The Roles of Social Media Use and Attractiveness in Blaming Victims of Sexual Assault

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Abstract

Social media has become a popular addition to many people's everyday routine. Research has begun to study the effects of social media on its users but has varying reports. This study offers an addition to social media research with the consideration of blaming sexual assault victims of varying attractiveness levels. Over 180 undergraduate psychology students' responses were recorded to analyze the relationship between these variables. The researchers utilized a social media questionnaire to measure the level of social media use and rape vignettes and a perceived culpability scale to measure participants' level of blame they placed on victims considered attractive, unattractive, or their attractiveness was not mentioned. The results did not support a relationship between social media use and victim blaming, regardless of the victim's attractiveness description. More research needs to be done in the areas of the effects of social media use and differences in blaming victims of sexual assault when their attractiveness is mentioned.

Keywords: social media use, attractiveness, sexual assault, victim blaming

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Social Media

Social media has been described broadly and in various definitions across previous literature. It is widely referred to as different kinds of applications used to communicate through a profile in various ways. For example, WhatsApp is used for messaging, and Facebook incorporates messaging with posting and interacting. Social media users may interact with others through likes and comments on posted pictures and videos. According to a study done in 2021 by the Pew Research Center, the social media applications that were most frequently used among 18-24-year-olds in the United States were Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok; at percentages of 76%, 75%, and 55%, respectively (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Applications such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) are common for people of all ages (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). As the use of social media increases, more studies have been conducted to understand the impact that significant usage can have on people. Many studies focus on the negative effects of social media (Ertürk, 2016; Martingano, 2022; Seekis & Barker, 2021; Verrastro et al., 2020) to emphasize the potential dangers of excessive use. Other studies aim to highlight the positive effects of social media by focusing on aspects of community while acknowledging the negative effects of use without moderation (Bekalu et al., 2019; Ostic et al., 2021).

Social Media's Interaction of Positive and Negative Effects

As it is common for social media users to interact with others, many studies support the concept of social media users being positively affected by their membership in an online community. Bekalu et al. (2019), note there is a gap in the literature on how social media use connects with emotional attachment to applications. Bekalu et al. (2019) measure social media use in two ways: frequency and emotional attachment. A significant number of participants who

had a high frequency of social media use also had higher scores of psychological well-being when social media was routinely used as a normal social behavior. However, participants who recorded high emotional connection scores to social media use also recorded lower scores of psychological well-being (Bekalu et al., 2019). As the discussion of this study notes, social media use can vary by user, therefore positive and negative effects may also vary (Bekalu et al., 2019).

Social capital is a concept that has accounted for some of the positive effects of social media use. Previous studies define the concept of social capital as resources or norms that allow people to communicate and feel connected with others (Ostic et al., 2021). Research on this subject branched off into two subgroups; bridging and bonding (Ostic et al., 2021). Bridging refers to the opportunity to connect with those who are from different backgrounds and bonding refers to the strengthened support social from those one is already connected with (Ostic et al., 2021). Ostic et al. (2021) emphasize social media's strong connection with social capital and speculate that it positively impacts psychological well-being. However, they also hypothesize that social media use leads to social isolation, "phubbing" (ignoring others to interact with one's phone), and smartphone addiction. The results from participants' responses to questionnaires supported these notions that social media may positively affect psychological well-being by building social capital. On the other hand, social media use also had a positive correlation with social isolation, "phubbing", and smartphone addiction and these concepts also correlated with negative psychological well-being (Ostic et al., 2021). The use of social media may not always result in negative effects and can positively affect users by enabling social interactions when face-to-face connections are not as prominent as they used to be (Ostic et al., 2021). However, as

previously discussed, studies suggest that different kinds of social media use may lead to various effects (Bekalu et al., 2019; Ostic et al., 2021).

Social Comparison and Social Media Use

Existing literature is abundant on the negative effects of social media on its users and has grown since the rise in social media's popularity. Researchers have investigated many ways in which social media negatively affects its users. Many studies have found data supporting the relationship between social media use and a decrease in mental health due to views of one's body and appearance. It is speculated that beauty standards on social media play a role in these negative effects. For example, Hogue and Mills (2018) observe the differences between social media users' feelings about themselves after they view photos of family members or peers whom they consider attractive. The findings of this study support the notion that an increase in active social media engagement resulted in more negative comparisons of themself to their peers and higher reports of body dissatisfaction. There were no comparisons when participants viewed photos of their family members regardless of their level of social media use (Hogue & Mills, 2018). Increased social media use had a direct influence on the participants' likelihood that they compared themselves to a peer they considered attractive which also increased negative feelings about themselves. However, social media use, at any level, did not elicit comparisons when users looked at their family members (Hogue & Mills, 2018). This may have to do with the exposure of beauty standards on social media leading people to feel the need to abide by these standards and in turn feel negatively about themselves when they view someone who mirrors these qualities.

