion, purposeful intoxication and force), in which the sex of perpetrator and victim was purposely varied. The variables studied include: (1) scenario acceptability, (2) victim responsibility, (3) perpetrator responsibility, (4) victim pleasure, (5) victim distress and (6) support for filing a police report. The results indicate that sexual coercion of men is taken less seriously than sexual coercion of women, especially among Dutch men. However, most differences between attitudes towards male and female victims were found only in the physical force scenario. The findings highlight the importance of educational programmes to raise awareness and reduce stereotypical views on male sexual victimisation.

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### KEYWORDS

Sexual coercion; attitudes; male victim; female perpetrator; Dutch citizens

### Male sexual coercion

The issue of sexual coercion in adulthood has attracted a lot of attention from researchers. This scientific interest is hardly surprising, considering the stressful nature of these experiences. Krahé, Tomaszewska, Kuyper, and Vanwesenbeeck (2014) define sexual coercion as “behaviour carried out with the intent or result of making another person engage in sexual activity or sexual communication despite his or her unwillingness to do so” (p. 546). This covers a broad range of behaviours, such as manipulating the other by continuing to insist after the other person refused sex, lying about feelings or intentions, threatening with anger, withdrawing love, or using force.

Considering the gendered nature of sexual aggression, the larger part of studies conducted in this area has focused on situations with male perpetrators and female victims. However, sexual coercion by females occurs as well (e.g. Breiding et al., 2014). Only in 1991 was the legal definition of rape under Dutch law rephrased into a gender-neutral wording. Before this time, rape was by definition committed by a male perpetrator against a female victim (Römkens, 2008). Even though it is now recognised that males and females can be victims of sexual coercion, research on the subject of male coercion by a female perpetrator remains limited.

It is also acknowledged that situations of sexual coercion where the victim and the perpetrator are of the same sex are also only scarcely included in research. However, these situations are beyond the scope of this article, as the aim of the current study is to investigate the attitudes of Dutch citizens (16 years and older) towards adult male victims of sexual coercion by a female perpetrator. This type of research has not previously been conducted in the Netherlands.

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### *Prevalence estimates of male victimisation*

Just as among female victims, ascertaining exact prevalence rates of male sexual victimisation is difficult for various reasons. First of all, studies differ greatly in their operationalisation of sexual coercion. The effect of these differences in measurement is seen in the conclusion of a review from 27 European Union (EU) countries, where the prevalence estimates for life time male victimisation range from 2% in Denmark to 66% in the Netherlands (Krahé et al., 2014).

Numbers based on police reports are also unlikely to give an accurate prevalence estimate, as sexual assault often goes unreported. A Dutch panel study found that only 13% of sexually victimised men and 19% of female victims reported their assault to the police (De Haas, 2012). This hesitance to report sexual victimisation to the police is even stronger for male victims, due to a high degree of shame and stigmatisation of sexually abused men (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). A literature review on sexual assault of male victims suggests that reports are often only filed in extreme cases, where the chances of the victim being believed are maximal (Davies, 2002; Weiss, 2010). This is not surprising, as negative responses to male victims have been reported among police officers and providers of care for sexual assault victims (Maier, 2008).

Several studies have been conducted to ascertain prevalence estimates based on self-reports. Research conducted among 284 male US high school and university students found that 21% had experienced unwanted sexual intercourse and 43% had experienced some form of sexual coercion (French, Tilghman, & Malebranche, 2015). In 95% of these cases, the participant reported a female perpetrator. A US national survey based on 12,727 completed interviews reported that 1.7% of men had been raped and 23.4% had experienced other forms of sexual coercion during their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014). The numbers reported in research conducted in the Netherlands are somewhat lower than estimates from the USA. In a representative sample of 8000 Dutch men and women, 13% of males (aged between 25 and 71) reported at least one experience of physical sexual transgression (De Haas, 2012). For male victims older than 16, the perpetrator was female in 79% of the cases.

### *Coercive strategies*

Even though victimisation reports are often higher than reported perpetration, significant numbers of men and women admit having used coercive strategies to obtain sex. Different types of coercive strategies can be distinguished, for example: the use of threat or physical force, the exploitation of the other person's inability to resist the unwanted advances and the use of verbal pressure (Krahé et al., 2015). In a study among 656 US college students, 26% of women and 40% of men reported having used coercive strategies (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). The strategy most often used was continuing to persuade the other to have sex by trying to arouse them after they had refused to have sex. About 13% of men and 5% of women used alcohol as a tactic, by taking advantage of an intoxicated person or by purposely intoxicating someone in order to obtain sex; 5% of men and 3% of women used forceful tactics. A Canadian study among 222 heterosexual couples showed that 17.1% of women reported having engaged in sexually coercive behaviour in their current relationship and 20.5% reported having sexually coerced a previous partner (Brousseau, Bergeron, Hébert, & McDuff, 2011). Low agreement between the reports of both partners suggests that this perpetration of sexual coercion was underreported.

