

# Perceptions of Rape Perpetrators Based on Skin Tone, Attire, and Relationship to Victim

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## ABSTRACT

The CDC states that 20-25% of college women will experience a completed or attempted rape at some point during their life (Fisher et al., 2000). A prevalent stereotype about rape perpetrators is that a majority are African American men who rape White women (Baker, 1997; Reddington & Kreisel, 2005). Additionally, two styles of dress are linked with racial stereotypes. Urban clothing is often associated with African American stereotypes whereas preppy clothing is associated with White stereotypes. The purpose of this study was to examine blame attributions towards African American rape perpetrators based on light or dark skin tone, urban or preppy attire, and relationship to the victim. College women (N = 180) assessed levels of blame and guilt after reading a mock newspaper article that described an alleged stranger or acquaintance rape. The article was accompanied by one of four different images of the alleged rape perpetrator with a skin tone of either African American light or African American dark and an attire of urban or preppy. Results using ANOVAs showed significant main effects regarding relationship and significant interactions regarding relationship and attire.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 20-25% of college women will experience a completed or attempted rape at some point during their education (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). However, only about 10% of all women report their rape to authorities (Varelas & Foley, 1998). The aftermath of rape includes unplanned pregnancies, shock, denial, anxiety, distrust of others, sleep disorders, flashbacks, depression, and posttraumatic stress (Sexual Violence, 2008).

Many stereotypes of rape perpetrators and victims result in serious implications for how victims are treated in society and the legal system. Often times, victims of rape are seen as having somehow deserved the rape, especially if their rapist was an acquaintance or if they were dressed in a provocative way (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995). Having a relationship to the victim also produces different amounts of blame attributed to perpetrators and victims. Prior research has shown that if the perpetrator is an acquaintance of the victim, the victim is blamed more for the rape (Barnett, Quackenbush, Sinisi, Wegman, & Otney, 2001).

### *Acquaintance vs. Stranger Rape*

Two out of three rape victims between the age of 18 and 29 had some form of relationship with their rapist, and among all incidences of reported sexual assault and rape, almost three out of four victims knew their perpetrator in some way (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997). Frequently, however, victims of acquaintance rapes are accused of consenting to the rape during court proceedings because they knew the perpetrator (Epstein & Langenbaum, 1994). Moreover, if the rape is committed by a stranger, the victim can be accused of not properly identifying the attacker (Epstein & Langenbaum, 1994). In general, if a rapist is an acquaintance of the victim people perceive them and a rape trial more ambivalently (Epstein & Langenbaum, 1994). This fact makes rape perpetrators of acquaintance rape harder to try and convict in a court of law.

### *Race and Rape*

A prevalent stereotype about rape perpetrators is that the majority of them are African American and that African American men rape White women (Baker, 1997; Reddington & Kreisel, 2005). In reality, about 88% of all rape cases involve people of the same race (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997), and the vast majority of rapists are White young males (Reddington & Kreisel, 2005). According to Baker (1997), the myth of the "black rapist" is

rooted in the racism and sexism of the United State's history. America's history of racist rape laws and traditions has fueled stereotypes and judgments by society and those in the judicial system without factual evidence to support them.

If a woman is the victim of an interracial rape she is judged more harshly by society and even by law enforcement. When assessing blame attributed to victims and perpetrators of different characteristics, Varelas and Foley (1998) found that the race of the perpetrator was more important to judgments of blame than was the race of the victim. For fear of being stereotyped or judged, many women do not report their rape because so many individuals in society believe in the myths and racial prejudices of rape (Varelas & Foley 1998).

Whereas many studies have been done on differences between African American and White rape perpetrators, research on the role of skin tones in African American perpetrators is less common. Research unrelated to crime has indicated that Americans with lighter skin tones are more favorably viewed and more likely to be granted rewards and opportunities (Hill, 2002). The proposed study will explore the role of skin tone and race in perceptions of rape perpetrators.

### *Dress and Rape*

Research on how type of dress affects perceptions of the wearer is scant. Vrij (1997) found that a person who was wearing black was perceived as more aggressive and irritating and showed more guilt for a crime than someone who was wearing lighter shades of clothing. Another study that looked at types of dress found that a greater social distance was given to people who wear athletic clothing as opposed to casual or fashionable clothing (St. James, de Man, & Stout, 2006). These studies show that type of dress does affect how the wearer is perceived although no research has been done specifically to examine whether type of dress affects how a rape perpetrator is perceived.

