A photograph of a graduation ceremony. In the foreground, several hands are seen holding up black graduation caps with purple tassels. In the background, more graduates are visible, some with their caps raised. The setting appears to be outdoors, with green trees and a building with classical columns visible.

**MALE SEXUAL AGGRESSION AT UK UNIVERSITIES:  
A PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF A PERENNIAL  
PROBLEM**

Samuel T. Hales  
*CORE-FP, University of Kent*

# OVERVIEW

- Background & Rationale
- Overview of Studies
- General Discussion
- Implications
- Looking Forward

## **Sexual aggression** *noun*

“Any sexual interaction – from petting to oral/genital contact to intercourse – which is gained against one's will through use of physical force, threats of force, continual arguments/pressure, use of alcohol/drugs and/or position of authority”

(Koss & Gaines, 1993, p.96)



# Background

- University-based sexual aggression is a pervasive public health issue globally

In China, 34.8% of female university students report having experienced gender-based sexual violence (CFPA, 2016)

1-in-10 women students at Canadian postsecondary schools were sexually assaulted in 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2020)

26.4% of undergraduate female students in the US self-report experiencing rape or sexual assault victimisation through physical force, violence, or incapacitation (AAU, 2020)

Nearly 1-in-10 female students (9.4%) in Brazil reported being subjected to sexual aggression since starting university (Zotareli et al., 2012)

Precisely 10.0% of female students in Australia reported sexual assault victimisation in 2015/16 (AHRC, 2017)



## Background

- University-based sexual aggression is a pervasive public health issue globally
  - Rough estimate: 1-in-4 female students globally will be sexually victimized
  - Perpetrators often known heterosexual male students
- Recent climate surveys highlight that UK universities are not exempt
- Wide-reaching economic, psychological, physical, and academic consequences
- Implications for campus culture, climate, and safety



of female students & recent graduates report having experienced sexual violence at university.



of female students & recent graduates report having been raped.

*The Student Room & Revolt Sexual Assault (2018)*  
 (Sample. 4,491 students across 153 UK HEIs)



of women in the UK have experienced rape (including attempts) since the age of 16

*Office for National Statistics (2021)*  
 (Extrapolated from Crime Survey for England and Wales)

# Background

- What about perpetration?
- Robust body of campus sexual assault work in the US (and elsewhere)
  - **Scope:** 29.3% of university males have engaged in sexually violent behaviours
  - **Causes:** Various established risk factors that span the socio-ecological continuum
  - **Solutions:** Good understanding of interventions that do reduce perpetration (but some questions marks over how interventions are evaluated)
- Limited insights in the UK
  - **Scope:** Not sure – offence testimonies provide some insights, as does broader community research (7.3% of community men have engaged in sexual aggression)
  - **Causes:** Mostly anecdotal evidence and no direct cause-and-effect research
  - **Solutions:** Early evaluations of bystander training, marketing campaigns, and alcohol interventions... but are they appropriately evidence-based?
- Findings from US do not generalise to UK due to differences in university culture, climate, geography, and history

## Rationale

- Sexual violence is rife on UK campuses, but there's limited empirical research assessing perpetration amongst students
  - How many male students perpetrate offences?
  - What are the causes of this behaviour?
  - How can we reduce their offence likelihood?
- We need to understand the **scope** and **causes** of the issue before we can address it **effectively**
- To maximize its potential, research must be theory-driven, evidence-based, and empirically-informed

*“ Psychologists are particularly well placed to contribute to policies and practices in the area, given our knowledge and understanding of the perpetrators of sexual offending, and with a number of us working with victims/ survivors of sexual violence. ”*

Towl, G. (2018). Tackling sexual violence at universities. *The Psychologist*, 31, 36-39.

