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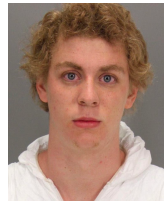
# Attitudes Towards Sexual Assault: The Influence of Athletic Background and Media Portrayals on Perceptions of Rape

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## Introduction

- Empirical findings suggest that college athletes who perpetrate sexual assault receive more lenient legal consequences than non-athlete perpetrators. Understanding how media portrayals influence perceptions of real-world reported cases of sexual assault may illuminate one pathway by which societal forces contribute to this phenomenon.
- Student athletes are overrepresented in cases of sexual assault perpetration and partner battering, accounting for 35% despite comprising only 3% of the student body (Crosset, Piatek, McDonald & Benedict, 1996).
- However, despite being more likely to be arrested and indicted for sexual assault than non-athletes, college athletes are significantly less likely to be convicted for such crimes.
- Melnick (1992) inserts that this is a privilege that begins in youth sports and extends through professional ranks in which American society holds "star" athletes in such high regard that there should be no shock that these athletes expect differential treatment for their actions.
- There is evidence that athletes receive lighter penalties for their transgressions, like Brock Turner, the Stanford University swimmer who received only three months of jail time for two charges of rape, two of felony sexual assault, and one of attempted rape. For many, this case highlighted deep cultural biases tied to rape culture, class privilege and corruption of the legal justice system, all of which continue to sanction sexual assault by prominent male athletes (Remnison & Dodge, 2017).
- Such cases of sexual assault raise questions about cultural and behavioral patterns implanted within the culture of sports. For example, sports teams function as platforms for male bonding which is highly associated with instances of gang rape, and in this fashion group loyalty can be so strong as to override personal integrity (Melnick, 1992). This social pressure can provide environments in which, "Group members will do anything to please each other... they are raping for each other. The women are incidental" (Toufexis & Brady, 1990, p. 77) and, "The pressure to be one of the boys can turn rape into a team activity" (Weir, 1990, p.3c).



## Current Study

The current study seeks to address the connection between athlete status and the relative repercussions of sexual assault perpetration. From the prior research, it is evident that athletes have received specialized treatment in legal proceedings related to sexual assault perpetration and that effect may be stronger for individuals who have a connection to athletics or an athletic background. Through this study we are seeking to additionally seeking to address if there are different participant-level characteristics that influence perceptions of media portrayals of sexual assault more generally? These individual characteristics will predict responses on evaluations of victim blame, perpetrator blame and characterization of sexual assault. I predict that individual factors like age, gender and athlete status will have an effect on rape myth acceptance and victim blaming.

## Methods

**Participants:** 616 individuals were included for final analysis. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics exclusively from pre-vetted "research panels".

- Gender: Male ( $n=306$ ), female ( $n=298$ ), ( $n=12$ ) who did not identify as a male or female.
- Age: 18-92 years ( $M=41.14$ )
- Race: The majority identified as Caucasian/White (55.68%), Hispanic/Latino/a (21.43%), Black/African American (13.64%), Asian/Pacific Islander (4.38%), Mixed Race/Other (3.57%), and Middle Eastern (1.30%).
- Region: Participants were recruited for representative sample across the United States and were regionally distributed as follows: South (37.01%), West (23.54%), Midwest (20.94%) and Northeast (18.51%).
- Athlete Status: 14.77% of participants identified that they are currently an athlete and 54.06% said they have been an athlete at some point.

### Measures:

**Demographics.** Asked region of the U.S. they are from, gender, race, religious background, highest degree of education obtained, college student status, household income, relationship status and sexuality.

**Sports fandom.** Questions were asked to assess the participants degree of sports fanaticism. There were 6 items on which participants rate (5-point Likert-type scale) to which degree they identify with the statement from "describes me extremely well" to "does not describe me". Examples include, "To what extent would you identify as a college sports fan?" and "To what extent do you follow news about sports?"

**Rape myth acceptance.** The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale-Short Form (IRMA; Payne et al., 1999) is a 22 item self-report measure to measure agreement to designated rape myths. This items on which participants rate on a 6-point Likert-type scale to which degree they agree with each statement from "disagree strongly" to "agree strongly".