The present study examined the effect of two styles of dress that are linked with stereotypes. Urban clothing is often associated with African American stereotypes whereas preppy clothing is often associated with White stereotypes. Preppy clothing consists of labels like Abercrombie & Fitch and J. Crew, which is popular for argyle and alligator prints (Wallace, 2005). The brand Rocawear is a popular brand of urban style clothing inspired by men's active wear (Rocawear, 2010). Another popular brand of hip hop style clothing that many young, African American men wear is Sean John, which is fashionable for pants that are worn loose and baggy (East, 2002).

In our study we examined the implications of attire, skin tone, and relationship to the victim on perceptions and blame of rape perpetrators and victims. We hypothesized that urban-dressed perpetrators would be blamed more compared to perpetrators dressed in a more preppy style. We also expected to find that perpetrators with a darker skin tone would be blamed more than those with a lighter skin tone. Finally, a perpetrator who was the victim's acquaintance would be blamed less than one who was a stranger, whereas the victims of acquaintance rape would be blamed more. Overall, we anticipated finding that participants who saw the urban dressed, darker perpetrator who was a stranger would attribute the most blame to the perpetrator compared to all other groups.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

The participants were 180 University of Wisconsin-La Crosse female students from Psychology courses who received course credit for participating. Participants were mostly White (88.3%) and their mean age was 18.22 years old. A large number of participants (44%) knew someone who had been sexually assaulted or raped, and 5% of participants admitted to being raped themselves.

### *Materials and Procedures*

Participants completed the study individually at computer stations in a research lab. After obtaining informed consent, written instructions informed the participant that a news article and image were to appear on the screen and that she should study it very closely before proceeding to questions. Participants were told in the informed consent and in the written instructions that in this study they would be evaluating rape reporting and should focus on the quality and content of the news article presented rather than the rape itself.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions. A photograph of one African American actor was used to portray the rape perpetrator and was modified in a 2(skin tone) x 2(attire) factorial design. Computer photo editing software, Photoshop, was used to modify the skin tone of the actor to make it either darker or lighter. In addition, the man was either wearing a preppy (polo shirt) or urban (loose fitted sweatshirt) style of clothing (see Appendix A for images). Each of these four images was paired with one of two news articles. One of the news articles depicted an acquaintance rape, the other a stranger rape (see Appendix B for the scenarios). Participants then completed survey questions assessing the level of blame, misunderstanding, and responsibility they attributed to the victim and perpetrator, their assessment of personality traits of the victim and perpetrator (e.g., likeability and

respectability), and if the alleged rape occurred because of external causes or a mental defect of the perpetrator. Responses were measured on a 0-100 sliding percentage scale. Distracter questions were also included to keep participants believing that the study was about the evaluation of rape reporting. These questions included how the participants rated the quality of writing, the amount of information presented, either too much or too little, and if this type of writing was encouraging violence.

In addition, other questions were added as manipulation checks to ensure the participants paid attention to the color of attire and relationship to victim in the initial article. For example, questions asked what color the perpetrator was wearing and if the victim knew the perpetrator prior to the rape. Results of the manipulation check showed that 82% of participants who received the urban condition and 92% of participants who received the preppy condition correctly identified what the perpetrator was wearing in a multiple choice question. Other manipulation checks indicated that 94% of participants who received the urban condition and 85% of the participants who received the preppy version correctly identified the color of the perpetrator's attire to be either grey or blue. Both of these answers were accepted as they could be seen as similar. Also, further manipulation checks showed that 92% of participants who received the acquaintance condition and 80% of participants who received the stranger condition correctly identified the relationship shown between the perpetrator and victim. After completion of the survey and a brief demographic survey, the participants were debriefed and given contact information for the Counseling and Testing Center and the Violence Prevention Office on campus.

## RESULTS

A series of 2(skin tone) x 2(attire) x 2(relationship) between-groups ANOVAs were used to analyze the data. The data showed significant main effects of relationship but none for attire or skin tone on blame attributions. By running simple main effects tests, significant interactions between relationship and attire were investigated. Although many aspects were evaluated, only significant findings are reported.

