



**FROM ONE-IN-FOUR TO NONE-IN-FOUR:**  
**AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY-  
BASED SEXUAL AGGRESSION PERPETRATION**

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# OVERVIEW

- Background & Rationale
- Overview of Studies
- General Discussion
- Implications & Next Steps

## Sexual aggression *noun*

“Any sexual interaction – from petting to oral/genital contact to intercourse – which is gained against one's will through use of physical force, threats of force, continual arguments/pressure, use of alcohol/drugs and/or position of authority”

(Koss & Gaines, 1993, p.96)



# Background

- University-based sexual aggression is a pervasive public health issue globally

In China, 34.8% of female university students report having experienced gender-based sexual violence (CFPA, 2016)

1-in-10 women students at Canadian postsecondary schools were sexually assaulted in 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2020)

26.4% of undergraduate female students in the US self-report experiencing rape or sexual assault victimisation through physical force, violence, or incapacitation (AAU, 2020)

Nearly 1-in-10 female students (9.4%) in Brazil reported being subjected to sexual aggression since starting university (Zotareli et al., 2012)

Precisely 10.0% of female students in Australia reported sexual assault victimisation in 2015/16 (AHRC, 2017)



## Background

- University-based sexual aggression is a pervasive public health issue globally
  - Rough estimate: 1-in-4 female university students sexually victimized internationally
  - Perpetrators often known heterosexual male students
- Recent climate surveys highlight that UK universities are not exempt
- Wide-reaching implications (for victims *and* perpetrators)
- Why are male students at increased risk of perpetrating sexual aggression?

70% 

of female students & recent graduates report having experienced sexual violence at university.

8% 

of female students & recent graduates report having been raped.

<sup>2</sup> *The Student Room & Revolt Sexual Assault (2018)*  
(Sample. 4,491 students across 153 UK HEIs)

3.4% 

of community females self-report (attempted) rape/assault by penetration victimization since the age of 16

<sup>4</sup> *Office for National Statistics (2018)*  
(Figures extrapolated from Crime Survey)

# Background

- Why do male university students perpetrate sexual aggression?
  - US: Broad body of campus sexual assault work

**Societal-level influences:** Larger social and cultural factors that contextualise an individual's behaviours.  
e.g., Social and economic policies, living in a patriarchal society, 'lad culture' and 'rape culture'.

**Community-level influences:** Risk-relevant factors linked to an individual's community and social environment.  
e.g., Tolerance of sexual assault, poor criminal justice support, institutional factors (e.g., mistrusting a university).

**Relationship-level influences:** Interpersonal factors linked to peers, intimate partners, and family members.  
e.g., Association with sexually aggressive peers, a violent or emotionally unsupportive family.

**Situational-level influences:** Elements of the immediate social and physical environment.  
e.g., Proximity to alcohol and drugs, proximity to sexually aggressive peers, access to victims.

**Individual-level influences:** Subjective psychological, physiological, and personal historic factors.  
e.g., Sexually aggressive attitudes and beliefs, alcohol and drug use, emotional deficits or deviations.

*Based on Wagman, Dean, & Swartout (2020)*

## Background

- Why do male university students perpetrate sexual aggression?
  - US: Broad body of campus sexual assault work
  - UK: Not empirically assessed
  - Are these findings generalizable?
- What about general sexual offending literature?
  - Well-established knowledge base in the UK
  - May help extend or refine findings from US campus sexual assault research

*“Psychologists are particularly well placed to contribute to policies and practices in the area, given our knowledge and understanding of the perpetrators of sexual offending, and with a number of us working with victims/survivors of sexual violence.”*

Towl, G. (2018). Tackling sexual violence at universities. *The Psychologist*, 31, 36-39.

