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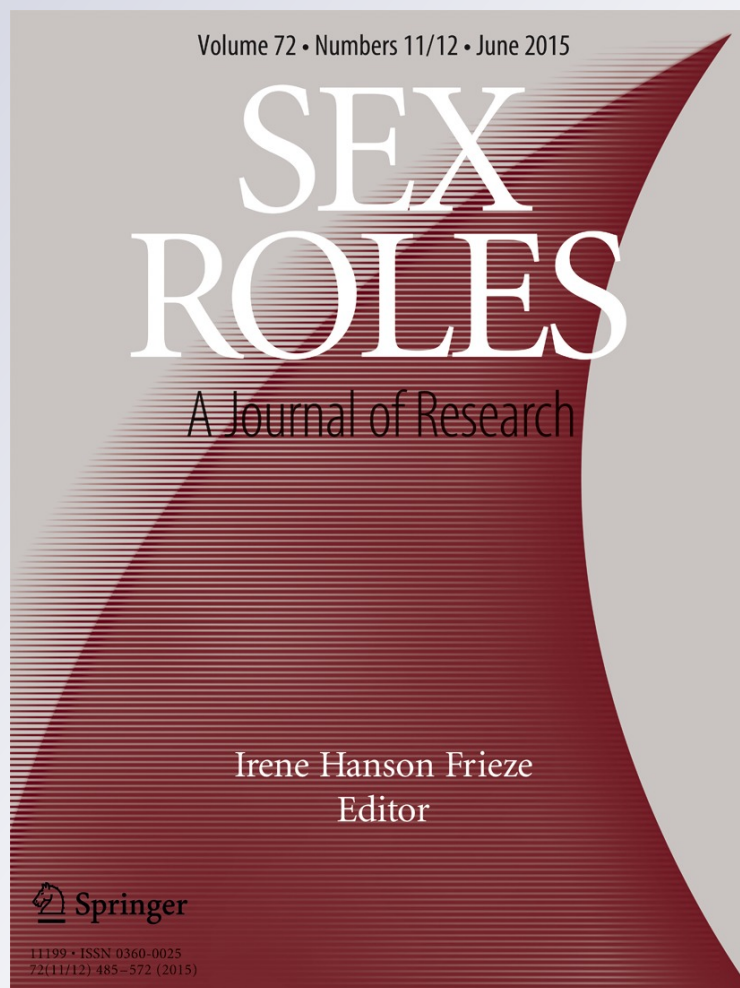
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# The Exonerating Effect of Sexual Objectification: Sexual Objectification Decreases Rapist Blame in a Stranger Rape Context

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**Abstract** A blossoming body of research documents the effect of sexual objectification on social perception, but little is known about the consequences of sexual objectification. This paper examines how sexual objectification influences men and women's rape perceptions in case of a stranger rape. We hypothesized that victims' sexual objectification might diminish rapist blame and increase victim blame in cases of stranger rape. Fifty-eight male and 57 female Belgian undergraduate students were assigned to either a sexual objectifying (i.e., body focus) or to a personalized portrayal (i.e., face focus) of a rape victim. After reading a newspaper report depicting a stranger rape, participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which they blamed the rapist and the victim. As predicted, participants blamed the rapist less in the sexual objectification condition, regardless of participant gender. In contrast, sexual objectification did not increase victim blame. These results have implications for the well-being of rape victims, as well as for the functioning of justice if it leads authorities to show leniency towards the length of penalty a rapist may receive. The implications of these findings for future research on sexual objectification and gender differences in rape perception are also discussed.

**Keywords** Sexual objectification · Gender · Rape perception · Rapist blame · Victim blame

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## Introduction

In February 2011, a man was convicted of raping a 26-year-old woman in Manitoba, Canada. He received a 2-year, non-custodial sentence, rather than the minimum 3-year prison sentence requested by the prosecution. In delivering his decision, Judge Robert Dewar explained that the victim had sent signals through her provocative attire; she was wearing a tube top, high heels, and heavy makeup (McIntyre 2011a, b). He concluded that these factors must be used when assessing the perpetrators' moral blameworthiness for the rape (McIntyre 2011a, b). As this example suggests, investigating how victim's sexual objectification shapes perceptions of rapist (and victim) blame among both sexes represents a crucial challenge because it has direct implications, such as the length of penalty a rapist may receive (see Viki et al. 2004, for data collected among British undergraduates). In light of recent findings suggesting that sexual objectification of women leads to increased victim blame in cases of acquaintance rape among British undergraduate students (Loughnan et al. 2013), this paper aims to extend the research by examining whether victim's sexual objectification is also likely to diminish rapist blame and to increase victim blame within a sample of Belgian male and female undergraduate students.

