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No, I Don't Think it was Rape: The Relationship between Rape Acknowledgment Status and Perceptions of Sexual Violence

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By

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Master's Thesis

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Paige K. Michel

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of *Science*

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Paige K. Michel
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Abstract

Among college students who experience rape, on average, 60% are unacknowledged rape victims, meaning they do not label their sexual violence experiences as rape. Perhaps this is due to unacknowledged rape victims internalizing mainstream cultural values that normalize and stigmatize experiences of sexual violence. This survey and vignette-based study investigated the relationship between rape acknowledgment status, labels, and perceptions of rape. Female-identifying college students ($N = 214$) with a history of rape reported perceptions and labels of their experiences of rape and a vignette depicting rape. It was hypothesized that unacknowledged rape victims would be more likely to acknowledge their experiences of rape when using a Likert response format compared to a multi-categorical response format, which findings supported. Additionally, it was hypothesized that unacknowledged rape victims (vs. acknowledged rape victims) would be less likely to view a vignette depicting rape as rape, which findings did not support. Results indicated that rape culture and cultural stigma were more influential when labeling and perceiving one's own experience of rape compared to others' experiences. Furthermore, the findings highlight that rape acknowledgment status is fluid and should be measured on a continuum. This study began to establish how cultural stigma is central to perceptions of rape while expanding the literature on labels acknowledged, and unacknowledged rape victims used to describe experiences of rape (i.e., personal experiences and others' experiences).

Keywords: Acknowledgment status, rape, sexual violence, perceptions, labels

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No, I Don't Think It was Rape: The Relationship Between Rape Acknowledgement Status and Perceptions of Sexual Violence

Among college women, sexual violence is a silent epidemic (Coulter et al., 2017). College women are four times more likely than men to experience rape (Cantor et al., 2015), a criminal act in which any form of penetration occurs without consent (Basile et al., 2014; Hamby, 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Among individuals who have experienced rape, on average, 60% do not label their experience as rape (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Individuals who do not label their rape experiences as rape are referred to as unacknowledged rape victims (Koss, 1985). Unacknowledged rape victims (vs. acknowledged rape victims) are less likely to seek social support or disclose their assault, which can negatively impact their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being (Clements & Ogle, 2009; Kahn et al., 2003).

Understanding rape acknowledgment status in college populations is imperative as the prevalence rate of unacknowledgment among college women rape victims ranges from 27.6% to 88.2% (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Part of the reason for high rates of unacknowledgment may be the presence of stigmatizing, victim-blaming attitudes about sexual violence on college campuses, which are aspects of rape culture (Howard et al., 2008; Littleton & Axsom, 2003). To the extent that survivors internalize rape culture, they may be reluctant to recognize their own experiences as rape, instead of using terms such as miscommunication or bad sexual experience (Littleton et al., 2009; Harned, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2020). More research is needed to understand what this internalizing of rape culture looks like for survivors, such as how they would label their own and others' experiences of rape when given a larger variety of labels to choose from. The current study was designed to investigate how rape acknowledgment status relates to labels applied to

one's own and others' experiences of rape, using a modified rape acknowledgment measurement tool.

Dominant Societal Perceptions of Sexual Violence in the United States

Survivor perceptions of sexual violence on college campuses are informed by broader, mainstream cultural values and assumptions about sex, gender roles, and relationship violence in the United States (Ryan, 2011). Decades of research with survivors on and off college campuses suggest a pervasive cultural stigma surrounding interpersonal violence, one that attaches shame and condemnation to abuse survivors for their experiences (Delker, 2022; Edwards et al., 2011; Neville & Heppner, 1999). Proposed forms of cultural stigma include the survivors themselves or their experiences being denied, minimized, distorted, blamed, or labeled (Delker, 2022). These forms of cultural stigma are not mutually exclusive. For example, telling someone that what occurred to them "was not rape but instead a drunken mistake" not only denies their experience but also distorts the event as consensual sex and blames the victim for being too drunk.

A specific facet of cultural stigma is rape culture, which is defined as the normalization and justification of rape. Features of rape culture include sexist attitudes, stereotypical ideas pertaining to rape, and the objectification of women and girls (Brake, 2017; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). These features of rape culture are reflected across various levels of society and its institutions (e.g., news media, mass media, judicial and level systems), invalidating the harm done to individuals who have experienced sexual violence (Ullman, 2010).

Core features of rape culture are rape myths and rape scripts. Rape *myths* reinforce the idea that women are "gatekeepers" to sex, meaning that men must actively seek or coerce sex from women (Cannon et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2021). Women being seen as gatekeepers

normalizes stereotypical ideas that often result in victim-blaming, such as, "women lead men on, and then they cry rape," "women are almost never raped by their boyfriends," or "if a woman kisses a man, it is not a big deal if he goes a little further" (Payne et al., 1999). In contrast, rape *scripts* are perceptions or "scripts" of what is thought to transpire during a "typical" rape (Leiting & Yeater, 2017). For example, a rape is extremely violent, and perpetrators are strangers (Crome & McCabe, 2001). Rape myths and scripts have permeated dominant societal ideas about rape (e.g., "typical" rape) and can influence attitudes about rape.

Rape myths and scripts reinforce one another. For example, within rape *myths*, stereotypical ideas about rape are perpetuated, such as boyfriends cannot rape their girlfriends (Payne et al., 1999). Furthermore, within rape *scripts*, stereotypical ideas are normalized and accepted as typical characteristics to transpire during a rape. For example, individuals endorse the idea that only strangers perpetrate rape (Littleton & Axsom, 2003) which normalizes the rape *myth* that romantic partners cannot perpetrate rape (Payne et al., 1999). Rape myths and scripts ultimately narrow the definition of rape. A narrower definition of rape may make it more difficult for individuals who have experienced rape to view their experiences as rape due to internalizing rape myths and scripts.

Culture on College Campuses

A college campus is a place that contains its own culture. At universities, young adults meet others who hold similar attributes or qualities and collectively maintain a stable set of beliefs, meanings, and values that set the foundation for their actions. These stable ideas provide social unity, set behavioral standards, and provide a means for understanding behavior (Billings & Terkla, 2014; Smircihi, 1985). Common subcultures on college campuses are party and hookup culture, which have ties to rape culture (e.g., glorification of male aggression). Party

culture encourages socializing while drinking heavily and using drugs, whereas hookup culture encourages casual sex outside of a committed relationship (Sweeney, 2011). College students who participate in and endorse hookup and party culture are more likely to endorse rape myths and scripts (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Reling et al., 2018).

Rapes that occur during or after college parties have shared assault characteristics such as perpetrators being acquaintances, alcohol consumption, and consent confusion (Abbey, 2002; Sampson, 2003; Sweeney, 2011). These common assault characteristics could be due to college parties being facilitative of opportunities to commit sexual violence by access to alcohol, loud music, secluded rooms, and, among men, a "bro code" that prioritizes loyalty and protection (Sampson, 2003). Further, these environmental factors, in combination with alcohol intoxication, can decrease an individual's ability to identify risk cues, therefore increasing instances of consent confusion, as consent is interpreted and delivered differently by college men and women (e.g., college men often rely on interpreting body language cues as consent; Hindmarch et al., 1991; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). Yet, alcohol consumption and an absence of affirmative consent are common in college rapes. College women are three times more likely than men to report alcohol consumption before a sexual violence experience (Herbenick et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2008). These findings highlight that the cultural norms on college campuses endorse and reinforce rape culture. Rape culture on college campuses, in conjunction with the broader cultural stigmas to sexual violence, may be why rates of unacknowledgment are highest among college women (Wilson & Miller, 2016).

College Students' Responses to Sexual Violence

Labeling Rape Experiences

Research on how college students label instances of rape is imperative to understanding rape acknowledgment. United et al. (2012) found that when college students read a vignette depicting a rape, they were less likely to label it as rape when the victim had consumed alcohol compared to when the victim had not. Additionally, Yndo et al. (2020) had college students label an unwanted penetrative sexual encounter, which is considered rape, on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (*definitely not sexual assault)* to 6 *(definitely sexual assault*). The researchers found that when the victim was depicted as being sexually interested in the perpetrator before the sexual assault (e.g., flirting or kissing), the encounter was less likely to be viewed as sexual assault compared to when the victim was uninterested in the perpetrator. This demonstrates that college students were less likely to label an experience of rape as rape when a victim consumed alcohol or showed interest in their perpetrator (i.e., flirting, dancing, or any form of public affection) prior to the rape occurring.

