The Adaptive Behaviours of Women in Reaction to the

Threat of Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Due to the prevalence of sexual violence, women adopt certain behaviours in an attempt to mitigate the risk of sexual violence. Additionally, it describes findings obtained from a qualitative research project involving seven women who noted down the adaptive behaviours they noticed over the course of a week. According to the results obtained through this study, participants used different techniques to mitigate the possibility of sexual assault, which were then categorised into 6 overarching themes: Awareness, Appearance, Predictability, Community, Defense and Technology. The research underscores how the behaviours adopted by women relate to the Victim Selection Techniques employed by predatory rapists in terms of mitigating their ability to be percieved as vulnerable, and therefore, as a potential victim.

Introduction

It is undeniable that sexual violence is a constant, looming threat to women, with an estimated 35% of women experiencing sexual harassment within their lifetime (World Population Review, 2024). Women are constantly having to look over their shoulders, in fear of the worse happening. This fear is not unfounded, with UN Women UK (2021) revealing that, in England alone, 97% of women between the ages of 18 and 24 have experienced sexual harassment: "71% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. This number rises to 86% among 18-24-year-olds and only 3% of 18-24 year-olds reported having not experienced any types of harassment listed" (UN Women UK, 2021, p. 6). When looking at these statistics, it is crucial to remember that these are based on *reported* cases, which do not constitute the majority of the cases of sexual assault, with less than 40% of women seeking help, and less than 10% reaching out to law enforcement (World Population Review, 2024). Due to the alarmingly high instances of sexual violence, every facet of women's lives is directly affected, down to their very behaviour. These adaptive behaviours are due to the horrifying reality that, as women, we must live in a perpetual state of vigilance in order to simply *exist*. This paper aims to demonstrate just how deeply the threat of sexual violence affects women's everyday lives. This paper exemplifies the fact that the responsibility of mitigating the risk of sexual violence falls on the primary victims of this violence, and poses the question: *How effective are the adaptive behaviours of women in reducing the threat of sexual violence?*

Prior to delving into the topic of behaviour adaptations, one must first understand what is meant by the term 'violence'. Luuk Slooter MA describes violence as a 'slippery concept' (Travelling Concepts, 2022). This classification means that, in essence, there is no set definition of violence, but rather, a definition built off of context and personal perspective. That being said, to conduct this research, simply leaving the definition up to individual understanding would leave room for misunderstanding. This is why the definition of violence used to conduct this research was Johan Galtungs's definition: "Violence occurs when human beings' potential, either somatic or mental, are not realised" (Galtung, 1969, p.168). Often, when thinking of sexual violence, or violence of any sort, we conclude that it is limited to the physical; however, to constrain violence to the physical, is ignoring the multitude of different ways violence manifests. Constraining violence to physical harm is also dangerous as it perpetuates a pattern that dismisses and diminishes a victim's experience, and once again, pushes the responsibility of the violence onto those subjected to it, and even goes so far as to twist the thinking that for one to be considered a 'true' victim, they must endure physical harm.

This paper primarily focuses on stranger-perpetrated sexual violence. This is important as stranger-perpetrated sexual violence only makes up a fraction of all cases of sexual violence: "For women, the male perpetrators were more likely to be known persons than strangers" (AIHW, 2024). Though the phenomenon studied within this paper pertains to stranger-perpetrated sexual violence, the importance of understanding how the threat affects women's behaviour is still crucial to the comprehension of the overall issue of responsibility.

Though it is evident that experiencing sexual violence is not confined to women, there is a clear trend in data that shows women are the primary victims (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013, p. 2). Moreover, to ignore the fact that women are the primary targets would be to misrepresent the issue. Additionally, to ignore the patriarchal factor within this research would be to ignore a crucial part of the issue. Majoritarily, the perpetrators of all sexual violence cases are men, 'Intimate partner and sexual violence are mostly perpetrated by men against women" (WHO, 2021). This is not to say that all men are perpetrators. However, to understand the position women are put in, where they have to measure their movements or alter their everyday behaviour in hopes of avoiding sexual violence, we must look at those who mainly perpetrate it, much like how we look at those who mainly experience it.

To remove gender from a clearly gendered issue would be counterintuitive and counterproductive to the aim of resolving the issue of sexual violence and its impacts on women, as within the society we inhabit, being perceived as a woman significantly impacts lived experience. This being said, most of the data available has a very binary understanding of gender, and instead focuses on sex assigned at birth. Having this cloistered conception of gender leads to little focus being given to victims who do not fit into the categories of sex as a basis of gender, such as transgender or nonbinary individuals, especially considering that an estimated 47% of transgender people have been sexually assaulted (Seelman, 2015, p.1). Nevertheless, increasing the scope of this research to also examine the adaptive behaviours of those who do not fit into binary categories would be fascinating as further research. Still, this research is simply not achievable due to the length of a Bachelor's thesis. Despite this, being aware of these

limitations is crucial in writing this type of research in a manner that is as inclusive and aware as possible.

This paper will comprise a literature review, dissecting the patriarchal basis of sexual violence, the manifestation of adaptive preferences, and a review of the article *Predatory Rapists and Victim Selection Techniques.* The research methodology will outline the methods employed during the research project. After setting the basis for the research, we can move to the results collected from participants. The last part of this study will be a discussion comparing the results to the Victim Selection Techniques from the literature review, followed by a limitations section, and a conclusion.

Literature Review

The Patriarchal Basis of Sexual Violence

When looking at sexual violence against women, one is forced to confront the fact that the systems that govern society normalise this violence. To understand why women bear the burden of prevention, along with the blame for the action, we must look towards the patriarchy, and how it has embedded its notion of sex, submission, and violence against women within society. *The Power of Patriarchy: Its Manifestation in Rape* by Carla Ackerman (1995) does precisely that.