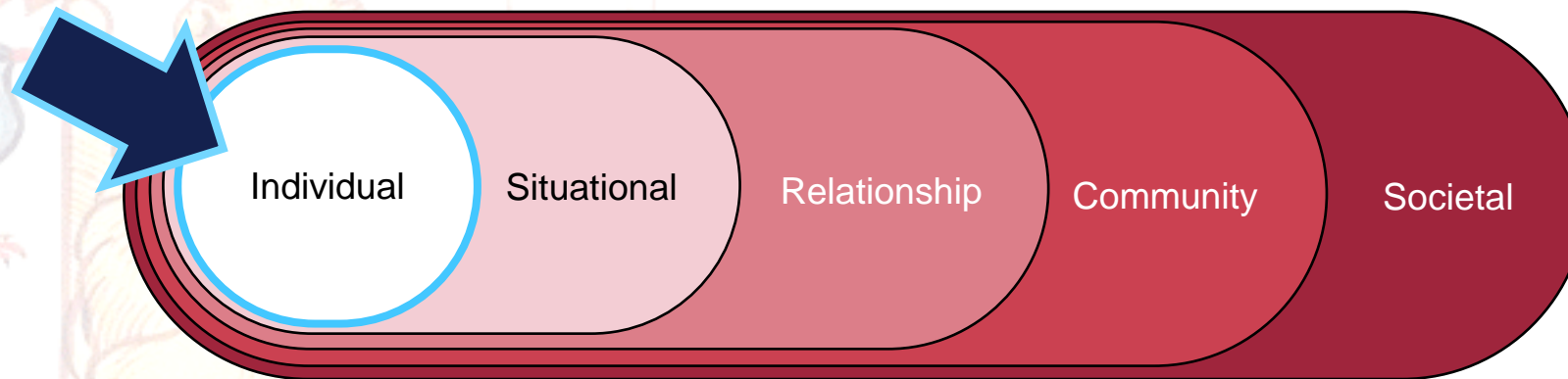
## Overview of Studies

- First attempt to empirically assess the scope and causes of sexual harm perpetration by male university students in the UK, as well as possible methods to reduce their risk of offending
- Six empirical studies that extend past research
  - \* **Studies 1 and 2** seek to uncover the key micro (individual) level risk factors associated with male students' sexual aggression
    - **Study 3** examines whether perpetrators comprise a homogenous group based on their psychological characteristics
    - **Studies 4 and 5** extend Studies 1 and 2 by assessing more macro (i.e., situational, relationship, and community) level factors
  - \* **Study 6** is a feasibility study that evaluated outcomes of The Pathways Programme – a self-help intervention we developed based on our earlier findings



## Studies 1, 2, 4, and 5: Background

- To develop harm prevention interventions to tackle sexual violence at UK universities, we must understand what behaviours students engage in and the factors that encourage their perpetration
- Offending behaviours are the product of multiple levels of influence on an individual's behaviour
- Bronfenbrenner's (1977) socio-ecological model conceptualises these influences and their interplay and is a good framework through which to examine sexual aggression at UK universities (Jones et al., 2020)





## Studies 1, 2, 4, and 5: Background

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- Bronfenbrenner's (1977) socio-ecological model conceptualises these influences and their interplay and is a good framework through which to examine sexual aggression at UK universities (Jones et al., 2020)
- The revised short form *Sexual Experiences Survey – Perpetration (SES-SFP)* probed participants' recent sexual aggression
  - Asked participants to report the number of times they had engaged in each of 35 sexual tactic/outcome strings in the past 24 months (where "tactics" are the methods used to coerce sexually aggressive "outcomes")

## Studies 1 and 2: Individual level factors

- **Study 1** – Male students at one university ( $N = 259$ ) recruited using local research platform
- **Study 2** – Male students across the UK ( $N = 295$ ) recruited through Prolific
- Both completed online a battery of validated psychological measures linked to violent or sexually aggressive behaviours amongst UK male students or incarcerated offenders
- Also completed a measure of impression management to assess response bias (n/s)
- Provided anonymous demographic data