Social media offers platforms for users to post images of themselves, which is an opportunity to present the best version of themselves even if their photos are enhanced or altered

(Verrastro et al., 2020). By presenting photos that are not accurate representations of oneself but rather projections of beauty standards, social media enforces the need to abide by beauty standards defined in society. Verrastro et al., (2020) look into researching social media users' views of themselves, especially those who alter their photos. As stated above, people are comparing themselves to photos of others on social media, yet these photos are often not an accurate representation of their appearance in real life. They are also feeling pressured to abide by these falsified beauty standards by altering their pictures. Verrastro et al. (2020) found that the participants who altered their pictures scored higher on scales of social comparison, negative perceptions of and anxiety about their body, and beauty standard adherence than those who did not alter their photos (Verrastro et al., 2020). Therefore, people with high social media use may engage in more social comparisons which leads to negative views of oneself. These negative views of oneself add to one's willingness to abide by beauty standards by modifying their appearance.

Social comparisons due to social media are not only causing a lot of distress for users, they also force them to analyze themselves which often leads to negative views. Seekis and Barker (2022) define interactions with content that include modified photos and overemphasized beauty standards as beauty social media engagement. This type of content was found to evoke social comparisons and correlated with dysmorphic views of one's body. Body dysmorphia can be understood as an intense negative view of one's body that incorrectly assesses one's physical appearance and disproportionately focuses on negative perceptions. Participants who had high reports of dysmorphic views were also asked if they would consider cosmetic surgery (i.e., rhinoplasty, botox, etc.) to look more like beauty standards promoted in social media and their willingness to do so was high (Seekis & Barker, 2020). Social media has a powerful influence

over its users and its effects are still being established. The concept of beauty standards is woven into social media and is hard to avoid, especially if users are most familiar with this type of content. People who use social media in general have more opportunities to make social comparisons due to the level of interaction integrated into these applications. Researchers have demonstrated that beauty social media engagement engenders various negative effects, however, there is limited research on other specific content areas' effects on social media users.

Emotions Associated with Social Media

Literature discusses emotions that correlate with social media but most of it centers around negative emotionality that impacts oneself. Ertürk (2016) analyzed levels of self-esteem and narcissism in social media users and found a positive correlation between these traits and posting selfies. The criteria for participants in this study is that they actively post photos of themselves. They were measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and self-esteem scales. Participants who scored high on self-esteem and narcissistic traits were more likely to engage in self-presentation behaviors, which in this study was defined as posting selfies (Ertürk, 2016). This means, in this study, traits of high self-esteem and narcissism correlated with increased social media use. There is not much research on how social media changes users' perceptions of others. However, if it is evident that social media correlates with traits such as narcissism and excessive self-esteem then it is possible that high social media use can lead to negative perceptions of others.

With limited research, people with high levels of personality traits that contribute to detaching from people may be the key to understanding how social media influences users' perceptions of others. Martingano et al. (2022) performed a literature review on several different studies to find correlations between levels of empathy, narcissism, and alexithymia and social

media use. An analysis of four different studies was combined to assess the relationship between social media use and these traits. Participants in each study filled out a questionnaire regarding their frequency of social media use and scales that measured empathy, narcissism, and alexithymia. Analyses indicated that participants who frequently used social media also scored high on levels of narcissism. The statistical analyses showed similar results for alexithymia but this trait most strongly correlated with high usage of Facebook as compared to the other social media platforms assessed. Self-reported empathy levels were correlated with lower average levels of social media use (Martingano et al., 2022). As indicated by this study, lower levels of social media use correlated with higher levels of empathy, yet higher levels of social media use correlated with high levels of alexithymia and narcissism. These traits are important for people to be able to relate to and understand others. High levels of narcissism and alexithymia and low levels of empathy may result in an inability to recognize the perspectives of others. This may lead to a lack of support for others, deficiencies in acknowledgment of one's wrongdoing, and even blatant disregard for other's well-being. It is important to analyze this wide range of literature about social media to see what can be understood about the little information available on this topic. Analysis of this literature is especially important considering the negative effects social media has on one's self-perspective. Furthermore, since there is very minimal research on how social media affects people's perceptions of others, it may be anticipated that higher social media use will correlate with negative views of others.

