IMPACT OF GENDER IDENTITY ON OBSERVER BLAME IN SEXUAL ASSAULT

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ABSTRACT

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The present research explores how third-party observers' perceptions of words and behaviors of a transgender versus a cisgender individual differently when attributing blame from a sexual assault. Stereotypes, attributions, and gender identities, as well as how these constructs influence blame in sexual assault, will all be considered within the framework of this study. There are two primary research questions: (a) Does gender identity of the victim influence third-party observer blame in sexual assault? and (b) Do gender stereotypes influence third-party blame in sexual assault? The study incorporated a 2 by 2 between-subjects factorial design to answer these research questions. The independent variables are gender (woman, man) and gender identity (transgender, cisgender) and the primary dependent variables are victim blame and perpetrator blame. Gender stereotypes was also measured utilizing a scale that was adapted and developed from wording in Hutchison and Abrams (2003), while the items from what was identified as stereotypes unique to transgender people were compiled from Howansky et al. (2019).

The first hypothesis is women will have more blame attributed to them than men in sexual assault. The second hypothesis is transgender individuals will have more blame attributed to them than cisgender individuals. For the third hypothesis, an interaction between gender and gender identity is expected, such that transgender women will have a higher level of blame than is expected for women and for being transgender, transgender men and cisgender men will be similar. The exploratory secondary hypothesis is that people with stronger stereotype acceptance will attribute more blame to transwomen in comparison to other groups in sexual assault. For the

first hypothesis, the main effect of gender (man/woman) on perpetrator blame was significant. More specifically, perpetrator blame was higher when the victim was a woman versus when the victim was a man.

During data analysis it was discovered that a proportion of participants did not understand what the word "transgender" means. The proportion of respondents who did not know what the word "transgender" meant was 43.1%, compared with 56.9% who did know. The knowledge of the term "transgender" had a relationship with the amount of victim blame. Knowledge was not related to the amount of perpetrator blame. There was a negative correlation between transgender knowledge and gender stereotypes as measured by the stereotype measure adapted from Hutchison and Abrams (2003) and Howansky et al. (2019). Due to these findings, it is essential for future research and interventions to focus on reducing the negative impacts of ignorance about the transgender community. Moreover, interventions must target disseminating positive and factual knowledge regarding transgender people.

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Keywords: Transgender, sexual assault, blame, stereotypes, LGBT+, trans panic, cisgender, woman, man

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my friend, Lydia Lenore Lewallen, and to all LGBT+ individuals who deserved to live full and long lives, free from mental illness.

Impact of Gender Identity on Observer Blame in Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is a significant and life-changing public health issue in the United States. Survivors of sexual assault suffer mental, physical, economic, and social consequences (Hackman et al., 2022; Potter et al., 2018). Sexual assault is any attempted or completed sexual act that is unwanted by the victim and occurs through physical force or threats of force, intimidating, threatening, verbal coercion, or incapacitation (DeCou et al., 2019). Incidents of sexual assault are alarmingly high in the U.S., with an estimated range of 11-22% of women in the United States experiencing some form of sexual assault within their lifetime (Masters et al., 2015). The rates may be higher when examining rates of contact sexual violence (refers to a combined measure of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, being forced to penetrate another individual, and/or rape), with approximately 44% of women and 25% of men experiencing sexual violence (Smith et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that in higher risk populations, such as women with history of heavy episodic drinking and sexual risk, the likelihood of experiencing sexual assault may be as high as 80% (Masters et al., 2015). Furthermore, the occurrence of sexual assault may be higher, especially for those who experience vulnerability or marginalization, such as being incarcerated or having a violent partner (Masters et al., 2015).

The ramifications following an experience with sexual assault are staggering, with approximately 70% of survivors encountering moderate to severe distress following an assault regardless of circumstances or the causal agents (Langton & Truman, 2014). In addition to short-term distress, some of the other negative consequences of assault are PTSD, depression, anxiety, sexually transmitted diseases, self-blame, or increased alcohol consumption (Masters et al., 2015; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2005). Survivors are impacted and

experience problems throughout their lifespan following an encounter with sexual assault. For instance, survivors of sexual assault have a high risk for being sexually revictimized again (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Additionally, negative self-evaluations (perceiving oneself to be a burden, being unable to feel a sense of belonging and have productive relationships) and trauma-related shame can make a survivor persistently feel like something is inherently "wrong" with their self-identity (DeCou et al., 2019). Long-term mental health and reproductive complications, as well as academic and career struggles, are chronic challenges survivors of assault must cope with and pose a risk to financial security (Potter et al., 2018). Further, survivors are at an increased risk for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and dying by suicide (DeCou et al., 2019). There is strong evidence that the many potential short-term and long-term consequences of sexual assault are dependent upon individual differences of the sexual assault survivor, as well as the severity and context of assault (DeCou et al., 2019; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Masters et al., 2015; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016; Potter et al., 2018; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2005).

The topic of sexual assault is extensively researched regarding cisgender individuals. A cisgender individual identifies with their gender that was assigned at birth (Anderson, 2022). However, research specifically related to gender diverse individuals is extremely limited. Therefore, it is critical to examine the experience and consequences of sexual assault for gender-diverse individuals. More specifically, it is important to investigate contributing factors regarding sexual assault blame in relation to diverse gender identities. This study addresses this gap in the literature. Results from this study will inform future research and literature in that it will bring to light issues involving transgender individuals and attributions of blame within sexual assault. The following section will dive deeper into discussing diverse gender identities in relation to sexual assault.

Transgender Individuals and Sexual Assault

Scientific and public awareness about issues the LGBT+ community face emerged considerably within the past 20 years (Russell & Fish, 2016). The increased awareness is related to shifts within the sociocultural understanding and acceptance of both gender and sexual orientation minorities (Russell & Fish, 2016). A common gender identity in the LGBT+ community is identifying as transgender. The term transgender represents an individual whose gender identity or outward gender expression is different from their assigned gender at birth based on their biological sex of male/female (Ching & Xu, 2018). People who identify as transgender may or may not have operative procedures to change their biological sex and/or secondary sex characteristics (Ching & Xu, 2018). The term transgender has recently become an umbrella term to describe individuals who identify themselves with any gender identity except for cisgender (Anderson, 2022). Diverse gender identities are included underneath that umbrella. Some examples of gender diverse identities include, but are not limited to, genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, trans masculine, trans feminine, two-spirit, bigender, and gender fluid (Anderson, 2022; Beischel et al., 2021; NAP Staff, 2001; Erickson-Schroth, 2014).

Despite an increase in awareness and acceptance of transgender individuals, academic research that addresses the transgender communities is minimal (Greenburg & Gaia, 2019). For instance, there remains no tracking system to capture reported sexual assault by transgender individuals, even though there are a few national surveys that now track sexual assault by sexual orientation (Seelman, 2015). A review of United States data suggests that approximately 50% of gender nonconforming or transgender people, in general, have had some form of experience with unwanted sexual contact (Stotzer et al., 2009). Thus, it is imperative that researchers investigate experiences of sexual assault and consequences for transgender people.

Present Study

Even though visibility and acceptance of transgender people increased during the last decade, erasure of diverse gender identities remains a hallmark of the U.S. political and social climate (Anderson, 2022). Transprejudice is the stereotyping, negative valuing, and discrimination of people who do not conform to social expectations of gender identity and/or appearance (Ching & Xu, 2018). For transgender individuals, elevated levels of discrimination, prejudice, sexual assault and violence are highly prevalent throughout their life span (Bradford et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2011). These chronic, elevated levels of experiencing sexual assault for transgender individuals are alarming given the substantial and negative consequences of sexual assault. Moreover, the lack of research regarding sexual assault for transgender populations needs to be addressed in order to understand the unique contributing factors and experiences that are risk factors for sexual assault.