Rape Acknowledgment Status and Labeling Others' Experiences of Rape

There is minimal research on how an individual's rape acknowledgment status relates to labels given to *others'* experiences of rape. Sasson and Paul (2014) investigated this topic, but not with college women. They found that rape acknowledgment status was not a significant predictor of how participants labeled a hypothetical scenario of rape. However, this study was conducted via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The sample had a mean age of 33, meaning participants were less likely to be unacknowledged rape victims, as older individuals are more likely to be acknowledged rape victims compared to college students (Conoscenti & McNally, 2006; Wilson & Miller, 2016). Further, this study depicted a rape that included physical force, which is often viewed as a typical characteristic of rape, meaning the encounter was more likely to be considered rape, as it aligned with rape myths and scripts (Littleton & Axsom, 2003;

Peterson & Muehlenard 2004). Given that college women survivors would most likely be receiving disclosures of rape by peers who are victimized by an acquaintance or partner with non-physical acts of coercion, it is important to understand how survivors would label a more prototypical form of sexual assault.

Assault Characteristics, Rape Acknowledgment Status, and Labeling One's Experiences of Rape

Survey-based research on unacknowledgment among college women has tended to focus on why women do not label their experiences as rape rather than the alternative labels they *do* use. Reasons why college women do not label their experiences as rape, include knowing the perpetrator before a rape, being sexually interested in the perpetrator before a rape, or consuming alcohol before a rape (Littleton et al., 2006, 2009; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Rousseau et al., 2020). Further, college women whose rape consisted of assault characteristics such as non-physically violent rape, lack of victim resistance during a rape (e.g., did not say "no," "stop," or did not physically resist), or a rape that did not result in serious physical injury, often do not label their experience as rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Littleton et al., 2006). These situational factors endorse stereotypical ideas about rape and highlight how individuals who have experienced rape may internalize rape culture, leading them not to label their rape experiences as rape. Instead, the limited available literature suggests that unacknowledged rape victims are more likely than acknowledged rape victims to use terms such as "miscommunication" or "bad sex" to label their experiences of rape (Harned, 2005; Littleton et al., 2009). The present study aims to expand the understanding of alternative labels used by survivors.

Measuring Rape Acknowledgment Among College Women. Part of the proposed contribution of the present study is methodological, and as such, issues core to the survey-based

measurement of unacknowledgment are addressed here. Rape acknowledgment status among college women is generally measured via self-report questionnaires that assess experiences of sexual violence through behaviorally specific questions (e.g., Sexual Experience Survey-Short Form Version; Koss et al., 2007). Responses to the questionnaire about one's history of sexual violence are compared to a question assessing rape acknowledgment status (i.e., "have you been raped?") that generally has dichotomous answer choices (e.g., yes or no). However, some researchers have included "maybe" as a response option (Botta & Pingree, 1997; Fisher et al., 2003; Kahn et al., 2003). If a participant answered "no" or "maybe" to the rape acknowledgment status question but endorsed experiencing rape on the sexual violence questionnaire, they would be considered an unacknowledged rape victim.

The addition of the response option "maybe" was included by some researchers because acknowledgment is a complex construct and, forcing participants to answer yes or no may come with strong personal implications (e.g., accepting victimization or ignoring victimization). Further, acknowledgment status can change over time (Littleton et al., 2006, 2008, 2009). In conjunction with this idea, researchers have begun to look at rape acknowledgment on a continuum, resulting in increased variability in responses compared to research with only dichotomous response options (Jaffe et al., 2021; Peterson & Muelhenhard, 2004).

Notably, Peterson and Muelhenhard (2004) measured rape acknowledgment (have you been raped?) with two response options that all participants answered, the first being dichotomous (i.e., yes or no) and the second being a scaled response option ranging from 1 (*not at all agree*) to 7 (*very much agree*). Researchers then compared the dichotomous responses to the scaled responses to better understand if dichotomous rape acknowledgment questions were too restrictive. They found that 53% of the participants who responded with "no" on the

dichotomous question responded with answers other than 1 (*very much disagreed their experience was a rape*) on the 7-point continuous scale. In comparison, 36% of participants who responded with "yes" on the dichotomous question responded with answers other than 7 (*very much agreed their experience was a rape*) on the 7-point continuous scale. This study highlights the complexity of rape acknowledgment status. Not all individuals view their experiences in a polarized fashion, and some may be unsure of the nature of their rape experiences when asked to process and label them.

Present Study

Research has demonstrated that societal norms are influential when acknowledging and labeling experiences of rape. Further, college women are the most at risk of experiencing rape and the most likely to be unacknowledged rape victims (Wilson & Miller, 2016), highlighting why college women's perceptions of rape are critical to understand. However, there is limited knowledge on how college women's rape acknowledgment status relates to how they label their own and others' rapes. Therefore, this survey and vignette-based study were designed to develop an understanding of the relationship between rape acknowledgment status and the perceptions of others' rape while expanding on previous research regarding labels used to describe one's own experience of rape.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. How do rape victims perceive the rapes of *others*?
    a) What labels will acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims use to describe the rape of a female protagonist in a vignette?
    b) How do acknowledged and unacknowledged victims differ in their acknowledgment of the rape of a female protagonist in a vignette?

i) Hypothesis: Unacknowledged victims will label others' rape as rape at lower rates than acknowledged victims if asked on a 6-point, Likert-type continuous (vs. multi-categorical) response scale.

2. How do unacknowledged rape victims perceive their *own* experiences of rape?
   a) What labels will unacknowledged rape victims use to describe their experiences of rape?
   b) How does rape acknowledgment status vary based on survey response options?
      i) Hypothesis: Unacknowledged rape victims will be more likely to acknowledge that they have experienced rape if asked on a 6-point, Likert-type continuous (vs. multi-categorical) response scale.

Method

Participants

Five hundred and twenty-two college students (67% female) were recruited from the online research management system at a regional university in the Pacific Northwest. Data from 43 participants were removed because they either completed less than 50% of the study (n = 2); completed the study in 3 or more hours (n = 7); completed the study in less than 5 minutes (n = 9), or they failed the manipulation check (n = 25).

Of the remaining 478 participants, 214 female participants with a self-reported history of sexual assault were included in the study analyses. We oversampled, as G*Power suggested, 159 participants would be needed to detect an effect of .25 with 80% power in a one-way between-subjects ANOVA (three groups, $\alpha = .05$; Faul et al., 2007). Participants were age 18 or older (M = 20.50, SD = 3.48) with 50.5% of participants identifying as heterosexual, 36% as bisexual, and 13.5% identifying as LGTQIA+. Self-reported ethnic/racial identities were

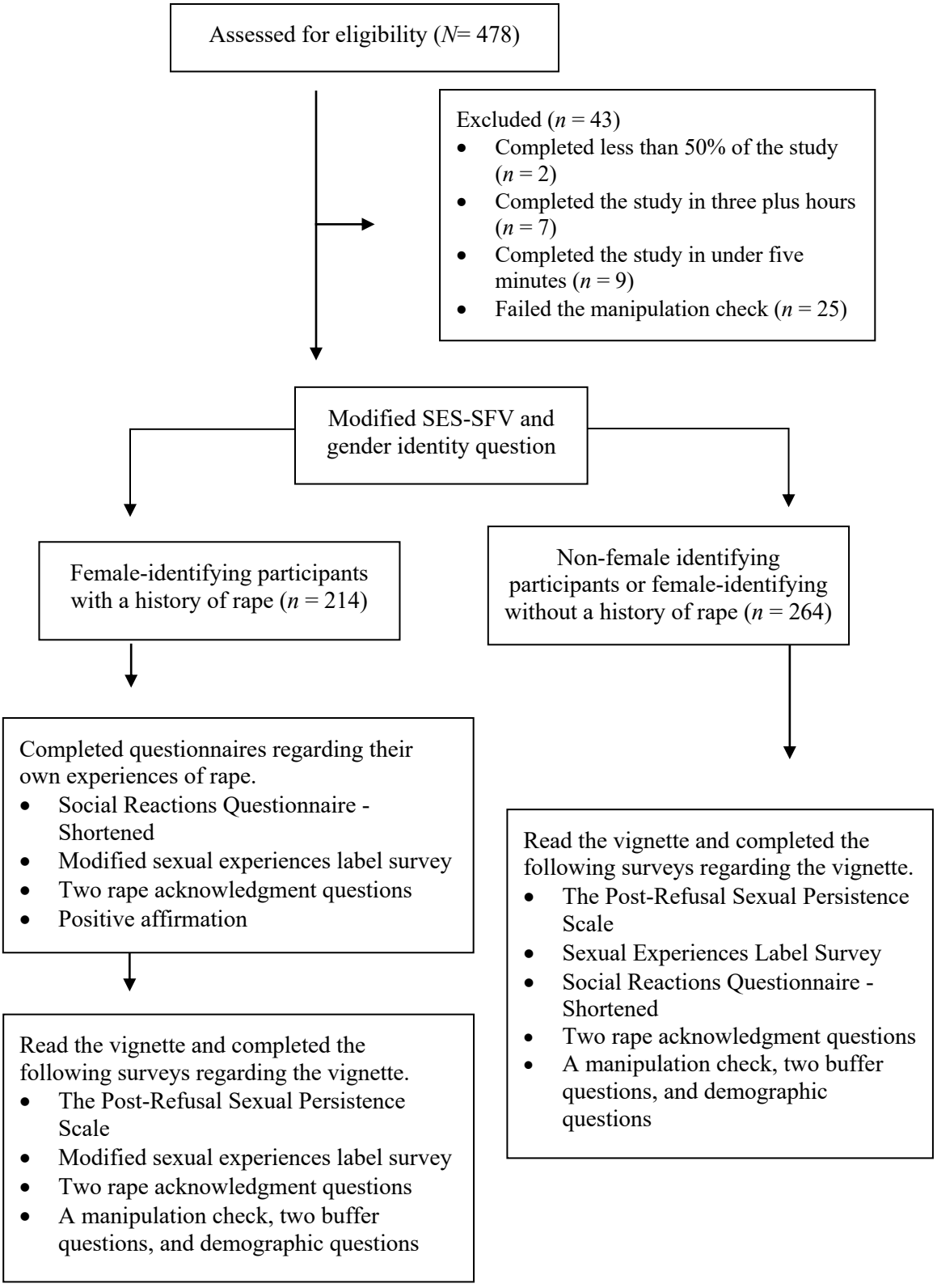
collected through a choose-all that apply format, which we coded into groups. To protect participant anonymity and provide meaningful descriptive data, we grouped responses into the following: 81.8% White, 10.3% Latino/a/x, 8.8% Biracial, 4.7% Asian, 1.9% Black, and 2.8% did not report.