**Additionally, subjects were given the following scales that were not used within the present analysis but were included because of their connections with rape accepting attitudes and scientifically relevant concepts:** Sexual history questionnaire, Degree of news following, The Community Beliefs about Rape scale (Taylor & Mouzis, 2006), Attitudes Towards Women Scale (Nelson, 1988), Belief in a Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), The Male Role Attitudes Scale (MRAS; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993), The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Ho et al., 2015), Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980, 1996), Levenson Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl & Fitzpatrick, 1995), Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), Single-Item Narcissism Scale (Konrath, Meier & Bushman, 2014), Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA; Altemeyer, 1996), Marlowe-Crowne Scale Short Form (Reynolds, 1982).

## Procedure

- Participants were randomly issued four out of a possible 1,771 previously collected actual news articles covering sexual assault cases from 2015 to 2017. Articles were retrieved via Google.com with the search terms "Sexual Assault" and "Rape", and by selecting "News". Articles were included in the final sample if they: primarily discussed a sexual assault case or cases, involved individuals (perpetrator or victim) between the ages of 13 and 24 (as this period of adolescence is supported as high risk for sexual assault victimization; Ullman, 2004), and had no controversial yet unrelated charges included (i.e., murder or theft), and took place in the United States.
- Articles are representative of athlete and non-athlete perpetrators and have been reliably coded for various content in relation to macro-level (e.g., emotional tone) and micro-level characteristics (e.g., word usage).
- After reading each article, participants were provided with a series of questions that measure their attitudes about the case (e.g., To what extent would you blame the victim?, To what extent would you blame the perpetrator?, To what extent would you consider this sexual assault?).

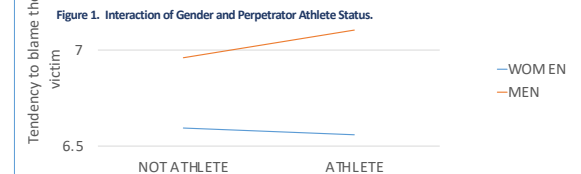
## Results

- At the participant level, the article data for each participant was stacked and a regression model was ran to predict victim or perpetrator blame. Predictors at the participant level were participant gender, athlete status ever, sports fandom, and rape myth acceptance. While, the predictor at the article level was perpetrator athlete status.

**Table 1. Effect Estimates and 95% CI for Participant- and Article-Level Predictors on Victim Blame and Perpetrator Blame**

Blame Attributions	Victim Blame		Perpetrator Blame	
	b (SE)	95%CI	b (SE)	95%CI
Intercept	6.96 (.55)**	[5.88, 8.05]	4.46 (1.14)**	[2.22, 6.70]
<b>Participant-Level Predictors</b>				
Sex	-.37 (.10)**	[-.57, -.17]	.13 (.21)	[-.29, .55]
Ever an Athlete	-.04 (.11)	[-.25, .17]	-.48 (.22)**	[-.91, -.04]
Sports Fan	-.10 (.04)**	[-.18, .03]	.01 (.08)	[-.14, .17]
Rape Myth Acceptance	-.83 (.05)**	[-.93, -.74]	.98 (.10)**	[.78, 1.19]
<b>Article-Level Predictor</b>				
Perpetrator Athlete Status	.14 (.07)**	[.00, .29]	.20 (.16)	[-.11, .51]
<b>Interaction</b>				
Sex by Perpetrator Athlete Status	-.18 (.11)	[-.39, .03]	-.19 (.23)	[-.63, .26]

- Women blamed the victim in the scenario significantly less than men
- Sports fans endorsed higher rates of victim blame than non-sports fans
- Participants who rated higher in supporting rape myths endorsed higher rates of victim blame
- An interaction of gender and perpetrator athlete status was run



## Discussion

- The interaction between gender and perpetrator athlete status plotted in figure 1 demonstrates trend level significance, which suggests that while women do not evaluate victim blame differently based on the athlete status of the perpetrator, men blame the victim more when the perpetrator is an athlete.
- The parameter estimate for perpetrator athlete status is the expected change in victim blame when the perpetrator is male, and this effect was significant, once again suggesting men take into account the perpetrators status as an athlete when evaluating victim blame.
- In reference to perpetrator blame, participants who had ever been an athlete judged the victim less to blame regardless of whether or not the perpetrator was an athlete.
- Rape myth acceptance is negatively associated with perpetrator blame.
- Person-level factors that associate with sports fandom or athlete status ever correspond with more victim blame and less perpetrator blame regardless of whether or not the perpetrator was also an athlete.
- This may suggest, as denoted in prior literature, that sports culture may be more favorable toward assault or that those who look more favorably upon assault gravitate towards sports. In this way, ferocity is deemed a vital characteristic in the athletic arena but translates to assault endorsing characteristics (Hust et al, 2013).

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