### Relevant Demographic Data

#### Sexual Fantasies

- Inappropriate sexual fantasies

#### Intimacy & Social Functioning

- Assertiveness
- Loneliness
- Self-efficacy in relationships
- Self-esteem (negative & positive)

#### Offence Supportive Cognition

- Hostility toward women
- Rape myth acceptance

#### Self/Emotional Regulation

- Aggression
- Emotion regulation

#### Additional Measures

- Impression management

# Studies 1 and 2: Individual level factors

## Study 1 Findings

- **12.7%** of participants reported perpetrating **106 sexually aggressive acts** over the past 24 months
  - **Sexual coercion** was the most common outcome (41.5% of acts); rape comprised 23.6% of acts
  - Most perpetrators committed **two offences**, typically against female students
- Perpetrators scored higher on average than non-perpetrators on most measured variables
  - Groups significantly differed in self-reported **hostility toward women** ( $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.51$ ), **inappropriate sexual fantasies** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.52$ ), and **rape myth acceptance** ( $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.66$ )
  - There were slight group differences in self-reported ethnicity ( $p = .048$ )
- Measures analysed using logistic regression modelling to see if they could predict past offending

Measure	$\beta$	SE	Wald	$p$	95% OR
Hostility towards women	0.01	0.03	0.06	.81	0.95 – 1.07
Inappropriate sexual fantasies	0.07	0.03	6.07	.01	1.02 – 1.14 *
RMA	0.08	0.03	8.48	.004	1.03 – 1.14 **
Ethnicity	0.27	0.44	0.36	.55	0.55 – 3.10

# Studies 1 and 2: Individual level factors

## Study 2 Findings

- **10.1%** of participants reported perpetrating **145 sexually aggressive acts** over the past 24 months
  - **Sexual coercion** was the most common outcome (37.9% of acts); rape comprised 35.9% of acts
  - Most perpetrators committed **three offences**, typically against female students **who they knew**
- Perpetrators scored higher on average than non-perpetrators on **all** measured variables
  - Groups significantly differed in self-reported **hostility toward women** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.94$ ), **inappropriate sexual fantasies** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.70$ ), **rape myth acceptance** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.70$ ), **aggression** ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.69$ ), **self-efficacy in relationships** ( $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.38$ ), and **emotion regulation** ( $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.33$ )
- Measures analysed using logistic regression modelling to see if they could predict past offending (initial model run to eliminate weak variables)

Measure	$\beta$	SE	Wald	$p$	95% OR
Aggression	0.11	0.04	10.33	.001	1.05 – 1.20 **
Hostility towards women	0.14	0.03	18.51	<.001	1.08 – 1.22 ***
Inappropriate sexual fantasies	0.12	0.03	13.33	<.001	1.06 – 1.20 ***

## Study 6: The Pathways Programme feasibility outcome study

- Studies 1 and 2 showed that male university students in the UK with recent histories of sexual aggression differ psychologically from their non-offending peers
- Other research (e.g., Hills et al., 2020; Wignall et al., 2022) has highlighted that many UK university students do not know what valid sexual consent is
- There are limited harm prevention interventions available for known/potential offenders
- Those that do exist are often plagued by conceptual, theoretical, or methodological issues

## Study 6: The Pathways Programme feasibility outcome study

- Research has shown that effective treatments for sexual offenders are:
  1. Evidence-based and empirically-informed
    - Does it target known treatment needs (risk factors) for offending?
    - Was it developed based on relevant data?
  2. Appropriately targeted
    - Are the correct individuals receiving treatment?
  3. Founded on strong theoretical principles
    - Does it have robust clinical underpinnings?
    - Is it informed by established behaviour change research?
  4. Robustly evaluated across representative groups over time
- For universities, interventions also need to be S.A.F.E.
  - **S**calable **A**ccessible **F**lexible **E**conomical