Whereas previous studies focus on the perception of sexually objectified women (for recent reviews spanning several countries, see Gervais et al. 2013a; Heflick and Goldenberg 2014), we suggest that sexual objectification may also shift the perception of targets who abused an objectified women and we consider this possibility in a novel context: stranger rape (i.e., a situation in which the perpetrator and the victim are unacquainted). We also examined whether participant gender influences rape perception (hypothesizing less rapist blame and more victim blame would be reported by male than by

female participants) and if participant gender moderates the effect of victim's sexual objectification on rape perception (again hypothesizing male participants would report less rapist blame and more victim blame than female participants when the victim is sexually objectified).

Given the high incidence of reported rape (United Nations 2015) and the pervasiveness of very liberal views regarding sexual practices in Belgium (see next section), examining how sexual objectification influences rapist blame in the Belgian context is particularly fitting and worthy of interest. We will first provide a cultural background of our study. We will then turn to an integration of objectification studies with the rape perception literature, which will lead us to raise our hypothesis regarding the effect of a victim's sexual objectification on a rapist and victim blame in cases of stranger rape.

### Views Toward Rape, Gender Equalities and Incidence of Rape in Belgium

Belgium is characterized by a high incidence of *reported* rapes (United Nations 2015). Indeed, it has the fifth highest incidence of rape and sexual assault in the world in a ranking including 60 countries (26.3 per 100,000 population, in 2008). Although rape incidence numbers notably depend of the definition of rape, evaluating factors that may influence rape perception (here the victim's sexual objectification) seem particularly crucial for this country. In the next paragraphs, we provide a cultural background of our study through an examination of the evolution of legislation regarding sexual aggression.

In Belgium, the late 60s was the starting point of a liberalization of sexual behaviors and sexual intimacy (Marwick 1998). Reproductive decisions and sexual behaviors became private matters and less controlled by traditional laws stemming from the public domain and colored by religious rules (Rosenblum 1997). Indeed, in the Belgian legislation, the idea of imposing conceptions of morally acceptable and traditional sexual behaviors gradually disappeared in favor of increasingly accepted freedom in matters of sexuality (e.g., sexual preference), contraception, abortion, and public nudity (Waites 2001). As in many other Western liberal countries, this period of liberalization of sexuality and sexual intimacy was followed from the late 80s onward by a preoccupation for sexual violence perpetrated toward women and children (see e.g., Vandeweghe et al. 1988). Policies were jointly implemented to combat physical and sexual violence. For instance, the Belgian Parliament implemented the Rape Act in 1989 to enhance treatment (e.g., providing psychological support during medical examinations) and protection of rape victims. This act also introduced more effective punishment of rapists and fewer obstacles for a victim to report a rape crime. In sum, the evolution of legislation in Belgium has been characterized

by a liberalization of sexuality, sexual intimacy and public morality (including nudity and sexual behaviors). Simultaneously, novel policies aimed at protecting these individual rights and regulating sexual behaviors were introduced (Stevens and Hooghe 2003).

On another note, similar to many other Western liberal countries, Belgium scores relatively high in terms of gender equality. For example, in 2013, it ranked ninth (the U.S. ranks 47th) on the United Nations ranking of gender equality in reproductive health, empowerment and labor market employment (Human Development Reports 2015). Moreover, Belgian ratings of sexist gender beliefs (i.e., Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: ASI), which predict gender inequality (for data collected in 57 countries, see Brandt 2011), are relatively low compared to ASI scores observed in countries characterized by a low level of gender equality (for data collected in 19 countries, see Glick et al. 2000).

### Sexual Objectification and Rape Perception

Sexual objectification consists of considering an individual merely as a body, or body parts, available for satisfying the sexual needs and desires of others (Bartky 1990; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). In social psychology, this concept has been operationalized as an appearance focus highlighting either the sexualized body (i.e., sexual objectification condition) or the face (i.e., personalization condition). A growing body of research has shown that focusing on targets' appearance (vs. personality) leads to decreased attributions of human nature, competence, warmth, and morality (for data collected among U.S. undergraduates, see Heflick and Goldenberg 2009; Heflick et al. 2011) when evaluating female—but not male—targets (for similar findings on male targets, see Gray et al. 2011, and Loughnan et al. 2015, for data collected among U.S. undergraduates and undergraduates from seven Western and non-Western nations, respectively). In addition, studies conducted in Belgium (Bernard et al. 2012, 2013, 2015a, b) and in the U.S.A. (Gervais et al. 2012) showed that female bodies (e.g., wearing swimsuits) are visually perceived as objects. Studies conducted in the U.S.A. (Cikara et al. 2010; Gurung and Chrouser 2007), Italy (Vaes et al. 2011) and Australia (Loughnan et al. 2010) also suggest that sexualized women are perceived by undergraduate students as possessing less intelligence, agency, and humanness (i.e., having thoughts and intentions), and they also elicited less moral concern than fully-clothed women. Despite evidence that sexual objectification entails perceptions of humanness and moral concern, little is known about the practical consequences of sexual objectification. Why exactly would sexual objectification influence rape perception?

