

Student perspectives on the normalisation of sexual assault within Huddersfield

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ABSTRACT

Statistics show the increasing threat Sexual Assault (hereafter referred to as SA) poses within contemporary society. The student population is disproportionately affected by SA, yet there is limited research on students' attitudes surrounding the topic within the UK. This study aims to address gaps in current research on SA, by using qualitative methods to understand student attitudes towards the normalisation of SA within two different geographical settings. Focus groups were conducted with a total of 15 participants, with themes emerging around 'excuses', 'risk' and 'acceptance'. All three themes were found to contribute to the normalisation of SA, with feminist perspectives, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) and alcohol influencing the themes, and supporting the findings generated from the literature review. SA was found to be overall normalised within the student population, more so in a nightclub setting (hereafter referred to as a club) than an outdoor university setting (University Plaza). The research both generated ideas towards why SA has become more normalised and what can be done to combat the normalisation of SA. However, more research needs to be conducted into student attitudes towards SA across the UK to make the results more generalisable to the student population, identifying at-risk settings and negative attitudes towards SA. The research is integral not only to shaping future interventions but also to identifying current interventions that are failing or why certain interventions are not already in place which is extremely problematic. It aims to tackle SA successfully, improving the safety of students and the general public.

Introduction

Sexual Assault (SA) is a type of offence characterised as a non-consensual violation in the form of a sexual act and an offence in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Metropolitan Police, 2021). SA is a particularly intrusive act, invading privacy, exploiting vulnerability and causing long-term harm to victims, both physically and mentally. After the tragic murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021, SA moved to the top of the political agenda. An

additional £25 million was allocated to the Safer Street Funds to create safer spaces for women. Relevant to the study, West Yorkshire received £655,000 in funding which was used towards safer public spaces and education packages to generate behaviour change in men, promoting women's safety (Home Office, 2021; West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021). However, SA remains a prevalent threat, evidenced by Police Recorded Crime data, with the number of reported incidents increasing each year since 2012 and women coming

forward through the #METOO movement (Home Office, 2021; ONS, 2021a).

In the year ending March 2020 a total of 162,936 sexual offences were recorded by the Police in England and Wales (ONS, 2021a). When including an estimate of the dark figure of crime from The Crime Survey for England and Wales, it was approximated that around 773,000 offences and attempts of SA had occurred (ONS, 2021b). Critically, certain sub-groups were identified as more vulnerable to SA within the statistics: 84% of victims were female; most were aged between 16 and 24 years; the highest rates were in Yorkshire; and full-time students were the most affected occupation type (ONS, 2021c; Phipps & Young, 2015; Sorotos & Terasa, 2017). Another study at Manchester University revealed 8/10 female students and 2/10 male students experienced SA during their time at university (Sorotos & Terasa, 2017). The current research will use female perspectives due to female students being disproportionately impacted by SA; however, other perspectives will also be utilised to ensure explanations also consider why males are affected by SA. The majority of current research focuses on females, therefore it is crucial to include perspectives that attempt to identify why males are impacted by SA. Current research also identifies that SA is an issue but offers little exploration into why or what can be done to combat this. Most problematically, the effectiveness of current interventions and lack of interventions has not been considered, which is integral to reducing the impact of SA and increasing public safety.

The current study

The current study aims to research perceptions around the normalisation of SA. It specifically explores the sub-groups disproportionately affected: students mostly 20–24, including female participants within West Yorkshire. The research is integral to understanding factors extenuating the issue of SA, informing policy and moving towards evidence-based interventions to decrease the prevalence of SA, specifically aimed at the student

population and other disproportionately affected groups.

Prior to determining the research questions, a review of existing literature was conducted to highlight current knowledge, theories and concepts or factors influencing SA, as well as gaps in knowledge, helping to shape the current research.

Literature review

Defining SA

The Sexual Offence Act (2003) defines SA as a situation where a reasonable person would consider the nature or act sexual, without clear consent. The Metropolitan Police define SA as a physical, psychological and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, inflicted without consent (2021). Definitions of SA are broad and open to interpretation, often a limitation of current research. The research within the literature review utilises the broad meaning of SA whereas the current study focuses upon a specific aspect of SA—inappropriate touching. This is to gain more in-depth and specific findings, and reduce the misinterpretation while discussing SA, diminishing a clear gap in the existing research.

Feminist theories

Feminist theories aim to explain SA through gender inequality (Canan & Levand, 2019; Goodman, 2019; hooks, 2015). The feminist standpoint suggests that patriarchal norms and gender power structures result in SA, although the different viewpoints within this standpoint have some contrasting perspectives (Whisnant, 2021).

Within liberal feminist theory, laws and policy are viewed as generating a gender divide creating the space for oppressive acts like SA. This suggests that changing policy and laws should reduce the gender gap, in turn reducing SA. However, this perspective is critiqued for setting the patriarchal standard to that of males, still supporting male superiority (Rennison, 2014).

Radical feminist theory suggests that patriarchy is the cause of gender inequality leading to sexual violence (Canan & Levand, 2019; Whisnant, 2021). Szekeres et al. (2020) found that men with a high social dominance orientation (SDO), and therefore strong patriarchal values, were more dismissive of SA experiences during the #METOO movement than those with lower SDO. The results suggest males with stronger patriarchal beliefs are more accepting of SA, increasing the likelihood of SA occurring. Although there is supporting evidence for the radical feminist perspective, there is no explanation for why other sub-groups and males can equally be victims of SA, which is a major flaw (Canon & Levand, 2019).

