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Blame is in the Eye of the beholder: Assessing the Role of Ambivalent Sexism on Subtle Rape Myth Acceptance

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ABSTRACT
The goal of the present study was to determine whether ambivalent sexism predicts subtle rape myth acceptance. Respondents comprised of 211 university students, who completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and the updated version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Results indicated that while benevolent sexism significantly predicted acceptance of subtle rape myths, hostile sexism did not. Additionally, male participants reported more ambivalent sexism and subtle rape myth acceptance than females. These findings add to the literature investigating gender inequality and rape mythology by giving a first account on the link between subtle rape myths and ambivalent sexist attitudes.

Keywords: Gender-based Violence; Rape Mythology; Subtle Rape Myths; Ambivalent Sexism

INTRODUCTION
Gender-based violence (GBV) is generally defined as acts of violence inflicted upon a victim based on their gender (Krantz, 2002). GBV is almost wholly carried out against women by men (World Health Organization, 2017) and is thus affirmed as a direct product of gender inequality and power disparity and has been conceptualized as central to maintaining the patriarchal structure (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005). Physical and psychological abuse, coercion and the threat of violence serve to maintain the status quo by consistently reasserting women's subservience and powerlessness to men (Ahrens, 2006; Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980) and Hunnicutt, 2009).

Sexual violence figures indicate that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2017). Scottish figures reiterate the gravity of this issue within the country, with 1 in 10 women aged over 16 having been raped and 1 in 5 having experienced attempted rape, according to the 2015 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Fuller, Clifton, Field, Mercer, Prah et al., 2015). In fact, though many other crime rates have been consistently declining in Scotland, rape reports have been on an upward trend since 1974 and are currently at the highest recorded level since 1971 (Scottish Government, 2019). Additionally, the most recent crime statistics released by the Scottish government show
that 2426 completed and attempted rapes were reported to the police between the years 2018 and 2019 alone, which is a worrying 8% more than the year prior - as opposed to the comparably minor 1% increase for overall crime and a 115% increase since 2010 (Scottish Government, 2019).

The non-disclosure of sexual violence isn’t surprising given that the majority of victims who report sexual violence receive negative reactions from at least one individual in their own social network (Ahrens, 2006; Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco & Barnes., 2001) as well as the criminal justice system (Ahrens, 2006; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Lehner, 2017). Receiving negative comments upon disclosure may alter victims’ perceptions of their own attack (Koss, 1985), with studies revealing that among women whose experience met the operational definition of rape, between 43% (Koss & Oros, 1982) and 73% (Koss, Dinero, Siebel & Cox, 1988) did acknowledge their experience as rape.

Victim blaming, which is characteristic of the response patterns associated with GBV, has been investigated as part of an increasing body of literature examining societal attitudes toward sexual violence. The construct of “rape myths” was first introduced in the 1970s in sociological (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974) and second wave feminist (Brownmiller, 1975) literature to define a complex set of false beliefs and stereotypes surrounding rape, rape victims and rapists. These include that women enjoy rape, lie about it, deserved it or that men cannot help themselves, all of which trivialize assaults (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; 1995), attribute blame to the victim (Grubb & Turner, 2012) and increase the likelihood of further sexual violence. Moreover acceptance of rape myths affect cause internalized blame for the victim herself (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004), which may prolong non-disclosure and perpetuate suffering. The pervasive nature of rape mythology, which is grounded in sexism adversely impact the treatment of victims (Ahrens, 2006; Campbell et al., 2001) and may influence the likelihood of prosecution and conviction rates (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Lehner, 2017).

Despite the fact that both men and women have been found to endorse rape myths, men have consistently been shown to be more accepting of rape myths than women (Kelly & Stermac, 2008; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, 1995). Furthermore, a strong relationship between RMA and men’s rape proclivity, or likelihood of perpetrating rape has been established in the literature (Bohner, Siebler & Schmelcher, 2006; Chapleau & Oswald, 2010; Chiroro, Bohner, Viki & Jarvis, 2004). Thus research has long focused on identifying the underlying ideologies that predict and maintain these myths. Glick and Fiske's reconceptualization of sexism as a dual-nature construct which encompasses both stereotypically negative (Hostile Sexism) and seemingly positive (Benevolent Sexism) attitudes toward women, known as “Ambivalent Sexism” (1996, 1997) in central to the study of gender based violence as it explains attributions of blame to women who do not comply with ascribed roles (Davies, Gilston & Rogers, 2012; Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Glick & Fiske, 1997). Both hostile and benevolent sexism as conceptualized by Glick and Fiske place women in a subservient position.