European research shows somewhat lower numbers of reported perpetration. A recent study from 10 European countries reports that between 2.6% and 14.8% of women admit to having engaged in sexual aggression (Krahé et al., 2015). A German study among 2149 university students found that 7.9% of women report perpetration of sexual coercion, with 4.3% using verbal pressure, 2.6% using alcohol-related strategies and 2.3% of women admitted using force (Krahé & Berger, 2013). Dutch research found that 14.7–19.7% of men and 6.9–9.7% of women reported having used sexually coercive tactics to obtain sex (De Haas, 2012). The most common coercive strategy was continuing to argue and push after refusal.

### *Rape myth acceptance*

Not all of the aforementioned coercive strategies are met with the same disapproval. Differences in perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours can in part be explained by differences in the acceptance of rape myths. Rape myths are oversimplified cognitive schemas on sexual assault that justify victim blaming (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). In this framework, a “genuine” rape is portrayed as an attack which includes violent penetration by a male stranger in a public, deserted place. A “genuine” victim is a chaste woman who actively resists the attack, which results in physical injury (DuMont, Miller & Myhr, 2003). If the attack or the victim deviates from this portrayal, more blame is laid on the victim (e.g. McKimmie, Masser, & Bongiorno, 2014). However, this stereotypical image differs greatly from the reality of most cases of sexual violence; in over 80% of sexual assaults, the perpetrator is an acquaintance of the victim (De Haas, 2012).

Likewise, male victims clearly violate the stereotypical victim image, which would suggest that they would be blamed more, and believed less, than female victims are. This idea is supported by several empirical studies. US college students were found to attribute less blame and responsibility to female perpetrators than to male perpetrators of sexual coercion (Rhatigan, Stewart, & Moore, 2011) and to be less empathic towards male victims (Osman, 2011). In a study among American college students, four scenarios were manipulated by changing the sex of the victim and perpetrator (Hannon, Hall, Nash, Formati & Hopson, 2000). Findings indicate that sexual aggressors were met with significantly less disapproval in situations with a male victim and a female perpetrator compared to scenarios with female victims of male perpetrators and scenarios where the victim and the perpetrator were both of the same sex. Men coerced into sex by female perpetrators are also found to be seen as more in control of the situation than coerced women, and therefore more responsibility was attributed to male victims (Katz, Moore, & Tkachuk, 2007).

An earlier study in which a scenario of forced oral sex at gunpoint was manipulated to change victim and perpetrator gender found that male victims of female perpetrators were seen as more likely to have initiated the episode or to have encouraged it, to have derived more pleasure from it and to have experienced less stress compared to the female victim/male perpetrator scenario (Smith, Pine, & Hawley, 1988). The mean score on amount of pleasure experienced by the victim was on the positive end of the scale for the male victim/female perpetrator, indicating that the participants on average rated the assault as pleasurable for the victim. However, this “positive” average was mainly due to the ratings of the male participants, as 47% of the men rated the assault as pleasurable, compared to only 9% of the women. Compelling is the comment of one male participant on this scenario: “Some guys have all the luck” (Smith et al., 1988, p.110).

This gender difference is also found in other research on the acceptance of male rape myths among college students (e.g. Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Russell, Oswald, & Kraus, 2011). A significantly higher percentage of men compared to women believed that most raped men are somewhat to blame and 51% of men (compared to 19.4% of women) indicated that they would have a hard time believing a man who said that he was raped by a woman (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Similarly, a study on verbal coercion found that male participants attributed less distress and more pleasure to the victim, although no gender differences were found in ratings of male victim responsibility (Katz et al., 2007).

### *Standard sexual script and coercion*

As follows from this overview, different myths about male victims’ sexual coercion still exist. For example, men are more in control and therefore more responsible for their victimisation; men may have initiated or encouraged the encounter; sexual coercion may be pleasurable for men. This is in line with the standard heterosexual sexual script (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), in which men have the role of sexual initiator and women are supposed to be the gatekeepers who decide whether sex takes place or not. Sexual scripts provide people with a framework on the appropriateness and order of sexual behaviours and feminine and masculine roles in sexuality (Beres, 2014). In

this standard sexual script, men are portrayed as always willing to have sex and women are expected to delay sexual activity (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2012). A reason for this expectation that women should be hesitant towards engaging in sex is the still existing double standard in sexual behaviour (Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, Lachowsky, & Undergraduate Research Group in Sexuality, 2014). Men are expected to be sexually experienced, while women may face negative judgements for being sexually active. Likewise, sex is thought to have a different function for men and women, where men have sex because of physical desires and women have sex for emotional closeness (Sakaluk et al., 2014).