When a rape occurs, even though the full responsibility should be attributed to the rapist, research shows that this is



not necessarily the case. Indeed, observers sometimes blame rape victims for the rape and thus undermine the severity of this sexual crime. This bias has been often explained by the belief in a just world (Just World Theory; Lerner 1980). Applied to rape perception, this theory suggests that when people evaluate a rape, they could feel an imbalanced state because the rape threatens their belief in a just world. From this perspective, victim blame can be understood as an attempt to restore the observer's belief in a just world (see data collected among Canadian undergraduates, Haynes and Olson 2006). Social psychology has extensively examined contextual and victim characteristics related to victim blame and it appears that the amount of skin a target reveals is a crucial factor positively associated with victim blame (e.g., for data collected among U.S. undergraduates, see Workman and Freeburg 1999; for recent reviews, see Grubb and Harrower 2008, 2009; for a meta-analysis, see Whatley 1996). A recent study integrated research that showed sexual objectification diminishes moral concern with the rape perception literature highlighting that target's clothing increases victim blame and examined whether sexual objectification increases victim blame due to diminished attribution of moral concern. In their study, Loughnan et al. (2013) assigned 60 British undergraduates to either a non-objectification or a sexual objectification condition. Participants read a story depicting Laura, a female student (who was also a waitress and part-time model) in either a sexually objectified (wearing a bikini) or non-objectified manner (wearing jeans). After seeing Laura's profile, participants completed a questionnaire that included a brief mind attribution task (i.e., ratings regarding the frequency with which Laura engages in e.g., wishing, planning, and feeling) and a questionnaire about moral concern (e.g., "how bad would you feel if Laura was treated unfairly and hurt"). Following the completion of this questionnaire, participants read a vignette reporting that Laura had been raped by an acquaintance. They finally completed measures of victim and rapist blame and victim suffering. Results showed that sexual objectification was associated with greater victim blame and lower moral concern compared to the non-objectified condition, but it did not affect rapist blame. Importantly, these results were not moderated by participant gender. Furthermore, the impact of sexual objectification on victim blame and victim suffering was mediated by moral concern: Participants evaluated the victim as more blameworthy and as having suffered less in the sexual objectification condition because they rated her as deserving less moral concern. In sum, these results suggest that, in an *acquaintance rape* context, sexual objectification increases victim blame, whereas sexual objectification does not affect perpetrator blame.

Loughnan et al. (2013) study is informative regarding the relation between sexual objectification and acquaintance rape, it remains unclear how sexual objectification shapes the

perception of stranger rape. This paper aims to fill this gap. Beyond replication purposes, this study provides an important extension of the data collected in the UK by Loughnan et al. (2013). Despite the vast rape perception literature that documents the effect of a variety of contextual and victim's characteristics on victim blame (for reviews, see Grubb and Harrower 2008, 2009), much less is known regarding the factors that shift rapist blame. Recent research found that lower reports of rapist blame are associated with higher scores in benevolent sexism among British undergraduates (Viki et al. 2004), U.S. undergraduates' beliefs in traditional gender roles (Yamawaki 2007), power status (Yamawaki et al. 2007), and with victim's resistance during the rape (e.g., Cohn et al. 2009). This paper aims to identify whether victim's sexual objectification is likely to diminish ratings in rapist blame.

As explained earlier, by offering an explanation for a disruptive event, such as rape, victim and perpetrator blame can be used to restore the observers' beliefs that the world is fair and predictable (Lerner 1980). In cases of acquaintance rape (as in Loughnan et al. 2013), victim blame is the easiest route to this end, given that the context is often perceived as ambiguous and is indeed commonly observed (for reviews, see Grubb and Harrower 2008, 2009). In contrast, victim blame is very low in cases of stranger rape because the victim is the target of a fully random and unpredictable event. Hence, to find an explanation for the cause of a stranger rape, we thus argue that sexual objectification should primarily influence rape perception by diminishing rapist blame (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, we also consider whether sexual objectification increases victim blame (Hypothesis 2).

### The Moderating Role of Participant Gender

A large body of research highlights that male participants generally report more victim blame when evaluating a rape scenario (for reviews, see Grubb and Harrower 2008, 2009), whereas research has found mixed results regarding rapist blame (e.g., for data collected in the U.S.A., see Workman and Freeburg 1999; Yamawaki et al. 2007). By contrast, past research on the impact of sexually objectifying portrayals of women on rape perception and related outcomes has failed to establish clear moderating effects of participant gender. Indeed, prior studies on objectification, which were conducted in Western countries, such as the United States (Cikara et al. 2010; Gervais et al. 2012; Heflick and Goldenberg 2009; Heflick et al. 2011), Italy (Vaes et al. 2011), Belgium (Bernard et al. 2012), and the UK (Loughnan et al. 2013) found that the impact of sexual objectification on social perception was not moderated by participant gender among undergraduates (see Australian data reported by Loughnan et al. 2010, for an exception). We will investigate whether males report less rapist blame (Hypothesis 3a) and more victim blame

(Hypothesis 3b). Finally, we will examine whether the effect of sexual objectification on rapist blame (Hypothesis 4a) and victim blame (Hypothesis 4b) is likely to be stronger among male participants.