Past research has typically found a relationship between Hostile Sexism RMA (Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000). However, subsequent studies distinguishing between stranger rape and acquaintance rape scenarios found Benevolent Sexism to be a predictor of victim blame in acquaintance rape scenarios (Abrams, Viki, Masser & Bohner, 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002).
Concerns have been raised in recent years about the extent to which such Rape Myth Acceptance scales can adequately assess current expressions of rape myths (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). For example, students have been found to score very low on the IRMA scale while expressing rape myths in interviews and focus groups (McMahon, 2007). Taking into account that the cultural nature of rape myths makes them susceptible to changes over time (Forbes, Adam-Curtis & White, 2004; Payne et al., 1999), McMahon’s findings are most likely an indication of a shift in expression of rape myths within the younger population. This could be particularly true of students, who have a higher chance of exposure to formal or informal education on sexual violence and may therefore be more conscious of the fact that traditional and overt rape myths are not socially acceptable (Frazier, Valtinson & Candell, 1994) or may simply not identify with traditional expressions of rape mythology (McMahon & Farmer, 2011).

Shifts in expression may reflect that more subtlety is engaged when expressing sexist attitudes (Swim, Aikin, Hall & Hunter, 1995). For example, while an overtly sexist comment may refer to the inferiority of women to men, subtle sexism may be expressed by a denial that gender inequality is still an issue (Swim et al, 1995). Similarly, traditional rape myths may be replaced by more subtle expressions that do not directly blame the victim for their attack but rather express that they put themselves at risk (McMahon, 2007). In order to account for this shift, McMahon & Farmer (2011) developed an updated version of the IRMA scale which reflects more current societal attitudes and assesses the subtleties of rape mythology. This 22-item revised version of the scale was updated in terms of language, placed a stronger emphasis on victim blame and measured four subscales, namely “She Asked for It”, “He Didn’t Mean to”, “It Wasn’t Really Rape” and “She Lied”.

In an effort to expand on previous knowledge of rape mythology by exploring subtle expressions, the present research aims to investigate the relationship between ambivalent sexism and subtle rape myths in the student population, since students have been identified as the most likely to exhibit subtle expressions of rape myths (Frazier et al., 1994; McMahon, 2007; McMahon & Farmer, 2011), while accounting for the effects of gender and social desirability. Drawing from existing literature, it is hypothesized that both hostile and benevolent sexism will significantly predict subtle rape myth acceptance and that Complementary Gender Differences will significantly predict the IRMA subscale “She Asked for It”. Moreover, it is hypothesized that Heterosexual Intimacy will significantly predict the subscale “He Didn’t Mean To” and that hostile sexism will significantly predict subscales “She Lied” and “It Wasn’t Really Rape”. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that both social desirability (Hart, Ritchie, Hepper and Gebauer’s, 2015) will significantly predict subtle rape myth acceptance overall. In regards to gender differences, in line with previous research (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Glick & Fiske, 1997), it is expected that male respondents will show greater levels of endorsement of both subtle rape myths and ambivalent sexist attitudes than female respondents.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants**
281 university students were initially recruited via advertising on different social media online platforms as well as the University online teaching site. After 52 participants were excluded from analyses the final sample was comprised of 211 university students (162 females; 43 males; 5
As only gender identity and student status were of interest to the present investigation, no other demographic information about the participants is here reported.

**Measures & Apparatus**

Participants’ level of social desirability was measured using Hart and colleagues’ (2015) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (BIDR-16). On a 7-point Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate how much 16 statements about socially desirable behaviour were true of them (1 = not true; 7 = very true). Higher scores indicated a higher desire to be viewed favourably by others. The overall Cronbach’s alpha for the measure was 0.68 and the Cronbach’s alphas for the subscales were 0.62 for Impression Management and 0.67 for Self-Deceptive Enhancement.