### *Main Effects of Relationship*

There was a significant effect of relationship to victim on the perpetrator having a misunderstanding of the victim's wishes,  $F(1, 169) = 7.81, p = .006$  (see Figure 1). On average, participants who read the article about an acquaintance relationship rape were significantly more likely to perceive that the perpetrator had a misunderstanding of the victim's wishes ( $M = 41.11, SD = 25.27$ ) compared to participants who read an article about a stranger relationship rape ( $M = 30.92, SD = 21.80$ ).

There was also a significant effect of relationship to victim on the participants' perception of the event being considered rape,  $F(1, 171) = 4.09, p = 0.045$  (see Figure 1). Participants who read the article about an acquaintance relationship rape were significantly less likely to consider the event rape ( $M = 70.64, SD = 21.82$ ) compared to participants who read an article about a stranger relationship rape ( $M = 77.17, SD = 20.85$ ).

Additionally, there was a significant effect of relationship to victim on the participants' perception of whether the victim enjoyed the alleged rape,  $F(1, 162) = 5.00, p = 0.027$  (see Figure 1). Participants who read the article about an acquaintance relationship rape were significantly more likely to believe that the victim enjoyed the rape ( $M = 17.57, SD = 19.11$ ) compared to participants who read an article about a stranger relationship rape ( $M = 11.50, SD = 15.92$ ).

### *Interactions Between Relationship and Attire*

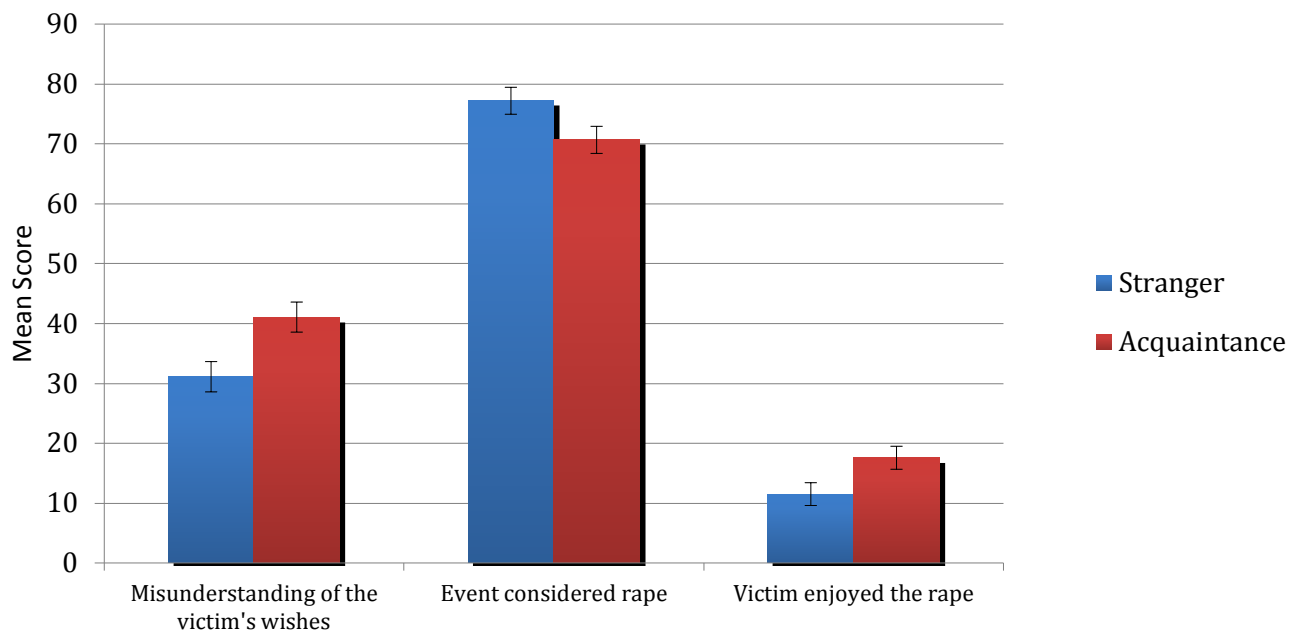
It was found that there was a significant interaction between relationship to victim and attire when assessing if the perpetrator was to blame for what happened,  $F(1, 171) = 5.81, p = 0.017$  (see Figure 2). Simple main effect tests were conducted to investigate the interaction. Participants found the perpetrator significantly more to blame if the perpetrator was an acquaintance wearing urban clothing ( $M = 71.84, SD = 21.27$ ) compared to an acquaintance wearing preppy clothing ( $M = 61.37, SD = 22.58$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 4.99, p = 0.028$ . Participants who read an article about a stranger relationship did not attribute more blame to perpetrators dressed in urban clothing ( $M = 67.14, SD = 22.27$ ) compared to those dressed in preppy clothing ( $M = 72.20, SD = 19.40$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 1.31, p = 0.255$ .