Other terms that describe biases and discrimination of non-heterosexual or non-cisgender individuals include transphobia, homophobia, and heterosexism (Cramwinckel et al., 2018). Discrimination and stereotypes contribute to social perceptions on attributions of blame in sexual assault. Blame refers to a cause being attributed to a changeable factor such as someone's actions, or even a stable factor such as a person's personality (Davies et al., 2009; Janoff-Bulman, 1979). For example, changeable actions could be that the victim was careless or should not have walked alone (Janoff-Bulman, 1979), whereas examples of stable factors could be that the victim was too naive or gullible.

Given the prevalence of sexual assault for transgender individuals and lack of research, this study investigates how biases may affect attributions of blame, specifically when the victim is a transgender individual. The present research study will investigate the degree to which a

third-party observer (i.e., a participant who reads the scenario and takes the survey) endorses stereotypes, attributions, and gender identities. In addition, the study will examine the impact of the third-party observer's endorsement on ratings of blame in a sexual assault scenario. There are two primary research questions: (a) Does gender identity of the victim influence third-party observer blame in sexual assault? and (b) Do gender stereotypes influence third-party blame in sexual assault?

Theoretical Models

Stereotypes

Stereotypes, from a cognitive viewpoint, are a type of schema or mental shortcut taken by individuals in order to reduce the time and effort in acquiring information (Karlins et al., 1969; Khan et al., 2012). Stereotypes involve certain traits that are commonly generalized to be associated with every individual within a social group, without taking into account within group variation (Karlins et al., 1969; Khan et al., 2012). The distinct beliefs that define stereotypes held by individuals significantly affect the cognitive processes of the individual, such as perception and attitudes toward others (Dovidio et al., 1986; Dunning & Sherman, 1997; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins et al., 1969; Katz & Braly, 1933; Khan et al., 2012; Wang & Yang, 2017).

Of importance, previous research reveals that stereotypes can be activated automatically when different social categories of race, age or gender are presented to individuals (Bargh et al., 1996; Wang & Yang, 2017). The activation of stereotypes alters an individual's social perception of other people since the individual is not even aware or purposefully intending to be influenced (Bargh et al., 1996). These mental shortcuts can result in accurate, swift inferences about people or situations (Wang & Yang, 2017). Stereotypes are established in children as young as five years old and are complex in their formation. Stereotypes can vary from person to person based

on their environment, the people around them, and the institutions and societies individuals are raised within (Martin & Ruble, 2004; Sovič & Hus, 2015). Early childhood experiences are correlated with implicit attitudes held in adulthood. These implicit attitudes are formed from contact with books, radio, television, news media and other sources of cultural information (Verhaeghen et al., 2011). In addition, individuals do not update the beliefs they form about social groups even when the beliefs they initially held become inaccurate (Allidina & Cunningham, 2021). Stereotypes are essentially a type of cognitive structure that impacts a person's memory, attention, and perception, which mediate the processing of information that is involved in the perception of other people (Dovidio et al., 1986). Gender is one social category for which stereotypes are formed and impact the daily lives of individuals.

Gender Stereotypes.

Men and Women Stereotypes. A gender stereotype is a generalization about various aspects of women and men, and gender stereotypes are frequently internalized both by women and men (Hentschel et al., 2019). Some gender stereotypes are based on men and women's different distribution into social roles or gendered divisions of labor (Hentschel et al., 2019). For instance, one gender stereotype is that men are innately more intelligent than women, and evidence exists that most societies experience what is called "brilliance-gender" bias (Del Pinal et al., 2017). Other common gender stereotypes are that women should be warm, supportive, and not self-promoting or aggressive, whereas men should be ambitious, independent, and not passive or emotional (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Gender stereotypes may have the ability to influence how observers perceive blame in sexual assault situations. Some common beliefs related to gender stereotypes and sexual assault are that people find it implausible that a woman would be able to sexually assault a man, be able

to force a man to take part in sexual activity, or that a man would refuse sexual activity at all (Davies et al., 2006). Gender stereotypes can be particularly salient regarding perceptions of blame by third party observers when perceiving a sexual assault scenario about transgender individuals.

Transgender Stereotypes. The term **"**sex" refers to anatomical and physiological differences between males, females, and intersex individuals, and sex is determined biologically, typically through appearance of genitalia, hormones, and genes (Case, 1995; Oakley, 1972; Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000). The gender of an individual is socially and culturally constructed, via expectations, norms and social roles in and from the environment (Case, 1995; Oakley, 1972; Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000). As alluded to previously, transgender individuals do not accept the gender identity given to them at birth that is in accordance with social and cultural expectations of gender. In opposition to societal norms, transgender individuals identify with a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth. Gender pertains to how a person identifies, which could be within the gender binary as a man or woman (Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000) or outside of this binary. There is a broad spectrum of identities such as transgender (typically within the gender binary), non-binary (typically outside the gender binary) and gender non-conforming. A gender non-binary individual does not identify as being either a man or a woman (Bosse et al., 2022), and the much broader term of "gender non-conforming" is anyone whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth (Tankersley et al., 2021), encompassing all gender identities outside the binary.

Those who violate traditional gender stereotypes are often negatively impacted in terms of social and economic penalties. Yet, research has primarily focused on cisgender stereotypes while at the same time leaving the experiences and beliefs regarding transgender people largely

unexplored (Howansky et al., 2019). Howansky and colleagues (2019) conducted a gender stereotype study and described how transgender individuals are frequently exposed to unique gender stereotypes that label them as deviant, confused, abnormal, unstable, or mentally ill. The results about stereotypes of trans-men, trans-women, cis-men, and cis-women indicate cisgender people may apply and overlap unique negative stereotypes about transgender people (Howansky et al., 2019). Additionally, cisgender people utilize stereotypes regarding a transgender person's assigned sex at birth or assign stereotypes of both a male and female, both of which can stigmatize and undermine the gender identity of a transgender person (Howansky et al., 2019).

"Psychological essentialism" is a term coined by Medin and Ortony (1989) to characterize a layperson's assumption that being a member of a certain social category is based on common essences of the members. Essentialist views emphasize perceived differences between social groups and similarities within the members (Medin & Ortony, 1989). In terms of gender and sex, experimental studies suggest that this view is causally related to gender stereotyping (Ching & Xu, 2018). Ching and Xu (2018) studied stereotyping and essentialist views of psychological impacts that are grounded in the male/female binary. The findings suggested that these types of views may give rise to more transgender prejudice toward individuals (Ching & Xu, 2018). In a similar but more specific study, cultural stereotypes were significantly more negative for transgender men than for transgender women (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). There was also evidence the participants who espoused more cultural stereotypes also experienced higher levels of transgender prejudice (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). The more participants endorsed traditional gender roles, the higher the acceptance of stereotyping was by the same participants (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). Moreover, an increase in religiosity predicted greater levels of transphobia and genderism (Greenburg & Gaia, 2019).

These present societal viewpoints and perspectives of transgender individuals have negatively impacted gender non-conforming people.

Trans Panic Defense

An important topic to cover in relation to transgender stereotypes is the concept of the trans panic defense. The trans panic defense is utilized to blame a crime, like murder or sexual assault, on the victim of the crime instead of the perpetrator (Equality maps: Panic defense bans, n.d.). More specifically, the trans panic defense attempts to justify the perpetrators actions based on sexual orientation or gender identity of the victim, and therefore, the perpetrator's violent response is justified (Equality maps: Panic defense bans, n.d.). While there has been little to no research that could be found on this defense specifically, it is still legal to this day in 35 states (Equality maps: Panic defense bans, n.d.). This defense exemplifies the need for further research regarding transgender stereotypes, and specifically the need to understand how blame is attributed within these crimes directed at transgender people.