Gender scripts

Feminist theories aim to explain SA through differences in gender power structures. An influencing element of this is how gender is scripted within society. Gender is viewed as a performance, with masculinity and femininity being scripted through entrenched norms and ideologies (Butler, 1988; Canan & Levand, 2019; Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). A multitude of research has shown gender scripts lead to miscommunication but also encourage male dominance and female passivity (Canan et al., 2018; Rossetto & Tollison, 2017; Wiederman, 2005). Females being scripted as sexually passive can leave room for interpretation of saying 'no' as token resistance. Conversely, scripts of men being sexually domineering encourages inappropriate oppressive acts over women, while producing conditions whereby saying 'no' to sexual contact is unmasculine and weak (Canan et al., 2018; Wiederman, 2005). The research suggests that performing gender roles contributes towards both the normalisation and prevalence of SA; therefore, this was a key focus in the current research.

Research on feminist views on SA

Previous research conducted into students' attitudes towards SA found that women's attitudes towards explicit consent is more positive than men's

(Camp et al., 2018; James, 2018; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Men rely on more non-verbal cues for consent, reiterating the potential for miscommunication that could result in SA (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Canan et al. (2018) found that male students were more accepting of rape-myths; however, culture and social networks impact as well. In the US, differences were found between students associated with a fraternity in comparison to students not associated with a fraternity. It was found that students associated with a fraternity had higher rape-myth acceptance for both male and female students. It was also found that fraternity-style social groups were particularly accepting of token resistance, have differing attitudes towards consent and present an engrained lad culture, where gender scripts were tightly followed. This suggests that gender scripts and social culture can create an environment with attitudes that support SA.

Research has also identified cultural and social norms that are conducive to SA (Camp et al., 2018; Canan et al., 2018). Students were found to view being groped in a club as a normal part of a night out. Furthermore, sexist behaviours were prominently identified in certain societies with links to sports and drinking. Negative sexual attitudes were found to be normalised across the student population (Camp et al., 2018; Phipps & Young, 2015). This supports the finding that gender and culture can create an environment where SA is normalised and accepted.

Each of the feminist perspectives offer insight into why SA may occur, with gender scripts being the most evidenced explanation (McPhail, 2016). The literature suggests gender and culture can lead to normalisation, and therefore increase the prevalence of SA (Hetzl-Riggin et al., 2021).

Limitations within current feminist research

A key limitation of previous research within the feminist perspective on SA is that there is often a disproportionate amount of female participants in comparison to males. In heavily weighted research

the female representation could be up to 73% of the participants (Camp et al., 2018). There is also a clear gap around in-depth qualitative research into attitudes on SA. Furthermore, most of the research has been conducted within the US, where there are clear differences in social norms, highlighting the gap for qualitative data on attitudes towards SA in the UK.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

CPTED utilises the concept that crime occurs due to opportunities in the physical environment, suggesting environmental design can be managed and manipulated to reduce crime (Armitage, 2013; Crowe & Fennelly, 2013). In line with rational choice theory, environmental features can mitigate risk or increase the likelihood of an offence (Cornish & Clarke, 2008). The principles of CPTED include natural security, movement control, management and maintenance, and defensible space (Armitage, 2013; Cozens & Love, 2015). Application of this theory suggests the environment can create or mitigate opportunities for SA and the normalisation of this within certain environments.

Previous research on CPTED

Research supports the idea that offenders use environmental cues when making offending decisions. Armitage and Monchuk (2019) found that convicted burglars use environmental factors such as surveillance and ease of access when deciding which properties to target. This supports theories around certain environments being more at risk and disproportionately impacted by SA (Home Office, 2021). A key limitation of CPTED research, however, is that it has very little direct research focusing on SA. The research instead focuses on crimes such as residential burglary; therefore, the current study will explore CPTED and the links to the normalisation of SA to generate new findings and theories.

It is, thus, imperative to research what environmental features could increase the prevalence and normalisation of SA in order to identify risky settings and begin to understand why SA disproportionately impacts different groups, a gap in contemporary research.

Setting one – A nightclub

Club settings feature overcrowding, restricted movement, limited visibility and close contact, all of which have been found to increase the likelihood of crime (Homel et al., 2001; Lane et al., 2009; Marselle et al., 2012). However, mitigations can be put into place. Marselle et al. (2012) found that increasing the pedestrian zone in Manchester's gay village reduced the contact between groups, resulting in fewer violent offences being committed in the area.

To reduce crime in pubs and clubs the following recommendations have been suggested:

- monitor spaces prone to loitering;
- mixed levels and through movement to allow the surveillance of overcrowded areas;
- open access to the bar to avoid overcrowding;
- CCTV and mirrors in any blind spots.

(Health Promotion Agency, 2019).

Setting two – A university open space (The University Plaza)

To reduce crime in outdoor public spaces the following recommendations have been suggested:

- multiple entry and exit points;
- activity generators to attract pedestrians, increasing surveillance;
- efficient signage and lighting;
- good maintenance.