It was also found that there was a significant interaction between relationship to victim and attire when assessing if the alleged rape was a violent act,  $F(1, 170) = 5.08, p = 0.025$  (see Figure 3). Participants were significantly more likely to assess the alleged rape as a violent act if the perpetrator was a stranger wearing urban clothing ( $M = 86.39, SD = 16.15$ ) compared to a stranger wearing preppy clothing ( $M = 76.87, SD = 20.34$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 5.91, p = 0.02$ . Participants who read an article about an acquaintance relationship were not more likely to assess the alleged rape as a violent act when the perpetrators were dressed in urban clothing ( $M = 78.90, SD = 20.15$ ) compared to preppy clothing ( $M = 80.62, SD = 18.19$ ),  $F(1, 84) = 0.70, p = .406$ .

In addition, it was found that there was a significant interaction between relationship to victim and attire when assessing if the alleged rape was a violation of the victim's rights,  $F(1, 170) = 4.66, p = .032$  (see Figure 4). Participants were significantly more likely to assess the rape as a violation of the victim's rights if the perpetrator was a stranger wearing urban clothing ( $M = 89.60, SD = 23.43$ ) compared to a perpetrator who was an acquaintance wearing urban clothing ( $M = 76.00, SD = 31.89$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 4.80, p = 0.03$ . When the perpetrator wore preppy clothing, participants did not view stranger relationship rape as more of a violation of the victim's rights ( $M = 78.91, SD = 34.81$ ) than acquaintance relationship rape ( $M = 84.63, SD = 24.69$ ),  $F(1, 88) = 0.81, p = 0.371$ .

#### Main Effects of Skin Tone

There was no significant effect of skin tone on blame attributions. Contrary to predictions, participants were not significantly affected by manipulations of the perpetrator's skin tone. However, one finding that was marginally significant was that participants were more likely to judge that the victim desired sexual intercourse if the perpetrator had a lighter skin tone ( $M = 24.07, SD = 21.25$ ) compared to if the perpetrator had a darker skin tone ( $M = 18.66, SD = 19.15$ ),  $F(1, 165) = 3.11, p = 0.08$ .