In addition, there is a deeply rooted conviction that women are vulnerable in sex, while men are not, as the power in sexuality is assumed as residing with men (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006; Murnen, Wright, & Kalzyny, 2002). Thus, women are seen as potential victims in sexuality. In the same way, in this standard sexual script, men can sometimes become perpetrators of sexual coercion when their physical desires take over and overrule the woman's refusal. However, it leaves little room for the fact that women can be perpetrators and men can be victims, as the idea of a sexually reluctant man and a sexually coercive woman does not fit the standard script (Denov, 2003).

In short, the available literature on male victimisation by female perpetrators shows that compared to female victims, male victims are often perceived as being more responsible for the coercion, either because they are thought to have initiated or encouraged the event or because they are perceived to be more in control of the situation. Male victims are also seen as deriving more pleasure from the event and as experiencing less distress about it. These attitudes are often found to be stronger among men than among women.

## Present study and research aims

While this overview shows that there is some literature already available on the topic, these studies do have certain limitations. First of all, some important studies were conducted more than 20 years ago. As societal norms on sexuality change, their findings might be outdated. Second, most research is conducted in the USA. There is no previous research on evaluations of sexual coercion in the Netherlands, let alone studies that include male victims and female perpetrators. It cannot be assumed that findings from the USA can be generalised to the Netherlands, as cultural differences in sexual behaviour and attitudes towards sexuality exist (Dodge, Sandfort, Yarber, de Wit, 2005). Furthermore, most research on sexual coercion only focuses on situations of rape and physical force, while the current study aims to compare attitudes towards different types of sexual coercion. Lastly, the great majority of research is conducted among college and university students. While this is understandable in terms of practicality, it again provides limited opportunity to generalise the findings. It seems important to include other age and educational groups too, as a younger age and a higher educational level are found to be related to less rape myth acceptance (Burt, 1980).

The aim of the current study is therefore to investigate the attitudes of Dutch citizens towards male sexual coercion by a female perpetrator. This is done by asking participants to rate four vignettes, each describing a sexual situation. Based on the findings of previous research, the hypotheses for this study are:

H<sub>1</sub>: The control condition will be rated as most acceptable, followed by situations of verbal coercion, then purposeful intoxication, and physical force will be rated as least acceptable.

H<sub>2</sub>: Scenarios where men are sexually coerced by female perpetrators will be rated as more acceptable than scenarios where women are coerced by men.

H<sub>3</sub>: Male victims of female perpetrators will be attributed more responsibility compared to female victims of male perpetrators.

H<sub>4</sub>: Female perpetrators will be attributed less responsibility than male perpetrators.

H<sub>5</sub>: Male victims will be attributed more pleasure than female victims.

H<sub>6</sub>: Male victims will be attributed less distress compared to female victims of male perpetrators.

H<sub>7</sub>: Reporting the incident to the police will be supported more for female victims than for male victims.

H<sub>8</sub>: Male participants will be more pronounced in the attitudes predicted in H<sub>2</sub>–H<sub>6</sub> than female participants.

## Methods

### Participants

The participants were 583 Dutch residents, ranging in age from 16 to 86 years ( $M = 30.25$ ,  $SD = 12.54$ ). Of these 583 participants, 348 (59.7%) were female, 198 (34.0%) were male and 35 (6.0%) did not disclose their gender. Two participants (0.3%) indicated not identifying as either male or female. Of the 515 participants who reported their location of residence, 21.7% lived in a large city (>200,000 residents), 29.5% lived in a moderately large city (50,000–200,000 residents), 30.1% lived in a town (10,000–50,000 residents) and 16.6% lived in a village (<10,000 residents). The majority of the sample was highly educated, with 38.8% indicating studying or having completed higher vocational education and 32.6% reporting university as their highest educational level. The remaining 28.6% reported having vocational education or secondary education as their highest educational level.

### Instruments

The attitudes towards situations of sexual coercion by either men or women were measured using a questionnaire containing four vignettes depicting consensual sex as a control measurement and three situations of sexual coercion. The questionnaire can be found in [Appendix](#). The control vignette depicts consensual sex, while the other vignettes depict sexual coercion either by verbal coercion, purposeful intoxication or by using force. Using vignettes is an established way of conducting research on attitudes towards sexual coercion (e.g. McKimmie et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2011). These categories were chosen to be in line with the findings of previous studies, as it was found that these categories present a hierarchy (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). Every vignette was followed by a set of eight questions. Two of the questions asked, the ones pertaining to perpetrator pleasure and perpetrator distress, were added to balance the survey by asking all questions about both persons involved in the scenario, to prevent influencing the participants' ratings. However, these questions deal with issues beyond the scope of this study and are not reported on here. The six remaining questions were used to measure the following variables: (1) scenario acceptability, (2) victim responsibility, (3) perpetrator responsibility, (4) victim pleasure, (5) victim distress and (6) support for filing a police report. For every vignette, all variables were measured by one item, for example, to what extent do you think this situation is acceptable? All questions were measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale, ranging from (1) not acceptable/pleasurable/et cetera at all to (7) very acceptable/pleasurable/et cetera (see [Appendix](#)).