Ackerman begins the paper by noting the recency of studies on rape, with the first studies being clinical studies, focusing on the perpetrator, sorting them based on motivation or clinical

classes. These older studies also focused on the act itself, however, it was treated as an isolated incident, with no consideration of context, treating it as though rape happens within a vacuum. It is only recently, in 1971, that the first major sociological paper was published about rape, which demonstrates the lack of understanding of this horrific act beyond isolated segments of its terrible whole. That being said, the lack of holistic literature regarding rape was, and still is, being remedied. Ackerman specifically highlights that much of the literature on rape "has been aimed at survival and self-defence techniques, self-help, consciousness-raising, encouraging wimmin[1] to report rapes and have rapists prosecuted and at providing support and guidelines for establishing service-delivery programs for rape victims" (Ackerman, 1995, pp. 13-14). This demonstrates the common understanding that women bear the responsibility of prevention, however, this responsibility can be understood in two ways: One is the placement of responsibility by the patriarchy, which blames women for the violence inflicted upon them. In the case of feminist literature, it is the understanding that there is a need for women to take responsibility for their own safety, as no one else will. Both stem from the infliction of sexual violence as a social norm, however, one is in defence of this infliction, whereas the other is a symptom of this norm.

According to Ackerman, the patriarchy can be understood to be "the foundation for the subordinate position of wimmin in our society" (Ackerman, 1995, p.83), this definition of the patriarchy also informs the way women experience social power, specifically in our experience of sexual violence. "Violence and its corollary, fear, serve to terrorise females and to maintain the patriarchal definition of womyn's place" (Ackerman, 1995, p.85). This looming threat of sexual

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[1] Ackerman uses a term for women that is found in some feminist literature, this removes the suffix 'men' from the word

violence is used to corral women in such a way that there is no space to question the motivation for their actions. This directly impacts a woman's ability to choose their actions freely, and limits their ability to live in the same capacity a man could. "At a subliminal level, fear is experienced as unease, a concern to behave properly" (Ackerman, 1995, p.85). This idea of 'perfect' behaviour reoccurs in much feminist literature. To convince women that their behaviour is what leads to sexual violence, rather than to hold the perpetrators accountable, is, in essence, to instil in women that they are the responsible party for any sexual violence that may befall them. Therefore, it is their responsibility to alter their behavior to avoid this violence.

This fear of sexual violence that drives women to 'behave', permeates every facet of a woman's life. Sheffield refers to this fear-based coercion as 'sexual terrorism', going on to state that sexual terrorism is the common characteristic of all forms of sexual violence (Sheffield, 1987). Sheffield also writes about the impact of obscene phone calls: "It is clear from these responses that obscene phone calls are sexual intimidation and harassment. While they do not involve direct physical assault or violence, many women experienced them as terroristic" (Sheffield, 1989, pp. 487-488). Sheffield illustrates the impact of non-physical sexual violence on women, and the results show that these phone calls create fear within the victims, along with a feeling of unsafety in usually 'safe' places such as home.

Adaptive Preferences

When considering the adaptive behaviours of women in reaction to the threat of sexual violence, one could equate these to what is known as 'adaptive preferences'. "Adaptive preferences are preferences formed in unconscious response to oppression" (Walsh, 2015, p.

829). This idea of adaptive preferences reoccurs in feminism. Liberal feminists portray adaptive preferences as things that ought to be disposed of, as they "undermine a person's ability to make genuinely autonomous decisions" (Kleist, 2013, p. 687). Serene Khader offers a different perspective on adaptive preferences. In her book *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, Serene Khader critiques the idea that adaptive preferences are simply a lack of understanding or rationality. Khader identifies two terms, 'deep preferences' and 'inappropriately adaptive preferences'. A deep preference is defined as "preferences they would retain under conditions conducive to flourishing that a person recognises as such" (Khader, 2011, p. 51). Khader then goes on to define an inappropriate adaptive preference as a preference that is, in essence, non-conducive to the basic flourishing of a person. When considering the adaptive behaviours of women in reaction to the threat of sexual violence, one could view these as adaptive preferences. However, through Serene Khader's understanding of adaptive preferences, these adaptive behaviours lie in a limbo between being conducive and non-conducive to basic flourishing. When reflecting on the issue, women living in fear and adapting their behaviour is non-conducive to basic flourishing, however when the alternative is to live in a society where sexual violence is commonplace, without taking precautions through adaptive behaviour, the 'non-conduciveness to basic flourishing' becomes a blurred concept. The adaptive behaviours in reaction to the prevalence of sexual violence are both conducive to basic flourishing in the way that they play a role in protecting women from said violence, yet at the same time, the impact of constant fear and the climate that induces these adaptive preferences are non-conducive to basic flourishing.

Predatory Rapists and Victim Selection Techniques

The counterpart to the defensive behaviours women employ to avoid sexual violence is the selection criteria employed by the perpetrators of this violence. The article *Predatory Rapists and Victim Selection Techniques* outlines the methods used by predatory rapists to select their victims. This study interviewed a total of 85 rapists, with only 61 of the interviews being considered reliable (Stevens, 1994). This study highlighted the essentiality of vulnerability in the selection of potential victims, and found that the rapists perceived the following criteria to make a woman a potential target: "easy pray (victims perceived as vulnerable); attributes (victim's appearance or job); random/situation (evaluation of the victim prior to the attack); and not sure" (Stevens, 1994, p. 424).

Stevens goes on to outline different aspects of each criterion: Easy Prey, Young Females as Easy Prey, Middle-Class Females as Easy Victims, Occupational Tracking and Easy Prey, Shoppers as Easy Prey, Situations Making Females Easy Prey, Attributes, Random/Situational, and Circumstance or Manipulation (Stevens, 1994).