**Figure 1.** Mean scores for main effects of relationship

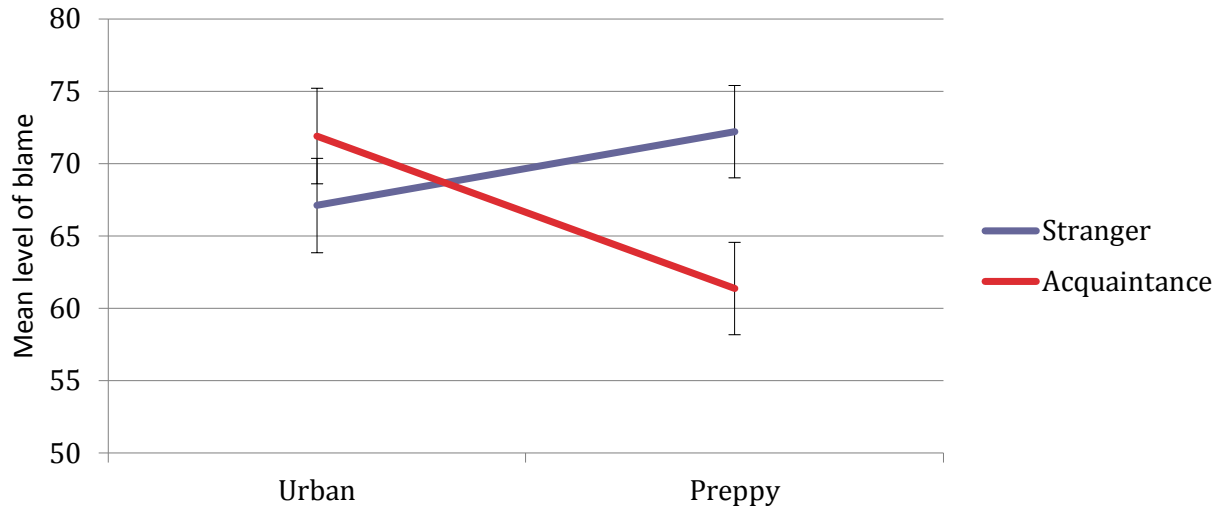


Figure 2. Mean level of blame attributed to perpetrator

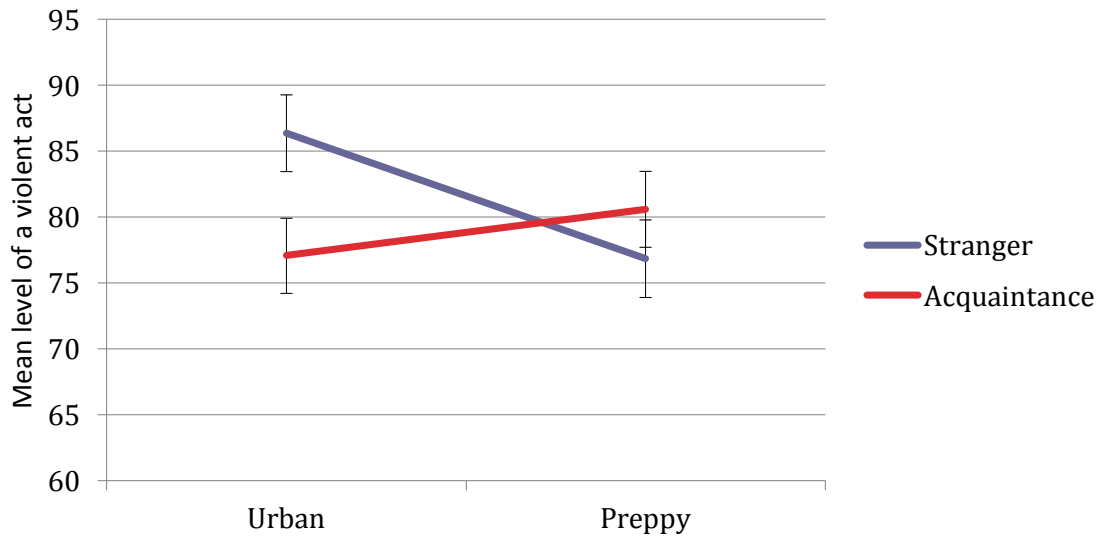
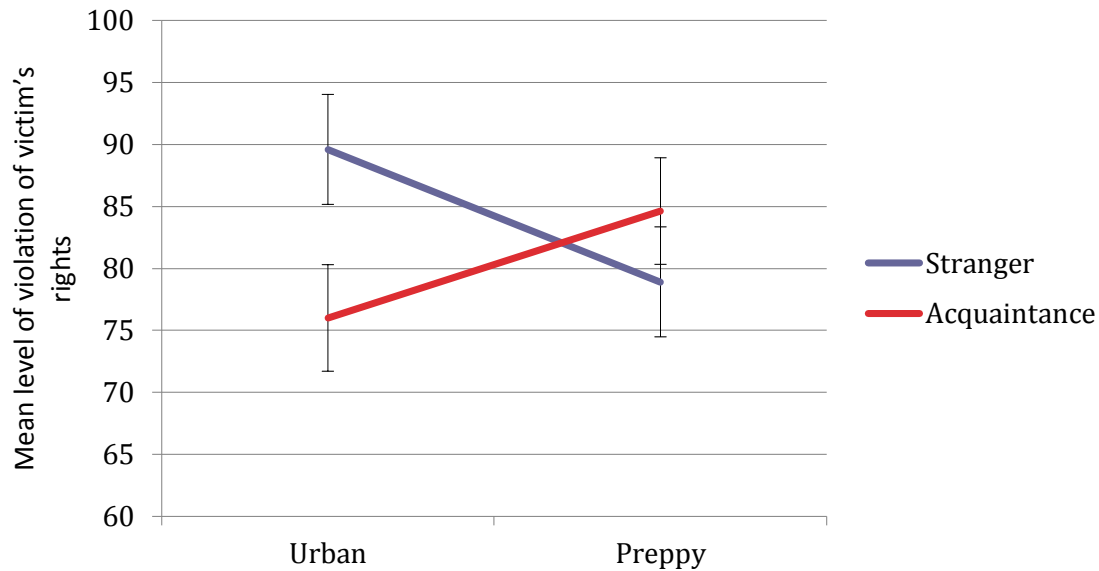