The three coercion vignettes were presented in random order to avoid order bias in the answers. Half of the questionnaires used vignettes with male perpetrators and female victims, the other half used vignettes with female perpetrators and male victims. These two conditions were randomly distributed. All vignettes described a friendship or dating relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, as sexual coercion is found to occur most often in these relationships (e.g. De Haas, 2012). Lastly, participants were asked to report their gender, age, educational level and area of residence.

### Procedure

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. This was done both face to face and through the internet in order to ensure that a sufficient sample size was obtained. Participants were recruited through the internet by placing the link to the questionnaire on several web pages and social media. The social media pages included a variety of Facebook groups for people in a certain city or region. Both cities and rural areas were chosen in order to avoid sample bias. The web sites were chosen based on accessibility and as an attempt to obtain diversity in the sample.

Face-to-face recruitment of participants took place on different days and times in Dutch intercity trains on different routes through the country. Consent for data collection in trains was obtained from



the Dutch Railways customer service in advance. In each train, consent was again obtained from the railway guard. Approximately 90% of the people approached, agreed to participate. No differences were found on the relevant variables between participants recruited through the internet and participants recruited face to face.

Participants were provided with a written informed consent, which states that participating is voluntary, that they can choose to withdraw at any time and that all data will be processed anonymously. The study was described as a study on the assessment of different sexual situations, comprising short descriptions of four situations. It was stated that participants would not be asked about their own sexual experiences. After completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with the email address of the researcher and contact information for several organisations which give information about sexuality and sexual coercion and/or care for victims of sexual coercion.

## Analyses

The first hypothesis, the hierarchy of situations on acceptability rating, was tested by carrying out a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the four scenarios as levels of the factor and with acceptability as the outcome variable.  $H_2$ – $H_7$  were tested using independent samples *t*-tests and linear regression analyses. Using independent samples *t*-tests is the most straightforward way to test for differences in reported acceptability, responsibility, pleasure and distress between the male victim and female victim condition. However, carrying out these analyses using linear regression made it possible to check for moderation effects of participant gender by including the condition variable, the gender variable and the interaction term as predictors. This was a test of the last hypothesis, which states that male participants are more pronounced in the tested attitudes compared to female participants.

## Results

### Scenario acceptability

First, it was tested whether the vignettes represent a hierarchy with regard to their acceptability rating. As stated in  $H_1$ , we expected that the control scenario would be rated as most acceptable and that verbal coercion would be rated as the most acceptable coercive scenario, followed by the purposeful intoxication scenario. The force scenario was expected to be rated as least acceptable. On average, the acceptability of the control condition was rated as 6.49, verbal coercion was rated 2.04, purposeful intoxication was rated 1.66 and force had a rating of 1.65, see Table 1. This indicates that the control vignette was rated as very acceptable and the vignettes that include coercion were on average rated as very unacceptable. Even though the control condition depicted a situation of consensual sex, 14 participants (2.4%) rated this scenario (somewhat) unacceptable and 12 participants (2.0%) supported or somewhat supported filing a police report about this situation.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was used to test whether the acceptability ratings differ significantly between the vignettes. As the assumption of sphericity was violated, the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was used. The results showed a significant difference between the acceptability ratings of the scenarios,  $F(2.718, 1451.668) = 2571.9, p < .001$ . A *post hoc* test of pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment showed that the verbal coercion scenario was rated as more acceptable than the purposeful intoxication and force scenarios, but these latter two categories did not differ from one another. All coercive scenarios differed significantly from the control scenario. Thus, the hierarchy predicted in the first hypothesis was confirmed for the larger part, but with the exception that purposeful intoxication was not rated as more acceptable than force.

The second hypothesis predicted higher acceptability rates for scenarios where men were sexually coerced by female perpetrators compared to the scenarios where women were coerced by men. Independent samples *t*-tests showed no significant differences for acceptability ratings of verbal

**Table 1.** Ratings of scenario acceptability, victim and perpetrator responsibility, victim pleasure and victim distress in four scenarios.