# Rationale

- There's a lack of empirical research assessing sexual aggression perpetration at UK universities
  - What is the rate of perpetration?
  - Why are male students at increased risk of perpetration during their studies?
  - Are perpetrators a homogenous group?
  - What about current interventions?
- We need to **understand** the issue before effectively **addressing** it

## Overview of our Studies

- First attempt to empirically assess and classify male sexual aggression amongst UK male university students
- Three empirical studies that extend past research
  - **Study 1** What is the prevalence of university-based sexual aggression perpetration?  
& **2** What are the individual-level risk factors for perpetration?  
Can we 'predict' past sexual aggression?
  - **Study 3** Do perpetrators comprise a homogenous group?  
Are there distinct clusters of perpetrator with unique psychological profiles?
- Guided by US work into campus sexual assault and the established UK knowledge base on sexual offending





## Study 1: “Local study”

- Assessed the individual-level risk factors for sexual aggression amongst male students at the University of Kent
- Participants ( $N = 259$ )
  - Mostly young, educated White British students
  - Descriptive similarities between our sample and the male student body
- Completed an online survey comprising a battery of validated psychological measures
  - All relevant to CSA in the US or sexual aggression amongst incarcerated males in the UK
  - Included the SES-SFP (IV) and BIDR-6-IM (CV)

### Relevant Demographic Data

#### Sexual Fantasies

- Inappropriate sexual fantasies

#### Intimacy & Social Functioning

- Assertiveness
- Loneliness
- Self-efficacy in relationships
- Self-esteem (negative & positive)

#### Offence Supportive Cognition

- Hostility toward women
- Rape myth acceptance

#### Self/Emotion Regulation

- Aggression
- Emotion regulation

#### Additional Measures

- Impression management

## Study 1: Findings

- 33 participants (**12.7% of the sample; “SAs”**) self-reported having perpetrated **106 sexually aggressive** acts over the past 24 months
  - Sexual coercion most frequently perpetrated act (41.5% of acts)
  - 14 participants committed rape or attempted rape (23.6% of acts)
  - SAs often committed 2 offences (39.4%), mostly against females (81.8%)

## Study 1: Findings

- 33 participants (12.7% of the sample) self-reported having perpetrated **106 sexually aggressive acts** over the past 24 months
  - Sexual coercion most frequently perpetrated act (41.5% of acts)
  - 14 participants committed rape or attempted rape (23.6% of acts)
  - SAs often committed 2 offences (39.4%), mostly against females (81.8%)
- SAs scored higher on average than their non-offending peers (“NSAs”) on most measured variables
  - Groups differed on **hostility toward women** ( $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.51$ ), **inappropriate sexual fantasies** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.52$ ), & **rape myth acceptance** ( $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.66$ )
  - Slight differences with regards to **ethnicity** ( $p = .048$ )

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  - Slight differences with regards to **ethnicity** ( $p = .048$ )
- Variables force-entered into a binomial logistic regression model to see if they could 'predict' past sexual aggression

## Study 1: Logistic regression

- The model was significant overall,  $\chi^2(4) = 25.82, p < .001$
- Explained 9.7% (Cox & Snell  $R^2$ ) to 19.3% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of variance in sexual aggression, with a high rate of correct classifications

Measure	$\beta$	SE	Wald	df	p	OR	95% CI for OR	
							LL	UL
Study 1								
HTW	0.01	0.03	0.06	1	.81	1.01	0.95	1.07
IRMA-R	0.08	0.03	8.48	1	.004	1.08	1.03	1.14
SFQ-R-SV	0.07	0.03	6.07	1	.01	1.08	1.02	1.14
Ethnicity	0.27	0.44	0.36	1	.55	1.31	0.55	3.10
Constant	-6.32	1.07	34.73	1	<.001	0.00		
HL goodness of fit: $\chi^2(8) = 2.54, p = .96$								

**Rape myth acceptance & inappropriate sexual fantasies predicted past sexual aggression**

- The model discriminated between groups at better-than-chance level, (AUC = .77,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.68, .85],  $d \approx 1.04$ )

## Study 2: “National study”

- Replication of Study 1 across a national sample
  - How generalizable were our findings?
  - Do the individual-level risk factors for sexual aggression amongst male students differ between universities?
- Participants ( $N = 295$ ) recruited through Prolific
  - Larger  $N$  to aid analysis and to ensure enough SAs for Study 3
  - Descriptively like our earlier group and the UK male student body
- Two new survey items asking for university affiliation and SA's relationship to their victim(s)