Figure 3. Mean level of rating of a violent act attributed to alleged rape



**Figure 4.** Mean level of violation of victim's rights attributed to the alleged rape

## DISCUSSION

In conducting this study, we attempted to determine whether variations in African American skin tone, attire, and relationship to victim of an alleged rape perpetrator would influence participants' attributions of blame and guilt regarding the alleged rape. Results found were mixed. While evidence to support the influence of type of relationship on participants' attributions of blame and guilt was found, we did not find any main effects for attire and skin tone. However, there were several interactions found between relationship and attire.

It was hypothesized that a perpetrator who was the victim's acquaintance would be blamed less than one who was a stranger, whereas the victims of acquaintance rape would be blamed more. Our results did match our hypotheses regarding relationship to victim and levels of blame attribution. Results showed significant main effects of type of relationship for the perpetrator having had a misunderstanding of the victim's wishes, the event being considered a rape, and the victim enjoying the alleged rape. Participants that read a news article describing an acquaintance relationship rape were significantly more likely to think that the perpetrator had a misunderstanding of the victim's wishes, that the event should not be considered rape, and that the victim enjoyed the rape compared to those who read about a stranger relationship rape. Previous research findings support our results, showing that the victim was blamed more for a rape if her rapist was an acquaintance versus a stranger (Barnett et al., 2001).

It was also hypothesized that urban dressed perpetrators would be blamed more compared to perpetrators dressed in a preppy style. Although main effects of attire were not found, interesting interactions between relationship and attire were uncovered. However, no clear conclusions can be drawn because of the varying results found with each significant interaction indicating a different relationship between attire and relationship. Participants found the perpetrator significantly more to blame if he was an acquaintance wearing urban clothing compared to an acquaintance wearing preppy clothing. Whereas participants were significantly more likely to assess the alleged rape as a violent act if the perpetrator was a stranger wearing urban clothing compared to a stranger wearing preppy clothing. Also, participants were significantly more likely to assess the rape as a violation of the victim's rights if the perpetrator was a stranger wearing urban clothing compared to an acquaintance wearing urban clothing. These results indicate a trend towards perpetrators in urban clothing being perceived as more to blame and the event being perceived as more violent than perpetrators in preppy clothing. This somewhat aligns with past research that found that a person wearing athletic clothing would be given more social distance than a person wearing casual clothing (St. James et al., 2006). Further research will have to be conducted to continue to investigate the influence of perpetrator attire on perceptions of rape and rape perpetrators.

While previous research did indicate that the victim's attire (provocative versus modest clothing) changed participant's opinions of if a victim "deserved" or "asked" for a rape, it is possible that the perpetrator's attire is less important in assessing blame. It is also possible that the attire used in this study was not perceived by the participants as it was intended to be and that the attire was not dramatic enough. The preppy condition could have

been taken to more of an extreme by using a suit jacket, instead of a gray polo shirt. The urban condition was portrayed by a baggy gray sweatshirt and a silver chain. On a college campus this is typical attire, and so may not have been associated with someone dressing in an urban style. The urban condition in the future could be portrayed by using typically associated urban name brand clothes.