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is an act of violence and is prevalent in many cultures. About one in five American women will experience sexual assault in their lifetime and one in three girls will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Men are also victims of sexual assault however, they

only make up 9% of this population (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2015). Sexual assault victims often experience serious consequences due to the incident which can be detrimental to their mental health and well-being. A few examples are the development of severe mental illnesses, risks of suicide, health conditions, and sexual dysfunction (Whiting et al., 2021). Although sexual assault may be reported to stop the perpetrator from assaulting another victim, incidents are often not reported and there are very few perpetrators who get convicted (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Cases are underreported for various reasons including fear of experiencing unsupportive and invalidating reactions, further traumatization, or lack of knowledge of the reporting process (Whiting et al., 2021). There are serious risks for victims of sexual assault when they report because of repercussions such as victim blaming.

Rape Vignettes in Sexual Assault Literature

Previous research on sexual assault and victim blaming utilizes rape vignettes to expose participants to a hypothetical incident and record their reaction to it. Many researchers shape their rape vignettes to fit into the context of what they are studying, therefore standardized vignettes are not used. However, Persson and Dhingra (2021) conducted a study to create standardized and valid rape vignettes. The participants of this study reported that the rape vignettes they viewed were believable. The researchers propose that these rape vignettes should be utilized for future research in this area because of their validation. This study also looked into the degree of victim culpability based on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. It was found that blame was attributed to the victim more when they were acquaintances with the perpetrator (Persson & Dhingra, 2021). These rape vignettes and the results on perceptions of acquaintance sexual assault are important for the future of research on this topic.

Victim Blaming Sexual Assault Survivors

Victim blaming can be defined as a third-party opinion that attributes blame to the survivor for their characteristics or behaviors. For example, outsiders claim that what the victim was wearing, doing, or saying caused the perpetrator to assault them (Klettke et al., 2018). Rape myths, which are defined as common justifications for sexual assault, put the sexual assault victim at fault for their behaviors or appearance and displace blame off the perpetrator (Whiting et al., 2021). Once rape myths are established in a sexual assault case, the victim may become a target of hate and the fault of the perpetrator may not be discussed. Previous researchers have made efforts to understand the relationship between rape myths and the attribution of culpability on victims of sexual assault, meaning there is an abundance of literature looking into a connection between victim blaming and different rape myths, such as the victim ingesting alcohol, putting themself in a dangerous situation by walking home alone, wearing clothing that is too revealing, or engaging in behaviors that lead the perpetrator to believe they wanted to be sexual. A common rape myth for researchers to explore is the topic of appearance.

Victim Blaming Based on Appearance

Researchers are attempting to understand people's attributions of blame to the various aspects of victims' appearance. For example, Klettke et al. (2018) studied attributions of blame to survivors of sexual assault based on their age and several other factors derived from rape myths. The perception questions included scenarios of females aged 10, 15, and 20 who wore "sexually revealing clothes" or behaved in a "sexually provocative manner," acted affectionately or promiscuously, or did not try to verbally or physically resist the abuse. The results showed that male participants and participants with children were more likely than female participants to attribute blame to survivors described as wearing "sexually revealing clothes." There were also findings from male participants and those who had children that supported attributions of blame

to victims based on their lack of physical or verbal resistance (Klettke et al., 2018). Rape myths

justify perpetrators' actions by overemphasizing victims' behaviors that are perceived as

provocative or wrong which is why participants in this study may attribute blame to victims

whose appearance elicited a sexual perception. The negative perceptions that are associated with

objectification and revealing one's body may have an impact on the attribution of victim blame.

Furthermore, people may view women who reveal their bodies as putting themselves at risk for

violence such as sexual assault (Marks & Zaikman, 2023).

The way people perceive others' appearance seems to play an important role in the level

of attribution of blame to sexual assault victims. Loughnan et al. (2013), focused on

objectification of women in sexual assault cases and observed an increase in attribution of blame

when described as such. Participants were shown a picture of a woman who was portrayed as

sexualized or non-sexualized. They were then asked to respond to a mind attribution task, which

measured how the participants perceived the pictured woman's mental activity levels.