Prior to discussing each aspect of the Victim Selection Techniques, a note on the term 'Easy Prey' must be made. The use of 'Easy Prey' as a descriptor for women is, in itself, dehumanising. That being said, this is the language that is used within this study to describe this perception by rapists. While this language is abasive, it is the choice of words of the author of the study, and not the conception of women that is held in this research paper as a whole.

Easy Prey as a general category was the most cited attribute in the selection of victims. This encompasses the ease of victimisation due to age, class, occupation, and situation. With 66% of interview participants referring to different attributes that make a woman more vulnerable to attack. One particular reference within the segment of *Young Females as Easy Prey*

is the perceived vulnerability of victims, along with a perpetrator referencing a specific instance in which a young girl smiled back at him, which was then perceived as 'permission' (Stevens, 1994, p. 425).

The classification of *Middle-Class Females as Easy Prey* highlights the experience of a specific rapist, which considered politeness to be an indicator of weakness, and therefore, indicative of a potential victim. "He would smile and ask for information. He said that when a woman answered his question and "glances down or looks away," he knew she could be victimised. Randall claims that lower-class women would tell him to "drop dead and stare me down" (Stevens, 1994, p. 426). Stevens poses the question: Are these predators describing seeking out women who are socially conditioned to 'yield' to men, and, do these yielding cues allude to a vulnerability?

Occupational Tracking and Easy Prey dissects the submissive roles that women are taught in society, and the societal training that moulds women into helping roles. "Another way

of explaining women's obedience is that predators manipulate "helping women" into vulnerable situations by drawing upon their helper objectives" (Stevens, 1994, p. 426).

The segment discussing *Shoppers as Easy Prey* analyses the perception of women and their demeanours in the context of shopping. One rapist cites the attitude of women toward other shoppers as a tell for potential victimisation. Specifically, the rapist mentioned the reaction of women when bumping into other shoppers, stating that if they were overly apologetic, it was a "dead giveaway" (Stevens, 1994, p. 427). Most of this segment refers to the nonverbal cues that predators pick up on when choosing a victim: women walking on their heels were deemed to be less likely to run or fight due to a lack of fitness, and women who were unaware were unlikely to be able to defend themselves. "If she's dizzy say at K-Mart's checkout, it means she probably

won't make a decision to strike back till it's too late, if she's going to do it at all" (Stevens, 1994, p. 427).

Situations Making Females Easy Prey begins with a fascinating observation: "Of course, predatory rapists do not always succeed as evidenced by victimisation reports, but the more the sample attacked helpless 'appearing' women, the greater were their chances of success, they [The Predators] claim" (Stevens, 1994, p. 427). This is specifically applied to women putting themselves in 'dangerous' situations, which do not go unnoticed by the predators. By being in more dangerous situations, the implication is that the woman is unaware of her surroundings, and, therefore, more vulnerable.

In terms of attributes, 13% of the interviewed predators cited that sexual desirability played a part in their victim selection. This segment consists of three separate quotes said by predators during their interviews, describing the extent of their thought process when victimising women whom they felt were sexually desirable. This segment is relatively short, as beyond stating how attractive their victim was, the rapists do not allude to any further thought process (Stevens, 1994, p. 428).

Random or Situational variables were cited by 18% of the rapists interviewed. This criterion alludes to the fact that the victims were chosen not due to any specific variable, but rather because of opportunity. Interviewees describe this criterion as chance, wherein they saw a woman in a vulnerable situation, and without considering any other variables, they attacked: "Both random and situational explanations reveal that there was little if any assessment about the victim herself by the predator prior to the attack (Stevens, 1994, p. 428).

Finally, in terms of Manipulation and Circumstance, 48% of participants described circumstance as a driving factor in their victim selection, "That is, when an offender first encountered a victim, had her circumstances been perceived as vulnerable and thus he attacked" (Stevens, 1994, p. 429). However, 30% of the interviewees described some sort of manipulation, such as giving the victim substances, to increase her vulnerability. Stevens goes on to state that 13% of participants used a combination of manipulation and circumstance, and 6% cited situations in which it was unsure whether circumstance or manipulation was the driving factor.

Methodology

Research type

This research project is qualitative in nature. This means that it is geared to acquire more comprehensive data about the adaptive behaviours women employ due to the threat of sexual violence. By doing this, the qualitative approach seeks to provide a more profound understanding of the lived human experience concerning the subject matter (Fossey et al., 2002). The applied qualitative technique is essentially used to make observations, identify trends, and develop inductive justifications for the adaptive behaviours noted. Due to the subconscious nature of some of these adaptations, qualitative methods were best suited for the data collection.

Participant recruitment

With the research scope being to discover the adaptive behaviours of women in reaction to the prevalence of sexual violence, all of the participants in this research study identify with the

label 'woman'. The participant recruitment was done through several methods, the first of which was sending a message about the research in several group chats, and asking if anyone would be willing to participate. Later, the recruitment tactic was expanded to posting messages on social media to reach a broader range of people. This led to the recruitment of seven participants, all between the ages of 18 and 24. Many of these participants come from an international background, with two participants living in the United Kingdom, two in the United States, and three in the Netherlands.

Data Collection Methods

The methods used in this study to collect data on adaptive behaviours are twofold; the first is the use of journaling, where participants were asked to document any behaviours they felt they adapted due to the threat of sexual violence. After the week of journaling, the participants were invited to participate in an interview, so as to discuss their findings over the course of the week. This two-part method was explicitly used to allow participants to reflect on their adaptive behaviours, and then a safe space to discuss these adaptations. Prior to the start of the journaling, the participants were given the definition of violence, as the definition being used in this paper goes beyond the physical. This clarification proved helpful, as all of the participants held the idea that sexual violence is limited to the physical. The journal was not bound by a strict structure, and the participants were simply asked to note down whenever they felt that they adapted their behaviour.