## Study 2: Findings

- 30 participants (**10.1% of the sample**) self-reported having perpetrated **145 sexually aggressive acts** over the past 24 months
  - Sexual coercion again the most common category (37.9% of acts)
  - 16 participants committed rape or attempted rape (35.9% of acts)
  - SAs typically committed 3+ offences (40.0%), mostly against females (86.7%) known to the participant (66.7%)

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  - SAs typically committed 3+ offences (40.0%), mostly against females (86.7%) known to the participant (66.7%)
- SAs scored higher than NSAs on all measured variables
  - Groups differed on **hostility toward women** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.94$ ), **inappropriate sexual fantasies** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.70$ ), & **rape myth acceptance** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.70$ )
  - They also differed on **aggression** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.69$ ), **self-efficacy in relationships** ( $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.38$ ), and **emotion regulation** ( $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.33$ )



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  - They also differed on **aggression** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.69$ ), **self-efficacy in relationships** ( $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.38$ ), and **emotion regulation** ( $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.33$ )
- Initial hierarchical regression model run to eliminate weak variables (i.e., rape myth acceptance, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation)

## Study 2: Logistic regression

- The model was significant overall,  $\chi^2(3) = 57.63, p < .001$
- Explained 18.1% (Cox & Snell  $R^2$ ) to 42.5% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of variance in sexual aggression, with a high rate of correct classifications

Measure	$\beta$	SE	Wald	df	p	OR	95% CI for OR	
							LL	UL
Study 2								
BPAQ	0.11	0.04	10.33	1	.001	1.12	1.05	1.20
HTW	0.14	0.03	18.51	1	<.001	1.15	1.08	1.22
SFQ-R-SV	0.12	0.03	13.33	1	<.001	1.12	1.06	1.20
Constant	-12.51	2.11	35.09	1	<.001	0.00		
HL goodness of fit: $\chi^2(8) = 4.81, p = .78$								

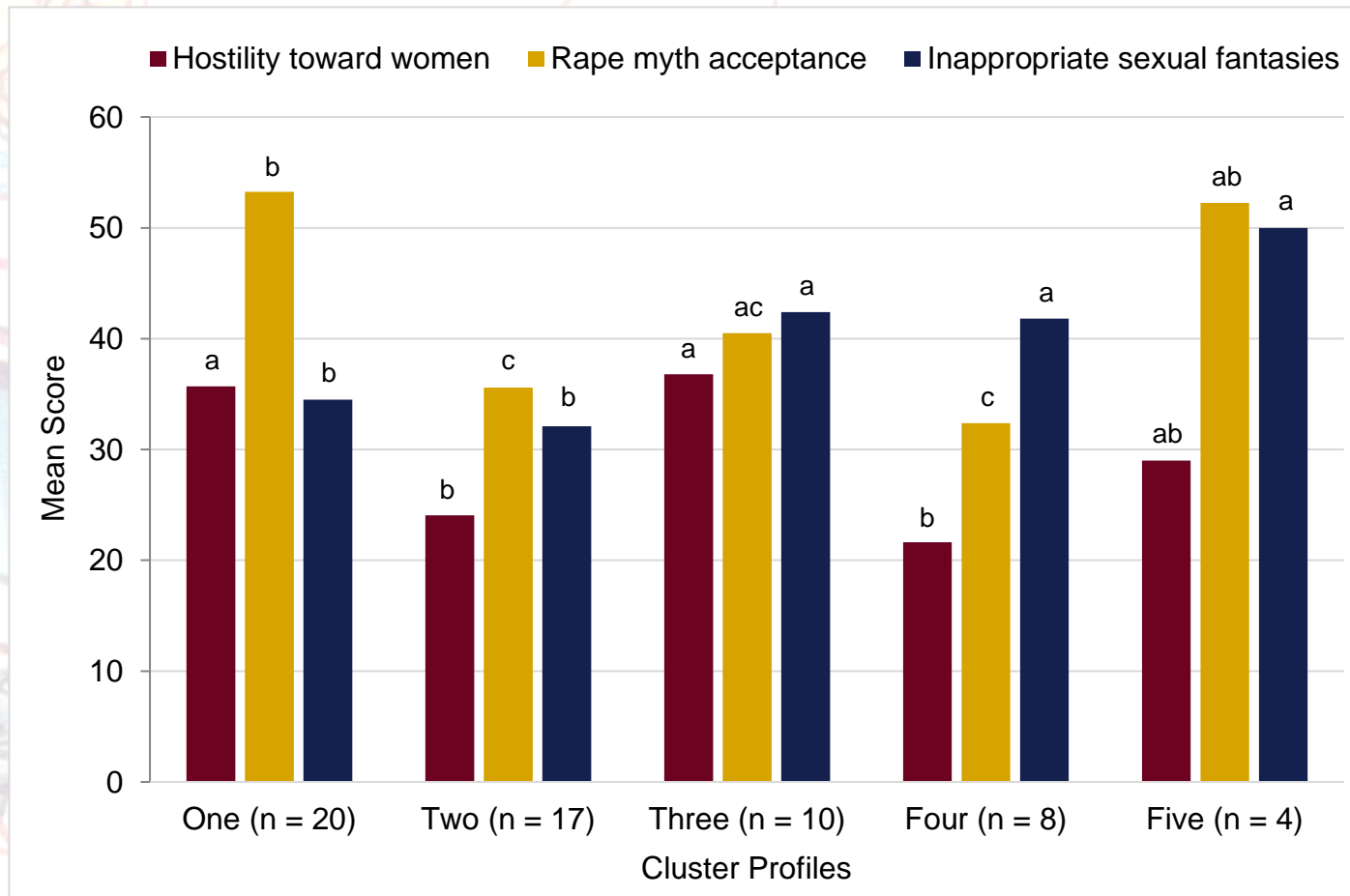
**Aggression, hostility toward women, & inappropriate sexual fantasies predicted past sexual aggression**