Procedures

The study was completed via Qualtrics.com, and participants provided informed consent electronically. Participants were recruited using a university-based recruiting platform (SONA). Course credit was offered to complete this study which was titled "Sexual Experiences of Undergraduate Students" (alternative means to obtain course credit were offered). Participants completed a set of self-report questionnaires based on their responses to the modified Sexual Experienced Survey- Short Form Version (Koss et al., 2007) and a gender identity question (see Figure 1). Additionally, all participants completed demographic questions regarding sexual identity, race/ethnicity, and age. Due to this study being focused on a sensitive topic we embedded survivor affirming affirmations (refer to Appendix for affirmation) between surveys; added a withdraw button on each page of the study; and of course, provided Debriefing resources related to mental health and survivor support/advocacy.

Figure 1

Survey Study flow



Initially, it was proposed that participants would complete a pre-screener for course credit to ensure they had a history of rape and identified as female before continuing onto the remainder of the study for additional course credit. However, once recruitment began, participants were completing the pre-screening survey but not continuing to the remainder of the study. After one month of running the study as a pre-screen survey followed by an additional survey, we incorporated the pre-screening survey (modified SES-SFV and a question regarding gender identity) into the main survey. Once the modified SES-SFV and a gender identity question were added to the main survey, the prerequisites for participation were removed. Individuals who reported an experience of rape and identified as female completed a set of self-report measures regarding their perceptions and history of sexual violence. Participants who did not report an experience of rape or did not identify as female completed an extra survey regarding perceptions of the vignette. This was done to ensure all participants spent an equal amount of time on the study (see Figure 1).

Materials

Vignette

The vignette administered was a first-person story describing the rape of a college woman while at a party with a male acquaintance. The vignette was created using research-based campus sexual violence characteristics, such as alcohol consumption, consent confusion, and aspects of rape culture (Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Harned, 2005; Sweeney, 2011; refer to Appendix for full vignette).

Pilot Testing the Vignette. The vignette was piloted among psychology students recruited from Western Washington University's online research management system to assess the ecological validity of the campus rape depicted. Upon completion of reading the vignette, students

answered a series of questions which included, “would this happen on WWU’s campus?” The responses were on a 4-point-Likert- scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), with the mean response being 3.13. A research lab of graduate and undergraduate students familiar with trauma research provided additional feedback on the vignette to ensure that it depicted what the author intended.

Measures

Modified Sexual Experience Survey- Short Form Version

The original Revised Sexual Experience Survey - Short Form Version (SES-SFV; Koss et al., 2007) is the most widely used scale in sexual violence research (Johnson et al., 2017; Koss et al., 2007). The SES-SFV assesses sexual violence history since the age of 14 and within the last year. The age of 14 is used in the SES-SFV as the cut-off because it is believed that experiences of rape before the age of 14 align more with childhood sexual abuse (Koss et al., 2007). The original form of the SES-SFV consists of six questions, three about specific sexual acts and three about attempted sexual acts (e.g., vaginal, anal, or oral acts). These three questions include five coercive tactics that may have been used to obtain the sexual acts (e.g., use of lies, verbal coercion, substance use, threat of physical harm, and physical harm). Participants endorse the number of times a sexual act and coercive tactic occurred to them (0, 1, 2, 3+ times) in the past year and since the age of 14. Participants are able to endorse multiple coercive tactics under one sexual act, as more than one coercive tactic can be used in instances of sexual violence (Koss et al., 2007). Participants then answer a stand-alone question of “have you been raped” with dichotomous response options (i.e., *yes* or *no*). Scoring for the SES-SFV can be done dichotomously (e.g., individuals did or did not experience victimization) or by adding the frequencies across acts.

In order to best capture this study's research questions, modifications were made to the SES-SFV. First, all questions regarding attempted sexual acts were removed as this study explicitly examined individuals who have experienced rape. Further, to increase gender inclusivity, all references to gender were removed, and questions assessing anal and vaginal penetration were combined. This study aimed to capture the experiences of female-identifying individuals regardless of their genitalia. Combining these questions allowed for the removing the question "do you have a vagina" before questions specifically about vaginal penetration. For example, the original SES-SFV states, "A man put his penis into my butt, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent by" and "A man put his penis into my vagina, or someone inserted fingers or objects without my consent by" (Koss et al., 2007). However, in this study, the question appeared as "someone put their penis, finger(s), or object(s) into my butt *or* vagina without my consent by." Previous researchers have modified the SES-SFV to make it more gender-inclusive (Anderson et al., 2017, 2020; Canan, 2020; Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015).

Additionally, surprise (e.g., just doing the behavior without asking) was added as a coercive tactic. This modification was suggested by a group of researchers who found that over 50% of their female-identifying sample, including individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, endorsed the surprise tactic as a type of coercion used by perpetrators during their experiences of sexual violence (Canan et al., 2020). Furthermore, the survey response format was changed from frequencies (i.e., how many times has this occurred?) to dichotomous response options of yes or no. Lastly, the stand-alone acknowledgment question was changed to have a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree).*

; refer to the appendix for the full survey). We found this survey to have acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .78$).

Modified Sexual Experience Label Survey

The Sexual Experience Label Survey (SELS) was initially created and implemented by Peterson and Muelenhard (2004). It consists of 20 possible labels for experiences of rape. Examples of the possible labels are unwanted sex, rape, something that happens to everyone, or a one-night stand. All participants completed this survey to assess what labels they felt best described the story depicted in the vignette. Participants with a history of rape completed this survey a second time regarding their most recent experience of unwanted sex. Again, they were asked to pick all the labels they felt best described that experience. For this study, the list of possible labels was updated to include a total of 27 items (i.e., an accident on my part, a normal hook-up, a drunken mistake on my part) that were informed by the current literature on labeling rape (LeMarie et al., 2016; Orchowski et al., 2013; Rousseau et al., 2020; refer to appendix for full survey).

Rape Acknowledgment Status Questions

There were two questions assessing rape acknowledgment status. The first, "Since the age of 14, have you experienced a rape?" had multi-categorical response options (i.e., yes, unsure, and no) the second, "I have been raped," had a continuous Likert-scale response format ranging from 1 (s*trongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). All participants answered both rape acknowledgment questions to measure how they assessed the vignette. The continuous response question was placed at the end of the vignette, while the categorical response question was placed among three questions between the vignette and the SELS (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004).

In addition, female-identifying participants with a history of rape answered the rape acknowledgment questions a second time to measure their rape acknowledgment status. The

continuous response question was placed at the beginning of the SRQ-S (Ullman, 2010), and the multi-categorical response question was placed at the end of the SES-SFV (Koss et al., 2007).