The interview was a crucial part of the research, as it helped to understand the mindset of the participants, along with the context around the adaptations. Having an unstructured format for these discussions facilitated the ability to explore multiple facets of the adaptations. It was

imperative to maintain a balance of an academic environment, without making the interviews feel clinical. This challenge to create conditions wherein the interviewee feels comfortable and relaxed was crucial, as the topic of sexual violence is sensitive, and being confronted with an interviewer who treats the research participants as subjects rather than people, creates a power imbalance. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner, while trying to minimise stress for the participants.

The method employed in this study was the subject of much deliberation, as with the sensitive aspects of the topic, questions of privacy and psychological strain are at the forefront when considering the best method to conduct sensitive research. Therefore, after a lot of deliberation and input from this research's supervisor, the journaling technique followed by an interview was decided. The use of journaling allows the participants to reflect on their experiences without the researcher's influence, along with allowing an insight into what each participant views as adaptive behaviours, and their conception of the impact of these adaptations on their lives.

Journaling

Journaling was a crucial part of this research model, as it allowed insight into the day-to-day activities of each participant. This insight brings the research a more ethnographic quality, as it follows the participants throughout the week. This research method was inspired by *The Land of Open Graves*, a research project by Jason De Leon (De Leon, 2015). This project uses the method of giving cameras to migrants to document their day-to-day reality while crossing the border from Mexico to America, allowing the research participants to report what

they feel is important to document. Though the concept slightly differs in the way the participants are asked to document their time, the idea of allowing research subjects to determine what needs to be reported is inspired by this study. Additionally, due to the concerns regarding generating identifiable data, the use of journaling is a less identifiable way of gaining insights into the lived experience of the people participating in this research through their eyes.

Before starting the process, every participant was briefed on the concept of violence used in the research, as it is vital to maintain a common understanding of the definition of violence used. As previously mentioned, the common understanding of sexual violence tends to pertain almost strictly to the physical, whereas this study uses a much larger conception of the term sexual violence.

Interviews

The participants were interviewed using an unstructured format. The importance of an unstructured interview was significant as it allowed the participants to explore any direction they viewed necessary. Throughout the discussions, there was general informality; with such a sensitive topic, the need for tact and humanity was far more important than maintaining a rigorous academic environment. The ability for the interviewees to stop the interview, skip a topic or take a break was heavily stressed, as sexual assault is a sensitive subject. Immediately after the discussions, notes were taken. These notes were then analysed and categorised into eight behavioural change categories.

Ethics

The nature of the research demanded that much thought be given to the moral aspects of the study. Two main ethical issues were identified: the possibility of psychological distress to the participants and the confidentiality aspect of the data collected. Due to the nature of the research, there was a need to create a safe and welcoming environment for participants when the interviews were conducted.

One particular precaution to minimise the risk of triggering the participants, was to ask them preemptively if any topics should be avoided to prevent triggering them. In addition, due to the ethical considerations of recording the interviews, taking notes was the only way to record the data without producing identifying information. Therefore, it was critical to refrain from taking notes during the discussions, as the participants may regard note-taking as clinical or disconnected.

The second ethical issue encountered was the production of identifying data. Due to the delicate nature of the subject matter, having any data that could be used to determine the identity of the participants posed a risk to the research subjects. Therefore, instead of receiving the raw version of the journal kept by each participant, before the interview, notes were taken on the journal, which allowed for the data that was obtained to be anonymised in the process of note-taking. This system was also applied to the process of the interviews, where instead of recording the interviews, notes were taken post-interview, therefore anonymising any data generated.

Results

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that considering women are frequently confronted with the uncomfortable reality of sexual harassment, they are forced to create a variety of behavioural adjustments as coping mechanisms to navigate hostile contexts and limit harassment risks. Understanding these adaptations provides insight into the pervasive impact of sexual harassment and, therefore, the constant preventative measures women take to protect themselves. During the research, fourteen different adaptive behaviours were recorded. These behaviours were then sorted into six overarching categories: Awareness, Appearance, Predictability, Community, Defense and Technology.

Awareness

In terms of awareness, the three adaptive behaviours that fit into this category are avoiding distractions while being out alone, remaining hyperconscious of one's surroundings, and monitoring the behaviour of others. These adaptations demand a near-constant sense of vigilance. According to all of the participants, the need to stay in a state of alertness in order to preserve their safety is incredibly mentally draining (Participants 1-7, 2024).

Firstly, avoiding distractions while being in public alone was an adaptation that every participant cited, with almost all participants stating that this adaptation was particularly strong when alone, and particularly at night. Two prominent examples of this adaptation were cited during the interviews, the first being in regards to headphones.

Most participants cited that they either avoided wearing headphones at all, or that they made sure not to use the noise cancelling function on their headphones, so as to be able to hear around them. "When I went to walk my dog at night, I never wore headphones. Honestly, I never even realised that this was something I did. It was almost automatic" (Participant 6, 2024). One participant noted that they wore their headphones to listen to music every time they went outside; the only time they differed from that behaviour was when going out alone after dark.

The second example was avoiding using phones. Once again, this behaviour was particularly prominent after dark, while the participants were outside alone. "Actually, I noticed that I avoid going on my phone while I was outside walking with no headphones on, and as I was going to note that down, I second guessed taking my phone out because I wanted to avoid being distracted" (Participant 6, 2024). Two participants cited avoiding texting or generally looking down at their phones while they were walking alone at night (Participants 1 & 6, 2024).

Remaining hypervigilant of one's surroundings was an adaptation cited by all of the participants. While not all participants could point to specific examples beyond just looking around them, one participant cited the use of shadows and reflections to monitor where others were around them. "I don't really know when I started doing it, but now I always use the reflections of store windows to make sure no one is walking too close behind me" (Participant 6, 2024). All participants did specify that these behaviours did intensify at night, as they felt more unsafe after dark. Another example of hypervigilance was avoiding being in altered states of mind, such as being drunk, when in unfamiliar situations (Participant 7, 2024). One participant noted explicitly that they kept tabs on possible exit routes when entering different locations where they felt unsafe, such as nightclubs or house parties (Participant 7, 2024).