Glick & Fiske’s (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) was used to measure participants’ level of hostile and benevolent sexism toward women. On a 6-point Likert scale (0 = Disagree strongly; 5 = Agree strongly), participants were asked to report how much they agreed with 22 items advocating hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes toward women. Higher scores denoted more ambivalent sexist attitudes. The overall Cronbach’s alpha for the measure was 0.90 and the Cronbach’s alphas for each subscale were 0.90 for Hostile Sexism, 0.81 for overall Benevolent Sexism, 0.56 for Protective Paternalism, 0.78 for Complementary Gender Differences and 0.70 for Heterosexual Intimacy.

To measure participants’ acceptance of subtle rape myths, McMahon & Farmer’s (2011) updated version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (updated IRMA) was used. On a 5-point Likert scale, participants were to indicate how much they agreed with 22 statements surrounding subtle rape myths (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree). Higher scores denoted higher rejection of subtle rape myths. The overall Cronbach’s alpha for the measure was 0.98 and the Cronbach’s alphas for each subscale were 0.96 for She Asked for It, 0.91 for He Didn’t Mean To, 0.98 for It Wasn’t Really Rape and 0.96 for She Lied.

As data was collected online, the survey was run on the website “esurveycreator.com” and could be accessed by any device with internet access (e.g. computer; laptop; phone; tablet) of the participant’s choosing.

**Procedure**

Participants were administered the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (Hart, Ritchie, Hepper & Gebauer, 2015), the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Upon completion of the scales, participants were directed to a debrief form page and thanked for their participation.

**RESULTS**

Although some subscales were significantly correlated, as can be seen in Table 1, multicollinearity was assumed to not be an issue, as r values did not surpass 0.8. The residuals of each regression followed a normal distribution and were equally distributed.

It was hypothesized that Hostile Sexism (HS), Benevolent Sexism (BS) as well as both Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management would significantly predict overall Subtle
Rape Myth Acceptance (SRMA). However a Pearson correlation indicated that only HS, r (211) = -.241, p < .001, and BS, r (211) = -.275, p < .001, were significantly correlated to overall SRMA. Although BS significantly contributed to to the regression model (r = -.203, p = .014), HS did not (r = -.121, p = .142).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (n=211) and Inter-correlations between Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE), Impression Management (IM), Hostile Sexism (HS), Benevolent Sexism (BS), Protective Paternalism (PP), Complementary Gender Differences (CGD), Heterosexual Intimacy (HI), Subtle Rape Myth Acceptance (SRMA), She Asked For It (She Asked), He Didn’t Mean To (Not Mean), It Wasn’t Really Rape (Not Rape) and She Lied (She Lied).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SHE</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.55 (1.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>.244</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>-.103</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.08 (0.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>-.153</td>
<td>.184</td>
<td>-.591</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.26 (0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>-.124</td>
<td>-.170</td>
<td>.507</td>
<td>.819</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.96 (0.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGD</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.723</td>
<td>.408</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.97 (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HI</td>
<td>-.125</td>
<td>-.145</td>
<td>.604</td>
<td>.848</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>.393</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.89 (0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDE</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>-.241</td>
<td>-.275</td>
<td>-.255</td>
<td>-.183</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>-.224</td>
<td>-.232</td>
<td>-.228</td>
<td>-.140</td>
<td>.178</td>
<td>.972</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.41 (1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>-.210</td>
<td>-.305</td>
<td>-.271</td>
<td>-.212</td>
<td>-.233</td>
<td>.930</td>
<td>.859</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.23 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGD</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>-.171</td>
<td>-.234</td>
<td>-.2.7</td>
<td>-.170</td>
<td>-.175</td>
<td>.967</td>
<td>.955</td>
<td>.855</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.38 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HI</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>-.337</td>
<td>-.295</td>
<td>-.255</td>
<td>-.185</td>
<td>-.240</td>
<td>.927</td>
<td>.866</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>.851</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.14 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: r values higher than 0.8 were caused by computing both overall measures and their subscales for ease of creating this table. No individual regression however used both overall measures and their subscale.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. (two-tailed)

A Pearson correlation indicated that HS (r (211) = -.224, p = .001), Protective Paternalism (r (211) = -.228, p = .001), Complementary Gender Differences (r (211) = -.140, p = .042), and Heterosexual Intimacy, r (211) = -.178, p = .009, were significantly correlated with the updated IRMA sub-scale “She Asked For It” (See Table 1), while Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management were not. HS, Protective Paternalism, Complementary Gender Differences and Heterosexual Intimacy were entered in a multiple regression model. They accounted for 7% of the variance and were significant predictors of the scores on the “She Asked for It” sub-scale (F (4, 206) = 3.855, p = .005). However, the did not separately contribute to the model (p > .05), so the hypothesis could not be supported.