Buffer Measures Not Used in Analyses

For this study, two buffer measures (i.e., The Post-Refusal Sexual Persistence Scale and the Social Reactions Questionnaire– Shortened), two buffer questions, and a manipulation check were administered. All the buffers were added to prevent participants from knowing the study's true purpose. The two buffer questions were "the female in this story is intoxicated" and "the male in this story is intoxicated." The manipulation check question was, "What class did the two individuals meet in?"

Data Analysis Plan

Analyses were conducted in SPSS and R Studio. To test the hypothesis that unacknowledged victims would label *others'* rape as rape at lower rates than acknowledged victims, we performed an independent samples *t*-test of the mean difference in rape acknowledgment—operationalized as scores on a 6-point, Likert-type continuous scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*)—between acknowledged versus unacknowledged participants in the sample. Participant responses to the categorical question about their rape history were used to create two groups for the *t*-test. Participants who answered *yes* were categorized as acknowledged verse *no,* and *unsure* were categorized as unacknowledged.

To test the hypothesis that unacknowledged rape victims would be more likely to acknowledge that they *themselves* have experienced rape if asked on a continuous (versus multi-categorical) scale, we performed a one-way-between-subjects ANOVA of the mean differences in rape acknowledgment—operationalized as scores on a 6-point, Likert-type continuous scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*)—between acknowledged versus

unacknowledged participants in the sample. Three groups were created for the one-way ANOVA based on participants' responses to the multi-categorical question about their rape history (i.e., *yes*, *no*, *unsure*). All other research questions were addressed with descriptive statistics.

Results

Descriptive Information Regarding Participants' History of Rape

All participants had an experience of rape since the age of 14, with a majority (60%) having an experience of rape within the last year (n = 128). The most common tactic that 96% (n = 206) of participants reported experiencing (n = 206) was criticism (i.e., criticizing my sexuality or getting angry but not using physical force). The least common tactic that 30% (n = 30) of participants reported experiencing was a threat of physical harm (i.e., threatening me or someone I love).

Perceptions of a Female Vignette Protagonist's Rape (Research Question 1)

Labels Applied to the Rape in the Vignette

When examining how acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims labeled the female protagonist's rape in the vignette, we categorized participants into two groups. The groups were created using participants' responses to the multi-categorical question about their rape history. Participants who answered *yes* were categorized as acknowledged, versus *no* or *unsure* were categorized as unacknowledged.

For participants categorized as unacknowledged, 22 of the 27 labels were selected. The modal label was *unwanted sex,* chosen by 96% of participants, followed by rape, chosen by 91% of participants. The most common labels chosen were *unwanted sex*, *rape*, *sexual assault*, *forced sex*, and *an assault*. Interestingly, more unacknowledged participants chose the label *rape* (91%) to describe the vignette rather than *sexual assault* (86%). As for the labels *not* chosen,

there were five: *childhood sexual abuse*, *a natural sexual experience*, *a normal hook-up*, *a good sexual experience*, and *an exciting experience*. Lastly, four participants in the unacknowledged category chose the label *none of these labels fit the story* and instead provided a self-specified label. Upon evaluating the four self-specified labels, we concluded they fit within the options already provided on the SELS (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004) and did not add additional labels. For example, a participant's self-specifying label was "this is clearly a sexual assault," which fit with the existing label of sexual assault.

For participants categorized as acknowledged, 19 of the 27 labels were selected. The modal labels were *unwanted sex* and *sexual assault,* chosen by 88% of participants, followed by rape, chosen by 86% of participants. The most common labels chosen were *unwanted sex*, *sexual assault*, *rape*, *forced sex*, and *an assault*. Interestingly, more acknowledged participants chose the label *sexual assault* (88%) to describe the vignette rather than *rape* (86%). The nine labels that the acknowledged group did not use were: *an accident on Cody's part*, *an accident on Laura's part*, *a mistake on Laura's part*, *none of these labels fit the story*, *a natural sexual experience*, *a normal hook-up*, *a good sexual experience*, and *an exciting experience*.

Exploratory analysis of how label selection differs by participant acknowledgment status. To further examine the differences in labels chosen to describe the vignette by participant acknowledgment status, chi-square tests were done on each label to identify any statistical differences between the two groups (acknowledged vs. unacknowledged). Boustani's (2020) excel template was used to apply the Holm-Bonferroni correction (Holm, 1979) to control for family-wise error. After applying the Holm-Bonferroni correction, no statistical differences were found between the labels chosen to describe the vignette based on acknowledgment status (see Table 1).

Table 1

Labels Applied to the Female Vignette Protagonist's Rape by Participant Acknowledgment Status

	Rape Acknowledgment Status		
	Unacknowledged	Acknowledged	
	%(n)	*%(n)*	$\chi^2(1) =$
Unwanted Sex	96% (142)	88% (56)	3.33, $p = 1.340$
Rape	91% (135)	86% (55)	0.74, $p = 3.384$
A Sexual Assault	86% (127)	88% (56)	0.29, $p = 3.384$
Forced Sex	82% (122)	73% (47)	1.68, $p = 2.805$
An Assault	74% (109)	70% (45)	0.12, $p = 3.384$
A Crime	71% (105)	61% (39)	1.67, $p = 2.805$
A Bad Sexual Experience	65% (96)	52% (33)	2.90, $p = 1.602$
A Mistake on Cody's Part	41% (61)	25% (16)	4.78, $p = .667$
A Drunken Mistake on Cody's Part	23% (34)	19% (12)	0.41, $p = 3.384$
A Miscommunication	22% (33)	23% (15)	0.05, $p = 3.384$
Cody's Uncontrollable Arousal	16% (24)	13% (8)	0.43, $p = 3.384$
A Typical College Experience	15% (23)	25% (16)	2.81, $p = 1.602$
A Bad Hook-Up	13% (20)	23% (15)	3.35, $p = 1.340$
A Learning Experience	9% (13)	9% (6)	0.03, $p = 3.384$
A Seduction	8% (12)	5% (3)	0.76, $p = 3.384$
An Accident on Cody's Part	6% (10)	0	4.48, $p = .748$
An Accident on Laura's Part	5% (8)	0	3.55, $p = 1. 260$
A Drunken Mistake on Laura's Part	4% (7)	2% (1)	1.20, $p = 3.003$
A Mistake on Laura's Part	3% (4)	0	1.74, $p = 2.805$
None of These Labels Fit the Story	3% (4)	0	1.74, $p = 2.805$
Something That Happens to Everyone	2% (3)	5% (3)	1.19, $p = 3.003$
A Normal Sexual Experience	1% (2)	3% (2)	0.79, $p = 3.384$
Childhood Sexual Abuse	0	2% (1)	2.36, $p = 2.000$
A Natural Sexual Experience	0	0	
A Normal Hook-Up	0	0	
A Good Sexual Experience	0	0	
An Exciting Experience	0	0	

Note. $n = 150$ for unacknowledged rape victims and $n = 64$ for acknowledged rape victims. All p values were adjusted using the Holm-Bonferroni correction to keep the family-wise error rate at .05. * indicates statistical significance.

Acknowledgment of the Rape in the Vignette (Hypothesis 1)

To examine how acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims would view the rape of a female protagonist, we categorized participants into two groups. Participants were categorized by their multi-categorical responses. Those who answered *yes* were categorized as acknowledged versus *no,* or *unsure* were categorized as unacknowledged. We hypothesized that unacknowledged rape victims would label others' experiences of rape as rape at lower rates than acknowledged rape victims when asked on a 6-point Likert scale. A between-subjects *t*-test revealed that there was no difference between how acknowledged rape victims (M = 5.66 SD = .78) and unacknowledged rape victims (M =5.59 SD = .65) viewed a female protagonist's experience of rape as rape on a 6-point Likert Scale $t(212) = .61$, $p = .616$.

Perceptions of One's Own Experiences of Rape (Research Question 2)

Labels Applied to One's Own Recent Experience of Rape

When examining how acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims labeled their most recent experience of unwanted sex, we categorized participants into two groups. As in research question 1, groups were created using participant responses to the categorical question about their rape history: participants who answered *yes* were categorized as acknowledged, versus *no* or *unsure* were categorized as unacknowledged.

For participants categorized as unacknowledged, 27 of the 27 labels were chosen. Additionally, two labels (*a coercive experience* and *an experience I was pressured into*) were added based on participants choosing to self-specify labels. The modal label chosen by unacknowledged participants was *a bad sexual experience* (50% of participants), followed by *a miscommunication* (36% of participants). The most common labels chosen by the unacknowledged participants were *a bad sexual experience, miscommunication, unwanted sex, a*

learning experience, and *a mistake on my part.* Of the unacknowledged participants, only 3% selected the label *rape* to describe their own experience.