	Control		Verbal coercion					Purposeful intoxication					Force				
			Male victim		Female victim		<i>t</i>	Male victim		Female victim		<i>t</i>	Male victim		Female victim		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Scenario acceptability	6.49	1.08	2.12	1.38	1.95	1.24	−1.52	1.71	1.22	1.59	1.13	−1.28	2.02	1.35	1.25	0.72	−8.41***
Victim responsibility			4.83	1.83	4.68	1.95	−0.93	3.34	2.19	3.31	1.96	−0.193	3.58	2.27	2.07	1.82	−8.92***
Perpetrator responsibility			6.48	1.11	6.60	0.93	1.38	6.71	1.03	6.82	0.72	1.55	6.72	1.01	6.96	0.51	3.67***
Victim pleasure			2.65	1.79	2.24	1.74	−2.80**	2.52	1.97	1.99	1.71	3.50***	2.71	2.07	1.51	1.56	−7.91***
Victim distress			5.96	1.41	6.30	1.20	3.20***	5.02	1.99	5.29	1.86	1.67	6.01	1.59	6.77	1.04	6.94***
Support for police report	1.42	1.02	3.50	1.82	3.88	1.94	2.42*	5.07	1.89	5.35	1.77	1.84	5.01	1.97	6.39	1.37	9.67***

Note: Degrees of freedom range from 451.65 (equal variances not assumed) to 581.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .



coercion,  $t(558) = -1.53, p = .127$ , and purposeful intoxication,  $t(558) = -1.28, p = .200$ . However, acceptability of the force vignette did show significant differences,  $t(554) = -8.41, p < .001$ . Scenarios where male victims are forced into sex by female perpetrators were rated as more acceptable than scenarios where men forced women into sexual contact. The second hypothesis can thus only be confirmed for the force vignette.

### Responsibility

Most victim responsibility was attributed to victims of verbal coercion, followed by victims of purposeful intoxication and force victims were attributed least responsibility, see Table 1. The third hypothesis states that male victims are attributed more responsibility than female victims. For the verbal coercion and purposeful intoxication vignettes, no differences were found in responsibility attributed to male victims versus female victims. However, male victims were attributed significantly more responsibility than female victims in the force scenario,  $t(581) = -8.92, p < .001$ . Thus, the third hypothesis only holds true for the force scenario.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that female perpetrators would be attributed significantly less responsibility than male perpetrators of sexual coercion. Differences in responsibility attributed to male perpetrators versus female perpetrators were only found in the force scenario. In the force vignettes, significantly less responsibility was attributed to female perpetrators compared to male perpetrators,  $t = 3.67, p < .001$ . In conclusion, as with the previous hypotheses, the fourth hypothesis can only be confirmed for the force scenario.

### Victim pleasure

The fifth hypothesis predicted that more pleasure would be attributed to male victims than to female victims. Even though on average little pleasure was attributed to victims, male victims were attributed significantly more pleasure than female victims in all three coercion scenarios (see Table 1). This confirms the fifth hypothesis.

### Victim distress

On average, all coercive scenarios were rated as moderately to highly stressful (see Table 1). Male victims of verbal coercion and force were attributed significantly less distress than female victims, respectively,  $t = 3.17, p = .002, t = 6.94, p < .001$ . Male victims of purposeful intoxication were attributed less distress as well, but this difference was not significant,  $t = 1.66, p = .097$ . The sixth hypothesis, which predicted lower distress ratings for male victims than for female victims, thus holds true for the verbal coercion scenario and the force scenario.

### Reporting the coercion to the police

A repeated-measures ANOVA was used to test for significant differences between support for filing a police report in the various situations. As the assumption of sphericity was violated, the Greenhouse–Geisser correction had to be used. There was a significant difference between support for filing a police report,  $F(1.95, 1041.8) = 287.54, p < .001$ . A *post hoc* test of pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment showed that all scenarios differed significantly from one another (all  $p$ -values  $< .001$ ). As shown in Table 1, the force scenario yielded most support for filing a police report about the coercion ( $M = 5.67$ ), followed by the purposeful intoxication scenario ( $M = 5.20$ ). There was less support for filing a police report in the verbal coercion scenario ( $M = 3.68$ ).

There were significant differences between support for male victims and female victims on filing a police report in the verbal coercion scenario,  $t = 2.43, p = .016$ , and in the force scenario,  $t = 9.67, p < .001$ . As the seventh hypothesis predicted more support for female victims than male victims

on filing a police report, this was confirmed for the verbal coercion and force scenario, but not for purposeful intoxication.

### Participant gender

The eighth hypothesis predicted that male participants would be more pronounced in the attitudes predicted in the previous hypotheses than female participants. A difference in attitudes between male and female participants was found for all measured attitudes, except perpetrator responsibility. Male participants had on average higher ratings on scenario acceptability (see Table 2) and attributed more pleasure to the victim in all vignettes describing coercive situations compared to female participants,  $t_{\text{verbal}} = 3.99, p < .001$ ,  $t_{\text{intoxication}} = 4.68, p < .001$  and  $t_{\text{force}} = 3.22, p = .001$ . Male participants also showed less support for filing a police report than female participants ( $t_{\text{verbal}} = -4.68$ ,  $t_{\text{intoxication}} = -3.68$  and  $t_{\text{force}} = -7.34$ , all  $p$ -values  $< .001$ ). Male participants were also found to attribute more responsibility ( $t = -4.11, p < .001$ ) and less distress to the victim than female participants ( $t = -3.28, p = .001$ ), but these effects were only found in the force scenario.