Monitoring the behaviours of others was cited by two separate participants; however, this adaptation occurred in different contexts for both participants. One participant used the example of monitoring the behaviour of the different people they encountered on the street at night, and then avoiding those who displayed what the participant deemed to be 'suspicious' behaviour, such as seeming intoxicated, staring or otherwise erratic behaviour (Participant 5, 2024). Another participant highlighted the same behaviour applied to a social context. However, the 'suspicious' behaviours that were noted and avoided were the same in both situations (Participant 7, 2024).

Appearance

Appearance is arguably one of the most well-known adaptive behaviours, with the use of what a woman was wearing as a justification for the sexual violence they have suffered being far too familiar. With the myth of the 'perfect victim' is one that informs a lot of the adaptive behaviours that women employ, with a common phrase to disprove victims of sexual violence being 'what were you wearing', thereby implying that somehow one is responsible for being a victim of sexual violence simply due to the clothes they were wearing, instead of holding the perpetrators accountable. This is also sometimes the case with catcalling, wherein after being rejected, the perpetrators will imply that somehow it was the victim asking to be harassed due to their outward appearance (Participant 2, 2024). Within the category of adaptive behaviours regarding appearance, there are two main types of adaptations: outward appearance, and attitude.

In terms of outward appearance, the concept of clothing was stated as an adaptation by every participant, with mentions of wearing baggier clothing so as not to attract attention

(Participants 1 & 4, 2024), or wearing less classically 'feminine' clothing, such as skirts or dresses (Participant 2, 2024). There were also discussions around the hesitation of wearing weather-appropriate clothing, with one example being shorts in hot weather, and how the likelihood of being followed, catcalled or otherwise harassed in public increases as soon as one wears shorts or other warm weather apparel. One participant used the example of wearing a shirt over a bikini while at the beach, a place where it is entirely *normal* to wear that kind of apparel, as without wearing something over their swimsuit they felt more vulnerable to negative attention (Participant 1, 2024).

Another participant also mentioned the use of makeup as adaptive behaviour, wherein they avoided wearing makeup in situations where they felt that there was the possibility of unwanted attention: "I wear less makeup when I know it's going to be busy" (Participant 2, 2024). Within the context of appearance, there were multiple discussions with different participants surrounding the desire not to be perceived as feminine, presenting when in situations that could pose a risk of sexual violence, such as being out alone at night. "When I'm out walking, especially alone, I try not to have my hair down, or I wear my hood up so that it's harder to tell that I'm a woman' (Participant 7, 2024). When one reflects on the adaptive behaviours of women to avoid sexual violence, it is difficult not to see just how pervasive these adaptations are. Nevertheless, the threat of sexual violence alters the way women behave, even in terms of their self-expression and creative freedom.

Regarding attitude as a behavioural adaptation, one quote particularly stood out: "Smile politely but not friendly; you don't want to insinuate anything" (Participant 3, 2024). Many

participants cited attitude as an adaptation; however, there were three different ways the adaptations manifested: being 'polite', being 'mean', or being 'unapproachable'.

In terms of politeness, it was mainly in situations where the participants were already in conversation with a person whose behaviour was making them uncomfortable. This politeness was applied in order not to anger the person, and to escape the situation safely (Participant 2, 2024). On the opposite side, being 'mean' or 'rude' was also used to escape the situation as an attempt to make oneself unappealing (Participant 1, 2024). Being unapproachable was a behaviour that all participants cited. However, it was specific to situations such as walking alone, where the participants were not already in a situation confronted with someone making them uncomfortable, but rather, this adaptation was to avoid this situation preemptively. Adaptations include avoiding eye contact, not smiling, or maintaining unapproachable body language, such as crossed arms (Participants 1, 2 & 4).

Predictability

Predictability as an overarching theme includes only one primary adaptive behaviour, which is specific to the context of avoiding being followed. Two participants cited this behaviour, with one citing two instances in which predictability was avoided through a behavioural change.

Participant Six used the example of changing how they walk home from university occasionally, to avoid the possibility of someone having learnt their way home, and possibly waiting for them. This is due to a previous experience in which someone had waited for them and then verbally harassed them with sexual remarks. Since this experience, changing the way

they go to and from places is something they do regularly, so as to avoid that kind of situation (Participant 6, 2024).

Participant Seven also reported this adaptive behaviour; however, they also recorded another instance of this behaviour, in the context of feeling followed, and changing the way that they go home, for example, turning into more crowded areas, where there is a higher possibility of blending in, and therefore becoming more challenging to follow. This is specifically while walking alone at night. Taking a more convoluted, longer route to avoid being followed or the possibility of someone learning their daily routine is something that is mentally taxing, as routines allow a sense of control and continuity in life, which is taken from women due to the threat of sexual violence. Additionally, all participants stated that if they experienced harassment in a specific place, they were likely to avoid that place until they felt safe enough to resume walking in that area, which further inconveniences women, especially if the area in which they experienced this harassment is unavoidable, or the alternative is a particularly inconvenient detour, which leaves them with the choice of either feeling unsafe and possibly experiencing the harassment again, or taking extra time out of their day to regain a sense of safety (Participant 7, 2024).

Community

Community plays a prominent role in feeling a sense of safety: in the previous paragraphs, the mention of being 'alone' is pervasive, with many adaptations specific to this context. All participants cited a sense of safety in numbers, specifically in social situations. The

behaviours comprised under the umbrella of community are 'gossip', safety in numbers, and notifying other members of the group when arriving at 'safety'.