For participants categorized as acknowledged, 26 of the 27 labels were chosen. The modal label was *sexual assault,* chosen by 63% of participants, followed by *unwanted sex* chosen by 58% of participants. The most common labels chosen by the unacknowledged participants were *sexual assault*, *unwanted sex*, *rape*, *bad sexual experience*, and *forced sex.* The one label that the acknowledged group did not use was *an exciting sexual experience*. Although participants did choose to include self-specified labels, they fit within the available labels (e.g., my ex-boyfriend raped me), so no additional labels were added.

Exploratory analysis of how label selection differs by participant acknowledgment status. Chi-square tests were performed to further examine the differences in the labels which acknowledged versus unacknowledged participants chose to describe their most recent experience of unwanted sex. Boustani's (2020) excel template was used to apply the Holm-Bonferroni correction (Holm, 1979) to control for family-wise error. After applying the Holm-Bonferroni correction, there were statistical differences in the labels selected by acknowledged and unacknowledged participants for four labels: *unwanted sex*, *sexual assault*, *forced sex*, and *rape*. Specifically, *unwanted sex* was selected by 58% of acknowledged participants compared to 34% of unacknowledged participants; *sexual assault* was selected by 63% of acknowledged compared to 23% of unacknowledged; *forced sex* was selected by 43% of acknowledged compared to 23% of unacknowledged; *rape* was selected by 53% of acknowledged compared to 3% of unacknowledged (see Table 2).

Table 2

Labels Applied to One's Own Most Recent Experience of Unwanted Sex by Acknowledgment Status

	Rape Acknowledgment Status		
	Unacknowledged	Acknowledged	
	%(n)	*%(n)*	$\chi^2(1) =$
A Bad Sexual Experience	50% (74)	50.3% (32)	0.08, $p = 5.496$
A Miscommunication	36% (55)	32% (21)	0.29, $p = 5.496$
Unwanted Sex	34% (51)	58% (37)	10.51, $p = .026$*
A Learning Experience	34% (51)	33% (21)	0.03, $p = 5.496$
A Mistake on My Part	28% (42)	22% (14)	0.87, $p = 4.914$
A Bad Hook-Up	24% (36)	20% (13)	0.35, $p = 5.496$
A Sexual assault	23% (35)	63% (40)	30.23, $p = .027$*
An Instance of Uncontrollable Male Arousal	23% (35)	18% (12)	0.55, $p = 5.496$
A Mistake on the Other Person's Part	21% (32)	23% (15)	0.12, $p = 5.496$
A Drunken Mistake on My Part	20% (30)	23% (15)	0.32, $p = 5.496$
An Accident on My Part	18% (27)	.06% (4)	5.00, $p = .575$
An Assault	17% (25)	34% (22)	8.21, $p = .096$
Something That Happens to Everyone	15% (23)	20% (13)	0.80, $p = 4.914$
Drunken Mistake on The Other Person's Part	14% (21)	12% (8)	0.09, $p = 5.496$
Forced Sex	12% (18)	43% (28)	26.70, $p = .029$*
A Typical College Experience	11% (17)	20% (13)	3.00, $p = 1.743$
A Seduction	10% (16)	7% (5)	0.41, $p = 5.496$
An Accident on The Other Person's Part	10% (16)	6% (4)	1.03, $p = 4.848$
A Normal Sexual Experience	9% (14)	9% (6)	0.00, $p = 5.496$
A Normal Hook-Up	7% (11)	3% (2)	1.39, $p = 4.522$
A Crime	6% (10)	20% (13)	8.71, $p = .075$
Childhood Sexual Abuse	6% (10)	9% (6)	0.48, $p = 5.496$
No Label Describes My Experience	6% (10)	4% (3)	0.31, $p = 5.496$
A Good Sexual Experience	6% (10)	3% (2)	1.06, $p = 4.848$
A Natural Sexual Experience	4% (7)	1% (1)	1.20, $p = 4.641$
An Exciting Experience	4% (7)	0	3.09, $p = 1.738$
Rape	3% (4)	53% (34)	78.21, $p = .028$*
A Coercive Experience	2% (3)	0	1.30, $p = 4.590$
An Experience I was Pressured Into	.06% (1)	0	2.36, $p = 2.500$

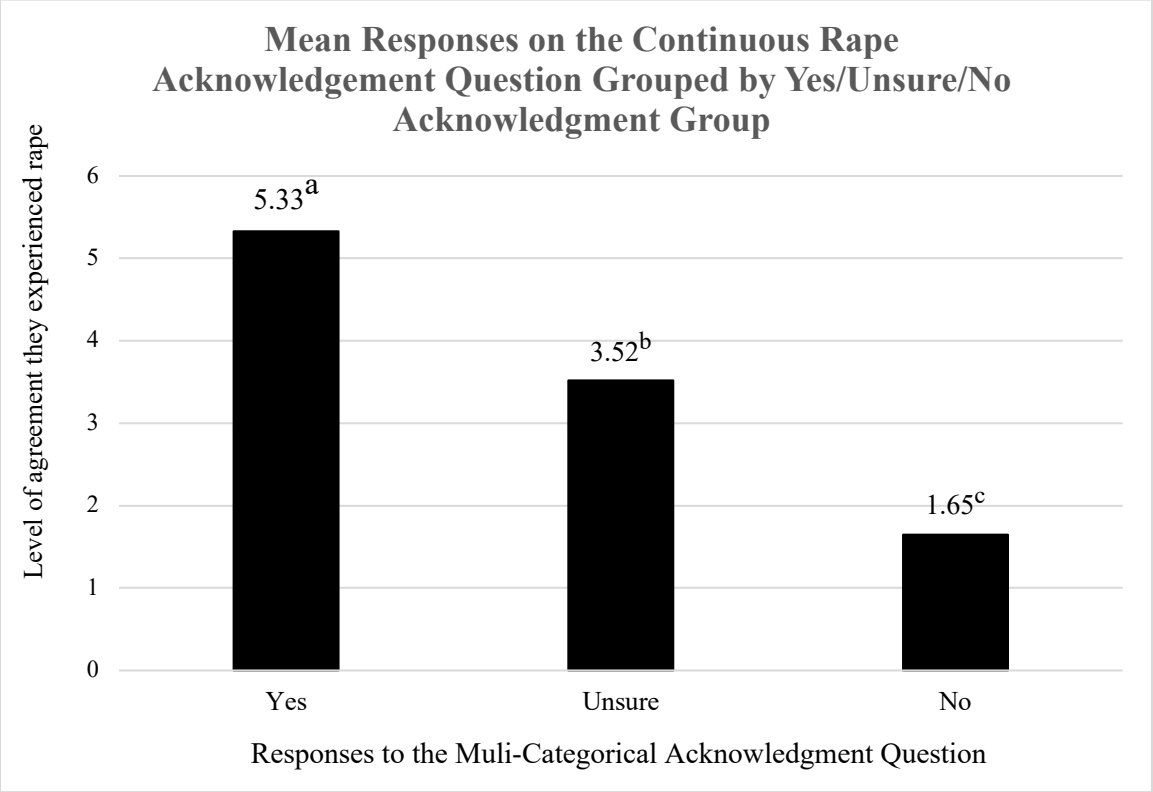
Note. $n = 147$ for unacknowledged rape victims and $n = 64$ for acknowledged rape victims. All p values were adjusted using the Holm-Bonferroni correction to keep the family-wise error rate at .05. * indicates statistical significance.

Acknowledgment of One's Experience of Rape on a Continuous Versus Multi-Categorical Response Scale (Hypothesis 2)

Next, we examined how participants' multi-categorical rape acknowledgment status (*yes*, *no*, *unsure*) related to their degree of rape acknowledgment assessed on a continuous scale. We hypothesized that unacknowledged rape victims (those in the *no* and *unsure* categories) would report a greater degree of acknowledgment that they have experienced rape if asked on a 6-point, Likert-type (vs. multi-categorical) response scale. The results of this ANOVA to test Hypothesis 2 can be found in Figure 1.

A Bartlett's homogeneity of variance test indicated a significant difference between multi-categorical rape acknowledgment (i.e., yes, no, unsure) and ratings of rape acknowledgment on a Likert scale $B(2) = 12.18$, $p = .002$. A Welch's ANOVA was used as the data did not meet the assumption of homogeneity of variance. There was a statistically significant difference between the three rape acknowledgment groups, Welch's $F(2, 119) = 345.89$, $p < .001$. To identify the differences among the groups, we conducted a Games-Howell post-hoc test ($p < .001$) sensitive to groups with heterogeneity of variance. The test indicated a statistically significant difference in mean responses to the continuous rape acknowledgment question when participants were categorized by their response to the multi-categorical rape acknowledgment question (yes, no, unsure; see Figure 2).