## Hypotheses

To summarize, first, our main hypotheses are that sexual objectification (seeing the victim's body vs. her face) will diminish rapist blame (Hypothesis 1) and increase victim blame (Hypothesis 2). Second, we will examine whether male participants will report less rapist blame (Hypothesis 3a) and more victim blame (Hypothesis 3b) compared to female participants. Third, we will investigate whether an interaction between participant gender and the sexual objectification manipulation emerges, believing male participants will report less rapist blame (Hypothesis 4a) and more victim blame (Hypothesis 4b) than female participants in the sexual objectification condition.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

We recruited 123 participants on a Belgian university campus (64 men,  $M_{\text{age}}=20.69$ ,  $SD=2.77$  years). Participants were asked to take part in a study about social perception that would last approximately 20 min. At the end of the questionnaire, participants read a debrief explaining the goals of the study; they also had the opportunity to request an additional oral debriefing. We offered 5 euros in return for their participation (approximately \$6.50). The sample was mostly heterosexual ( $N=117$ ), with one gay man, two lesbian women and three bisexual participants (who remained in the current study).

We eliminated eight participants. First, to identify our sample as a sample of undergraduate students, six participants (five men) were eliminated because they were either employed or older than 30 years old, or both. Second, two participants (one man) were eliminated because they reported having participated in a very similar experiment and were thus extensively debriefed. The present statistical analyses were conducted based on 115 participants (58 men). Mean age for men and women were 21.28 and 19.44 years, respectively. Note that including the persons that were eliminated does not change the pattern of results we report in this paper.

Participants first read a newspaper article in which sexual objectification was manipulated and were then asked to complete a questionnaire evaluating their attitudes about victim and rapist blame and their socio-demographic attributes (in this order).

The newspaper article reported the case of a stranger rape. Specifically, the story depicted a female model that was raped

by a stranger on a dark street while she was walking to a friend's house (see Appendix 1). In the story, no narrative elements described the victim in a negative manner. The picture caption mentioned that the model worked for a new lingerie brand. Sexual objectification was manipulated by adding a picture with the newspaper article highlighting either the body of the model wearing underwear (i.e., sexual objectification condition), or her face (i.e., personalized condition: For recent studies employing this manipulation, see Loughnan et al. 2010; Vaes et al. 2011). Different versions of the article were created with the female targets selected from the pretest. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perception of the rape.

### Pretest

We selected 11 body pictures from the Internet to utilize as pre-test stimuli for the sexual objectification condition. We cropped the faces from the bodies of these 11 pictures to use as pre-test stimuli for the personalization condition. We then conducted a pretest for selecting three pictures for both conditions (sexual objectification vs. personalization). Fifty-three participants (not included in the main study) were asked to rate the 22 pictures (11 bodies and 11 faces cropped from the bodies). Participants rated sexually objectified ( $N=30$ ; 15 men,  $M_{\text{Age}}=23.20$ ,  $SD=3.32$ ) or personalized ( $N=23$ ; 13 men,  $M_{\text{Age}}=22.26$ ,  $SD=2.99$ ) pictures on a 7-point Likert scale to evaluate sexual objectification (i.e., "How sexually objectified is this woman?") with the anchors 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *totally*.

Three pairs of pictures were selected (i.e., three pictures of bodies and three pictures of faces cropped from the bodies) and we performed a 2 (Condition [Sexual Objectification, Personalization])  $\times$  2 (Participant's Gender [Male, Female]) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) on sexual objectification ratings. As expected, participants rated the body pictures as more sexually objectified ( $M=5.36$ ,  $SD=1.49$ ) than the face pictures ( $M=2.94$ ,  $SD=1.42$ ),  $F(1, 49)=38.53$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.44$ . There was no effect of participant gender,  $F(1, 49)=.06$ ,  $p=.81$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.01$ , but there was a significant Participant Gender  $\times$  Condition interaction,  $F(1, 49)=4.09$ ,  $p=.049$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.08$ . Indeed, whereas both men and women evaluated body pictures as more sexually objectified than faces, this difference was more acute among women ( $M_{\text{body}}=5.71$ ,  $SD=1.30$  vs.  $M_{\text{face}}=2.43$ ,  $SD=.94$ ),  $F(1, 23)=47.01$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.67$ , than among men ( $M_{\text{body}}=5.00$ ,  $SD=1.62$  vs.  $M_{\text{face}}=3.33$ ,  $SD=1.63$ ),  $F(1,26)=7.33$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.22$ .