The moderation effect between participant gender and condition (male victims and female perpetrators versus female victims and male perpetrators) predicted in  $H_8$  is only found in the force scenario for the variables scenario acceptability, victim pleasure, victim distress and support for filing a police report (see Table 3). In other words, male sexual coercion was rated as more acceptable, the male victim was attributed less distress and more pleasure and there was less support for male victims for filing a police report, but these effects were stronger for male participants than for female participants.

No moderation effect was found for victim responsibility. For participant responsibility, a significant moderation effect was only found in the purposeful intoxication scenario,  $t = -2.03, p = .043$ , which indicates that the difference between responsibility attributed to male perpetrators versus female perpetrators of purposeful intoxication was greater for male participants than for female participants. However, it should be noted that the effect size of this moderation is small ( $R^2 = 0.021$ ).

There were no significant effects of age, location of residence or educational level on any of the variables studied.

In addition, 28 participants volunteered written comments to this questionnaire. Twenty-six of these participants were male. The comments ranged from explanations of why a certain answer

**Table 2.** Average acceptability of four scenarios by participant gender.

	Male participants		Female participants			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
Control	6.43	1.08	6.52	1.09	543	0.95
Verbal coercion	2.58	1.60	1.76	1.03	218.4 <sup>a</sup>	-6.43***
Purposeful intoxication	1.93	1.38	1.49	0.98	303.8 <sup>a</sup>	-3.93***
Force	2.10	1.45	1.41	0.89	270.3 <sup>a</sup>	-6.00***

<sup>a</sup>Equal variances were not assumed.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Moderation effects between participant gender and condition in the force scenario.

	Acceptability		Victim pleasure		Victim distress		Support police report	
	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>		<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Constant	1.17***		1.19***		6.75***		6.61***	
Condition	0.47***		0.78***		-0.64***		-1.09***	
Gender	0.27		0.55***		0.00		-0.68**	
Condition × Gender	0.75***		0.55**		-0.69**		-0.77**	
		.204		.200		.146		.229

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

was chosen, for example, “I do not support filing a police report on any of the situations because I think the police should be left out of one’s sex life”, to comments endorsing rape myths or standard sexual script, for example, “Can I have her number?” as a comment on the force scenario with a male victim and a female perpetrator. At least 20 participants commented on the questionnaire to the researcher directly. Several comments reflected rape myth endorsement, as in the case of a young man who asked the female researcher to provide her phone number, stating that he would be interested in exploring this topic further with her.

## Discussion

This vignette study examined the differences in Dutch people’s attitudes towards sexual coercion perpetrated by a male against a female versus sexual coercion perpetrated by a female against a male. The findings of this study are in line with previous research at several points, although there are some deviations. First of all, this study did not find the exact same hierarchy in acceptability of coercive situations as found in the study of Struckman-Johnson and colleagues (2003). In both studies, verbal coercion was rated as more acceptable than purposeful intoxication and force, but these latter two categories did not differ from one another in acceptability ratings in the present study. The lack of difference found between the force and intoxication scenarios might be influenced by recent awareness of drugs-facilitated sexual assault. Both in the USA and the UK, studies show a heightened risk perception among students following a period of media attention to the phenomenon (Burgess, Donovan, & Moore, 2009; Moore, 2009).

Second, the present study also did not find differences in responsibility attributed to male and female victims of verbal coercion as Katz and colleagues (2007) found, and no differences in attitudes towards male and female aggressors in the verbal coercion and intoxication scenario, in contrast to the findings of Russell and colleagues (2011). These differences may be explained by a cultural difference. As previously stated, the present research is the first study on evaluation of sexual coercion in the Netherlands, while most previous research is conducted in the USA. Not only are US prevalence estimates of sexual coercion consistently higher than Dutch estimates, sexual health behaviour and attitudes towards sexuality are also found to differ greatly between the USA and the Netherlands (Dodge et al., 2005). It is possible that attitudes towards victims and perpetrators of sexual coercion are influenced by the same cultural differences as Dodge and colleagues (2005) identify, namely differences in religiosity and sexuality education. Compared to the Netherlands, adults in the USA tend to have a more conservative perspective on sexuality, which restricts access to information about sexuality. This conservative perspective is heavily based on religiosity. Of the American participants, 83% identified themselves as religious, versus only 34% of Dutch participants (Dodge et al., 2005). Both more conservative attitudes and less access to comprehensive sexuality education might explain why the findings of US studies on attitudes towards sexual coercion differ from the findings in the current study.