Participants also completed a moral concern scale which measured the degree of concern they

held for the woman's well-being. After participants saw the picture of a sexualized or

non-sexualized woman and responded to the impression formation task, they were given a rape

vignette about the woman in the picture. Participants were then asked to complete a victim blame

questionnaire. Results showed that participants were more likely to attribute lower levels of

mental activity and lower levels of concern to the sexualized woman. Participants also blamed

the woman who was presented as sexualized more than the woman not sexualized (Loughnan et

al., 2013). These attributions of blame were based solely on whether the woman was shown as

sexualized or not because her clothing and objectifiable appearance were not mentioned in the

rape vignette. Furthermore, participants attributed lower levels of mental activity and concern to

the sexualized woman which seems to denote a negative perception of the victims who were sexualized.

Researchers have found support for appearance being a factor for why victims of sexual assault are attributed blame and have also studied the effects attractiveness has on perceptions of victim culpability. Wareham et al. (2019) conducted research on attributions of blame and verdict judgments of defendants in cases of sexual assault, physical violence, and domestic violence based on the victim's attractiveness. Participants were presented with images of female victims and vignettes depicting the various forms of violence previously noted. They were then asked to respond to questionnaires on victim and defendant culpability. Wareham et al. (2019) found a correlation between the rape vignettes describing the victim as attractive and participants' higher likelihood to attribute blame to the defendant. This means that participants were more likely to attribute blame to the defendant in cases of sexual assault when the victim was pictured as attractive as compared to those considered average-looking. This study supports previous researchers' findings that attractiveness lessens blame for victims of sexual assault.

However, other researchers have found the opposite or varying results on the effect attractiveness had on attributions of blame (Maeder et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2007; Yndo & Zawacki, 2017). Yndo and Zawacki (2017) conducted a study with only male participants to understand how they label nonconsensual sex when considering the female victim's attractiveness and perceived sexual interest. Male participants were shown a photo that depicted the victim's attractiveness and a corresponding rape vignette. Participants were asked to report their perceptions of the victim's sexual interest with the perpetrator and to what degree the rape vignette should be considered sexual assault or not. Yndo and Zawacki (2017) found a correlation between attractive victims and perceptions of high sexual interest. Therefore,

participants who considered attractive victims sexually interested in the rape vignettes also reported decreased labeling of the scenario as being sexual assault. Furthermore, victim attractiveness affected the way people perceived a sexual assault incident, and, in this case, participants did not consider the attractive victim's incident to be sexual assault. Attractive victims were attributed more blame because they were perceived as sexually interested.

 This concept is similar to the rape myth that claims victims of sexual assault wanted the contact. Consequently, attractiveness played a significant role in attributing blame to victims. The attractiveness of sexual assault victims has both increased and decreased attributions of blame in previous studies. These contradictory findings make understanding the actual effects of attractiveness on attributions of blame difficult.

Some researchers have even found that attractiveness did not affect attributions of blame of sexual assault victims. Rogers et al. (2007) conducted a study on sexual assault victim's age and attractiveness and attributions of blame. The study included pictures of children who were considered attractive or unattractive for participants to view and then record their perceptions of culpability in their sexual assault scenario. Participants' responses to the validated questionnaires on victim culpability reported that there were no differences in attributions of blame based on the attractiveness of the children. (Rogers et al., 2007). These studies on attributions of blame on victims of sexual assault regarding attractiveness cited studies that were conducted before the 2000s, reported varying results (Maeder et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2007; Wareham et al., 2019) and excluded female participants (Yndo & Zawacki, 2017). The research is limited and contradictory therefore, more research needs to be conducted in this area to understand the effects of attractiveness on attributions of blame of sexual assault victims.