### Victim Blame

Six items adapted from Abrams et al. (2003; see Appendix 2 for the French version of the scales) measured blame of the

rape victim ( $\alpha=.70$ , in this study). A 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely or totally*) accompanied all questions. Four items were selected from Abrams et al. (2003) to evaluate victim blame (e.g., “How much do you think Sophie should blame herself for what happened?”; “How much control do you think Sophie had over the situation?”). We modified two items from Abrams et al. (2003). One item (“How much do you think that Sophie is responsible for the way things turned out?”) was used instead of “Whose fault do you think it is if things turned out the way they did?” to separate evaluations from victim and rapist blame. Because another of Abrams et al.’s. (2003) items was not compatible with a stranger rape scenario (“How much do you agree Sophie should not have invited Loïc over [or walked with Loïc] if she did not want to have sex with him?”), we used another item instead (“How much do you agree Sophie should not have walked after sunset if she did not want to have problems”).

### Rapist Blame

To distinguish rapist blame from victim blame, we used a scale including the same items as the victim blame scale adapted to the rapist. However, one item (“How much do you agree Sophie should not have walked after sunset if she did not want to have problems”) was dropped as it cannot be adapted to assess rapist blame. Note that the internal consistency of the scale ( $\alpha=.67$ , in this study) was moderate: a threshold of .70 is often recommended (Kline 1999), although it is questionable (Lance et al. 2006). However, removing item(s) did not increase consistency.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

To examine whether our manipulation of objectification was successful, we ran a 2 (Condition: Sexual Objectification, Personalization)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender: Male, Female) ANOVA. As expected, participants in the sexual objectification condition rated the target as more like a sex object ( $M=5.14$ ,  $SD=1.77$ ) than participants in the personalized condition ( $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ),  $F(1, 111)=15.07$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.12$ . Importantly, we did not find a main effect of participant gender,  $F(1,111)=1.07$ ,  $p=.30$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.01$ , and the interaction term was not significant,  $F(1, 111)=1.97$ ,  $p=.16$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ .

### Univariate and Bivariate Statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics as a function of participant gender. We can see that both male and female

**Table 1** Univariate and bivariate statistics for male and female participants

	Male participants			Female participants		
	M (SD)	RB	VB	M (SD)	RB	VB
Rapist blame (RB)	6.38 (.76) <sup>a</sup>	–	–.09	6.51 (.68) <sup>a</sup>	–	–.15
Victim blame (VB)	2.76 (.99) <sup>a</sup>	–	–	2.22 (.81) <sup>b</sup>	–	–

A 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = completely or totally) accompanied each items of the rapist blame and victim blame scales. Subscripts indicate differences in ratings revealed by simple ANOVAs, but note that a MANOVA revealed a main effect of participant gender on the two variables

RB rapist blame, VB victim blame

participants report low scores on the victim blame scale and high scores on the rapist blame scale, which is a finding consistent with the literature on stranger rape perception (for reviews, see Grubb and Harrower 2008, 2009). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) examining the effect of participant gender revealed that participant gender has a significant effect on dependent variables,  $F(2, 112)=5.31$ ,  $p=.006$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.09$ , with more negative attitudes among male compared to female participants. This effect of participant gender was stronger when considering victim blame. Indeed, simple ANOVAs indicated that men reported more victim blame ( $M=2.76$ ,  $SD=.99$ ) than women ( $M=2.22$ ,  $SD=.81$ ),  $F(1, 113)=10.34$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.08$ , whereas rapist blame was not affected by participant gender,  $F(1, 113)=.97$ ,  $p=.33$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.01$ .

Note that victim blame did not significantly correlate with rapist blame,  $r(113)=-.14$ ,  $p=.14$ . This pattern can be observed for both male,  $r(56)=-.09$ ,  $p=.49$ , and female participants,  $r(55)=-.15$ ,  $p=.26$ . This suggests that blaming the perpetrator and blaming the victim represent distinct psychological outcomes in our study. Table 2 displays mean scores for rapist blame and victim blame as a function of participant gender and the sexual objectification vs. personalization manipulation.

### Effect of Sexual Objectification and Participant Gender on Rapist Blame

We conducted a Sexual Objectification (Sexually Objectified, Personalized)  $\times$  Participant Gender (Male, Female) ANOVA on rapist blame. In line with Hypothesis 1, we found a main effect of Sexual Objectification on rapist blame (see Fig. 1): People attributed less blame to the rapist when the victim was sexually objectified ( $M=6.31$ ,  $SD=.83$ ) than personalized ( $M=6.58$ ,  $SD=.57$ ),  $F(1, 111)=4.09$ ,  $p=.046$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.035$ .