(National Crime Prevention Council, 2003)

The influence of alcohol

Graham and Homel (2008) found alcohol to be an aggravating factor to many crimes rather than a sole cause, due to its pharmacological effects (Graham et al., 1997). Alcohol affects individuals in various ways; being both a sedative and stimulant, its consumption can increase confidence, reduce fear, make the individual more emotional and change the internal thought process (Barnwell et al., 2006; Graham & Homel, 2008; Grupp, 1981; Washburne, 1956). In line with rational choice theory, alcohol reducing the fear of consequences may increase the risk of an offence being committed (Cornish & Clarke, 2008).

The research suggests alcohol increases risk, reduces control and means the individual is easily influenced by external factors, increasing the likelihood of crime. Thus, drinking culture may create an environment where SA is normalised and tolerated (Camp et al., 2018). However, alcohol is only one factor that may increase the likelihood of SA. Washburne (1956) discovered that when intoxicated, decisions and activities were largely determined by cultural and peer group expectations (Graham, 2003). This is problematic, as research suggests certain groups and societies normalise SA behaviours (Canan et al., 2018; James, 2018). Bartolucci et al. (2009) state that the differences in gender scripts and the creation of an unequal power dynamic combined with alcohol lead to coercion becoming normalised. Research has also found that gender impacts attitudes towards alcohol and sexual consent, with men holding less positive attitudes (James, 2018), contributing to a 'lad' drinking culture which normalises negative or dismissive attitudes towards SA (Camp et al., 2018).

Rationale for the current study

The current study aimed to explore student attitudes towards SA within different settings and factors that influence these attitudes. Of particular interest is whether CPTED, gender scripts or alcohol exerts the greatest influence on attitudes towards SA, as indicated by the previous literature.

The current study aimed to explore clear gaps in the existing literature and research. There has been limited research surrounding CPTED and how the environment may impact upon attitudes to SA. The current study will address this gap by investigating attitudes towards SA within two different settings: one being a nightclub, drawing on the research and theory which indicates such social spaces may be culturally more likely to normalise attitudes associated with SA; the second an open space, which allows for the exploration of both an outdoor and indoor environmental design associated with SA risk and normalisation to be explored.

There has also been limited research on students' perceptions in the UK on SA. Often when research has studied this group it is around the prevalence of SA and uses quantitative methods. The current study, therefore, utilised qualitative methods to gain in-depth understanding of attitudes towards SA from both female and male students studying at the University of Huddersfield. Addressing this clear gap in research will add to existing literature, generate new theories around SA and have practical implications for reducing the prevalence of SA, improving the safety of students.

Aims and research questions

Aims

1. To understand students' attitudes towards SA in different environmental contexts;
2. To explore the various factors contributing to differences in attitudes towards SA within the different settings.

Research questions

1. Do students feel SA is more normalised in a nightclub setting compared to a university space?
2. Do students agree that gender scripts influence the normalisation of SA within different settings?

3. Do students believe design/layout influences their level of concern towards SA within different settings?
4. Do students believe alcohol consumption influences their level of concern towards SA within different settings?

Methodology

Research design

Focus groups were utilised to collect the data as the method offers opportunities for in-depth exploration of perspectives (Lune & Berg, 2017). The interactive element of the groups allowed the participants to generate, justify and question perspectives and attitudes around SA, producing rich data with increased validity (Liamputtong, 2016). Focus groups also allow ideas to develop collaboratively, bringing forward personal priorities (Smithson, 2008). Furthermore, focus groups allowed different techniques to be used to gather the data: questions, photo elicitation and scenarios to fully understand the research area (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

Focus group schedule

A focus group schedule was created so the research was replicated for all four focus groups. The first stage of the group involved the use of photo elicitation. Pictures of Huddersfield were shown to the participants to produce thoughts around the settings generally and around fear of crime. The use of photos allowed the participants to identify the most relevant settings without the interference of researcher bias. The discussion was led by the priorities of the participants, increasing the validity of the data (Glaw et al., 2017).

Secondly, case scenarios for inappropriate touching within the University Plaza and a club were presented. The participants were then asked how normal they would perceive the scenario and how they would react. The use of hypothetical scenarios allowed replicability between groups and avoided past experiences being discussed, reducing harm.

Finally, piloted questions to ensure understanding linking to the theoretical underpinnings of the research were asked. This arguably guided discussion while sparking new ideas around which factors contribute the most towards the normalisation of SA (Longhurst, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2017). During the pilot, the two main locations chosen to investigate were the University Plaza and a club setting.

The data was collected using a Dictaphone. The recordings were then uploaded onto a computer and stored in line with the University of Huddersfield's GDPR compliance to ensure confidentiality.