Attribution Models

Two early attribution theorists were psychologist Fritz Heider in the late 1950's and psychologist Harold Kelley in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Known as the father of attribution theories, Heider sought to explore interpersonal relationships within the social environment and phenomena related to a person's reactions to their surroundings and of other individuals (Heider, 1958). Kelley (1973) elaborated on how attribution theories have developed in social psychology as a way to understand social perception questions and how individuals interpret and explain the behavior of other people (Kelley, 1973). Another American social psychologist, Bernard Weiner (1985), developed an attribution model to explain the thought processes that are involved with attributions and how the totality of a person's personal

history, experiences, and even events one is exposed to throughout their life, may affect their attributions. Weiner's attribution model relates to how a person thinks, which is then dynamically related to feelings and actions, and he further describes in his model that individuals look for causality and controllability in situations (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Weiner, 1985). Essentially, attributions are the beliefs, assumptions, judgments, or inferences individuals generate or develop to help them explain the cause of how or why humans behave the way that they do in certain situations or events (Greenburg & Gaia, 2019; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1985). More specifically, attributions relate to two critical dimensions, wherein a person attributes the cause of an event to either an individual's disposition (internal: feelings, personality, abilities, gender, race) or the context of the situation (external: environmental, location, timing, luck) (Eberly et al., 2011; Gilmor & Minton, 1974; Gonzalez et al., 2022, Heider, 1958). These two types of attributions and how they connect to stereotypes are important to consider regarding the cognitive processes of the participants in this study.

Stereotypes can further explain internal attributions that are made by third-party observers in sexual assault. For example, a third-party observer may incorporate the stereotype mentioned earlier of a woman as "passive" into their attribution. The stereotype of women being passive might then impact the third-party observer's attributions and perceptions, who then blame the woman for not fighting back against a perpetrator. Applying an external attribution, on the other hand, might lead an individual to perceive an event occurring because another person was unfortunately "in the wrong place at the wrong time". Over the past few decades, empirical research into the relationship between attributions and stereotypes based on gender identity and sexual orientation of individuals has become more available and important to explore.

Diving deeper into how these models relate to the present study is vital. Third-party observers' attributions related to gender identity, victim blaming, and sexual assault may originate from very complex cognitive processes. In addition, an individual's unique life history can play a part in attributions that are formed. One pivotal study by Greenberg and Gaia (2019) involved exploring internal and external attributions. The authors discovered that participants had more positive attributions and lower levels of homophobia toward individuals when the cause of the other person's sexual orientation was attributed to biological (internal) factors instead of environmental (external) factors. To clarify further, these internal and external factor attributions are essentially whether "nature" vs. "nurture" is the "cause" of a person's gender identity. Interestingly, people who engage in interpersonal contact with transgender individuals have lower levels of transphobia and genderism (Claman, 2009; Greenberg & Gaia, 2019). The perceived cause, or controllability, of a sexual assault may influence how an individual assigns blame to a victim and a perpetrator.

Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)

Another related aspect to attributions is fundamental attribution errors that occur when individuals ignore external variables and rather attribute some form of internal factors or characteristics to the events or situations of other people (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021). The fundamental attribution error (FAE) is a theoretical framework that was first coined in 1977 by Lee Ross to understand how individuals will make distortions in attribution processes (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021; Ross, 1977). The FAE posits that people usually attribute negative consequences that occur to others as being more related to the other person's conduct or disposition (internal attribution) while minimizing situational contributions to the outcome (external attribution) (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021). In contrast, the individual will make the

reverse conclusion of their own negative outcomes. In other words, they will blame their personal outcome on situational events rather than from their own conduct (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021). The FAE framework is useful in providing further examination on how sexual assault situations are perceived and if third-party observers may make inaccurate attributions and blame innocent sexual assault victims for situations in which the victim did not have any control.

Blame Attribution Model

The attribution of blame model relates to judgments of injustices and how someone must be blamed and held responsible if there is some sort of violation that occurs to another person when there was not any sufficient justification (Mikula, 2003). The application of attributional theories to victims of crime is a way to explain how observers attribute responsibility when victimization occurs (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). One complication in understanding attributions of blame is that different observer characteristics influence these attributions based on complex situational, psychological, and personal factors (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). However, the attribution of blame model relates to injustice and blaming in that if there was not sufficient justification for the behavior or action of a person, then that individual should be held responsible and blamed for the injustice. For example, injustice may be associated with resentment toward someone whose actions, or lack of actions, brought forth "unjust" consequences. Mikula (2003) discusses further that when there is unfair treatment of an individual, someone should be held accountable for threatening another's physical or psychological well-being. Mikula's (2003) overall findings are that attributions of blame are built with perceived violations, lack of justification and attributions of responsibility. Understanding the research that third-party observers are more likely to attribute blame when greater "injustice" occurs are crucial to understanding possible perceptions and interpretation of

blame in sexual assault. One approach that has dominated studies of sexual violence and blame attributions is the rape perception framework (Grubb & Harrower, 2008), which will be discussed further.

Rape Perception Framework and Persistent Rape Myth

Although victims of rape are in fact the targets in a sexual assault, they are commonly the ones assigned responsibility for their own victimization and are perceived unsympathetically (Felson & Palmore, 2018). If the rapist is somehow acquainted with the victim, studies indicate a higher probability that the victim will be deemed responsible (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). One approach to understand victim-blaming is the "rape perception framework" where different factors impact negative attributions in rape, such as the attractiveness or clothing worn by the victim (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). In addition, Edmonds and Cahoon (1986) found that cisgender women who wore "sexually oriented" clothes (low cut dress also revealing legs) were perceived as being more vulnerable and more responsible for crimes where they were the victim. The rape perception framework is similar to the persistent rape myth in that the way a person behaved or presented themselves before an assault is the "reason" for the assault (Seelman, 2015). Victims who are passive and/or do not resist are also attributed more blame than someone who fought back and tried to stop an assault (Davies et al., 2009). Furthermore, victim blaming is well known to increase a victim's PTSD, guilt, depression, distrust, and a general hesitance to reach out for help (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2018).

Gender Identity and Sexual Assault

Prejudices about gender identity and sexual orientation relate to each other in different ways, and attitudes about gender nonconformity predicts sexual orientation prejudice indirectly through misconceptions about sexual orientation (Lick & Johnson, 2014). For example,

individuals quickly categorize the sexual orientation of an individual based on body movements, the way a person walks, and a variety of visual observations, which empirical findings reveal are related to prejudice (Lick & Johnson, 2014). These gendered features form femininity and masculinity perceptions, which drive categorizations of another person's sexual orientation, such as whether they think they are straight or lesbian/gay (Lick & Johnson, 2014). Research indicates that having a discomfort with violations of gender roles may explain sexual orientation prejudice in terms of violence that occurs (Cramwinckel et al., 2018), which is essential to further understand through advanced empirical research.

This study is primarily investigating gender identity and blame within a sexual assault scenario; however, sexual orientation is a confounding factor within these relationships. Altering survivor's gender identity and having the perpetrator of the assault remain constant in gender identity (a cisgender man) within the study, and assumed sexual orientation based on the dyad, may influence the participants' perceptions of blame. Prejudice against the LGBT+ community is prevalent today even though many believe they support equal rights for both gender and sexual minorities (Herek & McLemore, 2013), and the expectation is that the accumulated research from this study will help better understand how perceptions or misperceptions are influenced by gender identity and sexual orientation in the context of sexual assault.

Sexual orientation and perceptions of blame exploration has been, overall, minimal in research (Seelman, 2015; Morrison & Pedersen, 2018), however, the sexual orientation of an individual will impact blame perceptions of reported sexual assaults (Davies et al., 2009). Although women tend to minimally attribute blame to the victim no matter what the victim's sexual orientation is, men blamed heterosexual males more if they didn't resist their attacker, and yet blamed a homosexual male more if he did put up resistance (Davies et al., 2009).

Furthermore, some people believe cisgender men who are victims of rape are to blame for their assault because they are assumed to be stereotypically masculine and should be able to avoid confrontations of a sexual nature (Davies et al., 2009).