Contrary to Hypothesis 3a, we did not find a main effect of participant gender: Men ( $M=6.38$ ,  $SD=.76$ ) and women

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics as a function of victim's sexual objectification and participant gender

	Sexual objectification		Personalization	
	M (SD)		M (SD)	
	Male participants (N=30)	Female participants (N=28)	Male participants (N=28)	Female participants (N=29)
Rapist blame	6.30 (.92) <sup>a</sup>	6.31 (.74) <sup>a</sup>	6.46 (.56) <sup>b</sup>	6.70 (.57) <sup>b</sup>
Victim blame	2.67 (1.13) <sup>a</sup>	2.22 (.85) <sup>b</sup>	2.86 (.85) <sup>a</sup>	2.21 (.78) <sup>b</sup>

A 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = completely or totally) accompanied each items of the rapist blame and victim blame scales

( $M=6.51$ ,  $SD=.68$ ) did not differ in the attribution of rapist blame,  $F(1, 111)=.90$ ,  $p=.34$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.01$ .

Contrary to Hypothesis 4a, we did not find an interaction between participant gender and our sexual objectification manipulation,  $F(1, 111)=.71$ ,  $p=.40$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.01$ , which indicates that male participant did not report more blame in the sexual objectification condition compared to female participants.

### Effect of Sexual Objectification and Participant Gender on Victim Blame

We then conducted a Sexual Objectification (Sexually Objectified, Personalized)  $\times$  Participant Gender (Male, Female) ANOVA on victim blame. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, attribution of victim blame did not differ in the sexual objectification condition ( $M=2.45$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) compared to the personalized condition ( $M=2.53$ ,  $SD=.87$ ),  $F(1, 111)=.27$ ,  $p=.60$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.01$ .

Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, we found a main effect of participant gender: Male participants ( $M=2.76$ ,  $SD=.99$ ) reported more victim blame than female participants ( $M=2.22$ ,  $SD=.81$ ),  $F(1, 111)=10.32$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.09$ .

Contrary to Hypothesis 4b, we did not find an interaction between participant gender and our sexual objectification manipulation,  $F(1, 111)=.32$ ,  $p=.57$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.01$ , which indicates that male participant did not report more victim blame in the

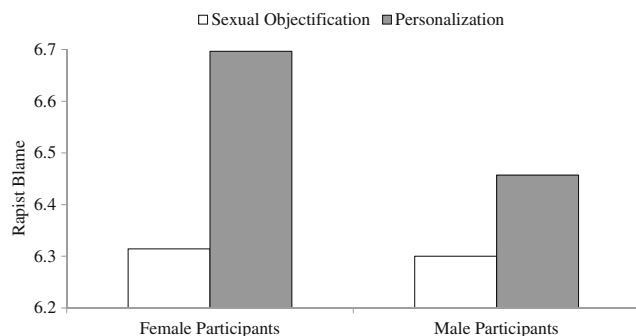
sexual objectification condition compared to female participants.

In sum, in line with Hypothesis 1, sexual objectification decreased rapist blame. However, contrary to Hypothesis 2, sexual objectification did not increase victim blame. Contrary to Hypothesis 3a, male participants did not report less rapist blame than female participants. Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, we found a main effect of participant gender on victim blame ratings so that male participants reported more victim blame compared to female participants. Finally, contrary to Hypotheses 4a and 4b, participant gender did not moderate the effect of sexual objectification on rapist and victim blame.

### Discussion

This paper examined the consequences of sexual objectification on rape perception. Following a recent study conducted in the UK showing that sexual objectification diminishes victim blame in a case of acquaintance rape (Loughnan et al. 2013), we examined the effect of victim's sexual objectification on rape perception in cases of stranger rape. We focused on victim blame as well as on rapist blame, which has received much less attention in the rape perception literature. This paper examined whether victim's sexual objectification is likely to shift judgments regarding a person who sexually assaulted her.

We hypothesized that if people aim to explain an unpredictable and random event such a stranger rape, then they will blame the rapist less when the victim is portrayed as sexually objectified (Hypothesis 1). We also examined whether victim's sexual objectification was associated with more victim blame (Hypothesis 2). Our findings reveal that victim sexual objectification diminished rapist blame, but it did not influence ratings in victim blame. Interestingly, the study conducted in the UK by Loughnan et al. (2013) showed the opposite pattern, attributing more victim blame when the victim was sexually objectified and no effect of victim's sexual objectification on rapist blame. Taken together, Loughnan et al.'s. (2013) study and our study suggest that exonerating the perpetrator and blaming the victim represent



**Fig. 1** Rapist blame in the sexual objectification and personalization conditions as a function of participant gender



distinct psychological outcomes that may vary as a function of the type of rape (i.e., acquaintance vs. stranger rape). The absence of correlation between rapist and victim blame in our study favors our interpretation. It is true that exonerating the perpetrator may be associated with victim blame. However, it may also reflect a preference for other forms of explanations, such as viewing the rape as the outcome of a random contingency, an “accident”, or as the result of societal forces encouraging men to commit sexual assault (see data collected among British undergraduates, Harbridge and Furnham 1991).