Present Study

These areas of study, victim blaming based on appearance and negative effects of social media use, allowed the researchers to propose the current research question: how does social media use impact perceptions of victim appearance and culpability in sexual assault cases? The present study intended to establish a relationship between the level of social media use and perceptions of victim attractiveness and culpability in sexual assault cases. As was previously noted, prior research has connected increased levels of social media use with negative aspects of psychological well-being, self-reflection, and behaviors. Therefore, one may speculate that increased levels of social media use could result in negative or inflated perceptions of the self and in turn alter the view of others negatively. Social media use in this study was measured in terms of frequency of use. The variable of victim culpability was determined by perceptual responses to validated rape vignettes, which were adapted from Persson and Dhingra (2021) to include victim attractiveness. It was hypothesized that levels of social media use would be correlated with perceptions of victim culpability in sexual assault cases. Social media has also been studied regarding the effects of beauty standards. Social media emphasizes the importance of beauty standards and can affect users' degree of awareness of their appearance as well as others. Additionally, the defensive attribution hypothesis states that victim blame is attributed based on the level of identification an observer has with the victim (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Participants with high levels of social media use were expected to identify more with the sexual assault victim described as attractive and report less blame. Given the relationship between the variables above, the hypotheses for this study were as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): High social media users would assign more blame to sexual assault victims overall as compared to low social media users regardless of the scenario.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Participants would attribute more blame to unattractive victims regardless of their level of social media use.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): High social media users would blame attractive victims of sexual assault less as compared to low social media users.

Method

Participants

The participants were sampled from psychology students at Stockton University. Participants were recruited using SONA and awarded 1 point for their participation which went towards credit in psychology classes. Data was collected from 202 participants to provide adequate power for the statistical analyses.

Materials

Consent Form

An informed consent form described the instructions for this study and alerted participants they would encounter sensitive information that may be triggering. The participants were asked to check the "Yes" box to ensure they understood and consented to the terms of the study.

Demographic Information

A questionnaire about demographics asked for basic information regarding gender identity, race, and ethnicity (See Appendix A).

Social Media Use Questionnaire

The Social Media Use Questionnaire was used to record the quantitative data on participants' behavioral tendencies on different social media platforms (see Appendix B). The three sections were as follows: frequency of usage (e.g., "On average how much time do you

spend per week on this platform?"), follower count (e.g., "How many followers/friends do you have on this platform?"), and posting tendencies (e.g., "How many photos or videos of yourself do you have posted on this platform?"). This questionnaire measured the level at which participants use social media.

Rape Vignettes

Conceptual replications of rape vignettes designed by Persson and Dhingra (2021) were adapted to incorporate victim attractiveness (Appendix C). There were three versions of the vignettes. The difference between the conditions was whether the victim was described as attractive or unattractive or the control scenario which did not reference attractiveness. The vignettes detailed a situation in which a woman, who was either described as attractive, or unattractive, or her attractiveness was not mentioned, was said to be spending time with her male acquaintance who initiated sexual contact. After she verbally refused his advances, the man continued and sexually assaulted her.

Perceived Culpability Scale

A condensed version of the Perceived Culpability Scale (questions not relevant to the scope of this study were omitted) validated by Rogers et al. (2007) measured victim and perpetrator culpability to record reactions to the rape vignette (e.g., "The police should take this event very seriously. Do you agree?" [assault seriousness] such that higher scores indicate victim sympathy and lower scores indicate victim blame; see Appendix D). Responses were reported on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Debriefing Message

Participants received a debriefing message once they had completed the study. (See Appendix E).

Design

This study was conducted online by randomly assigning participants to one of three conditions; a rape vignette with a victim described as attractive, unattractive, or no mention of attractiveness. Participants were first asked for their informed consent to participate in the study. If the participant agreed to continue after reading the informed consent form, they checked the "Yes" box and were then asked to indicate their demographic information. Then they were asked to fill out the Social Media Use Questionnaire. The rape vignette condition followed the social media survey which asked participants to read the scenario and respond to the Perceived Culpability Scale. Finally, upon completion, participants were provided with the debriefing message.

Results

Data screening procedures revealed that 15 participants were missing data for one or both surveys. These cases were deleted from further analyses. Upon further review, six responses were suspected to be duplicates and also removed from further analysis. The final sample included 181 participants with 17 males, 158 females, four non-binary, and two prefer not to say. Additionally, participants reported their race as 65.7% White, 13.3% Black/African American, 6.6% other, 5% bi- or multi-racial, 4.4% prefer not to say, 3.3% Asian/Asian American, and 1.1% Middle Eastern. Participants also reported their ethnicity as 60.2% non-Hispanic/Latinx, 18.2% Hispanic/Latinx 16% other, and 5.5% prefer not to say.