The Just World theoretical model is a second framework which explains that perceptions may be negative toward sexual assault victims because people are motivated to believe they live in a "fair world" and that the victims misfortunes occur for some apparent reason (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Anderson (2022) elaborated on results from various studies that men report greater transprejudice than women and cisgender women, and cisgender women are more comfortable and less threatened than cisgender men with gender non-conforming individuals such as transgender people. Moreover, those who thought transgender individuals had a psychological disorder or that they were not "born this way" also had higher levels of transprejudice. Relating all this information back to the Just World model, and that heterosexuals represent the majority of participants on perceptions toward transgender and nonbinary in research (Anderson, 2022), it is likely possible that many third-party observers of sexual assault may attribute blame of the victim's misfortune on the victim's transgender identity.

Present Research and Hypotheses

As stated previously, the primary goal of the present research is to explore third-party observers' stereotypes, attributions, and perceptions of blame in a sexual assault scenario among transgender and cisgender gender identities. The rape perception framework and the persistent rape myth, as well as established tendencies toward societal blaming of women in sexual assault, is one basis for predicting the expected results from this study. Furthermore, the mechanisms involved in how these hypotheses were formulated are based on the previously stated research that existing stereotypes, biases, discrimination, and transprejudice are prevalent toward

transgender individuals and will therefore negatively affect the attitudes of third-party observers in perceiving transgender individuals sympathetically. Three main hypotheses and a secondary hypothesis analysis will be implemented into the research design.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis incorporates past research on gender biases in blaming women, rape perception framework, and blaming the rape victim. The hypothesis is that cisgender and transgender women will have more blame attributed to them than cisgender and transgender men in sexual assault.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis is based on presented research that transgender individuals experience high levels of trans prejudice with negative descriptions and, therefore, transgender individuals will have more blame attributed to them than cisgender individuals.

Hypothesis 3

For the third hypothesis, an interaction between gender and gender identity is expected, such that transgender women will have a higher level of blame than is expected for women and for being transgender, transgender men and cisgender men will be similar.

Secondary Hypothesis

The secondary hypothesis is that people with stronger stereotype acceptance will attribute more blame to transwomen in comparison to other groups in sexual assault.

Method

Design

The study incorporated a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design for the three primary hypotheses. The manipulated, independent variables were gender (man or woman) and gender

identity (cisgender or transgender) of a sexual assault victim. In addition, to test the secondary hypothesis, the independent variables of gender identity (cisgender, transgender), gender (man, woman) and gender stereotypes were used. The measured dependent variable was attribution of victim and perpetrator blame.

Participants

Participants (N = 297) from the general population across the United States were recruited via a Qualtrics panel to complete an online survey. All participants were over 18 years old.

Demographics

Participants were asked to respond to demographic questions about age, biological sex, gender identity, sexuality, political party, race/ethnicity, and religiosity. See Table 1 for full demographic information of participants. The majority of participants were 18 to 24 years old (36%) or 25-34 years old (26.60%), ranging from 18 to 84 years old. Most participants reported their birth sex as female (69%) and male (30.30%), with a gender identity as woman (68.01%) and man (31.31%), and sexual orientation as heterosexual (68%) and bisexual (14.14%). Political party affiliation of participants was diverse, with the majority of participants identifying as Democratic (34%), followed by Republican (20%), and Independent (18.18%). Half of the participants were White (50%), followed by Black (33.33%), and Hispanic/Latino (13.47%). Finally, most identified their religion as Christian (36%), Atheism (19.53%) and Catholicism (13.8%).

Materials and Measures

Participants accessed the survey via an online survey tool, Qualtrics, by utilizing their own personal electronic devices.

Sexual Assault Scenario

Participants were presented with a scenario illustrating sexual assault (See Appendix A). This scenario was based on vignettes provided by Sjöberg and Sarwar (2020), Strömwall et al. (2014), and Landström et al. (2015). For example, for a participant in the transgender woman condition, the beginning of the scenario would say, "Riley a transgender woman, and Jack a cisgender man were coworkers who, for some time, had talked to each other during lunch breaks and had similar positions in the company" (See Appendix A). The gender of the victim within the scenario was manipulated directly by stating the gender identity of the individual after their name.

Riley was chosen as the name of the victim as it is a gender-neutral name, and thus could be applied to both cisgender or transgender men and women. The name Jack was given as it is a common name for individuals identified as a man. The genders of perpetrators of sexual assault are more likely to be men (Finkelhor et al., 1990), and due to this prevalence, and the fact that gender of the perpetrator was not the purpose of this study, it was decided to have a cisgender man be the perpetrator in the scenario.

Scales

Attribution of Victim Blame Measure. The dependent variable of blame was operationally defined as the score on the victim blame scale, adapted and compiled from Harrison et al., (2008), Murdoch and Gonsalkorale (2017), and Strömwall et al. (2014), as a way to measure blame attribution to the victim (See Appendix B). The rating scale measured levels of blame toward the victim in the sexual assault scenario, and the participant's higher score indicated a greater the level of blame than a participant with a lower score. Examples of the items assessing each participant's victim blame were to what extent Riley was (a) responsible for

the event, (b) to blame for the event, (c) at fault, (d) acted improperly, (e) should feel guilty, (f) should feel ashamed (See Appendix B). Responses were measured on a scale of 0 to 100 percent (0 = *not at all,* 25 = *minimally,* 50 = *undecided or neutral,* 75 = *greatly,* 100 = *completely*). The internal reliability for the victim blame scale was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .934).

Attribution of Perpetrator Blame Measure. The dependent variable of perpetrator blame was operationally defined as the score on the perpetrator blame scale, adapted and compiled from Harrison et al., (2008), Murdoch and Gonsalkorale (2017), and Strömwall et al. (2014), as a way to measure blame attribution to the perpetrator (See Appendix B). The rating scale measured levels of blame toward the perpetrator in the sexual assault scenario, and the participant's higher score indicated a greater the level of blame than a participant with a lower score. Examples of the indices assessing each participant's perpetrator blame were to what extent Jack was (a) responsible for the event, (b) to blame for the event, (c) at fault, (d) acted improperly, (e) should feel guilty, (f) should feel ashamed (See Appendix B). Responses were measured on a scale of 0 to 100 percent (0 = *not at all,* 25 = *minimally,* 50 = *undecided or neutral,* 75 = *greatly,* 100 = *completely*). The internal reliability for the perpetrator blame scale was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .944).

Gender Stereotypes Measure. A gender stereotypes scale was adapted and developed from wording in Hutchison and Abrams (2003), while the items from what was identified as stereotypes unique to transgender people were compiled from Howansky et al. (2019). Examples of statements included within this adapted scale were transgender people are (a) deviant, (b) confused, (c) mentally ill, (d) gay, (e) disgusting, (f) normal, (g) sexual, (h) confident, (i) needy (See Appendix C). Participants responded to these statements with their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 =

neutral, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, and 7 = *completely agree*. A high score on the scale means the individual endorsed gender stereotypes, whereas a low score on the scale means the individual endorsed fewer gender stereotypes. The internal reliability for the gender stereotypes scale was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .763).

Procedure

IRB approval was obtained to conduct the present study. Participants were first provided informed consent information and then provided the opportunity to agree or refuse to agree to informed consent (See Appendix D). Once a participant agreed to the informed consent by checking that box, the participant was then randomly assigned one of the four conditions (transgender woman, transgender man, cisgender woman, cisgender man). After reading the scenario, each participant responded to questions measuring victim and perpetrator blame and gender stereotypes. Upon completion of questions, participants answered demographic information and were provided a debriefing form describing the purpose of the study, along with measures and contact information of researchers (See Appendix E).