For the updated IRMA subscale “He Didn’t Mean To”, it was hypothesized that the Benevolent Sexism subfactor “Heterosexual Intimacy”, Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management would significantly predict scores on the subscale. Conducting a Pearson correlation revealed that only Hostile Sexism, r (211) = .210, p = .002, Protective Paternalism, r (211) = -.271,
Complementary Gender Differences, \( r (211) = -.212, p = .002 \), and Heterosexual Intimacy, \( r (211) = -.233, p = .001 \), were significantly correlated to the updated IRMA subscale “He Didn’t Mean To” (See Table 1). Therefore, only these four factors were entered into a multiple regression model, which was found to be a significant predictor of scores on the updated IRMA subscale “He Didn’t Mean To”, \( F (4, 206) = 5.311, p < .001 \), and explained 9.3% of the variance. However, none of the predictors individually significantly contributed to the model (\( p > .05 \)). Ergo, these findings do not support the hypothesis.

An initial Pearson correlation indicated that only Hostile Sexism (\( r (211) = -.171, p = .013 \)), Protective Paternalism (\( r (211) = -.207, p = .003 \)), Complementary Gender Differences, (\( r (211) = -.170, p = .013 \)) and Heterosexual Intimacy (\( r (211) = -.175, p = .011 \)) were significantly correlated to the updated IRMA subscale “It Wasn’t Really Rape” (see Table 1). Consequently, only Hostile Sexism and the three benevolent sexism sub-factors were entered into a multiple regression model, which explained 5.7% of the variance and was found to be a statistically significant predictor of scores on the updated IRMA subscale “It Wasn’t Really Rape” (\( F (4, 206) = 3.103, p = .017 \)). Again, none of the predictors significantly contributed to the model on their own (\( p > .05 \)).

Similarly, Hostile Sexism (\( r (211) = -.337, p < .001 \)), Protective Paternalism (\( r (211) = -.258, p < .001 \)), Complementary Gender Differences (\( r (211) = -.185, p = .007 \)) and Heterosexual Intimacy (\( r (211) = -.249, p < .001 \)) were significantly correlated to the updated IRMA subscale “She Lied”, as can be seen in Table 1. A multiple regression model found them to be significant predictors of scores on the updated IRMA subscale “She Lied” (\( F (4, 206) = 7.591, p < .001 \)), accounting for 12.8% of the variance. While Hostile Sexism significantly contributed to the model (\( = -.268, p = .002 \)), the three benevolent sexism subfactors did not (\( p > .05 \)).

Gender was predicted to mediate participants’ endorsement of both subtle rape myths and ambivalent sexist attitudes. Specifically, it was hypothesized that male respondents would score higher than female respondents on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and all of its subscales (indicating higher endorsement of ambivalent sexist attitudes) and that male respondents would also score lower than female respondents on the update IRMA and all of its subscales (indicating higher acceptance of subtle rape myths). As the participant pool was unevenly composed of males and females, 43 female respondents were randomly chosen to match the 43 males. A MANOVA confirmed a statistically significant gender difference in scores on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and the updated IRMA (\( F (11, 74) = 4.337, p < .001 \); Wilk’s \( \eta_{p}^2 = .392 \)). A Bonferroni correction showed that gender had a significant effect on 9 out of the 11 scores tested, namely overall Ambivalent Sexism (\( F (1, 84) = 8.808, p = .004 \)), Hostile Sexism (\( F (1, 84) = 7.321, p = .008 \)), Benevolent Sexism (\( F (1, 84) = 6.382, p = .013 \)), Protective Paternalism (\( F (1, 84) = 9.800, p = .002 \)), overall Subtle Rape Myth Acceptance (\( F (1, 84) = 47.079, p < .001 \)), the updated IRMA subscale “She Asked For It” (\( F (1, 84) = 43.641, p < .001 \)), the updated IRMA subscale “He Didn’t Mean To” (\( F (1, 84) = 40.457, p < .001 \)), the updated IRMA subscale “It Wasn’t Really Rape” (\( F (1, 84) = 33.101, p < .001 \)) and the updated IRMA subscale “She Lied” (\( F (1, 84) = 29.242, p < .001 \)).