## Study 6: The Pathways Programme feasibility outcome study

- Based on our study findings and broader harm prevention work, we created The Pathways Programme
  - An innovative online self-help programme for UK university male sexual aggression
  - Comprises six psychoeducation-based modules that tap into known risk factors for offending
  - Targeted at male students who disclose a *proclivity towards* offending
  - CBT-based activities embedded throughout to reinforce and help participants apply learning
  - Based on established clinical and psychological theory (e.g., Theory of Planned Behaviour)

University of Kent Promoting Healthy Sexual Behaviours on Campus: A Longitudinal Assessment of a Novel Self-Help Intervention  
Samuel T. Hales (sth21@kent.ac.uk) – Lead Researcher | Theresa Gannon (T.A.Gannon@kent.ac.uk) – Supervisor

ESRC  
ECONOMIC  
& SOCIAL  
RESEARCH  
COUNCIL

Welcome to the  
Pathways Programme

A new evidence-based self-help intervention  
designed to promote healthy sexual behaviours  
on UK university campuses

Funded by the Economic & Social Research Council,  
in collaboration with the University of Kent

This program contains sensitive content that you may find distressing, including references to illegal sexual activity, and derogatory and sexist views. Some external content may also include strong language. We take no responsibility for the accuracy, legality, or content of any external websites or resources.

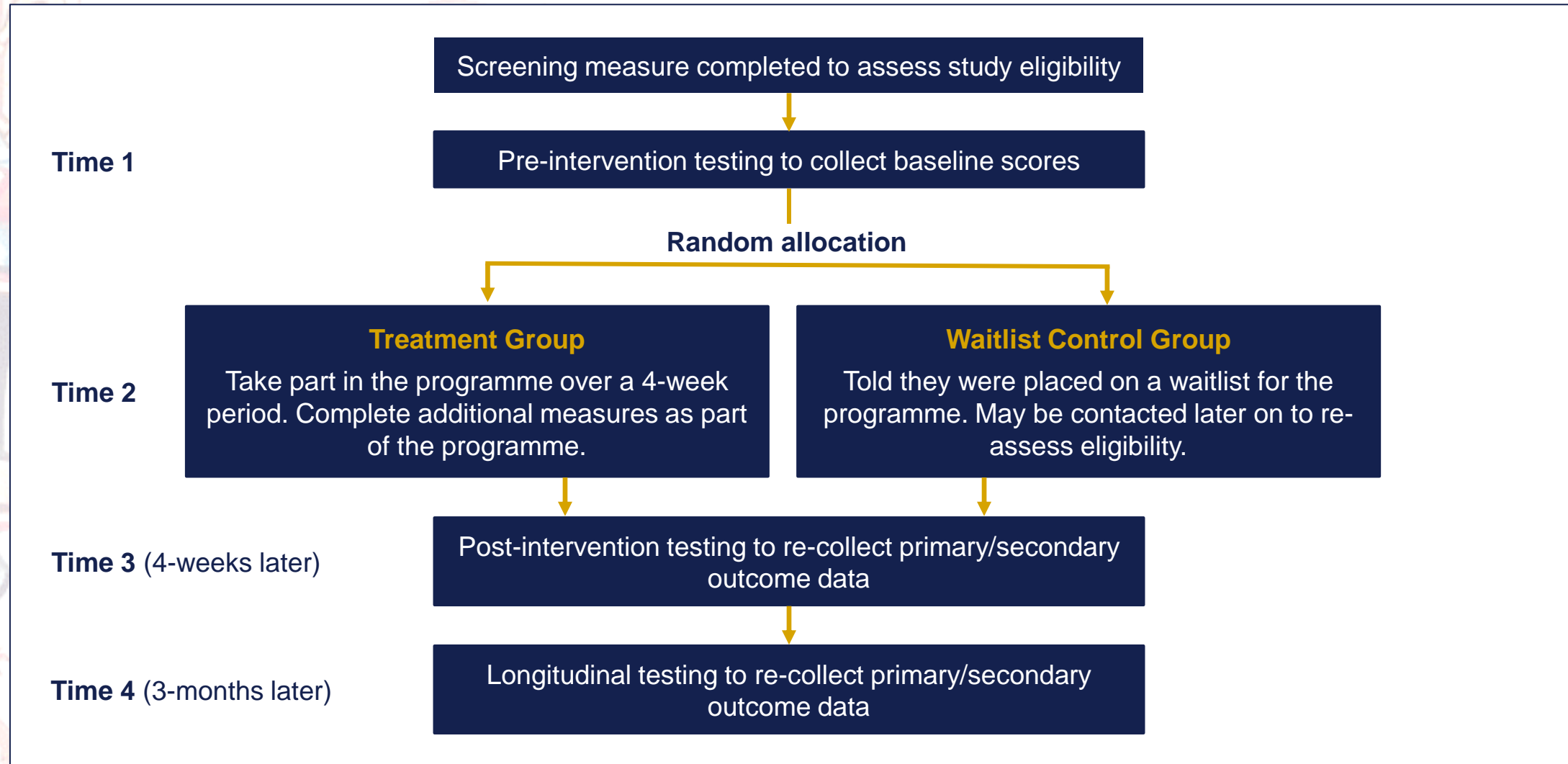
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## Study 6: The Pathways Programme feasibility outcome study