Our interpretation is also relevant to the moral typecasting model. This model suggests that, in the moral realm, people tend to categorize others in terms of their moral agency or patiency. Moral agency characterizes the capacity to act morally, to be responsible for one's acts. Moral patiency describes “the capacity to be acted upon in ways that can be characterized as good or evil” (Gray and Wegner 2009, p. 506). For example, a doll is usually perceived as low in moral patiency because it does not experience pain when being damaged. Importantly, people who are perceived as high in moral agency tend to be viewed as low in moral patiency and vice versa (see data collected in the U.S.A., Gray and Wegner 2009, 2011). For instance, a child would be expected to suffer more than an adult if a valued object was stolen from her but would be attributed less responsibility than an adult if she committed the same crime. Following this logic, seeing a rape victim as a “moral patient” might thus preclude people from seeing her as a moral agent. Blaming the rapist, the most natural inclination in the context of stranger rape, may prevent witnesses from evaluating the morality of the victim, thereby leading to low associations between perpetrator and victim blame. In a similar vein, we suggest that another consequence of moral typecasting is that victim blame is less likely to be modulated by characteristics of the victim, such as her physical appearance or attire, in cases of stranger rape due to the very low agency ascribed to her. Our data indicate that in cases of stranger rape, victim's sexual objectification influences rape perception in a less overt way by diminishing rapist blame, whereas overt victim blame remains possible in cases of acquaintance rape, as suggested by Loughnan et al.'s (2013) findings.

We found mixed results with respect to participant gender. Contrary to Hypothesis 3a, male participants did not report less rapist blame than female participants. This contrasts with evidence suggesting that male (vs. female) participants did blame the rapist less (e.g., see data collected among U.S. undergraduates, Workman and Freeburg 1999) due to greater identification with the rapist (e.g., see data collected among U.S. undergraduates, Kahn et al. 2011). However, like our study, others have failed to find an effect of participant gender (e.g., see Yamawaki et al. 2007 for data collected in the U.S.A.). These mixed results in the literature might also reflect

discrepancies across the various methodologies used in the rape perception literature (rape vignettes, rapist blame scales, etc.). Moreover, as predicted in Hypothesis 3b, male participants reported more victim blame compared to female participants. This result is consistent with the vast literature on rape perception (for reviews, see Grubb and Harrower 2008, 2009; van der Bruggen and Grubb 2014). However, some research controlling for pre-rape attitudes (e.g., rape myth acceptance) before the evaluation of a rape scenario found no effect of participant gender in studies conducted in Germany (Krahé 1985) and the UK (Krahé 1988). This suggests an alternative explanation; stereotypical attitudes toward rape myths might be a better predictor of the variations in victim blame than participant gender itself.

Contrary to Hypotheses 4a and 4b, we did not find an interaction between participant gender and the sexual objectification manipulation: Thus, men were not more influenced by the objectification manipulation than women. This should not necessarily arouse great surprise. If it sometimes happens that female (vs. male) participants do not react to sexually objectifying portrayals of women (see data collected in Australia, Loughnan et al. 2010, Study 2; see also Gervais et al. 2013b for similar findings among U.S. undergraduates), most objectification studies (e.g., for data collected in the U.S., see Gervais et al. 2012; Heflick and Goldenberg 2009; Heflick et al. 2011) have not found such an interaction. This might reflect that reactions to sexually objectifying portrayals are more likely to be associated with sociocultural factors similarly shared across participant gender.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present research represents an important step toward understanding the effect of sexual objectification on rape perception, it has also some limitations. As we mentioned earlier, taken together, Loughnan et al.'s (2013) study and our study suggest that exonerating the perpetrator and blaming the victim represent distinct psychological outcomes that may vary as a function of acquaintance versus stranger rape. Nonetheless, future research may want to test this assumption within a single experiment. On a related note, mediators of the effect of sexual objectification on rapist vs. victim blame have to be examined. In line with a moral typecasting perspective, one may expect that a target's sexual objectification would diminish rapist blame in cases of stranger rape due to less attribution in rapist's agency (i.e., capacity to act intentionally), whereas sexual objectification would increase victim blame in cases of acquaintance rape due to less attribution in victim's moral patiency.

The current paper exclusively employed sexualized targets. Even though research has shown that sexual objectification (manipulated to focus on the target's face vs. her body) has a similar effect regardless of whether the target's body is

depicted in sexualized ways (e.g., for data collected in Australia, see Loughnan et al. 2010) or not (e.g., for data collected in the U.S., see Archer et al. 1983), disentangling the role of sexualization (i.e., casual vs. revealing clothing) from our objectification manipulation (body vs. face-focus) should feature on the agenda of future research.