The term gossip comes with a negative connotation of spitefulness; however, the demonisation of gossip is used to break women's solidarity. The term gossip in this paper is used to describe sharing information, in this instance, specifically pertaining to instances of sexual harassment or other sexual violence. Two participants used the example of gossip, however the subject of the gossip differed. Participant Six discussed an incident pertaining to a nightclub, in which they were a victim of sexual harassment. During the incident, the club staff was unhelpful, and refused to take action against the perpetrator. This incident led to the participant telling her friends to avoid the club, as the environment was unsafe for women, both due to the patrons and the attitude of the staff. During the interview, the discussion surrounding this behaviour revealed that this was common practice within the participant's group of friends (Participant 6, 2024).

Participant Seven revealed the same adaptive behaviour, however, applied to a person rather than a location. The behaviour arose due to repeated uncomfortable interactions with a person, leading them to alert their friends to be wary around this person. During the discussion about this behaviour, the participant spoke about previous instances of this behaviour, specifically regarding the techno scene. The described instances in which a particular person was reported for being sexually violent, which led to that person's face, name, and locations they frequent being posted by people within the community to warn others to avoid that person (Participant 7, 2024).

Three participants cited moving in groups, or safety in numbers, as an example: sticking together in social settings, going to the bathroom together, and talking on the phone while walking alone.

Sticking together in social situations was noted by Participant One, stating that when they went out with friends, they made sure to stick together so as not to leave one person vulnerable (Participant 1, 2024). Participant Seven noted a variation of that same behavioural adaptation, specifically in the context of parties and clubs. They joked about the fact that women going to the bathroom in groups was a common stereotype: "I mean, it's true, like we really do go to the bathroom in groups. But I noticed it as a behavioural adaptation because one night we were out and went to the bathroom, and I thought, we have to find [Friend Name] before we go" (Participant 7, 2024). When discussing this further, they spoke of feeling more vulnerable when alone, especially in social situations, and how having trusted people around makes it harder to target a member of the group.

Participant Four cited a different behaviour falling under the category of group safety: phoning a friend while walking alone. During the discussion, it was specified that this was more often while walking alone in the dark, and specifically when feeling uneasy due to factors such as the possibility of being followed. When reflecting on this behaviour, they offered two possible reasons for the conduct: the behaviour may be to ensure that if something were to happen, someone would know and be able to call the necessary authorities, or alternatively, the behaviour is a dissuasion tactic to any possible perpetrators, as with someone on the phone and able to call authorities, it leaves the person less vulnerable (Participant 4, 2024). Multiple participants also cited a slight differentiation in the phone call behaviour, wherein they faked a phone call, to give potential perpetrators the impression that there was someone on the other end of the line, which

offers the same dissuasion advantage, but lacks the ability to have someone on call to alert authorities (Participants 4, 6 & 7, 2024).

Four out of the seven research subjects noted the behaviour of notifying their friends when arriving at a location perceived as 'safe'. This notion of a safe location was often home, or to a place such as university. When discussing this adaptation, the phrase 'text me when you're home' was mentioned every time, as an example of the adaptation. All participants that cited this as an adaptive behaviour noted the use of a variation of that phrase (Participants 4-7, 2024). During the interviews, the standard explanation for this conduct was to gauge if the person had made it home safe, as if no text was sent, further actioncouldn be taken swiftly (Participants 4-7, 2024).

Defence

The defensive aspect of adaptive behaviours could be used to include all of the aforementioned behaviours. However, this category is specifically designed to include the following behaviours: learning self-defence, being familiar with the laws surrounding self-defence, avoiding walking on the wall side of the pavement, keeping one's hands free, refusing drinks from men, and standing with one's back to the wall.

Self-defence is one of the most well-known adaptive behaviours to prevent sexual violence; this can take form in various ways, ranging from taking classes to repurposing objects into makeshift weapons in case of sexual assault. Participant Three brought up taking self-defence classes, and how the knowledge gained via those classes gives them a sense of security when in potentially dangerous situations (Participant 3, 2024). While the participant

noted that they did not have to use any self-defence techniques throughout the week, they felt it was necessary to mention, as, initially, taking self-defence classes was to ensure that they would be able to defend themselves if a dangerous situation ever arose (Participant 3, 2024).

Multiple participants brought up the use of everyday objects as self-defence tools, most commonly, the use of keys placed between the fingers while making a fist, as a form of makeshift brass knuckles, which allowed for a sense of safety[2] (Participants 1, 2, 3 & 7, 2024). While discussing this behaviour, participants also brought up other examples of everyday objects being used as self-defence aids, such as a lighter placed within a fist to avoid breaking one's knuckles while throwing a punch (Participant 1, 2024) or a can of hairspray as a replacement for pepper spray (Participant 7, 2024).

While discussing self-defence, Participant Seven spoke about familiarising themselves with the laws surrounding self-defence and what tools were legal to use as self-defence in their country. "I looked it up one day to see if it was legal, and then I went and bought myself a can. I haven't left the house without it since" (Participant 7, 2024).

Participant Three noted not walking beside the wall when walking alone, due to the possibility of being cornered. During the discussion regarding this adaptation, the participant mentioned a situation wherein they were stopped by a man, who proceeded to corner them as they were walking on the wall side of the pavement (Participant 3, 2024).

Additionally, Participant Three noted that they tried to keep their hands free, or, at the very least, always had their right hand available just in case. Participant Three noted that the

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[2] While keys between knuckles may not be actually beneficial in the case of a physical altercation, the confidence acquired from the sense of safety the action gives is a form of deterrent (Van t'Slot, Hostile Environment Awareness Training, Personal Communication, 2023).

origin of these two behaviours was likely from self-defense training; however, these behaviours had become so ingrained in their routine that it took them multiple days to notice them as adaptive behaviours.