- Participants were male students from across the UK who reported an interest in engaging in sexual aggression ( $n = 254$ )
- Adopted a 4-wave RCT design to assess short and longer-term outcomes over a five month period
  - **Primary outcome:** Self-perceived likelihood to engage in sexual aggression
  - **Secondary outcomes:** Hostility towards women, inappropriate sexual fantasies, RMA
  - Additional measures probed research motivations (in line with the TPB) and participants' perceptions of the programme
- An intention-to-treat protocol was used to mitigate against drop out bias
- Outcomes assessed using two-way mixed ANOVAs (for all outcomes) and by calculating reliable change indices (for the primary outcome)



# Study 6: The Pathways Programme feasibility outcome study



## Study 6: The Pathways Programme feasibility outcome study

- **Two-way mixed ANOVA:** Significant interaction between group and time on participants' scores across measures
  - Compared to the WCG, the TG showed **larger reductions** in their scores across testing points

Time	Likelihood to engage in sexual aggression		Hostility towards women		RMA		Inappropriate sexual fantasies	
	TG	WCG	TG	WCG	TG	WCG	TG	WCG
Pre-test	1.78	1.63	29.53	27.53	40.37	36.65	20.19	15.72
Post-test	1.02	1.21	27.77	26.31	36.59	36.51	18.79	16.47
Follow-up	0.64	0.82	26.49	25.92	35.42	34.88	17.72	15.66

- **Reliable change indices:** Most TG participants displayed a reduction or recovery in their likelihood to engage in SA. Patterns were similar, but weaker, for WCG participants.
- TG participants' **attitudes** towards programme completion ( $p < .001$ ) and their **perceived control over their behaviour** ( $p = .01$ ) significantly predicted their intention to complete the programme
- Positive user feedback was received from most TG participants

## General Discussion

- Male sexual aggression is prevalent on UK university campuses
  - 11.4% prevalence across Studies 1 and 2 versus 7.3% lifetime prevalence amongst community males as a whole
- Male students with a recent history of sexual aggression are psychologically distinct from their non-offending peers
- Key risk factors include hostility towards women, inappropriate sexual fantasies, RMA, and possibly non-sexual aggression
- Evidence-based online self-help programmes that target these risk factors **may** help reduce male students' likelihood to perpetrate an offence...
- ...but should be part of a university's armoury to tackle sexual aggression

# Implications

- Universities need proactively assess the breadth of sexual aggression on their campus, so they can devise appropriate strategies to tackle the issue
  - Regular campus climate surveys with results published online?
- Universities should consider how their (in)actions may contribute to sexual violence (cf. “lad culture”)
- Universities should empower staff to develop and trial more diverse and novel sexual harm prevention interventions
  - Should be evidence-based, empirically-informed, and relevant to (the risk factors associated with) UK students
  - Should be suitably targeted and evaluated
  - Must be S.A.F.E.