Proposed Analysis

Three hypotheses were proposed to be evaluated using a 2 (man, woman) by 2 (cisgender, transgender) between-subjects factorial ANOVA in the present exploratory study. In addition, the secondary hypothesis was proposed to be evaluated using a 2 (man, woman) by 2 (cisgender, transgender) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA, where gender stereotype endorsement served as the covariate. A power analysis was run using effect sizes drawn from a small number of previous studies that provided a range of effect sizes that were plausible, and the present study design was guided by a similar study on gender and sexual harassment. G*Power a priori power analysis results indicated the sample size required to achieve 80%

power to detect a small effect size of .25, with a significance criterion of α =.05 was *N* = 179 (Noncentrality parameter λ = 11.188, *F* = 2.656, df error = 175, actual power = 80.15%). The effect size metric was Cohen's *f*. The total sample size was increased as more participants participated in the survey.

Results

Overview of Analytic Strategy

It was proposed that an ANCOVA would be run with stereotypes as a covariate. However, there was a shift in analysis due to stereotypes being measured after manipulations. In order to utilize an ANCOVA appropriately, all covariates must be measured prior to any experimental manipulation. Since stereotypes were measured after the manipulation, an ANCOVA was not appropriate. Therefore, it was no longer appropriate to use ANCOVA for any of the analysis.

The first hypothesis was that a woman would be blamed more than a man in a sexual assault. The second hypothesis was a transgender individual would be blamed more than a cisgender individual in a sexual assault. For the third hypothesis, an interaction between gender and gender identity was expected, such that transgender women would have a higher level of blame than was expected for women, and for being transgender, transgender men and cisgender men would be similarly blamed. The secondary hypothesis was restated based on the change in analysis strategy from ANCOVA to Pearson's r, and the adapted hypothesis was that those with stronger stereotype acceptance would place more blame on the victim and less blame on the perpetrator.

For the three primary hypotheses a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design was implemented. The first independent variable was gender (man/woman). The second independent

variable was gender identity (cisgender/transgender). The main dependent variable was attribution of blame. For each participant, mean scores on the victim and perpetrator blame measures were calculated and used for analysis. An ANOVA was run with victim blame as the dependent variable, and a second ANOVA was run with perpetrator blame as the dependent variable. Instead of utilizing an ANCOVA to analyze stereotypes, Pearson correlations were utilized to examine the association between stereotypes and blame. Pearson correlations were utilized for stereotypes and victim blame as well as stereotypes and perpetrator blame.

Several assumptions were met to confirm the ANOVA was valid and reliable. The data was independent, the variances were approximately equal variances from each group, and the data was normally distributed for the response variable. Furthermore, no data was missing for any of the variables in the analysis.

While analyzing the results, it was discovered knowledge of what the word transgender means was not universal. An exploratory analysis was conducted examining how knowledge of what the word transgender means impacted blame and was related to stereotypes.

Victim Blame

For the three primary hypotheses, an ANOVA was utilized to examine the two main effects of the two independent variables, gender and gender identity, and the interaction of the two on the dependent variable, victim blame. The total model accounted for 0.6% of the variance in victim blame ($F(3, 293) = 0.55$, $p = .648$, $\eta_{p^2} = .006$). Levene's test was not significant, thus indicating that the population variances do not differ ($F(3, 293) = 0.87$, $p = .459$). For the first hypothesis, the main effect of gender (man/woman) on victim blame was not significant ($F(1, 293) = 0.15$, $p = .697$, $\eta_{p^2} = .001$). The main effect of gender identity (cisgender/transgender) on victim blame was not significant ($F(1, 293) = 0.33$, $p = .566$, $\eta_{p^2} = .001$). The third hypothesis,

which examined the interaction between gender and gender identity, was not supported (See Table 2; $F(1, 293) = 1.20$, $p = .274$, $\eta_{p^2} = .004$).

Perpetrator Blame

For the three primary hypotheses, an ANOVA was utilized to examine the two main effects of the two independent variables, gender and gender identity, and the interaction of the two on the dependent variable, perpetrator blame. The total model accounted for 1.6% of the variance in perpetrator blame ($F(3, 293) = 1.59$, $p = .193$, $\eta_{p^2} = .016$). Levene's test was not significant, thus indicating that the population variances did not differ ($F(3, 293) = 0.72$, $p = .538$). For the first hypothesis, the main effect of gender (man/woman) on perpetrator blame was significant ($F(1, 293) = 4.70$, $p = .031$, $\eta_{p^2} = .016$). Perpetrator blame was higher when the victim was a woman ($M = 69.13$, $SD = 24.71$) versus when the victim was a man ($M = 62.90$, $SD = 24.45$). This mean difference is small in magnitude as indicated by Cohen's $d = 0.253$. The main effect of gender identity (cisgender/transgender) on perpetrator blame was not significant ($F(1, 293) = 0.01$, $p = .923$, $\eta_{p^2} = .000$). The third hypothesis, which examined the interaction between gender and gender identity, was not supported (See Table 2; $F(1, 293) = 0.01$, $p = .916$, $\eta_{p^2} = .000$).

Stereotypes and Blame

A Pearson correlation was utilized to determine the relationship between victim blame and gender stereotypes. The analysis demonstrated that participants who endorsed harmful gender stereotypes also had higher levels of victim blame ($r(297) = .23$, $p < .001$). A Pearson correlation was also utilized to determine the relationship between perpetrator blame and gender stereotypes. This correlation was not significant ($r(297) = .04$, $p = .465$).

Summary of Main Findings

It was expected that gender and gender identity would have an impact on victim blame, however this was not supported. It was predicted that gender identity would impact perpetrator blame, and this was also not supported. However, the prediction that gender would impact perpetrator blame was supported. When participants endorsed gender stereotypes, for example "Transgender people are confused," they also reported higher levels of victim blame. However, the correlation between perpetrator blame and gender stereotypes was found to not be significant.

Knowledge of Transgender

Due to the unexpected null results for the hypotheses, an analysis of the question "What does the word transgender mean?" was completed (See Appendix C). This question was included in the initial survey and, therefore, allowed for further insight on the same participants that were asked the previous measures. Additionally, this question allowed for qualitative responses, in which the participant could freely type what they thought the word transgender means.

There were two coders who assigned participants to one of the two transgender knowledge groups. Transgender was operationally defined as meaning "transition" or "change" in gender/sex. If the participant used these words or phrases, they were coded as having understood what the word transgender means. The participants did not specifically have to know that transgender is a change in gender and not sex, as long as they mention a change in either sex or gender. Examples of responses that were coded as understanding what the word transgender meant include, "switched gender", "Relating to a person whose gender identity doesn't correspond with the sex registered for them at birth", "Identifies as a different sex", and "Men become woman, woman become man". The percent of agreement between the two independent raters for the transgender definition was 99.33%. Due to this minor discrepancy, the knowledge variable that was utilized in analysis was the coding from only one of the coders.

The proportion of participants who did not know what the words “transgender” meant was 43.1%, compared with those who knew the meaning of the word transgender at 56.9%. Some participants attempted to answer the question of “What does the word transgender mean” by saying transgender means, “Not male or female”, “In the process changing their sexual orientation”, a “Person that has sexual organs of both male and female”, or “Wanting to be both genders”. Other participants chose to use adjectives to describe what they considered a transgender to be like rather than defining the term, such as answering, “Confused” or “Very confused person”, “Screwed in the head”, “Fake”, or “Nasty”. Within this second group of participants, the most frequent answer, given by nine participants, was that transgender means “Gay”. In addition to these examples given, the remainder of the 129 participants either said they didn’t know what the word transgender meant, gave an incorrect answer, or left the question unanswered.

As previously suggested, almost half (43%) of participants did not understand the accurate definition of the word “transgender.” The knowledge of the term “transgender” was included in the analysis as a quasi-independent variable. Transgender knowledge was coded into a dichotomous variable with people who had knowledge (1) and people who did not have knowledge (0).