Figure 2

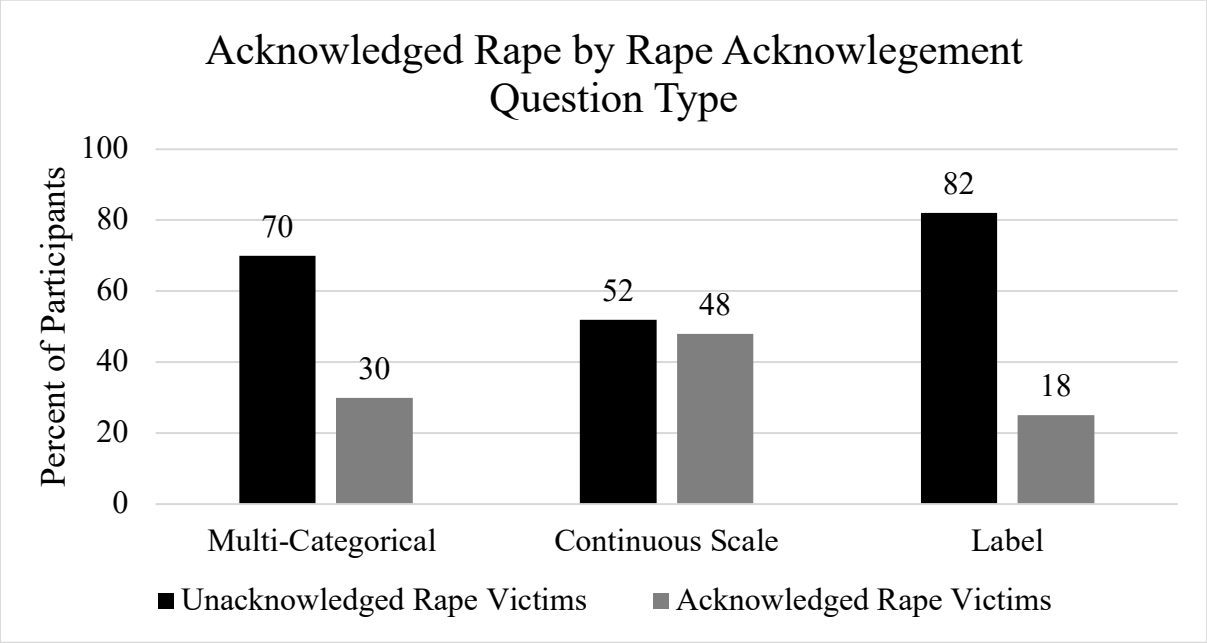


Note: A Games-Howell post hoc test compared the means and found that a > b, $p < .001$; a > c, $p < 001$; b > c, $p < .001$.

Participants ($n = 100$) who answered *no* to the question "Have you been raped?" had the lowest mean rate of agreement on the Likert-type question *I have been raped* ($M = 1.65$ SD = 1.07), between *Strongly disagree* and *Slightly disagree*, but closer to the latter. Among participants ($n = 50$) who answered *unsure* to the question "Have you been raped," the mean rate of agreement on the Likert-type question *I have been raped* ($M = 3.52$ SD = 1.02) was between *Slightly disagree* and *Slightly agree*, but closer to the latter. Lastly, participants ($n = 64$) who answered *yes* to the question "Have you been raped?" had the highest mean rate of agreement on the Likert-type question *I have been raped* ($M = 5.33$ SD = .71), between *Agree* and *Strongly agree,* but closer to the former (See Figure 2).

Additionally, we assessed whether rape acknowledgment status varied by how acknowledgment questions were posed (see Figure 3). Thus, we calculated the rates of

Figure 3



Note: The Multi-Categorical question categorized individuals who responded yes as acknowledged rape victims and no/unsure responses as unacknowledged rape victims. The continuous scale categorized individuals as acknowledged rape victims when their responses were 4-6 on the Likert scale, whereas responses of 1-3 indicated unacknowledged rape victims. The label question categorized individuals as acknowledged rape victims when they chose rape as one of the labels to describe their experience.

acknowledged vs. unacknowledged rape victims in the sample based on the different questions about participant rape history. First, when rape acknowledgment was operationalized as the answer *yes* (versus *no* or *unsure*) on the multi-categorical rape history question "Since the age of 14, have you ever been raped?", 30% of the 214 participants who responded to the question were categorized as acknowledged rape victims (n = 64 for *yes*), and 70% were categorized as unacknowledged rape victims (n = 100 for *no* and n = 50 for *unsure*). Second, when rape acknowledgment was operationalized as selecting a response option from *slightly agree* (4) to

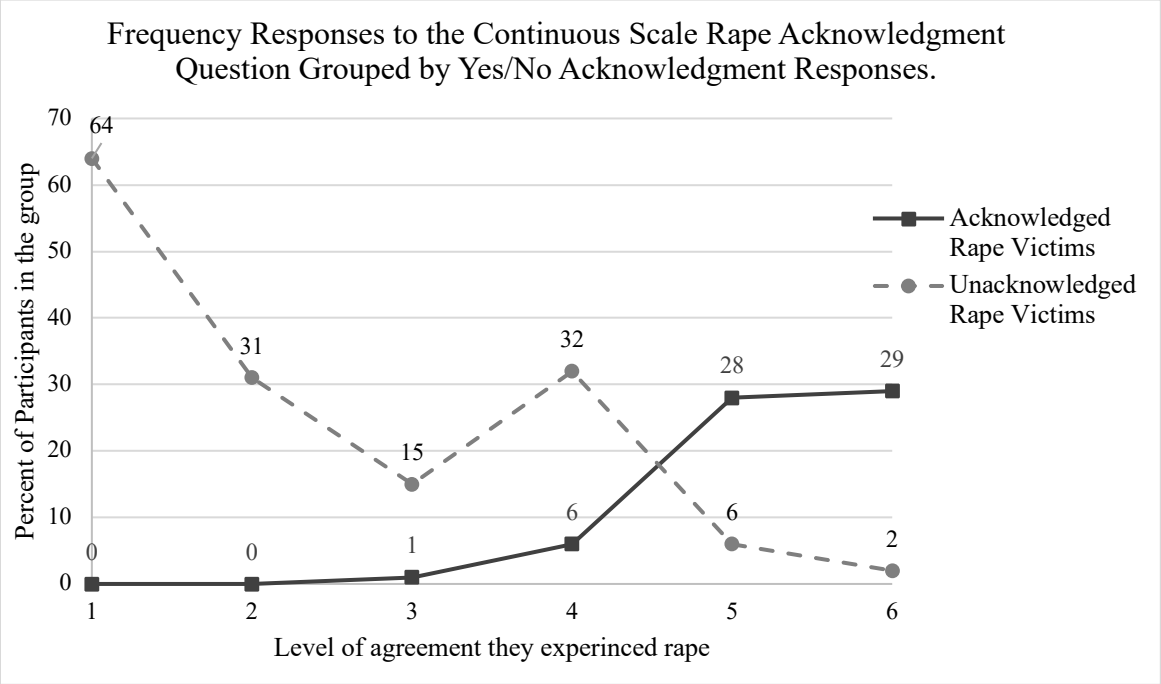
strongly agree (6) on the continuous scale rape acknowledgment question, "I have been raped," 48% of participants (*n* = 103) were categorized as acknowledged rape victims. The remainder, 51% (*n* = 111), selected response options from *strongly disagree* (1) to *slightly disagree* (3) and were categorized as unacknowledged victims in this operationalization.

Third, we examined the responses to the sexual experiences label survey (SELS; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004) as an operationalization of rape acknowledgment. Although the SELS is not traditionally used to measure rape acknowledgment status, due to participants being able to choose more than one label (rape, sexual assault, or forced sex), it presented as an interesting opportunity given the context of this study. Rape acknowledgment was operationalized as the selection of *rape* as a label on the SELS; 25% of participants (*n* =38) were categorized as acknowledged rape victims, and 82% (*n* = 176) were unacknowledged victims who selected *sexual assault* or *forced sex* as response options (see Figure 2).

Exploratory Analysis - Frequency Responses to Continuous Rape Acknowledgment Question

To capture nuances in participant responses to the continuous rape acknowledgment question by acknowledgment status, we looked at the frequencies of responses to the continuous Likert-scale rape acknowledgment question by dichotomous categorical acknowledgment status (*acknowledged* = yes, *unacknowledged* = no or unsure). We found that acknowledged participants—those who answered *yes* to the multi-categorical question "I have been raped"—had responses ranging from *slightly disagree* (3) to *strongly agree* (6). Unacknowledged participants—those who answered *no* or *unsure* to the multi-categorical question "I have been raped"—had responses ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



Note: Participants were categorized using their responses to the multi-categorical rape acknowledgment questions. Participants who answered *yes* were categorized as acknowledged versus *no,* or *unsure* were categorized as unacknowledged.