*“The cost, in both human and economic terms, is so significant that even marginally effective interventions are cost effective”*

National Institute for Health and Care  
Excellence (2014)

## Looking Forward

- Results are preliminary and need validating
  - Larger, more diverse samples to assess generalisability
  - Examine “modern day” offences (e.g., non-contact offences, online sexual aggression)
- Integrate more experimental methods into sexual aggression work to assess the validity of self-report findings
  - e.g., virtual reality, implicit association tests, bogus pipelines
- Assess the full spectrum of possible risk factors to ensure interventions are fully evidence-based
  - What about upbringing? Psychopathology? Past victimisation?
- What factors mediate the link between risk factors and perpetration?
- What other harm prevention strategies best supplement online interventions?



ANY QUESTIONS?

 @Hales\_Samuel

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# ADDITIONAL SLIDES

*Provide an overview of Studies 3, 4, and 5, as well as other useful background information*



# Rates of university male sexual violence perpetration globally

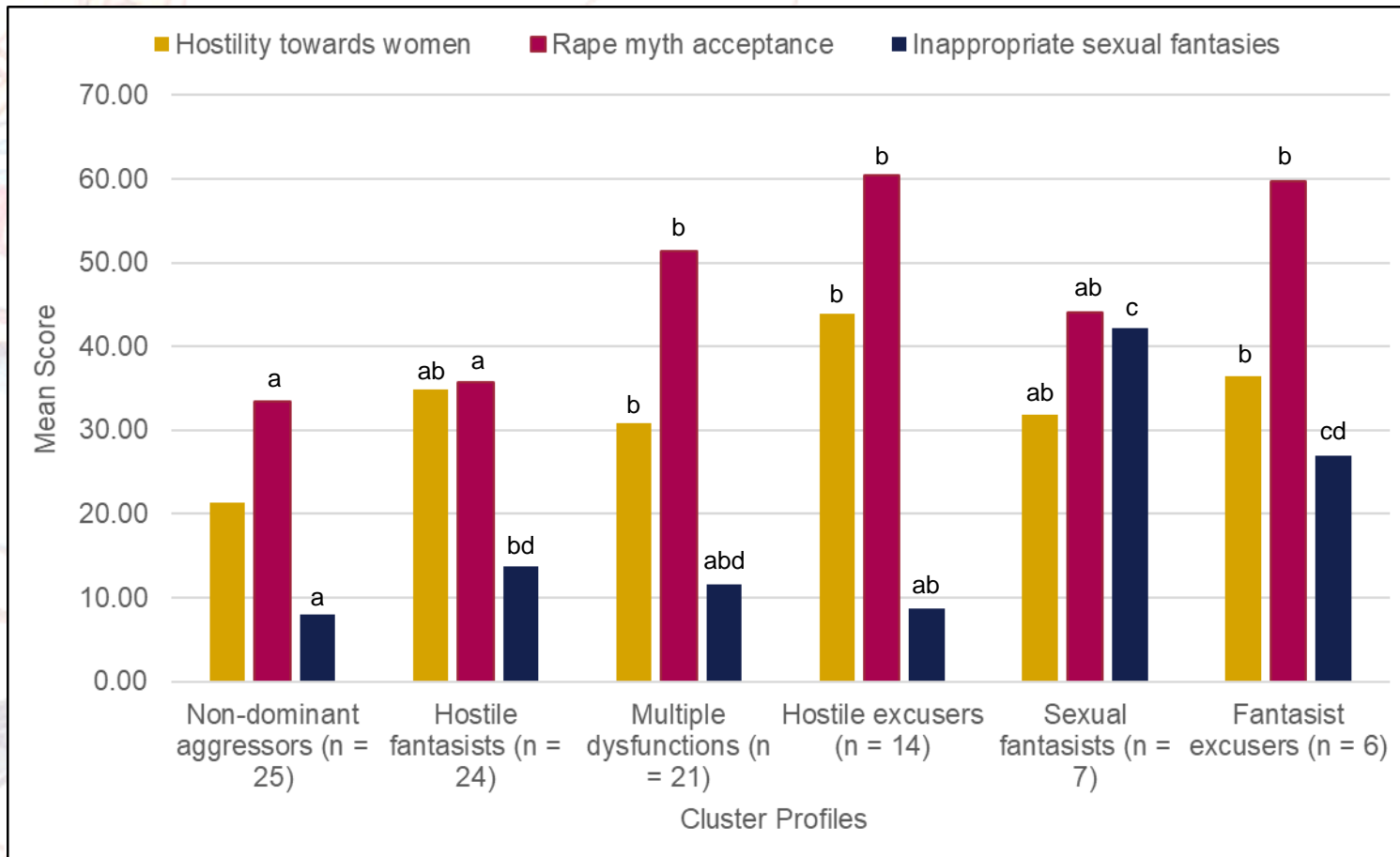
Country	Age of Consent	Author(s)	Prevalence <sup>1</sup>
Brazil	14	D'Abreu et al. (2013)	33.7% since age 14
		D'Abreu & Krahe (2014)	38.8% since age 14 and 18.3% in the past six months
Canada	16	Jeffrey et al. (2022)	6.1% in the past twelve months
Chile	14	Schuster et al. (2016a)	26.8% since age 14
		Schuster & Krahe (2019)	30.5% since age 14 and 17.6% in the past 12 months
China	14	Wang et al. (2015)	26.4% in the past 12 months
Croatia	15	Čvek & Junaković (2020)	36.9% lifetime prevalence
Germany	14	Krahe & Berger (2013)	13.2% since age 14
		Krahe & Berger (2020)	13.3% since age 14
		Krahe et al. (2021)	17.7% since age 14