After coding participants for transgender knowledge, a one-way ANOVA was conducted for the quasi-independent variable of transgender knowledge and the dependent variable of victim blame to determine if level of knowledge in impacted victim blame in sexual assault. The results were statistically significant ($F(1, 289) = 8.78$, $p = .003$, $\eta_{p^2} = .029$) and demonstrated that participants who were unknowledgeable about the term “transgender” ($M = 51.98$, $SD = 27.92$) were more likely to blame the victim than participants who were knowledgeable (See Table 3 &

Figure 1; M = 42.46, SD = 26.62). This mean difference is medium in magnitude as indicated by Cohen's d = 0.349. Another one-way ANOVA was conducted with the dependent variable changed to perpetrator blame. Adding the knowledge variable as a quasi-independent variable did not yield statistically significant results on perpetrator blame ($F(1, 289) = 0.01$, $p = .918$, $\eta_{p^2} = .000$). A Pearson correlation was run to determine the relationship between knowledge and stereotypes. There was a statistically significant negative relationship ($r(297) = -.18$, $p = .002$) demonstrating that people who did not understand what the word transgender meant had higher levels of gender stereotypes.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of this study was to address the two primary research questions: (a) Does gender identity of the victim influence third-party observer blame in sexual assault? and (b) Do gender stereotypes influence third-party blame in sexual assault? To reiterate the main predictions and findings, it was expected that gender and gender identity would have an impact on victim blame, however, this was not supported. It was predicted that gender identity would impact perpetrator blame, and this was also not supported. The prediction that gender would impact perpetrator blame was supported, however, this was in the opposite direction than what was indicated by prior literature and what was hypothesized in hypothesis one. Specifically, perpetrator blame was higher when the victim was a woman versus when the victim was a man. Moreover, this unexpected finding had a small effect size (Cohen's d = 0.253) and can also be explained further through addressing the methodological limitations of this study. Lastly, when participants endorsed gender stereotypes, for example "Transgender people are gay", they also reported higher levels of victim blame. However, the correlation between perpetrator blame and gender stereotypes was found to not be significant.

Understanding why a majority of the hypotheses were not supported and why perpetrator blame was higher when the victim was a woman than when the victim was a man, requires some consideration and further depth. According to Dunning and Sherman (1997), in order to be able to judge the behavior of another person, one must often come to understand what the details of the behavior were. Perhaps the scenario did not allow participants to elicit sufficient information about the two subjects, such as their background and personal information, or the environment within which the scenario took place, in order to attribute more or less blame to the victim or perpetrator. It is recognized that a large percentage of the participants were not clear on the meanings of certain words within the scenario. However, according to Dunning and Sherman (1997), people make inferences regarding words that are ambiguous in order to decipher the causes as well as the consequences of particular actions within the story. In addition, people will make personality trait inferences of characters in passages as well (Winter et al., 1985).

Because of increased awareness of LGBT+ identities over recent years, it was anticipated that incorporating the term "transgender" into the scenario would be sufficient to obtain significant results for the hypotheses. Furthermore, it was believed that stereotypes, gender stereotypes, and previously described rape myth perceptions toward women would provide significant evidence for supporting the hypotheses, regardless of what participants specifically knew or didn't know about transgender individuals. Perhaps posing the question to participants of whether it is acceptable to blame transgender people for sexual assault in order to determine whether social norms were understood would have been an interesting approach to analyze closer as well.

Another important point to discuss further is the geographic location of the participants in this study. The participants in this study were all from the United States, but data was not

obtained as far as what part of the country or state the individuals were from. However, this would be interesting to examine further, especially in relation to political identification. Different states tend to have different policies, political beliefs regarding LGBT+ people, as well as a more conservative or liberal population. As a majority of the participants were Democrat, this might partially relate to why null results were obtained, as democratic beliefs may tend to be more liberal toward the LGBTQ+ community.

Understanding why the variable of lack of knowledge of the term "transgender" impacts the blame placed on the victim by the participant is essential. While public awareness and acceptance of sexual orientations of individuals in the LGBT+ community has grown over recent years (Russell & Fish, 2016), specific knowledge and understanding of what the various gender identities are may still be lacking in the general population. While most participants attempted to give a neutral, technical meaning of the word "transgender," many of these responses, as noted in the results section, were not accurate. Anderson (2022) also studied lay people's definitions of transgender and concluded that describing transgender people as "confused" about what their gender is may lead to increased negative attitudes and the belief that people who are transgender are psychologically disturbed. It is highly possible that participants who used the stereotype of a transgender as "confused", may also be a reason these participants attributed blame of sexual assault more to the transgender victim.

Ignorance of what it means to have a transgender identity could possibly lead to fear or panic toward a transgender individual in general, which could inflate the participant's focus on gender identity alone as a possible reason for being sexually assaulted. On the other hand, research by Anderson (2022) also concluded that more positive attitudes are present toward transgender people when they are recognized as having a gender identity that is legitimate.

Participants who were more aware of the transgender identity could have been exposed to a variety of opportunities within their environment, resulting in them applying less blame to the transgender individual. Many variables can influence how people are able to define the word transgender, such as knowing a transgender person may decrease prejudice levels and how transgender is conceptualized (Anderson, 2022). In addition, being exposed to people of various sexual orientations through the media (Schiappa et al., 2005), or listening to class speakers (Kwon & Hugelshofer, 2012) can also create awareness and understanding of transgender identities, leading to less blame in sexual assault toward the transgender individual. Lastly, it might have provided insight on the results of the study to understand more about the general population to verify whether the participants believed that the scenario should even be considered a sexual assault in the first place.

Critically important as well within this study is analyzing results as to higher levels of negative gender stereotypes impacting the amount of victim blame in sexual assault of the transgender individual. Davies et al. (2009) discussed how blame may be attributed to changeable or stable factors, such as an individual's personality. In the absence of significant amounts of information about the victims within the scenario of the present study, it is possible that participants used a stereotype schema as a mental shortcut to decrease the time and effort in obtaining information (Karlins et al., 1969; Khan et al., 2012) to respond to the scenario questions about who was to blame for the sexual assault. Since stereotypes are often activated automatically and subliminally, the stereotype cognitive processes of participants may have significantly affected participant's attitudes and perceptions toward the victim without the participant even being purposely aware (Burgh et al., 1996; Dovidio et al., 1986; Dunning & Sherman, 1997; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins et al., 1969; Katz & Braly, 1933; Khan et al., 2012; Wang

& Yang, 2017). Based on the quasi-independent variable results, there is some indication that the first research question of this study was partially confirmed, as the gender identity of the victim did influence third-party observer blame in sexual assault.

The second research question of whether gender stereotypes were associated with blame also appears to be supported overall in the results of the present study based on the endorsement of gender stereotypes by participants and higher levels of victim blame for sexual assault. Howansky et al. (2019) previously discussed how people may apply negative transgender gender stereotypes to people, such as being unstable or confused, for instance. Various participants' descriptions of what a transgender individual is, such as being, "Screwed in the head", "Fake", "Nasty", or "Gay", are all negative gender stereotypes to describe a transgender individual. Long-lasting negative stereotypes that are inaccurate have the potential to not only harm the targets, but they can also lessen the ability of the perceiver to make appropriate social decisions and bring about pervasive social biases (Allidina & Cunningham, 2021). In addition, people are more likely to attribute negative and aggressive behaviors to internal causes of individuals in outgroups (Harrison et al., 2008; Hunter et al., 1991). Furthermore, participants who considered transgender people as an outgroup possibly used negative terminology and internal attributions to describe the individual and thus may have applied more blame to the transgender victim in return.

It is important to note it is difficult to determine what participants exactly knew about the term "transgender" when they used negative stereotypes instead of simply answering the question. However, these participants' responses confirm the second research question that endorsement of gender stereotypes does impact the attribution of blame for sexual assault. Finally, in addition to general negative stereotypes of transgender individuals, it is possible that

the trans panic defense may be applicable as well to why the participants blamed victims more, as participants may have cognitively justified that the perpetrators actions were because of the gender identity of the victim (Equality maps: Panic defense bans, n.d.).