Discussion

This study aimed to replicate and expand the literature regarding the relationship between young women's rape acknowledgment status and perceptions of sexual violence (both personal experiences and others' experiences) while also assessing differences in acknowledgment status based on survey question response formats. Implementing a survey- and vignette-based design, we found that regardless of their rape acknowledgment status, college women with experiences of rape used the label "rape" to describe a female vignette protagonist's acquaintance rape (described behaviorally in the vignette without being named or labeled as such). When examining the relationship between rape acknowledgment status and perceptions of one's own rape experiences, unacknowledged (vs. acknowledged) rape victims were more likely to name

their experience of rape as rape when asked on a continuous Likert-type scale (vs. a multi-categorical response scale). Lastly, when comparing rape acknowledgment question response formats, a continuous Likert scale resulted in the most acknowledgment of rape (vs. multi-categorical and choosing rape as a label response formats). These findings provide insight into the implications of rape acknowledgment status and suggest that an individual's status may not interfere with perceptions of others' experiences of sexual violence. Also, these findings have scientific implications as they suggest that the measurement of rape acknowledgment status can be improved.

Rape Acknowledgment Status and Perceptions of Other's Rapes

Our finding of acknowledgment status not being influential when perceiving others' rapes align with Sasson and Paul's (2014) finding. Sasson & Paul (2014) found that rape acknowledgment status did not influence how a community sample perceived a vignette depicting rape. We hypothesized the opposite of Sasson and Paul's (2014) findings due to their sample being older than college students (mean age of 33), including a small number of acknowledged (n = 66) and unacknowledged (n = 44) participants in the sample (N = 401), and their using a vignette that depicted a physically violent rape. An additional contribution of the present study is our comparison of the labels that acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims selected to describe a vignette depicting rape, although we did not find any statistical differences between the two groups. These findings suggest that, regardless of how they are asked, young women's rape acknowledgment status does not seem to connect to their perceptions of a stranger's experience of rape.

Previous research has established that unacknowledged rape victims are more likely to minimize their own experiences of rape through comparison (i.e., traditional rape scripts or

other's experiences), leading them to view their experiences of rape as "not bad enough" and not labeling the experience as rape (Harden, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2020). However, since the #MeToo Movement went viral in 2017 (me too. Movement, 2015), media attention regarding sexual violence has vastly increased, especially surrounding college sexual assault. For example, the walk-out that was staged to support Alexandra Docken at the University of Connecticut (Burchill, 2022). Therefore, it is possible that unacknowledged rape victims are minimizing their own experiences but are still able to identify instances of rape impacting others. Further, Sinko et al. (2021) found that college women were able to identify instances of sexual violence normalization on their college campuses. Our findings, collectively with those of Sinko et al. (2021), suggest that the internalization of rape culture is less influential when perceiving others' experiences of sexual violence.

Another possible explanation for our findings could be that women and those with a history of victimization are more empathetic towards individuals who have experienced sexual violence (Anderson et al., 2021; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Osman, 2011). Thus, it is possible that we found no difference in how acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims viewed the vignette, as participant empathy outweighed the influence of rape culture when reading the vignette.

Rape Acknowledgment Status and Perceptions of Rape Experiences Based on Question Response Format

Our hypothesis regarding women's rape acknowledgment status and perceptions of their own rape experiences was supported. We found that unacknowledged rape victims were more likely to acknowledge their experience of rape when asked on a continuous Likert scale than on a multi-categorical yes-no-unsure scale. Further, we found that individuals who were "unsure"

whether their experience constituted rape or not were more likely to agree their experience was rape when asked on a continuous Likert scale. Our findings replicate previous work showing that unacknowledged rape victims are more likely to label their experiences as rape when asked on a continuous Likert scale (Anderson et al., 2022; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that a categorical response format may be too narrow for unacknowledged rape victims, as this format forces the weighty choice between a label of rape or not rape. Indeed, the word "rape" is viewed negatively by society (Delker, 2022; Kahn et al., 2018) and can result in being labeled a "victim," which can cause negative personal and emotional impacts (Donde et al., 2018; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011).

Further, it has been established that many unacknowledged rape victims' experiences of rape do not match rape scripts (Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Rousseau et al., 2020); therefore, a categorical response format lacks flexibility, especially for individuals that are struggling to view their experience as rape. A continuous Likert-type response format may have resulted in more unacknowledged rape victims acknowledging their experience of rape. It allows for flexibility when acknowledging experiences of rape without undertaking the full emotional toll of labeling an experience as rape.

Similarly, when we compared the rates of acknowledged rape between three methods of measuring rape acknowledgment status (i.e., multi-categorical, continuous, and the sexual experiences label survey; SELS; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2004), we found the continuous Likert scale to result in the highest rate of acknowledged rape. The SELS is not commonly used to measure rape acknowledgment status. However, it presented an interesting opportunity for comparison. Our findings match those of Anderson and colleagues (2022). They also found a continuous Likert scale to result in the highest rates of acknowledged rape, suggesting that a

multi-categorical response format may be too restrictive when assessing rape acknowledgment status and should be reconsidered.

Rape Acknowledgment Status and Labeling Experiences of Rape

We expanded on Harden's (2005) findings of labels that unacknowledged rape victims used to describe experiences of rape. Additionally, we expanded the literature by comparing the labels that acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims used to describe these experiences. Specifically, we found that unacknowledged rape victims chose labels that aligned with rape culture, such as *a mistake on my part*, *a learning experience*, *a miscommunication*, and *a bad hook-up*. In comparison, acknowledged rape victims chose labels such as *rape*, *sexual assault*, and *forced sex*. This difference exemplifies how unacknowledged rape victims may internalize cultural stigma, particularly minimization and blame. The most common labels unacknowledged rape victims chose either minimized their experience of rape (i.e., *bad sexual experience*, a *miscommunication*, *a learning experience*, and *a bad hook-up*) or blamed themselves (i.e., *a mistake on my part*) for the experience.

Additionally, in contrast to previous research (Littleton et al., 2006), we found that acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims used minimizing labels (i.e., miscommunication, *bad sexual experience*, and *learning experience*) at similar rates. This finding extends previous research (Harden, 2005; Littleton, 2009) that found common alternative labels used by unacknowledged rape victims to be *miscommunication* and *bad sexual experience*. However, our findings indicate that these labels were used equally regardless of rape acknowledgment status, indicating that acknowledged rape victims are internalizing cultural stigma even if they are able to label their experiences of rape as rape, as they are also choosing minimizing labels. This finding may allude to a difference in the expression (i.e., overt vs.

covert) of internalized cultural stigma between acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims. We found it common for unacknowledged rape victims to choose labels that minimized or denied their experiences of rape (i.e., overt expression). In contrast, acknowledged rape victims chose minimizing and denying labels in conjunction with other labels such as rape, unwanted sex, sexual assault, or forced sex (i.e., covert expression).

Another novel contribution of this study was that unacknowledged rape victims chose the labels *unwanted sex*, *sexual assault*, *forced sex*, and *rape* at significantly lower rates than acknowledged rape victims. This finding highlights that unacknowledged rape victims not only are less likely to label their experiences of rape as rape, but they are also less likely to label their experiences of rape with commonly used alternative words for rape (i.e., *sexual assault*, *forced sex*, and *unwanted sex*). Our finding potentially suggests a need to adjust the way that rape victimization is measured, as many surveys use phrases such as unwanted sex, forced sex, and sexual assault to capture instances of rape. Perhaps this finding is due to unacknowledged victims experiencing assault characteristics that align with rape myths, such as less physical violence or increased alcohol consumption. Previous research has found that unacknowledged victims experience less physically violent rapes or report heavy drinking during the rape (Littleton et al., 2009), which may make them less likely to use the label rape and common alternative words. However, we did not ascertain data regarding assault characteristics to confirm this speculation.

Implications

Study findings have clinical, prevention, and survey research implications. Regarding clinical implications, clinicians should consider administering rape acknowledgment questions to clients to provide sexual violence resources for unacknowledged rape victims that may not view

their experience as rape, unwanted sex, forced sex, or sexual assault. Further, young women who are acknowledged may still need a clinician's help to work through their minimizing feelings associated with their experience of rape in the recovery process (Conoscenti & McNally, 2006; Littleton & Henderson, 2009). Lastly, college women with experiences of rape may have more than one label to describe their experience of rape.