Figure 1: A club, Huddersfield



Figure 2: Huddersfield University Plaza



Figure 3: Kingsgate Shopping Centre, Huddersfield



Figure 6: Lord Wilson, Huddersfield



Figure 4: Huddersfield parish church



Figure 7: Huddersfield canal



Figure 5: Piazza Queensgate, Huddersfield



Figure 8: Piazza Northern Tea House, Huddersfield

Table 1 Course and demographics for participants

| Course | Gender | Age |
|--|--------|-----|
| Policing and Investigation | Female | 21 |
| Information Technology | Male | 22 |
| Criminology with Law | Female | 22 |
| History 2019-2022 | Male | 21 |
| Policing and Investigation | Female | 35 |
| MLP Law | Male | 39 |
| Physiotherapy | Male | 23 |
| Policing and Investigation | Female | 21 |
| MLP Law | Male | 21 |
| Logistics and Supply Chain Management | Female | 22 |
| Psychology | Female | 20 |
| Policing and Investigation | Male | 21 |
| Forensic Science with Analytical Science | Female | 18 |
| Physiotherapy | Female | 19 |
| Music | Male | 27 |

Sampling

Snowball sampling was adopted. An invitation email outlining the research, participation requirements and how to register interest was sent to the Human and Health Sciences Department, the Students' Union and to sports societies. Any student studying an undergraduate degree at the University of Huddersfield could participate. Five participants were recruited from the Human and Health Sciences, four through sports societies and six through the Students' Union.

The overall sample contained 15 participants: eight females and seven males. The target number of participants was 16, within four focus groups; however, one participant did not attend on the day. Since existing research often had the limitation of a high proportion of female participants, the current study ensured the proportion of females was similar to males, allowing the findings to capture the views of both female and male students. Focus groups were gender specific: two female groups containing five and three participants; and two male groups containing four and three participants.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were addressed in line with the British Society of Criminology guidance (2021) and the project was approved by the appropriate University Ethics Panel. The key areas being informed consent, confidentiality, avoiding deception and avoiding harm to participants. An information sheet was sent to the participants informing them of the purpose, involvement and key information for the study; this had to be read before signing the consent form, ensuring the participants were informed. The consent form also explained the right to withdraw consent until the write-up of findings. Smithson (2008) explains that having multiple participants can lead to challenges in confidentiality (Moriña, 2021). To overcome this, participants were referred to by number (Participant 1.1, 1.2 etc). Furthermore, the participants were aware it would be a group dynamic and understood that the information discussed was confidential (Wiles, 2012). All data was anonymised in the write-up. The topic of SA is regarded as sensitive and could lead to psychological harm. To address this, SA was only referred to in the sense of 'inappropriate touching' and falsified scenarios. Participants were made aware of the topic being discussed beforehand, and

that personal experiences should not be divulged – otherwise the focus group was halted. Finally, the individuals were debriefed and provided with contact information of welfare services.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to explore the data. Themes and concepts were generated from analysing reoccurring codes and identifying patterns and nuances in the data. Coding was used to categorise the data and apply meaning (Neuman, 2014; Strauss, 1987). Themes were identified via Boyatzis' (1998) key steps – recognising patterns, considering concepts and utilising existing knowledge on the subject. The data was re-analysed to find support and dispute of the themes. Thematic analysis allowed multiple perspectives to be analysed, identifying reoccurring views and attitudes.

Findings and discussion

The themes of excuses, culture and risk were identified which supported the theories of gender scripts, layout and design, and alcohol as contributing towards the normalisation of SA. Further, additional themes were identified around current and new prevention strategies for tackling SA within the club and the University Plaza, adding to the existing literature and having practical implications.

Excuses

The theme of excuses was prominent within the data. Victims would excuse inappropriate touching, showing it is accepted and normalised. Furthermore, perpetrators would conduct SA when they knew it could be excused, increasing the prevalence of SA.

The layout and design of the club was thought to create opportunities to excuse inappropriate behaviour. Multiple participants explained that club settings are 'densely populated' (Participant 3.4),

with another stating: 'Everyone is packed together anyway, so they say it is an accident' (Participant 2.2), creating an excuse to touch others. The fact that multiple participants excused SA within a club setting due to it being highly populated creates the opportunity for SA and normalises its occurrence and acceptance in this type of setting. More problematically, one participant explained why SA is under-reported: 'even if you do not think it was an accident you are more likely to brush it off as an accident' (Participant 1.2). This shows SA as not having consequences and being accepted by victims. The environment of the club creates opportunities to excuse behaviour, leading to SA being accepted as a normalised concurrent thought. This finding reflects multiple studies that found that overcrowding in an environment increases the likelihood of crime (Homel et al., 2001; Marselle et al., 2012). More specifically, Marselle et al. (2012) found that areas that promote close contact create potential excuses, leading to an increase in crime. SA will therefore be more prevalent in a club, where it can be excused and perpetrated with little risk.

The University Plaza, however, was described by a participant as a safe space: 'even at its busiest point the Plaza is not packed, in any situation it is not acceptable there at all, there is no excuse or area to misconstrue an assault' (Participant 3.4). Another participant stated: 'There is an expectation of space between people, so someone has intended to do it and it is not excusable' (Participant 3.2). The contrasting thoughts towards each setting highlights that the students have learnt to excuse, accept and normalise SA in certain settings linking to intention. If SA occurred in the Plaza it was intentional and predatory, whereas in a club setting it may not have been intentional. Yet this excuse is ingrained for SA whether it was intentional or not. The finding confirms that the layout of the environment impacts the normalisation of SA in different settings and supports the literature on CPTED that the physical environment creates opportunities for crime (Crowe & Fennelly, 2013). Troublingly, it presents normalisation as creating opportunities and increasing the prevalence of SA,

giving partial explanation for SA being more prevalent in club settings.