Greece	15	Krahe et al. (2015)	48.7% since age 15
Hong Kong	16	Chan (2021b)	15.8% lifetime prevalence
Poland	15	Tomaszewska & Krahe (2018a)	6.8% since age 15 up to a year ago and 8.7% in the past 12 months
		Tomaszewska & Krahe (2018b)	11.7% since age 15
Portugal	14	Carvalho and Sá (2020)	52.6% lifetime prevalence
		Moreira et al. (2022)	35.0% lifetime prevalence
Philippines	12 (pre-2022), 16 (post-2022)	Tuliao et al. (2019)	14.4% lifetime prevalence
Spain	13 (pre-2013), 16 (post-2013)	Martín et al. (2005)	14.3% since age 14
		Krahe et al. (2015)	9.5% since age 13
Turkey	18	Schuster et al. (2016b)	28.9% since age 15
		Schuster & Krahe (2019)	33.1% since age 15 and 26.6% in the past 12 months

<sup>1</sup> Differences in conceptualisations and methods of measuring past sexual aggression mean that these statistics are not directly comparable.

## Study 3: Homogeneity testing

- Do perpetrators comprise a homogenous group?
  - Implications for intervention (tailored versus one-size-fits-all)
- Male students from Studies 1, 2, 4, and 5 who reported perpetrating recent sexual aggression ( $N = 103$  after data cleaning)
- Measures that differentiated between offenders and non-offenders in both Studies 1 and 2 were analysed using cluster analysis procedures
  - Included responses to our measures of hostility towards women, rape myth acceptance, and inappropriate sexual fantasies
- Derived clusters subject to validation
  - Re-ran analysis using different linkage measures
  - Split-sample validation
  - Criterion validity assessed against using measures that differentiated between offenders and non-offenders in *either* Study 1 or 2

## Study 3: Homogeneity testing



Note. Letters that are shared by columns highlight clusters that do not significantly differ from one another using Dunn's (1964) follow-up test with a Bonferroni correction (adjusted  $p < .005$ )