Finally, it was hypothesized that perpetrators with a darker skin tone would be blamed more than those with a lighter skin tone. Overall, it was anticipated that participants who saw the urban dressed, darker perpetrator who was a stranger would attribute the most blame to the perpetrator compared to all other groups. There were no significant findings regarding skin tone in this study. There are several reasons for why we believe the manipulation of skin tone did not produce results supporting our hypotheses. First, participants were students from a mid-sized midwestern college in a rural area. Students at this university may have less experience with interracial bias or violence compared to students who attend college in an urban area. Also, the limited diversity of participants' race and ethnicity could be a factor contributing to the results found. Eighty-eight percent of participants described their race as White. In replicating this study, it may be beneficial to distribute the study to participants attending multiple schools around the state to obtain greater racial diversity. Also, results may be drastically different had this research been done in a state with a more significant history of racial discrimination and segregation.

Also, educated individuals may be less inclined to hold a racial bias based on skin tone than an uneducated population. Individuals in higher education, such as college students, may have more opportunities to be exposed to different races and ethnicity's than their own, and therefore may be less racially prejudiced. Also, educated individuals are more likely to be informed about the negative implications of prejudice and racism than the uneducated. However, we are unsure if our results show participants did not have a racial bias due to the fact that there was no White skin tone control image. For this reason, we cannot conclude if participants were equally prejudice against African American light and African American dark skin tones, or if they were not prejudice at all.

In addition, after completion of the research it was concluded that asking participants questions assessing racial bias and personal opinions regarding race would be beneficial. Having knowledge of participants' opinions and attitudes towards race prior to their completion of the survey could be used to improve future research. Scales such as the Color Blind Racial Attitudes Scales and Symbolic Racism 2000 Scale may be used to strengthen conclusions that are drawn from future research (Holmes, 2009). It also may be beneficial to ask participants the amount of exposure they have had with other races than their own and in particular the amount of exposure they have had with the race of the perpetrator that is being studied.

In conclusion, this research attempted to uncover racial bias related to skin tone and attire that may be attributed to African American rape perpetrators. There has never before been research done related to bias within the same race or regarding attire of perpetrators in rape scenarios. While strong conclusions were only found for relationship between perpetrator and victim, this study did indicate that attire of the perpetrator could also prove to be important in perceptions of rape scenarios. Additional research should be conducted to look at the influence of perpetrator attire on rape scenarios and to explore biases seen within the same race regarding rape perpetrators.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPENDIX A



## APPENDIX B

### *Acquaintance Rape*

A local 22-year-old man was brought in for questioning in the alleged rape of his 20-year-old neighbor outside their apartment building Thursday night. The police were notified of the rape early Friday morning and medical staff performed an examination, but no DNA samples were able to be collected.

Thursday night the victim had been dropped off two blocks from her apartment building by some friends after a concert at the UW-La Crosse campus. According to the victim, the assailant ran to catch up with her and made small talk for a block before pushing her against a nearby garage and raping her.

The victim, whose own identity has not been made public at this time, later identified her accused rapist in a line up as Jacob Williams. Williams was an acquaintance of the victim, having lived in the same apartment building as the victim for the past year. The two would occasionally talk and once had a class together. "The particular details of the rape are still being investigated, as it is early in the case, and so no formal charges have been made," said La Crosse Police Officer Barker. Additionally, "no weapons of any kind were used," said Barker.

Because of the nature of Thursday's alleged attack, local and campus police are working closely to monitor the highly populated student-rented residential areas around the UW-L, Viterbo, and WTC campuses.



*Stranger Rape*

A local 22-year-old man was brought in for questioning in the alleged rape of a 20-year-old woman outside her apartment building Thursday night. The police were notified of the rape early Friday morning and medical staff performed an examination, but no DNA samples were able to be collected.

Thursday night the victim had been dropped off two blocks from her apartment building by some friends after a concert at the UW-La Crosse campus. According to the victim, the assailant ran to catch up with her and made small talk for a block before pushing her against a nearby garage and raping her only a block from her apartment.

The victim, whose own identity has not been made public at this time, later identified her accused rapist in a line up as Jacob Williams. She had no previous relationship of any kind with Williams. "The particular details of the rape are still being investigated, as it is early in the case, and so no formal charges have been made," said La Crosse Police Officer Barker. Additionally, "no weapons of any kind were used," said Barker.

Because of the nature of Thursday's alleged attack, local and campus police are working closely to monitor the highly populated student-rented residential areas around the UW-L, Viterbo, and WTC campuses.