Alcohol was also found to be associated with an increase in excusing the inappropriate behaviour. One participant stated: 'They are drunk, so they are not thinking straight' (Participant 1.3). A similar thought to 'I think there is a level of misunderstanding due to alcohol, things can be interpreted wrong' (Participant 2.1). Both participants have attached excuses for inappropriate behaviour to the consumption of alcohol, based on the pharmacological effects of alcohol. However, other participants also thought alcohol meant SA was more likely, again because it provided the perpetrators with an excuse: 'If they think someone is drunk, they think they are more likely to get away with it' (Participant 2.2). Furthermore, another participant stated: 'If I had drunk alcohol, I probably would excuse it' (Participant 1.4). This suggests that a perpetrator is more likely to target someone that is intoxicated as they may be more likely to excuse the behaviour. This creates the opportunity for predatory behaviour on vulnerable individuals. One participant stated: 'the drink makes a massive difference; it can be an excuse or a lad thinking once a girl has drunk, they are more likely to accept that behaviour than when sober' (Participant 1.1). This opinion supports alcohol as an aggravating factor to SA but it was nuanced in that the participant stated a 'lad', thinking a 'girl' will be more accepting. This insinuates gender scripts also intertwine with alcohol and the creation of excuses.

When given hypothetical scenarios for a club setting there was a shift in attitudes depending on the time of night. One participant stated that at 10pm: 'Being less drunk at that time would make it more predatory' (Participant 4.2). Another said: 'At 10pm people are not that drunk yet it is less excusable at that point. ... At 1am it's more of a shrug off thing' (Participant 3.3). This suggests that alcohol is a more influential factor than the setting.

There was a recurring theme that drinking meant SA was excusable or would be excused. The fact that students perceived this shows that SA is more

normalised and accepted within this population. Multiple participants, both male and female, would normalise SA when a perpetrator is intoxicated, or excuse SA themselves if intoxicated. This culture of acceptance and not reacting to SA, instead SA being 'shrugged off' (Participant 3.3), will in turn increase the risk of SA and exasperate the issue of SA. More so, students are often linked to a heavy drinking culture, emphasising why they may be disproportionality impacted by SA.

Gender also linked to the creation of excuses around SA. One participant explained: 'If a guy goes out and does this kind of thing, he is just being a lad' (Participant 3.1). This makes inappropriate touching acceptable if conducted by a male. Another participant when considering SA stated: 'Men are more likely to do it because they have that lad culture' (Participant 3.3). This shows that students believe that lad culture includes being sexually inappropriate. This creates further excuses around SA, but also suggests that lad culture can encourage men to believe they should or can act in a sexually domineering way to conform to cultural and gender expectations, leading to an increase in SA (Canan et al., 2018; Wiederman, 2005). This supports Camp et al. (2018) who found that lad and drinking culture provide an environment where normalised SA behaviours are tolerated (Camp et al., 2018).

Canan et al. (2018) found that rape culture can exist in an environment in which sexual violence is prevalent, normalised and excused. This is problematic when the findings of the current study suggest that in a club setting SA is normalised and excused. Furthermore, it was more so female participants that fully excused the behaviour, which is difficult as they are the most vulnerable group to SA.

There are multiple aspects to how excuses can influence SA in various settings, with the victim excusing behaviour, the perpetrator using excuses to offend without consequence, and most nuanced and problematic excuses encouraging SA to be conducted through cultural and gender norms. The findings show that layout and design, alcohol and

gender scripts all intertwine to create an environment where SA is excused, accepted and therefore normalised, having implications on the prevalence of SA within club settings. Excusing behaviour appeared to be ingrained in multiple participants; this suggests that attitudes need to change in order to de-normalise SA in club settings specifically, which has multiple barriers. The findings suggest SA is more normalised in a club than the University Plaza, having implications for the safety of individuals who visit club settings and showing that the student population to an extent have normalised SA.

Culture

Only one female participant raised the idea of masculinity also impacting upon male victimisation stating: 'There is different stigma, if guys say something they will be labelled a lot of things by their mates because they are complaining about a girl touching them... it's not in the media as much as girls is' (Participant 3.3). This highlights the notion that gender scripts and labelling theory both influence the acceptance of SA by male victims, but could also encourage men to conduct SA to conform to being sexually domineering. The fact this was a nuanced attitude also highlights the distinction between female and male victimisation and the existing knowledge about both.

Female gender scripts suggest girls are sexually passive, meaning saying 'no' could be seen as token resistance to a male (Canan et al., 2018; Wiederman, 2005). One participant explained: 'If girls react, they are spoiling the night, making a big deal out of something, or frigid' (Participant 1.2), and a male participant stated SA is 'more normalised for women in nightclubs' (Participant 4.1). This suggests that women should just accept the fact that SA happens to them. The creation of gender scripts has negative implications for both males and females, creating situations where both genders are at risk of SA and environments where SA is more normalised, particularly in club settings.

Interestingly when discussing the University Plaza scenarios one participant stated: 'Although lad culture is there, it would not be to the extent of touching, they would maybe make a comment or heckle you' (Participant 1.4). The literature suggests males use sexual remarks in public spaces to introduce sexuality and extenuate the power dynamic between genders (Day, 1999). Reinforcing that gender scripts contribute to the normalisation and prevalence of SA; however, it also suggests that the setting is a larger predictor of SA as the location influences the extent to which the enaction of hyper masculinity and femininity is acceptable.