The majority of the hypotheses could only be confirmed for the force scenario. For example, acceptability of the situation, victim responsibility and perpetrator responsibility were found to differ significantly between the two experimental conditions only in the force scenario. This may suggest that male rape myths, such as the idea that men are more in control of sexual encounters and thus more responsible for their victimisation, particularly play a role in situations of forceful sexual coercion. This might be especially true for men, as moderation effects between participant gender and experimental condition were only found in the force scenario, with the exception of responsibility attributed to the perpetrator. The only hypothesis confirmed for all three coercive scenarios was that male victims were thought to derive more pleasure from the situation than female victims. This finding is in line with the male rape myth that men would enjoy being sexually coerced.

A possible explanation of why several of these differences in attitudes towards male and female victims are found in the force scenario, but not in the scenarios of purposeful intoxication and verbal coercion might lie in the role of physical strength. The study on rape myths by Struckman-Johnson

and Struckman-Johnson (1992) found that male victims of sexual assault by a female perpetrator, rather than by a male perpetrator, were blamed more for not escaping from the attack. As men are often physically stronger than women, it could be that participants perceive the male victim as having the advantage of being stronger than the female perpetrator and therefore should be able to resist a forceful incident more easily than a female victim. In the situation of verbal coercion and purposeful intoxication, physical strength does not influence whether coercion occurs and women may be held responsible for dealing adequately with such situations as much as men are. This may reduce the differences in attitudes towards male victims and female victims, as they might be perceived as being similar in their ability to resist the coercion.

Furthermore, Larimer and colleagues (1999) found that similar numbers of men and women reported being the recipients of verbal coercion and purposeful intoxication, but significantly more women reported being physically forced into sex. Thus, it is relatively more common for men to become victims of verbal coercion or purposeful intoxication, which might suggest that a deviation from the standard sexual script is more accepted in these two situations compared to the use of physical force. This provides another possible explanation for the finding that attitudes towards sexually coerced men and women on differ mostly in the physical force scenario.

The force scenario also yielded the most support for filing a police report on the incident, on average 5.01 for male victims and 6.39 for female victims on a seven-point scale. This support was found to be significantly higher for female victims in both the verbal coercion and the force scenario, but no difference was found in the purposeful intoxication scenario. Very little research has been conducted on support for reporting sexual coercion to the police. It is established that victims often do not file a police report on the incident (e.g. French et al., 2012) and a study on bystander willingness to report various crimes to the police found that this willingness was the lowest for sexual assault (Nicksa, 2013). The findings of the present study might therefore implicate that while many people in theory support filing a police report on sexual assault, in practice, most people will not act on this.

A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that real-life situations of sexual assault are sometimes more ambiguous than the vignettes presented here. The more situations deviate from the stereotypical sexual assault where a resisting female victim is physically forced into sex by a male stranger, the less likely it is that the assault will be reported to the police (Du Mont, Miller, & Myhr, 2003). The vignettes used in this study are very short and provide only a minimum of information, which reduces the ecological validity.

Another limitation of this study is that the questions used to measure the attitudes may have influenced the participants' scores. Even though care was taken to phrase the questions as neutrally as possible, the question about their support of filing a police report on the situation may have alerted participants that the scenario might be considered to be a criminal offence. This could have directed participants into thinking of the scenario as less acceptable. A related limitation is the fact that all variables were measured by a single item instead of a scale, as the latter has a higher predictive validity (Diamantopoulos, Sarstedt, Fuchs, Wilczynski & Kaiser, 2012).

Despite these limitations, the present study provides some important insights in the attitudes Dutch citizens have towards sexual coercion. Especially in situations where physical force is used to obtain sex, male victims of sexual coercion are taken less seriously than female victims. Women are held as responsible for verbal coercion and coercion by purposeful intoxication as men are, but female perpetrators of forceful coercion are attributed less responsibility compared to male perpetrators. Several differences in attitudes were found between male and female participants. Male participants rated the coercive scenarios as more acceptable, attributed more pleasure to the victims and were less supportive of filing police reports. In the force scenario, male participants also attributed more responsibility and less distress to the victim than female participants.

The finding that especially men do not always take male victimisation seriously was supported by the experiences of the researcher while conducting the study. Comments such as "Why would that guy refuse sex? Is she ugly, or something?" were almost exclusively given by men about male victims.

The motives of the women to refuse sex were never questioned. These comments suggest that there is still acceptance of male rape myths and adherence to the standard sexual script, where men are seen as always willing to have sex and as basically non-vulnerable in sexuality. These comments were not deliberately elicited for this research. Nonetheless, these spontaneous remarks gave important information, which shows the promise of combining quantitative studies with qualitative research.