Another rather notable adaptive behaviour is in regards to beverages, more specifically, alcoholic beverages; this behaviour manifested itself in multiple ways: refusing drinks from men, never leaving one's drink unattended and covering one's cup with a hand, to avoid anything being put in the drink (Participant 1, 2024). These behaviours were most prominent at social gatherings, such as parties and nightclubs. During the discussion, Participant One attributed two possible reasons behind refusing drinks from men: refusal so as to not give them the impression that there is an interest in further advances, and a fear of the drinks being tampered with.

Participant One also noted standing with their back to the wall, to avoid unwanted touches, and to have a visual on anyone approaching them. When discussing this behaviour further during the interview, they cited public transportation, parties and nightclubs as places where they felt the need to stand with their back to a wall, as those places tend to be crowded and, therefore, felt less safe (Participant 1, 2024).

Technology

Two main adaptive behaviours within the technology umbrella are using location-sharing services and keeping social media accounts private.

Three participants cited three different examples of sharing location. The first instance was sharing one's location generally so that someone knows where they are at all times: "I share my location with my friends because they live in the same town as me. Therefore, if something were to happen, they would notice faster and be able to contact my parents and the police" (Participant 3, 2024).

Particpant One stated the use of location sharing when going on dates. This was also accompanied by sharing a photo of the person they were going on a date with, along with a timeframe for when they would get back from the date and where the date was taking place, as a precaution (Particpant 1, 2024).

Participant Six noted the use of the location-sharing service on Uber: "I mean, it's really practical, it makes me feel safer. I always share it with my mom" (Participant 6, 2024). During the discussion, the participant stated that they used to just send their location to their mother, but the fact that Uber makes it simpler and additionally sends the information regarding the driver's name, the make and model of the car, and the license plate number to the person receiving the shared location, makes this a more practical way to share their location for safety (Participant 6, 2024)

Finally, one participant cited keeping social media accounts private, with multiple reasons behind the adaptation. Primarily, this was done to reduce the number of strangers having access to images of them, as they were aware of the potential dangers of deepfakes, but also the ability to infer someone's location based on the background of pictures. Additionally, they noted that they would get far more unwanted sexually explicit messages when their account was

public, whereas with a private account, the number of such messages decreased significantly (Participant 6, 2024).

Discussion

It is critical to recognise that these behavioural changes should not be considered as women's responsibility to avoid harassment. Instead, these behaviours are a consequence of being held responsible to prevent the very violence that they are the victims of. Highlighting the sheer number of adaptive behaviours recorded over the week demonstrates the pervasive nature of the threat of sexual violence women have to grapple with every day to live their lives. It is evident that society continues to hold women responsible for a safety that is owed to them, rather than tackle the issue at the root: that the society we inhabit condones and informs an environment in which women are both victims and responsible for sexual violence.

While the behaviours listed in the previous segment of this paper may seem excessive or arbitrary to some, when comparing these adaptive behaviours to the selection criteria taken from the study of *Predatory Rapists and Victim Selection Techniques*, the similarities between the selection techniques and the adaptive behaviours are striking. Observing the adaptive behaviours employed to reduce perceived vulnerability is incredibly interesting, given the intense focus on vulnerability in victim selection. This discussion aims to highlight the overlap between the behaviours of the participants interviewed for this study and the victim selection criteria of the rapists from the article *Predatory Rapists and Victim Selection Techniques,* and argue the direct correlation of these adaptive behaviours with the threat of sexual violence.

While this article is specific to predatory rapists, "Every predator utilises surveillance, intelligence collection and strategy prior to executing a crime" (Escape the Wolf, 2014); therefore, having this insight, regardless of the type of rapist, allows us to glean a crucial understanding of how victims are selected.

Awareness as an umbrella term for adaptive behaviours can be compared to its counterpart in Victim Selection Technique (VST), the *Easy Prey* category. Increased awareness of surroundings minimises the potential victim's vulnerability perception, which is a crucial element in VST. When looking at the statements made by the rapists interviewed, the mention of women appearing 'dizzy' or unaware of their surroundings increased the perception of helplessness. Therefore, behavioural adaptations such as hyperconsciousness of one's surroundings or avoiding distractions are necessary when in more 'vulnerable' situations, such as walking outside alone at night.

Appearance can be compared to two VST: Easy Prey, and Attributes. This is due to the separation of appearance behaviours into two categories: outward appearance, and attitude. When participants cite behaviours pertaining to outward appearances, such as altering clothing choices or limiting makeup, it is easy to see how these behaviours are used to mitigate the sexualisation of the feminine. This is pertinent when viewing these behaviours through the lens of VSTs, as sexual desirability influenced 13% of the participants to select their victim. When considering the attitude based behaviours, the direct correlation between the perception of politeness as a 'yielding cue', or the lack of confrontation and learned helpfulness cited in the section regarding *Middle-Class Females as Easy Prey,* and the concept of rudeness as a deterrent

cited by Participants One, Two and Four. Multiple rapists cited the perception of acquiescence as a part of their VST.

While predictability was not directly quoted as a part of VSTs, it can be connected to a situational selection technique, wherein knowing a potential victim's patterns can increase their vulnerability, and, therefore, their victimisation potential in the eyes of a rapist. Additionally, the behaviour of avoiding places where one has experienced previous sexually threatening behaviour is synonymous with avoiding dangerous environments, which correlates directly with the VST describing placing oneself in dangerous situations as a sign of higher vulnerability, and, therefore, having a higher victim potential.

Community as an umbrella term for certain adaptive behaviours does not have a direct counterpart in the VSTs, with no specific mentions of lack of community as a driving factor of victim selection. That being said, the different components under the umbrella of community can be applied to specific VSTs. Specifically, multiple rapists cited instances of victims being alone, or later seeking out women when they are alone as opposed to with others, which speaks to a lower perception of vulnerability when in groups. Additionally, the concept of gossip can be compared to the concept of politeness as vulnerability. When considering the 'rude' connotation of gossip, it serves a double purpose: spreading important information and altering the perception of politeness.