Findings also indicate that social groups interact with the influence of setting and 'lad culture' to impact on the normalisation of SA. Most male and female participants believed there was a prominent lad culture within the male sports societies at the University of Huddersfield, increasing the prevalence and normalisation of inappropriate behaviour specifically in a club setting. 'Within certain groups of people, there is a collective lad culture especially in sports societies... Rugby Union, Football, and American Football' (Participant 3.1), with another participant stating: 'Rugby especially has that sort of lad culture of making inappropriate jokes and drinking a lot' (Participant 4.3). One participant commented: 'it's a massive culture especially in rugby and football... I avoid them, it's part of the society, they are just lad lads' (Participant 1.1). This shows that the role of gender scripts is more ingrained in sports societies, creating an atmosphere where being sexually inappropriate is accepted by both the perpetrators and victims of inappropriate touching and part of the culture. The findings suggest that certain societies at the University of Huddersfield encourage SA through their attitudes that inappropriate touching is a masculine norm and acceptable. As many participants believed multiple societies had these attitudes, it reinforced the fact that the student population accept it. Instead of tackling the issue they just 'avoid' certain societies, again showing the lack of interventions in place and normalised attitudes towards SA.

This supports Phipps and Young (2015) who claim that sexual behaviours can be articulated through sport, drinking and other activities, contributing to the prevalence of SA within student populations. The culture is influenced by peers, as one participant stated: 'They find it more acceptable when they are in bigger groups... they egg each other on' (Participant 1.3). This suggests that certain groups encourage conforming to being sexually domineering and this can influence other members of the society as it is within the culture. One participant explained: 'they have challenges on a night out and they can be really inappropriate, but they all just find it funny' (Participant 4.3). There appears to be a level of immaturity to the inappropriate behaviour, suggesting there is a culture of masculinity, but inappropriate behaviour is also found to be funny and entertaining. It was suggested that men in these contexts may not understand the harm of SA: 'SA is predominantly male to female so men don't always know or understand how a girl feels when that happens' (Participant 4.1). The lack of understanding may influence the extent of inappropriate behaviour conducted by members of sports societies in particular settings, suggesting education around the topic may help alleviate the problem. However, a male participant explained: 'I just think it's a culture, if a society has that lad culture, educating them probably won't change their way of thinking' (Participant 4.2). This suggests the culture is too ingrained, and there needs to be more positive action towards changing attitudes around SA within sports societies at the University of Huddersfield.

The findings support the literature around feminist perspectives on SA. Gender scripts seem to impact upon the prevalence and normalisation of SA, and furthermore sport societies and certain peer groups appear to have ingrained cultures that negatively contribute towards SA. The ingrained culture acts as a way of excusing SA but also actively encourages inappropriate behaviour. Students' perspectives suggest gender scripts, alcohol and the environment all contribute towards the

normalisation of SA specifically within a club setting.

Risk

Another theme that emerged from the dataset was risk. The participants were shown eight photos and asked which of the settings they would consider the riskiest in terms of inappropriate touching. All 15 participants highlighted the club setting as one of the riskiest places for SA. One participant stated: 'The risk seems way more apparent for a club when you compare it to somewhere like the Plaza, where there are multiple routes that you could escape via and there is a lot of surveillance' (Participant 3.1). Layout is shown to increase the risk of SA, supporting existing research that the physical environment influences the likelihood of an offence (Armitage et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2009).

The layout of a club was also shown to increase risk. One participant explained: 'The layout means there is no getting out quickly, you can become stuck' (Participant 1.1), with another stating: 'in a lot of the rooms everyone is touching each other, you are like sardines' (Participant 1.4). The close proximity was highlighted as reducing the risk of detection for the perpetrator with one participant explaining: 'In clubs because everyone is packed together and it is dark, no one will see it, it's really hidden' (Participant 2.1). The layout features, including low visibility, overcrowding and restricted movement, were all believed to increase the likelihood of crime (Crowe & Fennelly, 2013; Marselle et al., 2012). The reduced lighting and layout create an environment where the risk of detection is heavily reduced, increasing the likelihood of an offence in line with rational choice theory. Moreover, the layout also interestingly relates to the victims' ability to react and have control within a situation (Cornish & Clarke, 2008).

One participant explained: 'There is less to do about it in a club the bouncers are busy, everyone is drunk, you may not know who has done it, yes, it is more normal and yes there is less you can do about it and that's sad' (Participant 3.3). This statement

suggests that the decreased risk of detection both increases the prevalence of SA but also creates an environment where SA is accepted.

There was also evidence that the excuse of alcohol reduces the risk of detection and consequences for SA. One participant explained: 'if they are drunk in a club, it seems less threatening' (Participant 1.2), and another: 'I would probably excuse the behaviour if I had drunk alcohol' (Participant 1.4). This reinforces the idea that the irrational effect of alcohol results in the victim excusing inappropriate behaviour (Graham & Homel, 2008). The consumption of alcohol and the layout of clubs also align with routine activity theory – the idea that for an offence to occur there needs to be a suitable place, target and time. In a drinking environment, there is an increased number of suitable victims; furthermore, the setting itself is a suitable environment, with the excuses, acceptance and reduced risk all creating the perfect conditions for SA to occur (Clarke & Felson, 1993). Most problematically, one participant explained: 'It is more difficult to have something come out of it, the victim has no recourse as they don't know who the offender was, for some people that can make them feel more vulnerable and more unsafe' (Participant 3.4). This shows that the mutual acceptance and normalisation of SA in a club setting could create a higher extent of victimisation and the feeling of vulnerability. This emphasises the importance of interventions aimed at tackling the prevalence of SA within club settings.