A 3 (attractiveness) x 2 (social media use) factorial ANOVA was performed on the perceived culpability scale. The main effect for attractiveness was not significant ($F(2, 181) = 1.06, p = .350$). Participants gave victims in the Attractiveness condition a mean culpability score

of 44.72 (*SD* = 6.04), victims in the Unattractive condition a mean culpability score of 46.23 (*SD* = 4.92), and victims in the Control condition a mean culpability score of 45.33 (*SD* = 5.47). The main effect for social media use was also not significant (*F*(1, 181) = .50, *p* = .48). Participants in the low ⌷⌷⌷social use level reported a mean culpability score of 45.10 (*SD* = 5.41) and those in the high social media use level reported a mean culpability score of 45.69 (*SD* = 5.64). The interaction between attractiveness and social media use on culpability of sexual assault victims was also not significant (*F*(2, 181) = .86, *p* = .92) (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of social media use on the perceived culpability of sexual assault victims with varying levels of attractiveness. This research question was based on the following hypotheses, Hypothesis 1: High social media users would assign more blame to sexual assault victims overall as compared to low social media users regardless of the scenario, Hypothesis 2: Participants would attribute more blame to unattractive victims regardless of their level of social media use, and Hypothesis 3: High social media users would blame attractive victims of sexual assault less as compared to low social media users. The data did not show support for any of these hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 stated that participants who frequently used social media would be more likely to blame victims of sexual assault than participants who did not frequently use social media. This hypothesis was based partly on speculation due to the lack of research on social media's effects on how users view others. Current studies on social media have reported there to be a negative impact on users' perceptions of well-being, self-reflection, and behaviors (Bekalu et al., 2019; Ostic et al., 2021; Hogue & Mills, 2018; Seekis & Barker, 2022; Verrastro et al, 2020; Ertürk, 2016; Martingano et al., 2022). If social media users are reporting these negative

effects, then it is likely that their negative mindsets could transfer onto others as well. Ertürk (2016) and Martingano et al. (2022) found a positive correlation between high social media use and high levels of narcissism. People who have the trait of narcissism are unable to understand others' perspectives or emotions. For example, if someone were to go through a traumatic event, a person who has the trait of narcissism may not be able to sympathize with that person. This reasoning was therefore used to justify Hypothesis 1, as an increase in social media use could affect one's ability to sympathize with a victim therefore participants with high social media use would attribute more blame to victims in a sexual assault scenario.

This hypothesis was not supported. A potential explanation for the lack of support for Hypothesis 1 could be due to the measure for social media. The social media questionnaire focused on frequency of use, number of followers, and how many photos the user posted of themself. This method of measuring social media use was not precise and some of the questions could have been confusing for participants, potentially allowing for errors in responses. The measurement could have been improved by allowing participants to input the actual number for each of the questions rather than guessing whether they were above or below a certain number. For instance, a participant could report how many hours they spent on social media in the last week as opposed to guessing if they spent, on average, more or less than 14 hours on social media per week. Additionally, other questions about the type of social media use participants engage in would allow for more than two categories of social media use (low and high). Questions about specific content and reasonings for using social media may have provided important qualitative data and could result in a more powerful analysis for the study.

Hypothesis 2 stated that participants would blame unattractive sexual assault victims more than other victims, regardless of their frequency of social media use. Previous studies on

perceptions of victim and perpetrator culpability in sexual assault cases assigned more blame to the perpetrator when the victim was attractive (Wareham et al., 2019). A study on male perceptions of women's level of risk of sexual assault from their responses to unwanted sexual advances supported victim attractiveness being an important factor in judgments. This study discovered that attractiveness was correlated with less perceived risk of sexual assault occurring (Nason et al., 2020). However, another study observed male perceptions of attractive female sexual assault victims correlated with higher perceived culpability in a sexual assault scenario (Yndo & Zawacki, 2017). Furthermore, in a study about child sexual assault cases, attractiveness did not affect perceived culpability (Rogers et al., 2007). Due to the varying results of the effect of attractiveness on perceived victim culpability, the basis of this hypothesis used the previous literature's skew toward more sympathy toward attractive victims. Many of these studies reference the social psychology theory that "beauty is good," therefore attractive individuals would be considered less culpable in sexual assault cases. One potential reason this hypothesis was not supported was because the stimulus of the attractiveness conditions was not strong enough. For each condition the only difference in the rape vignette was the woman was considered attractive, unattractive, or there was no mention of her appearance. One-word differences between the conditions may not have been powerful enough to evoke varying responses.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that participants who frequently used social media would be less likely to blame attractive victims of sexual assault than participants who did not frequently use social media. The defensive attribution hypothesis was used as a basis for this prediction. The defensive attribution hypothesis refers to an observer's level of identification with a victim (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Participants with high levels of social media use were also expected