- Six meaningful subgroups derived and tentatively defined based on their descriptive characteristics
  - Inferential testing highlighted that all groups could be differentiated by their responses across measures
- Six participants were part of an “entropy group” and excluded
- Validation tests alluded to “high stability” (cluster assignment maintained in  $\approx 83\%$  of cases)
- Scoring patterns similar across criterion validity measures

## Study 4: Situational and relationship level factors

- Male students across the UK ( $N = 448$ ) recruited through Prolific
- Again, completed online a battery of measures linked to situational or relationship-level factors theoretically linked to UK male students' harmful sexual behaviours
- Adopted a modified version of the SES-SFP to increase the accuracy of disclosures
  - Used tactics-first versus outcomes-first strings
  - Removed the need for participants to infer their victims' sexual desire

### Relevant Demographic Data

#### Sex-Related Behaviours

- Compulsive sexual behaviours
- Sex drive
- Sexual media consumption
- Sexual sensation seeking

#### Perceptions of Others' Sexuality

- Friends' approval and pressure for coerced/forced sex
- Misperception of sexual intent

#### Self Control

- Subjective self control

#### Substance Misuse

- Alcohol consumption/misuse
- Illegal substance misuse

## Study 4: Situational and relationship level factors

### Study 4 Findings

- **9.60%** of participants reported perpetrating **218 sexually aggressive acts** over the past 24 months
  - **Sexual coercion** was the most common outcome (43.6% of acts); rape comprised 33.9% of acts
  - Most perpetrators committed **three offences**, typically against female students
  - Both parties were typically sober when the offending occurred
- Perpetrators scored higher on average than non-perpetrators on most measured variables
  - Groups significantly differed in self-reported **self control** ( $p < .001$ ,  $r = .157$ ), **compulsive sexual behaviours** ( $p < .001$ ,  $r = .208$ ), and **sexual sensation seeking** ( $p = .039$ ,  $r = .097$ )
- Measures analysed using logistic regression modelling to see if they could predict past offending

Measure	$\beta$	SE	Wald	$p$	95% OR
Self control	-0.03	0.02	2.80	.09	0.93 – 1.00
Compulsive sexual behaviours	0.07	0.02	13.73	<.001	1.04 – 1.12 ***
Sexual sensation seeking	0.06	0.31	0.04	.85	0.58 – 1.93

## Study 5: Community level factors

- Male students across the UK ( $N = 451$ ) recruited through Prolific ( $N = 448$  from Study 4 plus three participants excluded during data cleaning)
- Same method as Study 4, but participants completed measures linked to community-level factors theoretically linked to UK male students' harmful sexual behaviours

### Relevant Demographic Data

#### Community level variables

- Campus connectedness
- Feelings of safety on campus
- Participation in sexual assault prevention activities
- Perceptions of school leadership climate for sexual assault prevention
- Personal acceptance of sexual misconduct
- Students' supportiveness of sexual violence
- Trust in their university's support systems
- Perceptions of their university's responsiveness to reports of sexual violence



## Study 5: Community level factors

### Study 5 Findings

- Perpetration figures mimic those from Study 4, as a similar sample was used
- Perpetrators scored higher on average than non-perpetrators on most measured variables
  - Groups significantly differed in self-reported **personal acceptance of sexual misconduct** ( $p < .001$ ,  $r = .157$ ) and **participation in sexual assault prevention activities** ( $p = .012$ ,  $r = .118$ )
  - There were slight group differences in self-reported ethnicity ( $p = .027$ )
- Measures analysed using logistic regression modelling to see if they could predict past offending

Measure	$\beta$	SE	Wald	$p$	95% OR	
Personal acceptance of sexual misconduct	0.17	0.05	12.03	<.001	1.08 – 1.30	***
Participation in sexual assault prevention activities	0.16	0.06	5.86	.02	1.03 – 1.33	*
Ethnicity	0.62	0.33	3.43	.06	0.96 – 3.54	