One participant stated: 'Clubs are much less likely to take action whereas the university would take action, as the incident would impact both the individual and the institutional reputation of the University' (Participant 3.1). This suggests that students perceive the University Plaza as a space where SA will not be tolerated, yet in a club SA is tolerated, confirming that students have accepted and normalised SA within a club setting.

Interventions

In the first focus group the participants brought up some suggested and current interventions aimed at increasing the safety of students on a night out specifically by the University of Huddersfield. The discussion was generated by the participants and therefore, can be viewed as important to consider when thinking about the normalisation of SA in different settings. Table 2 highlights how many of the participants knew about each of the interventions that had been brought up at the discussion.

Table 2 Number of participants aware of each intervention

| Intervention | Group One | Group Two | Group Three | Group Four |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|------------|
| Ask for Angela | 4/5 | 3/3 | 3/5 | 1/3 |
| Taxi service scheme | 3/5 | 1/3 | 2/5 | 2/3 |
| Street volunteers | 2/5 | 0/3 | 4/5 | 3/3 |
| Spiking equipment | 5/5 | 3/3 | 5/5 | 2/3 |

Ask for Angela

If an individual is in an uncomfortable situation they can go to the bar and ask for 'Angela', whereupon the staff will help them get away safely from the situation. Although this is a well-known scheme, especially by female participants, flaws in its implementation were found. One participant explained: 'You have to wait to be seen at that bar, then would have to scream it at them because they can't hear you' (Participant 1.1). Another participant explained: 'You are relying on the staff knowing the code word' (Participant 3.2). Barriers to the implementation of the scheme meant it was not suitable within a club setting. A participant said: 'It's a good system but people don't use it because of the flaws to it' (Participant 1.2), meaning that the intervention may not be effective at reducing SA in a club setting.

Taxi service scheme

The University of Huddersfield have set up a scheme whereby if a student does not have enough money to get home, they can give their Student ID to a taxi driver (from certain firms) to take them home. Many participants were unaware of the scheme and out of those that had heard of it, no one had seen it being utilised: 'I haven't seen anyone use the taxi service' (Participant 1.2). The lack of awareness about the taxi intervention could result in individuals walking home at night, increasing their vulnerability to crime.

Street volunteers

During freshers' week, there are volunteers that hand out water and assist anyone on a night out that needs help. One participant explained: 'On Hud Crawl you get SU members that don't drink, that can look out for people' (Participant 3.2). While another stated: 'On freshers you see volunteers, but on a Wednesday which is actually a big night, I have never seen any' (Participant 1.1). This shows the University and council are not utilising the intervention of street volunteers on Wednesday student nights in Huddersfield. One participant explained: 'Volunteers in high vis would act as a deterrent and you would be more likely to report it to someone like that' (Participant 4.1). This suggests street volunteers could help reduce crime, acting as a deterrent, but also encourage the reporting of crime, making SA appear less tolerated and as having consequences more in line with the Plaza setting.

Spiking

Most participants were aware of the University of Huddersfield's anti-spiking equipment, including bottle stoppers and testing kits. Many participants had picked up the equipment, but few had utilised it.

Suggested interventions

Undercover security was suggested to help tackle SA occurring in clubs. One participant stated: 'You wouldn't grope someone with a security person standing next to you, so using undercover security they are more likely to see an offence' (Participant 2.1). Another participant suggested: 'Undercover security to make sure that the security are actually dealing with the situations appropriately and not just brushing it off' (Participant 2.3). This shows that the students think interventions aimed at increasing consequence and reducing the acceptance of SA will reduce it in clubs.

Further, thoughts around tackling attitudes of certain societies and ensuring they are acting appropriately on nights out were considered important. One participant explained: 'The rules for societies and behaving on a night out are not monitored' (Participant 3.4). While another suggested the inappropriate behaviour was so culturally engrained that: 'There needs to be a clean slate with the leadership in societies' (Participant 3.2).

The utilisation of street volunteers on a Wednesday night was also viewed as an important intervention by acting as a deterrent and encouraging reporting.

Many believed the current schemes were not effective enough: 'The Uni has some schemes, but they are not effective' (Participant 1.4). While another explained: 'I don't think they are doing enough, if you don't know about the schemes in your third year, you haven't been helped by the interventions' (Participant 4.1). This was a reoccurring theme, with many participants feeling that the schemes are not advertised enough: 'They should advertise their current schemes more, not just for freshers' (Participant 4.2). It was agreed that 'the uni has some policy in place and is doing some things' (Participant 3.2) when thinking about SA; however, the thought that 'on paper they are doing a lot but in practice no' (Participant 3.4) was also expressed by most of the participants. Most interestingly it was pointed out that: 'A lot of the Uni interventions are to help you get home, but that doesn't tackle the issue when you are in a club'

(Participant 4.2). This suggests that although the University of Huddersfield has put certain interventions in place, they are flawed and do not tackle the root problem. Many agreed the University needs to 'do more' (Participant 4.2).