Future research could therefore include qualitative approaches to obtain richer data on the attitudes towards sexual coercion. This could give insight into how people arrive at a certain viewpoint and why male and female victims are perceived differently by some, but not by others. Future quantitative research could include vignettes with more detailed descriptions of coercive situations in order to establish the effects of these details on how the coercion, the victim and the perpetrator are perceived. For example, the behaviour of the victim and the perpetrator both prior to, during and after the coercion, and whether a police report is actually filed. Lastly, this study only included vignettes with heterosexual couples. Future research could include situations where the victim and the perpetrator are of the same sex, to examine the attitudes towards these situations.

In short, the findings of this first Dutch study on evaluation of sexual coercion suggest that forceful sexual coercion of male victims by female perpetrators is taken less seriously than sexual force of female victims by male perpetrators. As sexual coercion can be a very stressful experience for both men and women, it is important to increase our understanding of this difference in perception.

In this way, the findings also have important practice and policy implications. For example, this study found that people still believe that men enjoy coerced sex more than women, with the most notable difference in the force scenario. With regard to all other variables, differences in attitudes were also mainly found in the physical force scenario, which might suggest a stronger influence of the standard sexual script in those situations. If men are perceived as more able to resist forced sex than women or if coercion is perceived as not very unpleasant for men, less supportive reactions towards male victims are not surprising. In practice, this could mean that support for male victims can be improved by creating awareness of the fact that men who are forced into sex by women can experience distress and psychological problems and that these men have little control over their victimisation. A meta-analysis shows that education programmes are effective in increasing knowledge and changing attitudes towards sexual coercion (Anderson & Whiston, 2005). Such awareness raising may be desirable for the general public and relevant professional groups alike, not least for police officers taking reports. The realisation that male victims are not always able to resist sexual coercion, despite the portrayal of men as stronger and more in control of sexuality than women, may reduce victim blaming and increase the responsibility attributed to the perpetrator.

Another policy implication suggested by the study findings is the need for educational programmes on sexual coercion to include different types of coercion, as there seem to be different dynamics in verbal coercion than in coercion using physical force. Awareness and education programmes can help in changing the attitudes towards male victims of sexual coercion, which ultimately may lead to increased opportunities for these victims to receive proper care and support.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix

### Vignettes Male Victim/Female Perpetrator

#### Control

Jasper and Anna are involved in a romantic relationship. Jasper visits Anna, they are having a good time and it is already getting late. He decides to stay over for the night. When they are in bed together, Anna starts to kiss and pet Jasper. Jasper kisses and pets her back and they have sex with each other.

#### Verbal coercion

Marjolein and Thomas have been dating for two months. One evening they go out for dinner at a nice restaurant and afterwards they go back to Marjolein's apartment to watch a movie. During the movie, they start kissing. When Marjolein begins to pet Thomas, he states that he does not want to have sex. Marjolein responds that she is going to end the relationship if Thomas does not want to sleep with her and continues petting. Thomas gives in and they have sex.

#### Purposeful intoxication

Eveline is having her birthday party and invited Frank to come. Eveline and Frank have been friends for a long time. When everyone is leaving, Eveline asks Frank if he wants to stay a little bit longer. She starts kissing him and tries to remove his clothes, but Frank pushes her away and says he does not want that. Eveline stops and pours him a glass of wine instead. Frank says that this will be the last glass of wine he wants to drink, because he already had enough during the party. After this glass, Eveline still pours him more wine and keeps on refilling his glass. After a couple of glasses, Frank is very drunk and lies on the couch. Eveline removes his clothes and they have sex.

#### Force

Ilse and Patrick have had several dates and are meeting up again in the city centre. Ilse offers Patrick a ride home afterwards. During the trip home, Ilse parks the car on a parking lot and starts kissing Patrick. Patrick says he wants to make out with her, but he does not want anything more than that. Ilse then sits down on his lap, locks the car door and tightly holds down his seat belt. She unzips his jeans and they have sex.



*Questions after every Vignette*

- To what extent do you think this situation is acceptable?  
*Not acceptable at all–Very acceptable*
- To what extent do you think that *perpetrator* is responsible for the fact that *victim* and *perpetrator* had sex in this situation?  
*Not responsible at all–Completely responsible*
- To what extent do you think that *victim* is responsible for the fact that *victim* and *perpetrator* had sex in this situation?  
*Not responsible at all–Completely responsible*
- To what extent do you think that the situation was pleasurable for *perpetrator*?  
*Not pleasurable at all–Very pleasurable*
- To what extent do you think that the situation was pleasurable for *victim*?  
*Not pleasurable at all–Very pleasurable*
- To what extent do you think that the situation was stressful for *perpetrator*?  
*Not stressful at all–Very stressful*
- To what extent do you think that the situation was stressful for *victim*?  
*Not stressful at all–Very stressful*
- To what extent would you support filing a police report on the situation?  
*I would not support that at all–I would completely support that*

The vignettes with female victims and male perpetrators are the same as the vignettes described above, except that the names are switched in order to portray the other gender as the victim and perpetrator.