to have high levels of beauty standard exposure and feel the need to adhere to these standards. Therefore, they were expected to feel more sympathetic towards an attractive victim if they identified themselves as attractive. Perhaps this hypothesis was also not supported because of the lack of strength in the stimulus changes between attractiveness conditions. Participants may have been able to identify with the victim more if attractiveness was operationalized as a description or photo of the victim. On the other hand, constant exposure to filtered images of attractive individuals could result in users not identifying as attractive. Since the culpability reported for attractive and unattractive victims, and victims with no mention of attractiveness victims did not significantly vary, participants might not have identified with any level of attractiveness.

Limitations

Some limitations could have impacted the results of this study. The surveys were simplistic and had few conditions to compare. The social media questionnaire format was created as one large survey combined rather than individually personalizing questions for each social media platform. The survey could have confused or overwhelmed participants and led to inaccurate answers. Additionally, participants were asked to report averages of more or less than a number pertaining to the question (i.e., "On average how much time do you spend per week on this platform? About 14 hours per week or less, More than 14 hours per week, or I don't use this platform"). These estimates could have been inaccurate or the numbers chosen for participants to report if they were above or below that standard could have even lacked importance. The measurement method for social media use may have lacked power in this study. Therefore, asking participants to report their type of social media use may be an important component that was not addressed. If this study were to have more complex surveys inquiring about social media use the responses may have varied.

This study also utilized a sample of undergraduate psychology students with the incentive of one point toward their requirement in class. Participants' responses could have been invalid due to the incentive or requirement because they were not truly participating by their own will. Additionally, participants could have responded quickly or disingenuously to save time or ensure their assignment was completed, rather than focusing their full attention on the presented situation. Given that participants are from the same major and did not significantly vary in ethnic diversity, this is not an accurate representation of the population. When researchers utilize undergraduate psychology students, they are often pulling from a sample of Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) people. Since this study used this sample, it is unable to generalize to the greater population at large.

Future Directions

An important aspect of social media could be typology because inquiring about more than the frequency of use would provide more information and categories of social media use. By categorizing different types of social media users, researchers may be able to find more variability and specific data about social media use. It would be beneficial for future researchers to explore the different areas of content that social media users view and the varying reasons why they may use social media. Users may consume content focused on beauty, fitness, art, friends, etc. Furthermore, users can have several reasons for using social media, such as creating content, viewing content, keeping up with friends, making new relationships, etc. These patterns for using social media provide more distinct categories than only accounting for the frequency of social media use and placing participants in low or high social media use.

Research on the effects of social media must continue to grow as new findings continue to emerge. Since there is little to no research on how social media may affect users' views of

others, this area of research may have new revelations to add to the literature. With a lack of current research on this topic, social media may not affect users' views of others. However, future research could measure participants' social media use and compare it to their judgments of the appearance or characteristics of a person based only on a picture. This procedure may offer more information on the relationship between social media use and perceptions of others.

The literature on the importance of attractiveness in the perception of others varies between different studies. This study could have benefited from using a description or photo to identify different attractiveness conditions. This strategy would be useful for eliciting reactions based on the participants' understanding of attractiveness rather than being told whether the victim was attractive or not. Furthermore, future researchers could consider other identity factors, such as age or sexual orientation, when measuring the importance of attractiveness in sexual assault victims' perceived culpability. By analyzing the differences between participants' identities, the responses to victims' perceived culpability may vary.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of social media use on the perceived culpability of sexual assault victims with varying levels of attractiveness. This was the first study, to the knowledge of the researcher, that attempted to measure how the frequency of social media use affects users' perceptions of others. The results did not support the attractiveness of the victim being a significant factor in the perceived culpability of victims. There were also no differences between the low and high social media groups' perceptions of the culpability of the sexual assault victim. This study did not find a relationship between social media use and victim culpability.