Note also that the reliability of the French version of the rapist and victim blame scales was moderate (.70 and .67). Developing a more reliable and multifaceted measure of blame would aid this field considerably. We collected the data from students in Belgium, a country characterized by a high incidence of reported rape. One may want to replicate our study with non-student samples and in countries with lower incidences of reported rape to test the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, the participants' cultural background may have modulated the impact of sexual objectification on rape perception. Investigating objectification of others and self-objectification in seven nations (i.e., Australia, India, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, the UK, and the U.S.A.), Loughnan and his colleagues (2015) found that objectification of others and self-objectification were more acute in Australia, Italy, UK and the U.S.A. compared to Japan, India and Pakistan. Consequently, one may expect that a cross-cultural study on objectification and rape perception would reveal that victim's sexual objectification is more likely to mitigate the evaluation of the severity of the rape among Western countries (e.g., U.S.A., UK, Italy) compared to Eastern countries such as Japan, India or Pakistan.

## Conclusions

This paper contributes to understanding how sexual objectification biases perception of sexual violence. Departing from most objectification studies that focused on the perception of sexually objectified others, this paper shows that sexual objectification is also likely to encourage observers to show more leniency towards perpetrators of sexual abuse. Beyond its implications for social cognition literature, this attitude may have implications for the well-being of victims and, generally, for the functioning of justice, if it leads authorities to show leniency towards actual perpetrators of rape. We hope these implications will not go unnoticed.

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**Ethical standards** My coauthors and I do not have any interest that might be interpreted as influencing the research. Applicable ethical standards, specifically the APA standards, were followed in the conduct of the study. The rights of the human subjects participating in our research were protected.

## Appendix 1

Scenario (translated from French).

The famous model Sophie Dialle has been brutally attacked and raped on the night of Monday, March 7. The Brussels police arrested a suspect a few hours after the assault.

After the banquet in honor of the official launch of a new lingerie brand, Lilla©, Sophie Dialle was driven at her home by her chauffeur. Around 11 PM, her best friend invited her to a drink at her apartment located a few blocks away. She agreed and decided to walk. During her journey, the young woman was accosted by a 30 year old stranger who proposed to drive her to her destination. Sophie Dialle, who was suspicious, refused. The man insisted and became threatening. For the victim, it was too late. She was taken away by the stranger in a deserted and weakly lighted up alley. Her attempts to struggle were futile, the man kept her on the ground and raped her. An ordeal that lasted an eternity for the young model. In shock, Sophie Dialle nevertheless managed to call the police, which arrived quickly on the scene. She received psychological help from the police to give evidence. This morning, the spokesman for the police announced that it had arrested a suspect—a man named Loïc Dubois. The latter matches with the photofit and “has no serious alibi”. The suspect has been indicted by the prosecutor. Loïc Dubois's trial is scheduled to begin in less than 6 months. As for Sophie Dialle, she said she would return to photo shoots as soon as possible.

[Text below the picture: Sophie Dialle has recently posed for Lillas©, a new lingerie brand. Despite her state of shock, the famous model claimed that she will honor the contracts that she signed lately.]

## Appendix 2: French Version of the Scales

### B1. Victim Blame, adapted from Abrams et al. (2003)

1. How much do you think Sophie should blame herself for what happened? / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que Sophie devrait se sentir responsable de ce qui s'est passé?
2. How much control do you think Sophie had over the situation? / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que Sophie avait un contrôle sur la situation?
3. How much do you agree Sophie should not have walked after the sunset if she did not want to have problems / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que Sophie n'aurait pas dû marcher dans la rue lorsque la nuit est tombée si elle ne voulait pas avoir de “problèmes”?
4. Do you think this incident could have been avoided by Sophie / Pensez-vous que l'événement aurait pu être évité par Sophie?
5. How much do you think that Sophie is responsible for the way things turned out? / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous

que Sophie est responsable de la façon dont les choses ont tourné?

6. How much sympathy do you feel for Sophie / Dans quelle mesure ressentez-vous de la sympathie pour Sophie?

## B2. Rapist Blame, adapted from Abrams et al. (2003)

1. How much do you think Loïc should blame himself for what happened? / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que Loïc devrait se sentir responsable de ce qui s'est passé?
2. How much control do you think Loïc had over the situation? / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que Loïc avait un contrôle sur la situation?
3. Do you think this incident could have been avoided by Loïc / Pensez-vous que l'événement aurait pu être évité par Loïc?
4. How much do you think that Loïc is responsible for the way things turned out? / Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que Loïc est responsable de la façon dont les choses ont tourné?
5. How much sympathy do you feel for Loïc? Dans quelle mesure ressentez-vous de la sympathie pour Loïc?

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