Women scored lower than men on all the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory scores that were found to be significantly mediated by gender, supporting the hypothesis that women would endorse less ambivalent sexist attitudes than men (Table 6 and can be seen in Figure 1). Additionally, male respondents scored lower than female respondents on both the overall updated IRMA and all its

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subscales (see Figure 1), consistent with the hypothesis that women would be less accepting of subtle rape myths than men.

![Score Differences by Gender](image)

**Figure 1: differential effect of gender in relation to the scores on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale**

Note: higher scores on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory denote higher ambivalent sexism, while higher score on the updated IRMA indicate higher rejection of subtle rape myths.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary goal of the present study was to determine the role of ambivalent sexist attitudes in predicting endorsement of subtle rape myths in the student population. Further, the predictive role of social desirability and the mediating effect of gender on subtle rape myth acceptance was also explored. The present findings only partially supported the hypotheses. Some findings were surprising and require further scrutiny.

Benevolent sexism significantly predicted subtle rape myth acceptance. However, conversely to previous research (Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000; Yamawaki, 2007) hostile sexism did not significantly predict endorsement of subtle rape myths. This was an unexpected finding as past studies utilizing the standard rape myth scales have typically found hostile sexism to be the strongest (Yamawaki, 2007), or the sole (Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000) predictor of RMA. It may be the case that the use of the updated rape myth scale which measures subtle attitudes is not consistent with attitudes expressed in the hostile sexism subscale, an argument which in itself requires further exploration.
Similarly, the findings did not support the hypothesis that “Complementary Gender Differences” would predict the subscale “She Asked for It”. This again is inconsistent with previous work (Chapleau et al., 2007; Abrams, Viki, Masser & Bohner, 2003 and Viki and Abrams, 2002), showing that benevolent sexism, of which complementary gender differences is a component, is a significant predictor of victim blame in acquaintance rape scenarios, particularly when the victim was perceived as non-complaint with stereotypes. In terms of the second subscale of the updated Illinois Rape myth Acceptance scale, “He Didn’t Mean To”, it was hypothesized that the benevolent sexism subfactor “Heterosexual Intimacy” would significantly predict scores on the subscale. Again, the present findings are inconsistent with the hypothesis and contradict the idea that heterosexual intimacy underpins rape myths (Beech, Ward & Fisher, 2006 and Chiroro, Bohner, Viki & Jarvis, 2004). Further, studies have also found that the presence of alcohol at the time of the attack, a primary element of the subscale “He Didn’t Mean To”, and the perceived violation of traditional gender roles by the victim, a core notion of benevolent sexism, both significantly contributed to victim blame and rape trivialization (Abrams, Viki, Masser & Bohner, 2003; Koss, 1985; Yamawaki, Darby & Queiroz, 2007).

Hostile sexism did not predict subscale “It Wasn’t Really Rape”, a finding which was surprising and requires further study. Minimization and trivialization of sexual attacks have been found to be associated with both hostile and benevolent sexism (Abrams et al., 2003; Chapleau et al., 2007; Yamawaki, 2007; Yamawaki et al., 2007). Importantly, Yamawaki (2007) argued that outside perceivers who present with high ambivalent sexism disregard rapes because the victim is viewed as not behaving in the way she was supposed to, as for example by not fighting back (item of the subscale “It Wasn’t Really Rape”: “If a girl doesn’t physically fight back, you can’t really say it was rape”; McMahon & Farmer, 2011).

Examining the last updated IRMA subscale, “She Lied”, the present study hypothesized that hostile sexism would significantly predict scores on the subscale. The findings fully supported this and are congruent with prior literature, which has consistently found hostile sexism to be the strongest predictor of traditional rape myth acceptance (Chapleau et al., 2007; Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000; Yamawaki, 2007). Unique to the present study, however, hostile sexism was found to be a significant predictor specifically of subtle rape myths which assess the idea that women falsely accuse men of rape to avoid repercussions (e.g. item on the subscale “She Lied”: “A lot of time, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it”). One clear reason behind this is that hostile sexists often claim that women exaggerate the gravity of sexual assaults and seek to incriminate men in order to gain attention and power (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997; Yamawaki et al., 2007). Indeed, the conceptualization of women as scheming and cunning femme fatales embodies the hostile sexist half of the “Saints versus Sluts” dichotomy (Davies et al., 2012; Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Thus, in congruence with previous research and the hypothesis, the present finds hostile sexism to be a strong predictor of those subtle rape myths which allude to the prevalence of false charges.