Examining this study from an overall perspective, it is prudent to discuss what interventions or programs might be most effective at educating individuals. Although all levels of society could benefit from education, some crucial programs should be implemented within the educational and medical system. Within the school setting, promoting professional development of teachers and staff regarding gender identity and sexual orientation could decrease disparities that LGBT+ individuals face within this environment ("Reducing Inequalities," n.d.). Staff within the schools would then be able to be a role model for all students regarding inclusive behavior. In addition, instituting LGBT+ curricula within the school environment could not only provide basic information about gender identity, it could also improve school safety and decrease bullying of LGBT+ students ("Reducing Inequalities," n.d.). Designing models of education and training for students on various gender topics and transgender individuals could be a potential intervention as well (Gorrotxategi et al., 2020). Within the medical setting, annual gender identity training of providers and distributing educational resources to engage families about gender diversity could be a way to advance knowledge to the general population ("Engaging the Families," 2021). Even though a lot of improvement could be made at these levels, several interventions in a broader context are also important to suggest and consider.

In the present era of mass consumption of media and social media as a form of communication and learning, creatively employing educational resources about transgender individuals within this technology has the potential to be powerful in reaching as many as

possible. Creating online platforms focusing on gender diversity where individuals can communicate, gather, and learn from one another could possibly be a great way to increase visibility and awareness of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, social media can provide opportunities to interact with one's outgroup that may not happen otherwise. Being able to have interactions with those in one's outgroup can open discussions and expand one's beliefs. Responsible media representation and transmission of knowledge by people who are accurately informed about transgender individuals could also spread information quickly to thousands of people. Clearly, these suggestions barely touch the surface of all the possible interventions or programs that could make a difference in improving the lives of transgender individuals and society as a whole.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study has several important limitations that need to be interpreted carefully. First, the scenario itself could have been more descriptive to truly determine the influence of the transgender individuals on the attribution of blame for the scenario presented to the participant. The environment, actions, and behaviors of both individuals prior to the sexual assault was possibly too vague for the participants to truly attribute blame to one person over the other in the scenario. When provided insufficient information, the participant may have chosen to apply more equal blame to each individual, regardless of gender identity described, thus leading to not significant conclusions regarding the results. Almost half of the participants did not know what the "transgender" or "cisgender" terms were, which means the independent variable manipulation may not have been interpreted correctly by participants. This confusion may have influenced them as far as making attributions of blame in the scenario, which clearly could impact having statistically significant results.

Better understanding whether it is possible there were multiple null effects because there truly weren't any effects is something that should be briefly explored and discussed further. If this was the case it could indicate that participants were primarily focusing on the behaviors of Jack and Riley rather than deliberately using stereotypes, bias or prejudice to come to their judgments and conclusions. Even though it is evident from the research that these negative cognitive processes often still exist toward transgender individuals, advances have occurred over recent years in societal acceptance for transgender individuals. Perhaps the participants were able to cognitively separate the gender identity of the victim from what actually occurred within the sexual assault scenario itself. If this conclusion bears any weight, these results could be promising to the LGBT+ community as an indication that more neutral perspectives toward transgender individuals are transpiring over time. While plausible, assessment of the empirical literature and media coverage of transphobia indicates it is unlikely for multiple reasons. Of considerable significance is the previously mentioned trans panic defense still being legal in 35 states where 57% of the LGBTQ+ community lives ("Gay/Trans Panic," n.d.). In addition, more than 220 bills have been introduced through legislature within the first five months of 2023 alone that target non-binary and transgender people specifically ("Weekly Roundup," n.d.). Transgender people often face casual discrimination in the form of microaggressions at as high of a rate as 50-60 times per day ("Transgender People," 2017). All this evidence taken together indicates that the likelihood that there truly were not any effects of gender identity is improbable.

As is true in many empirical studies, the measures of the study could also have been better defined somehow to more accurately measure the transgender/cisgender man/woman influence of victim blame for the sexual assault. A complicating factor to having effective

measures was that there was such limited previous empirical research to know what measures would be reliable and have been tested to find robust and valid statistical measures. Putting all results into perspective, this study was more exploratory in nature and the measures used could be used in the future as empirical knowledge grows and becomes more established on LGBT+ individuals and sexual assault.

Recommendations for Further Research

In relation to the present study, it may be appropriate to see if stereotypes moderates the relationship between gender and blame. As just mentioned, further research and data analysis is critical in understanding social and cognitive processes of third-party observers of sexual assault specifically as it relates to the LGBTQ+ community. Second, how to effectively educate communities and society on understanding basic terminology as it relates to gender identity is vital to explore through research in years to come. Research establishing how to expand knowledge of gender identities is complicated by the fact that many gender identity terms may also describe other identities under its umbrella. For example, transgender can also include those who identify as being genderqueer, transexual, in addition to other various identities (American Psychological Association, 2014). The results of the present study indicated many participants from the general population struggled to accurately define what “transgender” was. Further research on how to properly narrow definitions of gender identities so there is less confusion to lay people is clearly warranted.

While there may be more public awareness on gender identities, how to positively impact people’s perceptions, attributions and negative stereotypes of the transgender community and any individual who falls outside the more typical gender norms is necessary to be examined as well. In addition, further research is vital in determining whether, and how, an individual’s

specific sexual orientation may contribute to, or detract from, their knowledge of the topic of gender identity. It is also recommended through further research that there are investigations on how to minimize the negative impacts of sexual assault and stigmatization as it relates to gender-diverse individuals. When a transgender individual experiences being sexually assaulted, the fear of stigmatization, prejudice or discrimination could possibly play a role in whether or not the person seeks help and support from the medical community, law enforcement, social services, mental health services, and even family or friends. Finally, focused research aimed at reaching the unique needs of the LGBT+ community regarding sexual assault, such as through short-term and long-term trauma recovery, is imperative.

Conclusion

While recognizing the limitations present in the study, several important findings were accumulated through the present study on transgender individuals, sexual assault, and attributions of blame. The study tried to help explain partially why third-party observers may attribute blame in sexual assault on a transgender individual. Insufficient knowledge about transgender as an identity in general, negatively influenced attribution of blame in sexual assault. Secondly, attributing negative transgender stereotypes as well statistically influenced whether the victim was blamed for a sexual assault. These findings can affect theory and practice in the field of psychology by providing insight on cognitive processes of third-party observers, which can assist in instituting ways of increasing knowledge and decreasing gender stereotypes of all individuals within the LGBTQ+ community.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Demographic	*n*	%
Age		
18-24	106	35.7%
25-34	79	26.60%
35-44	45	15.20%
45-54	21	7.1%
55-64	22	7.41%
65-74	20	6.73%
75-84	4	1.35%
Biological Sex		
Female	206	69.36%
Male	90	30.30%
Intersex	1	.34%
Gender Identity		
Woman	202	68.01%
Man	93	31.31%
Non-binary	2	.67%
Sexuality		
Heterosexual	202	68.01%
Bisexual	42	14.14%
Lesbian	12	4.04%
Pansexual	11	3.7%
Not Sure/Questioning	9	3.03%
Other	8	2.69%
Gay	6	2.02%
Asexual	5	1.68%
Queer	2	.67%
Political Party Affiliation		
Democrat	101	34.01%
Republican	58	19.53%
Independent	54	18.18%
Non-partisan	32	10.77%
Libertarian	19	6.4%
Other	11	3.7%
Green	10	3.37%
Constitution	8	2.69%
American Solidarity	4	1.35%
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	147	50%
Hispanic/Latino	40	13.47%
Black	99	33.33%
Asian	26	8.75%
Native American	16	5.39%
Native Hawaiian	10	3.37%
Other	5	1.68%
Religion		
Christianity	107	36.03%
Atheism	58	19.53%
Catholicism	41	13.8%
Other	36	12%
Protestantism	22	7.41%
Islam	15	5.05%
Mormonism	13	4.38%
Buddhism	13	4.38%
Judaism	12	4.44%
Agnosticism	7	2.36%
Hinduism	6	2.02%
Sikhism	1	.34%