When considering the behaviours comprised under the umbrella of defence, the primary correlation to the VSTs lies within the descriptors used in the segment Shoppers as Easy Prey,

wherein all of the quotes lifted from the rapists within that section mention a woman's likelihood to 'fight back'. While the ability to defend oneself is not necessarily apparent at first glance, the shift in demeanour, and the way one carries oneself in a more self-assured manner, shifts the perception of vulnerability. Additionally, when comparing the VST of circumstance to the behaviour cited by Participant Three of not walking next to walls to avoid being cornered, the adaptation reduces one's circumstantial appeal as a victim.

Due to technology as an adaptive behaviour being a relatively recent phenomenon, the correlation to the VSTs is not necessarily one that is perfectly apparent. However, when considering the heavy use of the concept of vulnerability as a VST, the use of technology mitigates this. With technology readily accessible to transmit locations, information, or otherwise warn others of potential threats, the ability to single someone out and isolate them is reduced drastically. Much like the community aspect, a person's vulnerability is higher when alone, and the use of technology can help reduce this aspect of the VSTs.

When comparing the behaviours listed by the participants to the Victim Selection Techniques cited by predatory rapists, the similarities between the two are rather apparent. While stranger-perpetrated sexual violence is not the most common form of sexual violence, it is the one that women mitigate against most ardently, according to the findings of this research. The comparison of the adaptations to the VSTs highlights the basis of the adaptations. This validates the application of the behaviours as a mitigation strategy to the threat of sexual violence.

Following this comparison of the study's results to the Victim Selection Techniques, it is evident that there is a real and terrifying basis for the actions taken by women to prevent sexual violence. The scope of this paper is not just to highlight the effectiveness or foundedness of these behaviours, but also to draw attention to the disparity in responsibility. Women must protect themselves against a near-constant threat, whilst being confronted with the grim statistics that only an estimated six per cent of rapists ever serve a day in jail (Central MN Sexual Assault Center, 2011), and confronted with news stories of rapists being sentenced to 6 months because the judge stated that a longer prison term would have "would have a severe impact on him" (Jeannie Suk Gersen, 2023).

Limitations

Though this study aims to be as comprehensive as possible, there are limitations to the research. This segment of the paper will discuss the confines of binary gender, participant pool size and variety, socioeconomic context, researcher positionality, and the narrow scope of the research.

Firstly, to constrain the scope of this study to the binary conception of gender as simply men and women ignores an entire chasm of different knowledge and experiences. Applying a more holistic concept of gender could potentially generate an entirely new set of results. This is particularly the case due to the comparison element of this research, wherein there are very few studies on rapists that take into account non-binary gender identities. That being said, further research should be done on the topic, as an information gap is in evident need of filling.

Secondly, this study is comprised entirely of women from Western countries, in higher education, and in a narrow age range. Therefore, this study cannot be seen as a comprehensive understanding of the behavioural adaptations of all women across all socioeconomic contexts. However, this paper aims to highlight the correlation between behaviours and threats while underlining the disparity between those who bear the responsibility to prevent this violence. Additionally, due to time constraints, the participant pool size had to be limited, as there was a total of 30 people who volunteered to participate, which was simply too much information to fit into a Bachelor's thesis. That being said, this clearly demonstrates the prevalence of the issue, as with so many participants reaching out to share their experience, it is clear that adaptive behaviours in reaction to the prevalence of sexual violence are something that many women grapple with on a day-to-day basis.

Due to the relatively narrow research pool, there are also limitations in analysing various socioeconomic circumstances that could affect the study results. This study cannot quantify the effect of other factors, such as class, race, disability, neurodivergency, sexuality, gender identity, and nationality, on people's experiences and behaviour in this context. While this study may not include these circumstances within the research, this only means that further research on their effects is needed.

In terms of researcher positionality, as a white woman in a Western society who is involved in higher education, there are obvious limitations in the positionality of the researcher in this work. With such a privileged position, fully grasping, comprehending, and researching the experiences of those who are in more precarious situations within the limit of this thesis would

have taken far more time and space than what is availabe. That being said, there was a constant effort to maintain awareness surrounding the positionality of this research. This, however, only signifies a need to continue this research further, and to broaden the scope to include those whom this paper may have overlooked.

Finally, due to the narrowness of the scope of this study, with a binary conception of gender identity, a skewed participant pool and a focus on a particular type of sexual violence, this study only serves as an observation of a very specific set of circumstances surrounding the threat of sexual violence and the adaptations this threat informs. Though this study may not be fully comprehensive, it nonetheless highlights the impact of the threat of sexual violence on women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the adaptive behaviours employed by women to mitigate the threat of sexual violence have a direct and clearly linked connection to the selection criteria employed by predatory rapists. Understanding the basis of these adaptations proves their effect on mitigating the threat of sexual violence, and in what aspects these adaptations aid to reduce the perception of one as a potential victim.

Having analyzed the similarities of the Victim Selection Techniques to the adaptive behaviours found during this study: Awareness, Appearance, Predictability, Community, Defence and Technology, the clear correlation between the behaviours employed by women to prevent sexual violence and the selection criteria of rapists is evident. That being said, this is not the only goal of this research, this study also aims to highlight the disproportionate amount of

responsibility placed on women, which is clear when considering that these behavioural

adaptations are only applicable to a fraction of possible situations of sexual violence.

    As a society, it is simple to dismiss the effects of the threat of sexual violence, yet we as

women continue to have to protect ourselves by altering what we wear, where we go, how we

talk, walk and act. We as women live in limbo, where we are damned if we do apply these

adaptations, and damned if we do not, and something happens to us. The double-edged sword of

being consciously aware of the possible threat, lying behind every corner, in every car that drives

a little too slowly past, in bars, restaurants, and every facet of our lives.

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