These findings indicate that the cultural stigma surrounding interpersonal violence, specifically rape culture, can influence young women as they perceive and label their experiences of rape. Rape culture not only affects unacknowledged victims but acknowledged victims as well. Thus, college campuses should continue to implement sexual violence prevention programs that focus on attitude changes (i.e., endorsement of rape culture; Cares et al., 2014), while resources for college students should highlight how cultural stigma can influence the way they label and understand their experience of rape. In addition, resources for survivors should highlight the ways that rape culture can be internalized (i.e., minimizing or denying one's experience) in an effort to give survivors the ability to identify when rape culture is skewing their perception of their rape.

Research implications of this study are related to the measurement of rape victimization, specifically rape acknowledgment status. Moving forward, researchers should consider using a continuous Likert scale when measuring rape acknowledgment status. Further, when measuring instances of victimization or working with unacknowledged rape victims, researchers should be aware that the use of the words rape, sexual assault, unwanted sex, and forced sex may result in unacknowledged rape victims being unable to identify with a question or statement. Instead, questions that tap into behaviorally specific events that correspond with sexual assault will provide a more accurate estimate of rape victimization in a sample. Lastly, we found an instance

in which rape acknowledgment status does not influence other measures (i.e., perceptions of others' rapes).

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study should be considered, such as the convenience sample, which was all-female psychology students who were predominately White, which impacts the generalizability of our results. For instance, Ahren et al. (2020) found a sample of Latina/x participants to adhere closely to traditional gender norms, leading us to infer that that sample may be less likely to label an act of rape as rape. Additionally, the university this data was collected is known for having a particularly left-leaning political orientation, which could have affected the way participants viewed the vignette, as liberal (vs. conservative) individuals tend to hold more positive attitudes towards victims (Naseralla et al., 2021).

Lastly, the vignette depicted a heteronormative rape which may have been easier for participants to identify as rape. Heteronormative roles are often defaulted to when talking about sexual acts. Therefore, it would be easier to identify an assault as rape when the perpetrator is male, and the victim is female (Javaid, 2018). Also, experiences of heteronormative rapes are more often shared than less prototypical experiences (i.e., female to female rape; Mortimer et al., 2019), and stereotypical rape scripts are often heteronormative (Littleton & Axsom, 2003). A replication and expansion of this study could address the limitation of the current study and measure perceptions of less heteronormative experiences of rape by varying components of the vignette (i.e., perpetrator and victim gender or sexual orientation).

Future studies should continue to investigate and improve the measurement of rape acknowledgment status. Specifically, future research should focus on ways to pose rape acknowledgment questions that will capture the experiences of unacknowledged rape victims or

develop a universal standard for measuring rape acknowledgment. Additionally, more research is needed to understand the extent of fluidity associated with rape acknowledgment status and if it changes over time. Future researchers should consider collecting longitudinal data that could capture predictive factors or the point in recovery that rape acknowledgment status changes, if at all. Further, longitudinal data could be used to identify if labels used to describe experiences of rape change while giving insight into survivors' utilization of minimizing labels over time.

Further, this study could be expanded by recruiting a more diverse sample (i.e., minority or male survivors). Replicating this study with male survivors would present a rich addition to the literature as there is limited research examining rape acknowledgment status in men. Due to gendered social norms around men's agency and invulnerability, we would expect additional layers of difficulty for male survivors to fully acknowledge experiences of sexual violence victimization (Turchik et al., 2016). Additionally, more research should be done to see if our results regarding the labels chosen by acknowledged and unacknowledged victims can be replicated and why individuals choose these specific labels.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing literature about rape acknowledgment status while beginning to tease apart the implications that internalizing cultural stigma can have on college women with experiences of rape. We hope this study inspires more work that continues to parse out the relationship between sexual violence and cultural stigma.

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Appendix

Modified Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Version

The following questions concern sexual experiences that you may have had that were unwanted. We know that these are personal questions, so we do not ask your name or other identifying information. Your information is completely confidential. We hope that this helps you to feel comfortable answering each question honestly. You may skip any questions you are not comfortable answering by **clicking the arrow at the bottom of the page**, or to withdraw from the study, **click the withdraw button at the bottom of the page**. Please circle Yes or No in the box to indicate if you have had this experience has happened to you. If several experiences occurred on the same occasion--for example, if one night someone told you some lies and had sex with you when you were drunk, you would circle yes in both box A and C. The past 12 months refers to the past year going back from today. Since age 14 refers to your life starting on your 14th birthday and stopping one year ago from today.

	Sexual Experiences Survey	**Has this happened in the past 12 months?**	**Has this Happened since the age 14?**
1	**Someone had oral sex with me or made me have oral sex with them *without* my consent by:**		
	a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn't want to.	Yes No	Yes No
	b. Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn't want to.	Yes No	Yes No
	c. Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	Yes No	Yes. No
	d. Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.	Yes No	Yes No

	e. Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon.	Yes No	Yes No
	f. Just doing the behavior without giving me a chance to say 'no' (e.g. surprising me with the behavior).	Yes No	Yes No

2	**Someone put their penis, finger(s), or object(s) into my butt *or* vagina, *without* my consent by:**		
	a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn't want to.	Yes No	Yes No
	b. Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn't want to.	Yes No	Yes No
	c. Taking advantage of me when I was too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	Yes No	Yes No
	d. Threatening to physically harm me or someone close to me.	Yes No	Yes No
	e. Using force, for example holding me down with their body weight, pinning my arms, or having a weapon.	Yes No	Yes No
	f. Just doing the behavior without giving me a chance to say 'no' (e.g. surprising me with the behavior).	Yes No	Yes No

3. I have been raped.
    1. Strongly Disagree
    2. Disagree
    3. Slightly Disagree
    4. Slightly Agree
    5. Agree
    6. Strongly Agree

Sexual Experience Label Survey – Measuring Participants Experiences

People label their experiences in different ways. Think about your most recent experience of unwanted sex. Which of the following label(s) would you apply to that experience? Check all that apply.

- A normal sexual experience.
- A natural sexual experience
- A bad sexual experience.
- A good sexual experience.
- A rape.
- Unwanted sex.
- Forced sex.
- A typical college experience.
- An accident on my part.
- An accident on the other person's part.
- A drunken mistake on my part.
- A drunken mistake on the other person's part.
- Something that happens to everybody.
- A mistake on my part.
- A mistake on the other person's part.
- A crime.
- An exciting experience.
- An assault.
- A sexual assault.
- A normal hook up.
- A bad hook up.
- A learning experience.
- An instance of uncontrollable male arousal.
- Childhood sexual abuse.
- A miscommunication.
- A seduction.
- None of these label's explain my experience. please specify_____

Sexual Experience Label Survey - Assessing Labels Given to the Vignette

Think about the story you just read. Which of the following labels would you apply to that story? Check all that apply.

- A normal sexual experience.
- A natural sexual experience
- A bad sexual experience.
- A good sexual experience.
- A rape.
- Unwanted sex.
- Forced sex.
- A typical college experience.
- An accident on Laura's part.
- An accident on Cody's part.
- A drunken mistake on Laura's part.
- A drunken mistake on Cody's part.
- Something that happens to everybody.
- A mistake on Laura's Part.
- A mistake on Laura's part.
- A crime.
- An exciting experience.
- An assault.
- A sexual assault.
- A normal hook up.
- A bad hook up.
- A learning experience.
- An instance of uncontrollable male arousal.
- Childhood sexual abuse.
- A miscommunication.
- A seduction.
- None of these label's fit the story, please specify_____

Survivor Affirming Affirmation

Please keep in mind that you are in no way responsible for the unwanted sexual contact that occurred, even if drugs or alcohol were involved. You are not alone, and it is not your fault. Support options are available and at the end of this survey.

Vignette

I was invited to a party last week by a guy I had been talking to in my psychology class. He seemed really sweet; we had been texting the whole week leading up to Friday night. I was super nervous but excited finally be hanging out with him. When I got to his house, the party was in full swing. He offered me a vodka shot. I wanted something to take the edge off, so I took the shot. For the rest of the night, we drank mixed drinks. We were having fun dancing, flirting, and playing beer pong throughout the night. He asked me if I wanted to go upstairs so we could cool off and talk. We were definitely buzzed at this point; I remember us stumbling up the stairs but being excited to chill and talk. When we got to his room, he showed me his space, and then we sat on the bed. At first, we were talking and getting to know each other. I was feeling good about where things were going and our conversation, so I kissed him. After I kissed him, he began taking my shirt off. I pulled away and said, “let’s go back downstairs,” but I didn’t say no. Then he grabbed my face and continued to kiss me harder; I didn’t kiss back. I froze. He started to pull down my skirt, I was panicked, and all I could think about was how I started this. The next thing I know, I was laid down on the couch and he was inside me. I remember feeling so cold, but I could not move or talk.