Note. $N = 297$

Table 2

Results for Gender and Gender Identity on Victim Blame and Perpetrator Blame

Victim Blame									
	Parameter Estimates						Least-Square Means		
Factor	*MS*	*F*(1, 293)	*p*-value	*partial* η^2			*Gender*		
Gender	116.144	.152	.697	.001			*Woman*	*Man*	
Gender Identity	251.794	.330	.566	.001	*Gender Identity*	*Trans*	44.50	46.76	45.63
Gender×*Gender Identity*	914.355	1.199	.274	.004		*Cis*	49.85	45.09	47.47
Error	762.418						47.18	45.93	
Perpetrator Blame									
Gender	2859.622	4.701	.031*	.016			*Gender*		
Gender Identity	5.699	.009	.923	.000			*Woman*	*Man*	
Gender×*Gender Identity*	6.778	.011	.916	.000	*Gender Identity*	*Trans*	69.14	62.63	65.89
Error	608.318					*Cis*	69.12	63.21	66.17
							69.13	62.92	

Note. * Indicates $p < .05$

Table 3

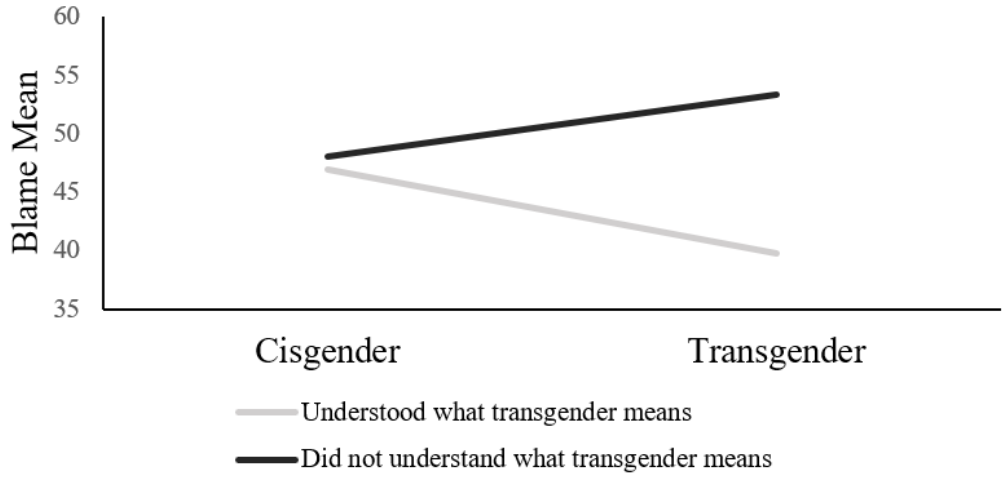
Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Knowledgeable and Unknowledgable of Meaning of Transgender on Victim Blame

Measure	Knowledgeable		Unknowledgeable		$F(1, 289)$	p-value	Partial η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Victim Blame	42.46	26.62	51.98	27.92	8.78	0.003*	.029

Note. * Indicates $p < .05$

Figure 1

Knowledge of the Meaning of Transgender Affected Participant's Victim Blame



Appendix A

Sexual Assault Scenario

Riley, a (trans/cis or man/woman), and Jack, a cisgender man, were coworkers who, for some time, had talked to each other during lunch breaks and had similar positions in the company. Jack arrived at Riley's house one Saturday night, unannounced. Riley invited Jack inside and they chatted about their hobbies and recent events at work. Jack flirted and made physical advances toward Riley and was very insistent. Riley stated "I'm not interested" and Jack persisted in his physical advances. Riley froze and didn't push him away.

Appendix B

Victim and Perpetrator Blame Scale

Scale for following are 0-100%, (*0=not at all, 25=minimally, 50=undecided or neutral, 75=greatly, 100=completely)*

1. To what extent do you think Riley can be responsible for the event?

2. To what extent do you think Riley can be blamed for the event?

3. To what extent do you think Riley can be at fault for the event?

4. To what extent do you think Riley was acting improperly?

5. To what extent do you think Riley should feel guilty?

6. To what extent do you think Riley should feel ashamed?

1. To what extent do you think Jack can be responsible for the event?

2. To what extent do you think Jack can be blamed for the event?

3. To what extent do you think Jack can be at fault for the event?

4. To what extent do you think Jack was acting improperly?

5. To what extent do you think Jack should feel guilty?

6. To what extent do you think Jack should feel ashamed?

Additional Questions.

1. What extent do you consider the described event a sexual assault?

2. What extent do you consider the described event sexual harassment?

3. What extent do you consider the described event a crime?

4. How much do you agree Riley should not have invited Jack to go into her apartment if she did not want to have sex with him?

Appendix C

Gender Stereotypes Scale (adapted)

Scale will be measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2= *disagree*, 3=*somewhat disagree*, 4=*neutral*, 5=*somewhat agree*, 6=*agree*, 7=*completely agree*).

Transgender people are deviant.

Transgender people are confused.

Transgender people are mentally ill.

Transgender people are gay.

Transgender people are disgusting.

Transgender people are normal.

Transgender people are sexual.

Transgender people are confident.

Transgender people are needy.

Additional Questions.

Transgender women are women. (yes/no)

Transgender men are men. (yes/no)

What does the word transgender mean? (fill in the blank)

What does the word cisgender mean? (fill in the blank)

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form Used in the Research

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled *Perceptions*. This study is being done by Rowan Reinhart from Northern Arizona University.

The purpose of this research study is to understand how individuals perceive a scenario that may or may not depict sexual assault. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey/questionnaire. This survey/questionnaire will ask about your feelings and thoughts on a scenario that may or may not regard sexual assault. For example, you may be asked questions about responsibility for the action. It will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete. We are hoping to recruit 300 people.

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may help us better understand how people perceive potential sexual assault scenarios. We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, as with any online related activity the risk of a breach of confidentiality is always possible. To the best of our ability your answers in this study will remain confidential. We will minimize any risks by ensuring that the data is kept in a secure location accessible only to the principal investigator and advisor, and the data will be collected anonymously.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. With full survey completion, you will be compensated from your panel's provider. Please see Qualtrics for a specific payment policy (https://www.qualtrics.com/support/survey-platform/information-survey-takers/). However, if you choose not to participate it will not affect your relationship with Northern Arizona University or result in any other penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researchers, Rowan Reinhart at arc547@nau.edu or Ann Rumble, PhD. at ann.rumble@nau.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact Northern Arizona University IRB Office at irb@nau.edu or (928) 523-9551.

By submitting this survey, I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age and agree that the information may be used in the research project described above.

Appendix E

Debriefing Form Used in the Research

Thank you for providing data to this student project conducted at Northern Arizona University during the Fall 2022 semester which explored the question, "Does gender diversity influence stereotypes and attributions in a sexual assault scenario?" As researchers, it is vital that we explain that the scenario you read did depict sexual assault, and that blame falls solely on Jack, the perpetrator.

Your participation was essential to the completion of this study.

As you recall, while demographic information was collected, the surveys were completed anonymously. This preserves the confidentiality of your responses. There was no deception used in the collection of data.

If any of the questions you were asked today have upset you and you would like to talk about them, please contact your instructor or one of these sources:

- TrevorLifeline 1-866-488-7386
- LGBT National Hotline 888-843-4564
- The National Sexual Assault Hotline 800-656-4673
- National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline 988
- Crisis Text Line (text only) 741-741

Again, thank you for your time and support of this process.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any of these projects, you may contact Dr. Ann Rumble.