- The model discriminated between groups at better-than-chance level, (AUC = .93,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.89, .96],  $d \approx 2.09$ )

## Study 3: Homogeneity testing

- Are UK male students who self-report recently perpetrating university-based sexual aggression a homogenous group?
- Participants ( $N = 59$  after cleaning)
  - Self-reported SAs from Study 1 & 2
- Agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis run
  - Main analysis conducted using standardised z-scores on measures of hostility toward women, inappropriate sexual fantasies, and rape myth acceptance
  - Cluster profiles validated using measures that differentiated between SAs and NSAs in either Study 1 or 2 (i.e., aggression, emotion regulation, self-efficacy in romantic relationships, ethnicity)
  - Stability testing confirmed final cluster profiles

## Study 3: Homogeneity testing



Note. Letters that are shared by columns highlight clusters that do not significantly differ from one another using Dunn's (1964) follow-up test with a Bonferroni correction (adjusted  $p < .005$ )

- Five meaningful subgroups derived and tentatively defined based on their descriptive characteristics:
  - **Cluster One:** “Hostile excusers”
  - **Cluster Two:** “Unremarkable aggressors”
  - **Cluster Three:** “Hostile aggressors”
  - **Cluster Four:** “Non-hostile fantasists”
  - **Cluster Five:** “Sexual fantasists”
- Slight differences in aggression and emotion regulation scores during cluster validation

## General Discussion

- Sexual aggression is perpetrated at worrying rates at UK universities
  - 11.4% prevalence across our studies (vs.  $\approx$ 7.3% amongst non-university males)
- UK male university students with a recent history of sexual aggression are psychologically distinct from their non-offending peers
- Individual-level risk factors for sexual aggression include atypical sexual fantasies, hostility towards women, rape myth acceptance, and aggression
- SAs are likely to comprise a heterogenous forensic group

## Implications

- Universities need to proactively tackle sexual aggression
- Better intervention design needed

## Next Steps

- Results are preliminary and need validating
  - Larger, more diverse samples to assess generalisability
- Follow-up questions:
  - What about situational, relational, community, and societal-level risk factors?
  - Would interventions that target the psychological risk factors for sexual aggression reduce proclivity to offend?



# ANY QUESTIONS?

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