In addition to investigating the link between subtle rape myth acceptance and ambivalent sexist attitudes, the present also set out to understand whether social desirability could importantly predict scores on the updated IRMA and its subscales. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the two subscales of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (Hart et al., 2015), namely Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management, would significantly predict
scores on the overall updated IRMA measure and its four subscales. The findings of the present study did not support this. However, the fact that no significant correlation was found between social desirability and subtle rape myth acceptance should not be disregarded. In fact, both Hart and colleagues (2015) and the author of the original Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1991) have noted that one of the most common uses of the scale is to control for social desirability bias, in that the lack of a significant correlation between a social desirability scale and all other scales tested indicates that responses were not altered by a desire of the respondent to be viewed favorably by others. As such, though the hypothesis was not supported by the present findings, it can be said that all other above reported results were not confounded by a social desirability response bias, making them much more reliable.

Lastly, the mediating effect of participant gender on individual endorsement of ambivalent sexist attitudes and subtle rape myths was examined. It was hypothesized that male respondent would have reported more hostile and benevolent sexism and more subtle rape myth acceptance than female respondents. The findings vastly supported this, as men scored lower than females on the overall updated IRMA measure and all four of its subscales, indicating higher acceptance of subtle rape myths, and also scored higher than females on the overall Ambivalent Sexism Inventory measure as well as the hostile sexism, benevolent sexism and protective paternalism subscales, indicating higher endorsement of ambivalent sexist attitudes. These results replicated those of prior research, which reported men being invariably more accepting of traditional rape myths (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Chapleau et al., 2007; Kelly & Stermac, 2008; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, 1995) and endorsing more ambivalent sexist attitudes than women (Glick & Fiske, 1997; Glick et al., 2000; Sakalli-Uğurlu et al., 2007). Interestingly, however, though gender appeared to have a differential effect on benevolent sexism as a whole, no significant gender differences were found for two of its subfactors, namely complementary gender differences and heterosexual intimacy. It is possible that, since a random sample of females was drawn from the original participant pool to test for gender differences, the 43 women selected for analysis scored lower than average on the two subscales.

While the present study adds to the existing body of literature on the link between ambivalent sexism and rape myth acceptance by giving a first account, at least to the present’s knowledge, of how this same relationship can manifest in relation to subtle rape myths, it should be noted that there are limitations to the study. Firstly, though the present believes that the updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) is reliable and was much needed, this was developed almost a decade ago, much like the original IRMA scale (Payne et al., 1999) was developed a decade before McMahon and Farmer’s (2011) instrument. As such, it is possible that the expression of rape myths has once again evolved and a revision of the scale may therefore be again needed. Similarly, the study acknowledges the fact that, since McMahon & Farmer’s (2011) update of the scale’s language was derived from interviewing American college students, the language used in the updated IRMA might not have had the same relevance for non-American participants. Lastly, the present study was unfortunately unable to gather an even sample of males and females, and undeniably future work could benefit from recruiting a more balanced pool of participants.

Overall, the present study found evidence that benevolent sexism significantly predicts subtle rape myth acceptance in the student population, and that hostile sexism specifically predicts those
subtle rape myths that allude to the prevalence of false charges and the belief that women exaggerate the severity of sexual violence. Further, the present provided evidence that male students endorse more ambivalent sexist attitudes and subtle rape myths than female students. These findings add to prior research by focusing on the subtleties in expression of modern rape myths, however literature on this is novel and future work is therefore needed to better understand the functioning of subtle rape mythology. Nonetheless, as gender-based violence continues to be a serious violation of human rights for women both in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2019) and worldwide (World Health Organization, 2017), the present study hopes to have provided worthwhile data on how subtle rape myths may importantly support violence against women and have offered valuable new insights for devising strategies with which to combat gender inequality and sexual violence.

References


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