Study limitations

The main limitation was time and resource restraints due to the research being conducted for a final-year project. Due to the range of participants involved in the research, the results are somewhat generalisable to the attitudes of students at the University of Huddersfield. However, the research being replicated in universities throughout the UK would increase the generalisability of student attitudes on SA. Focus groups also have limitations including difficulty in moderating and having dominant voices within a group (Bryman, 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Precautions like smaller groups and a focus group schedule were utilised to reduce the impact of the limitations; however, there will still be some influence from researcher bias and observers' paradox on the findings which should be taken into consideration (Bryman, 2012).

Conclusion

The research found that layout and design of the environment, gender, alcohol and social networks all contribute to the normalisation and thus prevalence of SA. It was found the student population excuses, accepts and normalises SA more so in a club setting than the University Plaza. The normalisation of SA was shown to further excuse, reduce the risk around SA and encourage SA. The findings suggest that the normalisation of SA links to why the student population is disproportionately impacted by SA. It is therefore important to have interventions that tackle both the prevalence and normalisation of SA. Through considering student attitudes towards the normalisation of SA new interventions and recommendations to tackle SA were generated with practical implications to help tackle SA. It was also highlighted that current interventions were lacking and not as effective as

believed. This is inexcusable and something that universities across the United Kingdom need to consider. More research needs to be conducted to make SA interventions more targeted and evidenced-based. It is clear that attitudes need to be addressed, focusing on thoughts around culture, drinking, sexuality and gender within the student population.

Recommendations for practice and policy

From the findings the following recommendations have been created:

- mandatory training around SA for society committee members;
- clear advertisement of current interventions and how to utilise them;
- the consideration of club layouts for future developments, and increased lighting, CCTV and signage, around the University Plaza;
- street volunteers on the streets on student nights;
- covert forms of security in clubs to detect SA;
- new schemes for the SU to be able to monitor society behaviour and introducing anonymous reporting tools so members of other societies can also report inappropriate behaviour and sanctions can be imposed.

Recommendations for future research

It is recommended that future research should utilise qualitative research methods like focus groups and investigate the attitudes of both at-risk

and less at-risk members of the population to consolidate knowledge on existing factors that contribute towards the normalisation and prevalence of SA, generate new understanding and discover additional influencing factors. The research should aim to identify mechanisms leading to SA to help shape interventions. More research around current interventions and tackling attitudes towards SA normalisation is integral to reducing the prevalence of SA and increasing public safety.

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Appendix A. Focus group schedule

Stage one – Photo elicitation

Participants will be shown eight photos of places and spaces around Huddersfield and then asked the following:

- 1) Considering the images, can you tell me how that space makes you feel?
- 2) Do you perceive any of the images to be safer than the others? And why?
- 3) Do you perceive any of the images as being riskier than others in terms of the risk of inappropriate touching? And why?
- 4) Any additional comments to make to do with the images and feelings of safety?

Stage two – scenarios

Nightclub

At 10.30pm on a Wednesday night when clubs have just opened, it is fairly quiet. You are walking to the dancefloor when someone inappropriately touches you from behind. How would you react and why? Would you deem this to be a normal event? Please explain your answer.

At 3am in a club on a Wednesday night, it is very busy. You are on the dancefloor when someone inappropriately touches you from behind. How would you react and why? Would you deem this to be a normal event? Please explain your answer.

At 3am in a club on a Wednesday night you have been consuming alcohol and are inappropriately touched by someone who has also consumed alcohol. How would you react and why? Would you deem this to be a normal event? Please explain your answer.

Is there any scenario within this setting when you would react differently to inappropriate touching? Or deem it to be normal? Please explain your answer.

University Plaza

At 2pm on a Wednesday you are walking through the University Plaza. It is fairly busy, and someone inappropriately touches you from behind. How would you react and why? Would you deem this to be a normal event? Please explain your answer.

At 1am on a Wednesday you are walking through the University Plaza. It is fairly quiet, and someone inappropriately touches you from behind. How would you react and why? Would you deem this to be a normal event? Please explain your answer.

At 1am on a Wednesday you are walking through the University Plaza. You have been consuming alcohol and someone who has also been consuming alcohol inappropriately touches you from behind. How would you react and why? Would you deem this to be a normal event? Please explain your answer.

Is there any scenario within this setting when you would react differently to inappropriate touching? Or deem it to be normal? Please explain your answer.

Stage three – questions

- 1) To what extent do you perceive inappropriate touching to be normalised in modern society? Please explain your answer.
- 2) To what extent does student culture influence the normalisation of inappropriate touching? Please explain your answer.
- 3) To what extent do you believe gender and the attitudes of a male compared to a female lead to the normalisation of SA? Please explain your answer.
- 4) To what extent does the layout and design of a setting affect your perceived risk of inappropriate touching? Please explain your answer.

Appendix B. Photo elicitation images



Figure 1: A club, Huddersfield



Figure 2: Huddersfield University Plaza



Figure 3: Kingsgate Shopping Centre, Huddersfield



Figure 4: Huddersfield parish church



Figure 7: Huddersfield canal



Figure 5: Piazza Queensgate, Huddersfield



Figure 8: Piazza Northern Tea House, Huddersfield



Figure 6: Lord Wilson, Huddersfield