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Appendix A

Demographics

Please indicate your gender:

Male

Female

Non-binary/third gender

Prefer not to say

Other

Please indicate all that apply to your racial identity:

Asian or Asian American

Black or African-American

White

Southeast Asian

Bi- or multi-racial

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

First Nations or Alaskan Native

Middle Eastern

Prefer not to say

Other

Please indicate all that apply to your ethnic identity:

Hispanic or Latinx

Non-Hispanic or Latinx

Prefer not to say

Other

Appendix B

Social Media Use Questionnaire

Please select all that apply to your social media use

	On average how much time do you spend per week on this platform?			How many followers/friends do you have on this platform?			How many photos or videos of yourself do you have posted on this platform? (not applicable to Snapchat)			How many photos or videos of yourself do you post on this platform per week?		
	About 14 hours per week or less	More than 14 hours per week	I don't use this platform	About 500 followers or less	More than 500 followers	I don't use this platform	About 100 posts or less	More than 100 posts	I don't use this platform	About 14 posts per week or less	More than 14 posts per week	I don't use this platform
Instagram												
TikTok												
Snapchat												
X (previously known as Twitter)												
Facebook												

Appendix C

Attractive Condition

Chaya is considered an attractive woman. She is at home with her friend Nick, watching TV. They have had a nice evening, eating a meal that they cooked together. It is getting late, and Chaya wants to get ready to go to bed - she has an early start at work tomorrow. As she is about to get up off the sofa, Nick starts to kiss her. Chaya says she is too tired, and continues to get up off the sofa. Nick pulls her back down on the sofa, and starts pulling off her clothes, telling her how attractive she is. Chaya says no, but Nick continues anyway. Despite Chaya's repeated objections, Nick holds her down and has sex with her.

Unattractive Condition

Chaya is considered an unattractive woman. She is at home with her friend Nick, watching TV. They have had a nice evening, eating a meal that they cooked together. It is getting late, and Chaya wants to get ready to go to bed - she has an early start at work tomorrow. As she is about to get up off the sofa, Nick starts to kiss her. Chaya says she is too tired, and continues to get up off the sofa. Nick pulls her back down on the sofa, and starts pulling off her clothes, telling her how attractive she is. Chaya says no, but Nick continues anyway. Despite Chaya's repeated objections, Nick holds her down and has sex with her.

Control Condition

Chaya is at home with her friend Nick, watching TV. They have had a nice evening, eating a meal that they cooked together. It is getting late, and Chaya wants to get ready to go to bed - she has an early start at work tomorrow. As she is about to get up off the sofa, Nick starts to kiss her. Chaya says she is too tired, and continues to get up off the sofa. Nick pulls her back down on the sofa, and starts pulling off her clothes, telling her how attractive she is. Chaya says no, but Nick

continues anyway. Despite Chaya's repeated objections, Nick holds her down and has sex with her.

Appendix D

Perceived Culpability Scale

Please answer the following questions using this scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral) 4 (agree), 5(strongly agree)

1. The police should take this event very seriously. Do you agree? [assault seriousness]

2. Do you agree that Chaya should be blamed for what happened? [victim blame]

3. People should be sympathetic towards Chaya in this situation. Do you agree? [sympathy for victim]

4. To what extent do you agree that Nick is to blame in this situation? [perpetrator blame]

5. Chaya was not responsible for what happened to her. To what extent do you agree with this statement? [victim responsibility]

6. Chaya will be traumatized by this event. To what extent do you agree? [victim trauma]

7. Nick was not responsible for what happened to Chaya. Do you agree? [perpetrator responsibility]

8. Nick is guilty for this event. To what extent do you agree? [perpetrator guilt]

9. Do you agree that Chaya's life will be negatively affected by this event? [negative affect]

10. Do you agree that Chaya was sexually encouraging towards Nick? [victim encouraging]

Appendix E

Debriefing Message

Thank you for your participation in this study. If you feel upset after reading this study's content or find that some questions or aspects of the study were distressing, talking with a qualified clinician or counselor may help. If you feel you would like assistance, please contact Stockton University's Counseling & Psychological Services through their office phone number: (609) 652-4722, email: counseling.services@stockton.edu, or visit their office on the Stockton University Galloway campus in J-204 anytime between 8:30 am and 4:00 pm. Additionally, you may contact the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Center through their office phone number: (609) 626-3611, email: wgsc@stockton.edu, or by visiting their center on the Stockton University Galloway campus in F-103. If you need immediate assistance, please contact the 24/7 National Sexual Assault Hotline number: 1-800-656-4673.

Finally, the experimenter's contact information is Jennifer Lyke, PhD (Professor). Her office is located at the Stockton University Galloway campus in G-210. Her phone number is 609-626-6839 and her email is Jennifer.Lyke@stockton.edu. You may contact her to address concerns, questions about the research, or any other comments about the study.

Figure 1

Estimated Marginal Means of Total Victim Sympathy